

You Can't Take the Sky from Me: Deleuze and "The Ballad of Serenity"

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The philosophical concepts postulated by Gilles Deleuze find a powerful and interesting form of expression in Whedon's *Firefly*. Deleuze's theories of nomadic philosophical thought, the nature of the force that animates ideas, nomadism, the war machine, deterritorialization and reterritorialization can all be found in episodes, characters and situations of *Firefly*. There is much to discuss in this area, but this presentation suggests a useful starting point: the series' theme song "The Ballad of Serenity," written by Joss Whedon himself.

Both lyrically and musically, "The Ballad of Serenity" is replete with Deleuzian ideas. The song is ostensibly sung in the voice of Captain Malcolm Reynolds, expressing his philosophy and his ethos and his motivation for striking out on his own path. The concept of a nomadic sense of place, for example, is neatly expressed throughout the lyrics with their references to "take my home, take my land," describing deterritorialization literally and metaphorically, as well as the assertion of freedom at the heart of the song, "you can't take the sky from me." The "sky" represents, among other things, an unlimited, ever-changing, smooth horizon. This is classic Deleuzian thought, invoking the "smooth, heterogeneous" physical and philosophical path of the "nomad" (Reynolds), as opposed to the "striated, homogeneous" world of the Alliance from which he is escaping. On the core planets, we are told throughout the series, there is homogeneity of opportunity and design, and a process of territorialization is taking place on the outer planets in which they are being transformed into part of this striated world. Reynolds once felt free on the core planets ("I'm *still* free", the song notes), but now finds them too rigid and confining. Whereas the "sky", the Deleuzian sense of the ever-shifting, constantly improvised heterogeneous space of the nomad, calls to Reynolds as the one space where he can make his way professionally, politically and philosophically. In fact, the "sky" is literally "any-space-wherever," in Deleuzian terms, a space through which the energy of nomads can move and change. And the second verse, which mentions "the black" is a direct reference to space, although it can be read metaphorically in a number of different ways, including an any-space-wherever. This is only one example of several in the lyrics that call us to a Deleuzian mode of thinking.

Musical allusions to Deleuze can also be found in the song. With its suspended ninth chords and unresolved, constantly shifting sense of melody and rhythm, "The Ballad of Serenity" is hardly a simple folk/country song. Musically it evokes restlessness, impatience and above all "space," and significantly it refers to space as a concept, not as a particular place (once again we have Deleuze's "any-space-wherever"). The open chords, the strange, non-linear flow of ideas and melody (the song ends on the same restless chord on which it begins) are evocative of a space that Deleuze would find familiar. Deleuze himself employed musical metaphors, stating, "the life of a nomad is in the intermezzo." In terms of music, he is referring to connective tissue, the spaces and moments between major notes and phrases, which this song has in ample quantity, especially considering how brief it is.

In this presentation, the lyrical and musical motifs of "The Ballad of Serenity" provide us with a primer, a starting point, for the more general application of Deleuze to *Firefly*.