



INVESTIGATING  
*firefly*  
AND  
SERENITY

SCIENCE FICTION ON THE FRONTIER

EDITED BY  
RHONDA V. WILCOX & TANYA R. COCHRAN

I.B. TAURIS

Investigating  
*Firefly* and *Serenity*

# INVESTIGATING CULT TV

Series Editor: Stacey Abbott

The **Investigating Cult TV** series is a fresh forum for discussion and debate about the changing nature of cult television. It sets out to reconsider cult television and its intricate networks of fandom by inviting authors to rethink how cult TV is conceived, produced, programmed and consumed. It will also challenge traditional distinctions between cult and quality television.

Offering an accessible path through the intricacies and pleasures of cult TV, the books in this series will interest scholars, students and fans alike. They will include close studies of individual contemporary television shows. They will also reconsider genres at the heart of cult programming, such as science fiction, horror and fantasy, as well as genres like teen TV, animation and reality TV when these have strong claims to cult status. Books will also examine themes or trends that are key to the past, present and future of cult television.

The first books in **Investigating Cult TV** series:

*Investigating* **Farscape** by Jes Battis

*Investigating* **Alias** edited by Stacey Abbott and Simon Brown

*Investigating* **Charmed** edited by Karin Beeler and Stan Beeler

Ideas and submissions for **Investigating Cult TV** to  
s.abbott@roehampton.ac.uk  
p.brewster@blueyonder.co.uk

INVESTIGATING  
*FIREFLY*  
and  
*SERENITY*  
SCIENCE FICTION ON THE FRONTIER

Edited by

Rhonda V. Wilcox and

Tanya R. Cochran

**I.B. TAURIS**

LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2008 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd  
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010  
www.ibtauris.com

In the United States of America and Canada  
distributed by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of St Martin's Press  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

Copyright © Rhonda V. Wilcox and Tanya R. Cochran 2008

The right of Rhonda V. Wilcox and Tanya R. Cochran to be identified as the editors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988.

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book, or any part thereof, may not be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 84511 654 5

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library  
A full CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: available

Typeset by JCS Publishing Services Ltd, [www.jcs-publishing.co.uk](http://www.jcs-publishing.co.uk)  
Printed and bound in the United States

# Contents

Contributors ix

Acknowledgments xiii

## Introduction

‘Good Myth’: Joss Whedon’s Further Worlds *Rhonda V. Wilcox and Tanya R. Cochran, editors* 1

‘They Tried to Kill Us, and Here We Are’: Episode and Film Guide *Rhonda V. Wilcox and Tanya R. Cochran, editors* 11

## Language and Rhetoric

1. ‘But She Was Naked! And All Articulate!’: The Rhetoric of Seduction in *Firefly* *Cynthia Masson* 19

2. Representing the Future: Chinese and Codeswitching in *Firefly* *Susan Mandala* 31

3. ‘Much Madness is Divinest Sense’: *Firefly*’s ‘Big Damn Heroes’ and Little Witches *Alyson R. Buckman* 41

## Gender

4. The Threat of the ‘Good Wife’: Feminism, Postfeminism, and Third-Wave Feminism in *Firefly* *Laura L. Beadling* 53

5. The Companions and Socrates: Is Inara a Hetaera? *Andrew Aberdein* 63

6. ‘I Aim to Misbehave’: Masculinities in the ‘Verse *David Magill* 76

## Genre

7. 'The Alliance Isn't Some Evil Empire': Dystopia in Joss Whedon's *Firefly/Serenity* Sharon Sutherland and Sarah Swan 89
8. Back to the Future: Retrofuturism, Cyberpunk, and Humanity in *Firefly* and *Serenity* Lorna Jowett 101
9. *Firefly*'s 'Out of Gas': Genre Echoes and the Hero's Journey Mary Alice Money 114

## Social and Cultural Themes

10. Reavers and Redskins: Creating the Frontier Savage J. Douglas Rabb and J. Michael Richardson 127
11. A Geopolitical Interpretation of *Serenity* Jeffrey Bussolini 139

## Religion and Morality

12. 'I Do Not Hold to That': Joss Whedon and Original Sin Rhonda V. Wilcox 155
13. Humanity in a 'Place of Nothin': Morality, Religion, Atheism, and Possibility in *Firefly* Gregory Erickson 167

## Music

14. Music, Race, and Paradoxes of Representation: Jubal Early's Musical Motif of Barbarism in 'Objects in Space' Neil Lerner 183
15. Marching Out of Step: Music and Otherness in the *Firefly/Serenity* Saga Christopher Neal 191

## Visuals

16. Between Past and Future: Hybrid Design Style in *Firefly* and *Serenity* Barbara Maio 201

17.	Deathly Serious: Mortality, Morality, and the <i>Mise-en-Scène</i> in <i>Firefly</i> and <i>Serenity</i>	Matthew Pateman	212
Fans, Transition, and the World Outside			
18.	'Can't Stop the Signal': The Resurrection/Regeneration of <i>Serenity</i>	Stacey Abbott	227
19.	The Browncoats Are Coming! <i>Firefly</i> , <i>Serenity</i> , and Fan Activism	Tanya R. Cochran	239
	Notes		251
	Works Cited		267
	Index		283





# Contributors

**Stacey Abbott** is Senior Lecturer in Film and Television Studies at Roehampton University. She is the editor of *Reading Angel* (Tauris, 2005) and author of *Celluloid Vampires* (University of Texas Press, 2007).

**Andrew Aberdein** is Associate Professor of Logic and Humanities at Florida Institute of Technology. He is the author of several articles, including a chapter in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy* (Open Court, 2003).

**Laura L. Beadling** is an Assistant Professor of Film Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, where she teaches film, literature, and composition.

**Alyson R. Buckman** is Associate Professor of Humanities at California State University, Sacramento, and has written several essays on *Buffy*, *Angel*, and *Firefly*, among others. She is currently working on a study of multiculturalism in Joss Whedon's work.

**Jeffrey Bussolini** is Associate Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York, and has contributed to Barbara Maio's Italian-language *Buffy* collection: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Legittimare la Cacciatrice* (Bulzoni, 2007).

**Tanya R. Cochran** is Assistant Professor of English at Union College in Nebraska. She has published in *Televising Queer Women* (Palgrave, 2007) and *Sith, Slayers, Stargates, + Cyborgs: Modern Mythology in the New Millennium* (Lang, 2008). Currently, she chairs the Science Fiction and Fantasy Area of the Popular Culture Association.

**Gregory Erickson** teaches at Mannes College and New York University. He is author of *The Absence of God in Modernist Literature* (Palgrave, 2007) and coauthor of *Rescripting the Sacred: Religion and Popular Culture* (McFarland, forthcoming).

**Lorna Jowett** is a Senior Lecturer in American Studies and Media at the University of Northampton, U.K. Her current research examines gender and genre in science fiction and horror. She is the author of *Sex and the Slayer* (Wesleyan, 2005).

**Neil Lerner**, Associate Professor at Davidson College, is a specialist in U.S. film music; he recently coedited *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music* (Routledge, 2006) and serves on the editorial boards of *American Music* and *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*.

**David Magill** is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh-Johnstown. His work has appeared in *Framing Celebrity* (Routledge, 2006), and he is currently completing his manuscript *Modern Masculinities: Modernist Nostalgia and Jazz Age White Manhood*.

**Barbara Maio** is a researcher at Dipartimento Comunicazione e Spettacolo at University Roma Tre. She is the author of *Fiction TV* (Cinetecnica, 2003), *L'Estetica dell'Ibrido* (Bulzoni, 2004), and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (Aracne, 2004) as well as the editor of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Legittimare la Cacciatrice* (Bulzoni, 2007).

**Susan Mandala** earned her Ph.D. at the University of Cambridge and is now Senior Lecturer at the University of Sunderland. She recently finished her first book, *Twentieth-Century Drama Dialogue as Ordinary Talk: Speaking Between the Lines* (Ashgate, 2007).

**Cynthia Masson** holds a Ph.D. in English (McMaster) and teaches in the English Department at Malaspina University-College in Nanaimo, British Columbia. Her academic research and publication areas include medieval visionary literature, medieval alchemy, and the works of Joss Whedon.

**Mary Alice Money**, Ph.D. University of Texas, is Emeritus Professor of English at Gordon College in Barnesville, Georgia, and past president of the Popular Culture Association in the South. She has written on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, *Heroes*, *The X-Files*, Westerns, British mysteries, and science fiction.

**Christopher Neal** is Associate Professor of Music and Director of Bands at McMurry University in Abilene, Texas. He conducts the wind ensemble, directs the marching band, and teaches courses in the Music Education sequence.

**Matthew Pateman** is Director of Cultural and Media Studies at the University of Hull. The author of *The Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy*

the Vampire Slayer (McFarland, 2006), he is currently writing another book called *Joss Whedon* for Manchester UP.

**J. Douglas Rabb** is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Lakehead University in Ontario. He has published on Native American philosophy and martial arts. With colleague Mike Richardson, he is a coauthor of *The Existential Joss Whedon: Evil and Human Freedom in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel, Firefly, and Serenity* (McFarland, 2006).

**J. Michael Richardson** is Professor of English at Lakehead University. He has authored/coauthored numerous articles on Shakespeare and popular culture and a number of books, including, with J. Douglas Rabb, *The Existential Joss Whedon*.

**Sharon Sutherland** is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Law, University of British Columbia. Her current research examines applications of drama and theatre to conflict resolution practice and pedagogy.

**Sarah Swan** is a practicing lawyer. She has collaborated with Sharon Sutherland on a variety of law and popular culture topics, including essays on *24*, *Alias*, and *Angel* (in *Reading Angel*).

**Rhonda V. Wilcox**, Ph.D., teaches English at Gordon College, Georgia. Editor of *Studies in Popular Culture*, a founding editor of *Critical Studies in Television*, and coeditor of *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies*, she is also the author of *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Tauris, 2005) and the coeditor of *Fighting the Forces: What's At Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Rowman, 2002).



# Acknowledgments

Thanks first to our excellent contributors, whose insights made this volume possible. We especially want to acknowledge those who offered advisory reading, including Andrew Aberdein, Greg Erickson, Cynthea Masson, and Mary Alice Money. Thanks to Philippa Brewster and Tatiana Wilde of I.B.Tauris for their knowledgeable support. Thanks to peerless series editor Stacey Abbott, Simon Brown, and their dog Max for our subtitle. Thanks to the Browncoats! Above all, thanks to the inimitable Joss Whedon, Tim Minear, and all the creators of *Firefly* and *Serenity*.

From Rhonda: My gratitude goes to my ever-supportive friends (including Marti Keller, who read my chapter) and family—my son Jeff Gess; father Zeb Wilcox; Marsha, Pat, and their families; and especially my husband, constant reader Richard Gess, and my mother June Lee Tugman Wilcox, who is cited herein. Thanks, too, to my co-convenor David Lavery and the administration of Gordon College, including Humanities Chair Richard Baskin, Dean Robert Vaughan, and President Larry Weill, for hosting the second *Slayage* conference (the *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses), from which some of the essays in this volume came—not to mention much other lively sociointellectual interaction, then and later. Big thanks to David for generous index aid. And special thanks to my active and intelligent coeditor and friend, Tanya Cochran, whose idea this book was.

From Tanya: Deepest gratitude goes to my family—Cynthia Cochran, Rita Cochran, and Jeff Roth—for their abiding encouragement; to my converts and fellow fans for their astute feedback—especially Wendy Campbell, Scott Cushman, and Jessica Robison; to my Humanities Division colleagues at Union College for their support; and to Rhonda Wilcox for being my coeditor, friend, and super-mentor. Until now, I had only dreamed of seeing my name on the cover of a book like this, one devoted to the critical exploration of Joss Whedon's imaginative worlds. Especially because the difficult work of writing and editing is finished, reality is far better than the dream. To everyone, stay shiny.



# Introduction

## ‘Good Myth’: Joss Whedon’s Further Worlds

RHONDA V. WILCOX AND  
TANYA R. COCHRAN

*‘You can’t take the sky from me’*

‘When she was born, she had no sky . . .’: So begins the amusingly provocative creation story told by the trickster Saffron to pilot Wash (‘Our Mrs. Reynolds,’ 1.6). By the time she has finished making a world with words, Wash, that most Whedon-like of characters, can only respond, feelingly, ‘Whoah. Good myth.’ Whedon has been making worlds for many years now, and in *Firefly* he takes us to the sky. In his space Western series (coproduced by Tim Minear), characters use the contraction ‘verse’ for their universe. The pun should make us think of poetry, song; it should remind us that Whedon creates a world with words—as do we all, in a sense. The stories we tell ourselves about our lives, the ways we mentally shape our experiences—these stories construct our worlds for us, at least in part. Whedon wonderfully uses images and music, too, but here the foundation is words—the dialogue and the story. Perhaps this is what makes him pre-eminently successful in the long-term medium of television. In *Firefly*, Whedon has created many worlds—from the glorious planet Sihnon to the busy, messy Persephone, to Shadow, the place that gave birth to Captain Malcolm Reynolds. Ursula Le Guin reminds us of the place shadow has in creation; dark and light, yin and yang, spin the engine of the world. And Whedon’s *Firefly* still spins through the sky of our minds.

Whedon’s voyage into television with the genre-blending and -bending *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and his subsequent turn



into the darker fantasy-scape of *Angel* (1999–2004) have established him as a major contributor to the art television provides and the cultural work it does. He took yet another creative step with *Firefly*, which appeared on the Fox Network in September 2002. By December, Fox had canceled the series for many reasons, all outside Whedon's control. But *Firefly* surprised some and pleased many when in 2005 the major motion picture sequel *Serenity* was released. The film is a testament to Whedon's belief in this world and to the perseverance of Whedon, his cast and crew, and the series' fans. The book you hold in your hands explores the myth as it continues to fill small and big screens around the globe.

A few decades ago, this book would have been impossible—not just because of academic resistance to positive assessments of television, but because of technological limitations: no home recording devices, no internet. On first viewing a broadcast of *Firefly*, one of the editors of this volume asked, 'How did I manage to miss the pilot?'—not knowing that everyone else had missed the pilot too, since Fox had decided not to air it. In an earlier age, viewers would have had only disordered memories of irregular broadcasts. But with the DVD of the series, the creators were able to present the work in narrative order (and the DVD reached number one in sales on Amazon.com, paving the way for the film). As those who study Shakespeare's folios can tell us, every artistic form must struggle to be born into the real socioeconomic world. Not every series is preserved as a DVD: some languish in homemade VHS recordings, and some live only in memory. Fortunately, *Firefly* and *Serenity* are not among those lost works. Indeed, we now have access to commentaries by writers, directors, actors, fans, scholars; scripts; and visual companions to enable us to mine the depths of these texts. And this is largely because of the second technological element, the internet: it was the fans, mainly through online activities, who convinced the powers-that-be that a DVD would be profitable. Both of these technologies have made possible the kind of studies presented in this book. This history and these studies should show us that Cult TV and Quality TV are not mutually exclusive terms. In fact, the editors of this book posit that in the case of *Firefly* the 'cult' has arisen *because* of the quality. This collection is a celebration and a critical examination of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, a contribution to, and further demonstration of, the substance of Whedon's work and of television studies.

‘. . . *Some idiot killed it*’

Perhaps the perfect length for a television series to be taught in a college or university would be fifteen hours—one hour for each week of a typical semester. Fifteen hours of *Firefly* were shot before it was canceled, and the sequel *Serenity* adds only two hours. The Fox executives who killed *Firefly* probably did not intend to increase its longevity, but in one of the ironies of cultural history, they may have done so, all unwitting. (Surely, wit had nothing to do with it.) No one who admires *Firefly* is glad it was canceled so soon, but admirers can all tell tales of people who started viewing the DVD version and were taken over by it, watching it all in one weekend. The length of *Firefly* and *Serenity* is inviting: there are enough hours for viewers to immerse themselves in this world, but not so many as to daunt newcomers. So from the perspective of those who view solely for aesthetic and moral pleasure and those who view with a desire to study excellent work, *Firefly/Serenity*’s length is, to put it simply, quite handy. We edit this book in the expectation that television of high quality will, like the dramatic literature preceding it, be studied for centuries to come. Executive producers Joss Whedon and Tim Minear may find that *Firefly/Serenity*’s length helps to keep it a lively force in the television canon.

*‘I got nine people here all wantin’ to breathe’*: Characters

The characters of *Firefly/Serenity* are indelibly likeable. When one of the editors of this volume persuaded her mother, June Lee Tugman Wilcox, to watch several hours of the series, the question ‘Which is your favorite character?’ left her puzzled. As soon as she thought of one, she said, she then thought it was another. (She finally settled on Kaylee. Or Wash.) Her difficulty indicates the strength of all the characters—a strength that derives from their disarming humanity. This humanity comes not only from Whedon, the original creator of the characters, but also from the other writers (Tim Minear, Jane Espenson, Drew Z. Greenberg, Ben Edlund, Jose Molina, Cheryl Cain, and Brett Matthews—half of them *Buffy* or *Angel* writers), and others, such as directors Whedon, Minear, and *Buffy* alums Marita Grabiak, David Solomon, and James Contner; director of photography David Boyd; editor Lisa Lassek; and, of course, the actors.

There are nine regulars on *Firefly*. Whereas Whedon's *Buffy* is a young woman turned superhero and *Angel* is a vampire villain turned superhero, *Firefly*'s Captain Malcolm Reynolds (Nathan Fillion) is, from beginning to end, just a person—sometimes heroic, sometimes un-. *Angel* helps us deal with our darkness; and perhaps a series like *Buffy*, focusing on what a young woman has to face, needed a superhero to show the kind of strength life takes; but Mal is strictly human. He is the leader of a crew who scrape a living on the frontier planets by smuggling, thieving, and, on occasion, serving as hired guns. He and his first mate Zoe (Gina Torres) are war buddies, veterans. Where he is a smart aleck, she is usually serious; both are intelligent, strong, and loyal. Zoe's loving husband Hoban 'Wash' Washburne (Alan Tudyk) is the character most like Whedon in this series ('I'm the funny one,' he says in 'Heart of Gold,' 1.13)—making his fate in *Serenity* all the more thought-provoking. (N.B. We use *Serenity* to indicate the film, 'Serenity' for the pilot episode, and *Serenity* for the vessel.) The big lug of muscle who is *Serenity*'s main gun hand is Jayne Cobb (Adam Baldwin), who'll shoot you in a minute but loves the ugly hat his mother knitted him. The genius mechanic of the ship is sweet-natured Kaylee Frye (Jewel Staite). One of the most touching scenes in the pilot shows Jayne crouched unseen, watching in concern as Kaylee is operated on. Someone good enough to reach Jayne's feelings must be kind indeed. Four other characters are passengers who become, in effect, crew and family. Shepherd Derrial Book (Ron Glass) has just left a monastery to 'walk [the world] . . . for a spell' as a missionary; he finds his mission on *Serenity*, and his mysterious past lends him physical and spiritual strength to help with many of their problems. The verbally and visually elegant Inara Serra (Morena Baccarin), a registered Companion, is of a higher social status than the crew; a well-educated, Academy-trained professional, she is a courtesan who, by the laws of her guild, gets to choose her clients and is very well paid by them. Like Book's, her past is mysterious. Why has she left the civilized central planets to travel with this ragtag group? (Though she clearly cares for Mal, she did not know him before she chose to rent one of *Serenity*'s shuttles as her home.) Her genuine friendship with grease-smudged Kaylee recommends her to us, and her occasional slips from decorum are more endearing than her courtesy. Joining *Serenity* at the same time as Book are two fugitives, the brilliant surgeon Simon Tam (Sean Maher) and his teenage sister River (Summer Glau), whom he has rescued from a government facility that experimented on her brain,

leaving her slightly mad though still extraordinarily intelligent (in a very non-linear fashion). Simon is the more engaging because, despite his good looks and wealthy background, he is wonderfully disastrous in social interaction—especially with Kaylee, who is charmed by him from the start, but whom he unintentionally offends again and again. Without these characters, *Firefly* would not be worth watching; but of course the characters grow within the text.

### Stagecoach and Star Wars: Genres

Whedon is known for successfully mating disparate genres. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* mixes horror, comedy, fantasy, teen drama, and more; *Angel* mixes horror, noir detective stories, and more; and *Firefly* mixes science fiction and Western and more. Whedon notes that he wrote the series theme song before he wrote the pilot, and from the moment the guitar strings sound, followed by the fiddle and the voice of Sonny Rhodes, the show's Western heritage is announced. The opening credits combine the two genres, closing with a shot of a spaceship flying low over thundering horses, with creator Joss Whedon's name in burning letters (evoking the burning title letters of the Western series *Bonanza*, 1959–73). While Gene Roddenberry sold *Star Trek* as 'Wagon Train to the Stars' (Whitfield 23), *Firefly*, as many have noted (see Erisman), harks back to *Stagecoach*, with its outlaw hero played by John Wayne (Mal has inherited his tight pants), his beloved prostitute with a heart of gold, the humorous Andy Devine on the driver's box, the doctor, the preacher type, and so on. (And June Lee Tugman Wilcox suggests that Jayne's name seems an amalgamation of *John* and *Wayne*.) While *Star Trek* and *Wagon Train* proffer worthy authority figures, both *Firefly* and *Stagecoach* suggest that we live in a world with a flawed system. (As he notes in the *Serenity* commentary, Whedon consulted his film professor Jeanine Basinger, who reminded him of the tradition of noir Westerns, another genre blending.) *Firefly* follows the Western historical pattern in that it is set after the time of a civil war. The Alliance supported Unification of all planets (cf. the Union in the nineteenth-century U.S. Civil War); the border worlds, the frontiers (visually presented as dusty towns in deserts, with horses and cows, Old West-style) fought against centralized government, calling themselves Independents or Browncoats. The defeated Browncoats can, of course, be compared to the Southerners who have migrated

to the Old West. But Whedon tries to cut off sharply any connection to slavery in this parallel: though Mal is very willing to play fast and loose with Alliance law, he is repeatedly shown objecting to slavery; for example, in ‘Shindig’ (1.4) he makes a virtue of stealing from slave traders. The Western elements of *Firefly* remind us of the reality of the physical world we inhabit, with all its pleasures and difficulties. In this world, a single strawberry is for a moment the center of the universe (and the screen); when Kaylee eats it, we know how rare it must be, and how much she values every bite—as should we all. We feel Zoe’s longing for a real bath; we share the doctor’s dismay as he steps in a cow patty. There are few more delightful moments than Mal and Inara, in Espenson’s ‘Shindig,’ sitting above the cargo bay sipping ‘very fresh’ wine and surveying a herd full of smuggled cattle in the bowels of their spaceship.

The spaceship, science fiction elements contribute to (among other things) the fast-action fun of the series. ‘Does George Lucas need a photo of that?’ we hear someone joke in *Serenity*’s ‘Future History’ DVD feature. *Firefly* has its share of space battles (though it has more gunfights). But Whedon and Minear dwell on the grubbier, cantina-scene elements. The cleaner, shinier places seem to belong to those in power. And although Whedon has made a point of saying that the Alliance has its virtues (Inara, for example, supported Unification), scenes on the Alliance ships recall Darth Vader’s Imperial vessels, in terms of equipment, uniforms, and character interactions. Whedon and Minear use even the science fiction parts (as, in fact, do all good science fiction creators) to make their characters seem real. Consider, for example, an allusive scene in *Serenity* that echoes the first *Star Wars*. Obi-Wan Kenobi shuts down the power terminal, a unit standing in emptiness that seems to fall away forever around it. Minutes later Luke and Leia, escaping Imperial troops, skid to a halt in front of another cavernous space, shoot it out with the troops, and then swing across the emptiness, Errol Flynn-style. In *Serenity*, Mal must get to the power generator of Mr. Universe’s station; it is structured like Obi-Wan’s, a tall tower with a dangerous gap around it; when Mal sees it, there is even a brief echo of *Star Wars* music, a quotation of high-pitched strings. The pursuing Alliance Operative catches up with him, and Mal, like Luke and Leia, has a gunfight; but it starts with his being shot in the back. And when Mal crosses the emptiness, he does not glide like Errol Flynn; he falls from chain to chain, damaged and graceless. This is Whedon’s space.

### 'The tenth character': Visuals/setting

Part of the reason for the human-sized heroism is the use of visual placement in terms of editing, lighting, *mise-en-scène*, and production design. Occasionally there are moments of glorious beauty; when in *Serenity* we glimpse Inara at the Companion Training House, she looks as though she is standing in a Maxfield Parrish painting. But most of *Firefly/Serenity* takes a much humbler place. Central to the effect is the spaceship *Serenity* itself. Production designer Carey Meyer had worked with Whedon for many years on *Buffy* when he was asked to design *Serenity*. As Whedon has often noted, the levels of the vessel are contiguous, a unified set, which enhanced the realism for the actors and—when long hand-held camera shots were used—for viewers as well. Whedon has repeatedly called *Serenity* 'the tenth character.' *Serenity* is, like many of those sailing in her, more worthy than she appears. The most positive adjective in the *Firefly* world is 'shiny'; *Serenity* is not. Her pieces fall off and break, but somehow she keeps flying. And she is home. Scenes around the long kitchen table are as warm as any family gathering ever shown, and sometimes as cranky or raucous. The interactions at this table represent much more: so, for instance, when Mal tells Jayne to leave it after a careless insult, this small ostracism threatens a larger one; or when Simon is brought a birthday cake (or birthday protein pile), we know something about his acceptance among the family of crew. The dinner table is also the conference table; it is where all major decisions are discussed and stories are told, whether for a laughing wake after the death of a war buddy or a solemn explanation of River's history. Mal always insists on his prerogative, as captain, to decide; but time and again he is shown as leading with the consensus of the kitchen-table majority. *Serenity* is a *Firefly*-class vessel; a firefly gives us a small natural light in the darkness. The warmth of *Serenity*'s kitchen often shines that light.

### 'No one's getting left': Themes

In the opening to the two-part *Firefly* pilot, we see Mal and Zoe struggling against ferocious odds in the Battle of Serenity Valley. The segment closes with their realization that they and their fellow soldiers are being left behind as the rest of their army retreats. The theme of loyalty pervades the *Firefly* 'verse, as it does Whedon's other worlds.

Even in great difficulty, the *Firefly* folk will go back for one of their own. When they return for River and Simon after being forced to leave them temporarily in ‘Safe’ (1.5), Simon repeatedly asks why. ‘You’re on my crew. Why are we still talking about this?’ the captain replies. Similarly, Zoe refuses to leave the captain in ‘Out of Gas’ (1.8); and when Mal learns that Jayne has tried to collect a reward for betraying River and Simon, he nearly kills him.

When River and Simon are separated from the rest in ‘Safe,’ River tells Simon, ‘Daddy’s coming.’ The episode is intercut with scenes of the Tams’ earlier family life, and one might think River is referring to their father; but she could just as easily be referring to Mal, who does—unlike Mr. Tam—come for them. *Firefly* gives us another of Whedon’s ‘Chosen Families,’ as Jes Battis calls them; and the meaning of family, with all its complexities, problems, and rewards, is explored. When Saffron sneers at the idea of genuine feeling, Mal points out that he has prevailed against her because ‘I got people with me, people who trust each other, who do for each other and ain’t always looking for the advantage’ (‘Our Mrs. Reynolds’). As Nathan Fillion says, ‘He knows what’s important and that’s what Saffron was able to teach our audience about Malcolm Reynolds’ (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:175). Mal and the other *Firefly* folk also know what’s not important; they are willing to do without security and scrape out a life on the edge of the law and civilization in order to maintain some measure of independence. They honor and support others, such as Nandi in ‘Heart of Gold,’ who feel the same. These are just a few of the important themes in the series; many more are explored in the chapters of this volume.

*‘. . . If you’d prefer a lecture, I’ve a few very catchy ones prepped’*

As is always the case with the work of Whedon and company, there is a rich variety of material. The chapters here are grouped into eight sections: Language and Rhetoric; Gender; Genre; Social and Cultural Themes; Religion and Morality; Music; Visuals; and Fans, Transition, and the World Outside. Many of the chapters cover multiple categories.

Any work by Whedon and his collaborating writers is marked by memorable language. In the first chapter, Cynthia Masson identifies the classical rhetorical techniques employed with sophisticated skill by

Inara and others, revealing their significance for power and relationships. Susan Mandala, in Chapter 2, examines the integration of Chinese language into the characters' dialogue, and argues that this usage implies an important and positive social theme which may, unfortunately, have contributed to the series' cancellation. Alyson R. Buckman, in the third chapter, provides a transition to the section on gender with her work on the feminist implications of the non-linear language of *River*.

Whedon and company are also well-known for work on gender; Whedon not only writes with feminist goals, but also acts on them in organizations such as Equality Now. Laura L. Beadling, in the fourth chapter, examines various roles of women and issues of feminism/postfeminism, focusing on Zoe, Saffron, and Kaylee. Andrew Aberdein evaluates Inara in terms of the historical role of the hetaira and questions of power. And in Chapter 6, David Magill argues that while Book and Wash do destabilize traditional masculinity, Mal gives the most positive representation of masculinity overall.

The masterful mixture of genre in Whedon has already been discussed in this introduction, and the fourth section delves much further. Sharon Sutherland and Sarah Swan analyze the use of themes from classic and feminist dystopias, as well as from post-9/11 work. In the eighth chapter, Lorna Jowett sets *Firefly* within the 'steampunk' genre of science fiction and the 'retro-fitting' combination of past with future, while investigating the concatenation of the embodied physical with the technological. Mary Alice Money pays particular attention to visual and auditory echoes of earlier genres in Chapter 9, focusing on Tim Minear's 'Out of Gas' (the favorite episode of many on both sides of the screen).

Social and cultural themes can be found in almost every one of the chapters. In the section devoted to them, J. Michael Richardson and J. Douglas Rabb take on the controversial presentation of the Reavers in terms of the Western setting, arguing that *Firefly/Serenity* as a whole works against a simplistic imputation of savagery to Native Americans. Jeffrey Bussolini examines *Serenity* as a critique of current U.S. imperial politics and economic power, especially in terms of pharmaceuticals and the Pax.

More than one book has been devoted entirely to the discussion of religion in Whedon's work. In Chapter 12, Rhonda V. Wilcox discusses his reworking of the patterns of Original Sin in *Serenity*, explicating several allusive images that carry out the themes. Gregory Erickson next moves to Whedon's own atheist beliefs and their complex



representation of moral possibilities in *Firefly*, including another look at the significance of the Reavers.

One of the reasons for Whedon's success is his ability to attract collaborators of high quality, and that has always included musicians. Neil Lerner, in Chapter 14, explores the delicately effective scoring for another of the very best episodes, Whedon's 'Objects in Space' (1.14), and contemplates the sometimes troubling, paradoxical racial implications of its aural allusions. Christopher Neal then discusses several musical elements, including both the *Firefly* theme and 'The Ballad of Jayne,' in terms of the thematic suggestions of their musical patterns.

Of Whedon's three series, *Firefly* is perhaps the strongest visually. Two chapters cover important visual elements in the series. This introduction includes some commentary on the Western setting and the *Firefly* ship; Barbara Maio, in the sixteenth chapter, goes into much more detailed analysis of the design style of the series and film and the filmic/television history on which they draw. Matthew Pateman focuses on a very different visual element, giving a detailed analysis of the rhetorical and narrative implications of the *mise-en-scène* of certain deaths in 'Serenity' (1.1), 'The Train Job' (1.2), and *Serenity*.

One of the most important aspects of this particular Whedon creation is, of course, its transition from canceled series to major motion picture, buoyed by the fans' enthusiastic and very active support. Many consider *Firefly* to be stronger than *Serenity*. Whedon himself says, 'I will always miss *Firefly*. I adore *Serenity*, but it is a different animal' (Bernstein 12). Most of the work in this volume is devoted to *Firefly*, though a significant portion is spent discussing some of the virtues of the film. In Chapter 18, Stacey Abbott posits the increasing aesthetic significance of television in her discussion of this transition from television to film; she also explores the change of techniques (both visual and narrative) for the shift. We close the book with Tanya R. Cochran's discussion of that important element of the *Firefly/Serenity* story, the extraordinary activism of the fans. She discusses the actions, identity, and power of the Browncoats, exploring the complex interactions of fans and media producers.

*'Yes, this is a fertile land, and we will thrive'*

Whether you are a media scholar who is interested in genre, a humanities professor who might use this text in a course, a die-hard

fan who purchases everything connected with your favorite speculative universe, a fan-scholar who maintains a thought- and discussion-provoking website, a scholar-fan who studies Whedon's work, or even a stranger to the Whedonverse who stumbled upon this volume, we envisioned our book with you in mind. We do not presume that the authors herein reach the depths of *Firefly/Serenity*, nor do they expect to. For example, a *Slayage* special issue on *Firefly/Serenity* is planned for 2008. In fact, much work is yet to be done on all of Whedon's texts (including the graphic novel *Fray*, the comic book series *Astonishing X-Men*, and another season of *Buffy*, also appearing in comic book form), and we expect much work is yet to come on texts we look forward to, beginning with the television series *Dollhouse* and the film *Goners*. The ground that Whedon has shared with us is fertile and, as *Buffy* scholarship has shown, many thrive on it.

For those who know well the setting, characters, and themes of *Firefly/Serenity*, we hope getting reacquainted has felt like coming home; for those who are meeting the series, film, and characters for the first time, we have included these introductions to orient you and whet your appetite. For the same reasons, we conclude with a series/film guide. May it welcome you to *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*.

## 'They Tried to Kill Us, and Here We Are': Episode and Film Guide

### Cast

Captain Malcolm Reynolds:	Nathan Fillion
Zoe Washburne:	Gina Torres
Hoban 'Wash' Washburne:	Alan Tudyk
Inara Serra:	Morena Baccarin
Jayne Cobb:	Adam Baldwin
Kaylee Frye:	Jewel Staite
Shepherd Derrial Book:	Ron Glass
Doctor Simon Tam:	Sean Maher
River Tam:	Summer Glau

## Episodes

### **1.1 ‘Serenity,’ Parts 1 and 2, writ., dir. Joss Whedon— 20 December 2002**

‘Serenity,’ the original pilot, opens in mid-battle (led by Malcolm and Zoe) in Serenity Valley. We see the captain’s face fall, along with his faith, as he realizes that help isn’t coming and the Alliance will prevail. Cutting to six years later, we meet the motley crew—Mal, Zoe, Jayne, Wash, and Kaylee—in the midst of salvaging an abandoned ship. When their current job goes awry because of Alliance intervention, they are forced to take on paying passengers: Book, Simon and River, and Dobson, a plain-clothed Alliance affiliate. When Dobson’s identity is revealed, a gun scuffle ensues, leaving Kaylee wounded and Mal to decide between dumping the fugitive siblings or saving Kaylee, between complying or running.

### **1.2 ‘The Train Job,’ writ. Joss Whedon and Tim Minear, dir. Joss Whedon—20 September 2002**

In the quickly written episode that the network required to be broadcast out of order as the pilot, Mal and crew are hired by the nefarious Niska to steal two boxes of Alliance goods from a moving train, which they do with a fair amount of skill and bravado. But when Mal discovers the goods are much-needed medical supplies for settlers, he knows he has to choose the people over getting paid.

### **1.3 ‘Bushwhacked,’ writ., dir. Tim Minear—27 September 2002**

The crew encounters a derelict ship that harbors a lone survivor of a Reaver attack. Mal calls for a rescue/salvage job. When the Alliance catches up to and boards *Serenity* looking for River and Simon, Mal must convince the commander all is on the up-and-up. When the survivor begins transforming himself into a Reaver by killing his Alliance doctors and desecrating his own flesh, Mal assures the commander that he (Mal) is their only hope.

**1.4 ‘Shindig,’ writ. Jane Espenson, dir. Vern Gillum—  
1 November 2002**

After their harrowing encounter with the fledgling Reaver and the Alliance, the crew takes a job that requires transporting cargo (a herd of cattle) between planets. To complete the task, Mal must attend a high-society ball that Inara is also attending. When her client Atherton Wing verbally degrades Inara, Mal punches him, a choice resulting in a swordfight to defend the Companion’s honor. Meanwhile, the local fence Badger holds the others hostage until the action is resolved.

**1.5 ‘Safe,’ writ. Drew Z. Greenberg, dir. Michael Grossman—  
8 November 2002**

Mal and crew attempt to unload their bovine cargo. To keep the job uncomplicated, Mal sends most of the crew into town. The job unravels when local authorities get involved. The Tams disappear, while Book is wounded in a gunfight over the cattle. The crew is forced to leave the planet in search of help for Book but later returns to rescue River and Simon from the locals who have marked River as a witch worth a stake-burning.

**1.6 ‘Our Mrs. Reynolds,’ writ. Joss Whedon, dir. Vondie Curtis  
Hall—4 October 2002**

Life on Serenity is upset when, after ridding a planet of its bandits and celebrating their success with the locals, the crew wakes to find a new passenger on board. Somewhere between the drinking, the dancing, and the passing out, Mal got himself hitched to Saffron. Much trouble ensues when Saffron turns out to be a con artist who disables the ship for her associates so they can incinerate the crew with an electrical charge and then salvage Serenity.

**1.7 ‘Jaynestown,’ writ. Ben Edlund, dir. Marita Grabiak—  
18 October 2002**

On Canton to recover some hidden loot, the Serenity folk discover that Jayne has a local reputation as a hero to the Mudders who subsist in the town. To the crew’s surprise, the Mudders literally sing his praises. Meanwhile, Inara beds Fess, the virginal son of a local magistrate; River and Book converse over River’s attempt to ‘fix’ the shepherd’s

Bible; and Jayne gets help dealing with the unexpected problems of being mythic.

**1.8 ‘Out of Gas,’ writ. Tim Minear, dir. David Solomon—  
25 October 2002**

Through Mal’s flashbacks, ‘Out of Gas’ offers us a look into the past purchase of *Serenity* and the assembling of her crew. Mal sends his crew away from the failing *Serenity* then secures a salvific gadget from a passing ship, but not before being double-crossed and shot prior to turning the tables on his assailants. Time is of utmost importance if Mal is to survive the loss of oxygen and the cold, to live long enough to repair his beloved ‘boat.’

**1.9 ‘Ariel,’ writ. Jose Molina, dir. Allan Kroeker—15 November  
2002**

The crew cautiously returns Inara to the central planet Ariel for her annual Alliance physical exam/license renewal. Simon convinces Mal to let him smuggle River into the facility so that he can ‘borrow’ their equipment; this is Simon’s chance to assess his sister’s condition. Mal agrees because Simon suggests helping them steal medications that will bring a high profit on the black market. Of course, events do not go as planned. Jayne attempts to sell out the Tams but is himself double-crossed by the Alliance, leaving him to convince Mal to take him back after everyone else is safely aboard.

**1.10 ‘War Stories,’ writ. Cheryl Cain, dir. James Contner—  
6 December 2002**

Niska, who hired the crew for the train job they reneged on, decides to dole out some revenge. Wash and Mal are captured by Niska’s henchmen, tortured, and threatened with death, before Zoe leads a rescue mission to save them. In the process, the audience learns that Book is surprisingly adept at wielding a weapon and River is a sure shot even with her eyes closed.

**1.11 ‘Trash,’ writ. Ben Edlund, Jose Molina, and Vern Gillum—  
Unaired**

After an opening shot of Mal naked and alone in the desert, we flash back to Saffron resurfacing and convincing Mal and a very reluctant crew to join her in a heist of an estate owned by a collector of artifacts from Earth-That-Was (notably a valuable antique laser gun, the Lassiter). What follows is an intricate plan, Saffron’s attempt to con the Serenity folk once again. But as events unfold, we find that the crew had its own plan to deceive Saffron. In the end, Inara leaves Saffron in the garbage bin used to smuggle the Lassiter and the crew picks up the abandoned and naked Mal before getting on its way.

**1.12 ‘The Message,’ writ. Joss Whedon and Tim Minear, dir.  
Tim Minear—Unaired**

At a bustling space station, the crew picks up its mail. Jayne receives a knitted hat and letter from his mom, and Mal and Zoe get the body of their former war buddy Tracey. But Tracey, who has requested they convey him home for burial, is only in a death-like state and is escaping Alliance officers who track down Serenity and attempt to board. In the process, Tracey is wounded and takes Kaylee hostage before Mal himself shoots Tracey. Ironically fulfilling his word, Mal and crew deliver the body to Tracey’s parents.

**1.13 ‘Heart of Gold,’ writ. Brett Matthews, dir. Thomas J.  
Wright—Unaired**

The crew helps defend a brothel against a local tyrant who will take the entire establishment down if he is not allowed to collect the child he has conceived with one of its whores. Mal goes at the request of Inara, who has been contacted by Nandi, a former Companion and friend of hers. The action seems straightforward: Rance Burgess and his cronies are the only enemies to deal with. But the plot is complicated when Nandi and Mal bed each other and, after the standoff with Burgess is resolved, Inara announces her intention to leave Serenity.

**1.14 ‘Objects in Space,’ writ., dir. Joss Whedon—13 December 2002**

Unbeknownst to the crew, *Serenity* is boarded by a bounty hunter who desires the reward offered for River. Stealthily, chillingly, he takes the crew hostage one by one. It is River herself who, by pretending to become the ship, saves the day and proves herself capable of occasional sanity. The bounty hunter is last seen floating through space as the crew truly embraces River and Simon as family.

Film

***Serenity, writ., dir. Joss Whedon—30 September 2005***

***Additional cast***

The Operative: Chiwetel Ejiofor  
Mr. Universe: David Krumholz

An operative of the Alliance is sent to retrieve the psychic River; she knows some of the government’s top secrets, having been in the presence of high officials. What she knows may alter government as they know it, may change the ‘verse. The *Serenity* crew must decide if what is stored in River’s brain is worth dying for.

LANGUAGE AND  
RHETORIC





# 1. 'But She Was Naked! And All Articulate!'

## The Rhetoric of Seduction in *Firefly*

CYNTHIA MASSON

Thus took he purpos loves craft to suwe.

(Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 1.379)

Saffron is able to seduce Malcolm Reynolds because she is not only beautiful but also well spoken: naked, and articulate, as Mal explains to the crew to justify his failure to resist Saffron's sexual temptations in 'Our Mrs. Reynolds' (1.6). The progression toward seduction of the flesh via seduction with the word is an ancient art—arguably reaching a crescendo in the Middle Ages with works such as the twelfth-century *The Art of Courtly Love* or fifteenth-century *The Craft of Lovers*.<sup>1</sup> These works, among others, give advice on how to articulate love and desire. Love is an art, a craft, a rhetorical construction—so much so that separating artifice from sincerity becomes virtually impossible for the object of affection. 'The game of narrative seduction,' asserts Akiko Tsuchiya in regard to textual and sexual construction, 'is, unquestionably, a game of power' (284). Traditional rhetorical artifice, along with its inherent power, is part of the culture of seduction in *Firefly*. Companions, in particular, are well trained in this arena: Inara is able to recognize Saffron's rhetorical ploys only too well because she, like Saffron, is 'a player' ('Our Mrs. Reynolds'). Analysis of the language of seduction used by Inara, Saffron, and Nandi reveals not only that *Firefly*'s Companions are skilled rhetoricians but also that these working women use their rhetorical skills to maintain a degree of control within the power struggles of this final frontier.

Some *Firefly* scholarship acknowledges Inara's skill at the artifice of seduction by pointing out a memorable scene in which Inara is seemingly *not* being artificial. Both Joy Davidson and Nancy Holder read Inara's love scene with the female Councilor in 'War Stories' (1.10) as *sincere*. Davidson contends, 'With the Councilor . . . Inara was able to shed pretenses and, we can only hope, revel in the splendor of shared intimacy' (125); similarly, Holder describes this scene as one in which 'Inara and her client agreed that they would lay aside expectations to perform or be "on" since they are two women' (149). I mention these two readings in particular because I disagree with them. Inara's rhetorical artifice is *so* good in this scene that she fools not only the Councilor but also, apparently, some of the spectators. As I will illustrate, when analyzed rhetorically in comparison with other Companion seduction scenes, Inara's lesbian love scene is yet another example of rhetorical artifice.

Inara's introduction in *Firefly*'s 'Serenity' (1.1) is blatantly sexual: we see her in bed, a young man in the throes of intercourse on top of her. Inara, apparently enjoying herself, moans, 'Oh—Oh—Oh my god—Oh—.' We do not learn of her Companion status until the next scene, when the topic comes up in her post-coital discussion with the man. For the audience, knowledge of Inara's professional status puts the validity of her sexual pleasure into question. Notably, the man's accusations of deception involve neither Inara's sexual nor her linguistic responses. Thus, when she says, 'The time went too quickly,' he does not criticize her use of such a stock phrase but instead sarcastically responds, 'Your clock's probably rigged to speed up and cheat us out of our fun.' Though he suspects artifice, he critiques the one element of their encounter that Inara would likely *not* have been able to feign. Yet their brief conversation makes Inara's rhetorical artifice clear to the viewers. She does not engage in meaningful conversation; instead, she speaks mainly in pithy sentiments (*sententia*<sup>2</sup>) that verge on cliché: 'Pictures can't capture it'; 'I wanted to see the universe.' Such sentiments are typical of politely phrased small talk—an aspect of verbal etiquette in which a Companion surely would be well versed.

Indeed, this aspect of Inara's rhetorical training can be seen again in her conversations with Atherton Wing, her client in 'Shindig' (1.4): 'What a flattering invitation'; 'I'm delighted to say I'll be there'; 'You're a generous man.' Inara never has a *real* conversation with a client—one in which she reveals who she is or what she wants. Even when Atherton makes an arguably inappropriate statement about her sexual

allure (remarking that all the men at the party wish they were in her bed), Inara politely diverts the conversation to a desire for wine. In doing so, she illustrates the rhetorical strategy known as *heterogenium*.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, Atherton does not notice Inara’s verbal artifice at all. Instead he makes note of her blushing (which could well be a misreading of her anger or embarrassment) and remarks that she is ‘a very singular woman,’ whom he admires ‘more and more.’ Inara, clearly, is very good at her job.

In ‘Jaynestown’ (1.7), Inara’s rhetorical skill is evident in conversations with both Magistrate Higgins and his son, Fess. With Magistrate Higgins, she initially speaks in a type of proverbial cliché (or *paroemia*<sup>4</sup>): ‘Every problem, Mr. Higgins, is an opportunity in disguise.’ With Fess, she appears to forgo both *sententia* and *paroemia*, but her rhetorical training is nonetheless evident. She knows precisely what to say to Fess (or in his presence) because she knows what he needs to hear. Magistrate Higgins has hired Inara to fix Fess’s ‘problem’—he is twenty-six and a virgin.<sup>5</sup> More problematic, however, is the way Magistrate Higgins continues to assert his domineering parental control over Fess even in private matters. Inara immediately understands this and, in the presence of both the Magistrate and Fess, adjusts her rhetorical strategies in order to unsettle the Magistrate’s control. Thus, when the Magistrate tries to insult his son by explaining that Fess ‘can’t find a willin’ woman himself—,’ Inara responds, ‘Mr. Higgins you’re not allowed here.’ When she then explains, ‘Only your son belongs here,’ she effectively unnerves the Magistrate, who suddenly seems unsure how to respond: ‘Well, I’m—.’ And when, very shortly thereafter, he regains his composure and warns, ‘Now listen here, young lady—,’ Inara merely says, ‘Goodnight, Mr. Higgins.’ At each of these three attempts, the Magistrate is unable to complete his sentence; Inara, on the other hand, completes each of hers. She uses her rhetorical skill to maintain power within the verbal exchange, thereby illustrating to Fess that his father does not hold immutable control. Inara has been hired to make Fess a man; her method for doing this includes empowering the son by rhetorically disempowering the father.

Alone after the Magistrate’s departure, Inara and Fess have tea and conversation. When Fess admits the situation is ‘embarrassing’ and worries that his ‘father’s right again,’ Inara states bluntly, ‘Your father isn’t right, Fess. It’s not embarrassing to be a virgin.’ Here Inara echoes Fess’s words, thereby bonding with him on the level of diction while simultaneously flattering him through reassurance. As Marcella

Bertuccelli Papi discusses in relation to Iago's technique of echoing Othello's words: 'the echo utterance indicates that the speaker is focusing attention not so much on the content of the (interlocutor's) utterance as on its representation in the interlocutor's mind' (201). For Fess, his father's criticism of his virginity represents an emotional vulnerability, one that Inara understands and attempts to mitigate. To do so, she uses the rhetorical figure known as *antanagoge*:<sup>6</sup> she claims that virginity at Fess's age is not something embarrassing. Though her alternative understanding ('It's simply one state of being') could be considered a stock phrase from her pacify-the-virgin repertoire, Fess does not recognize the potential artifice amidst the rhetorical flattery.

Her flattery continues when she de-emphasizes the Magistrate's act of hiring a Companion for Fess and, instead, emphasizes her act of choosing Fess for herself: 'Companions choose the people they're to be with very carefully. For example, if your father had asked me to come here for him, I wouldn't have.' In what appears to be a casual example of her preferences, Inara skillfully uses *pathopoeia*<sup>7</sup> and, in doing so, successfully flatters Fess by implying that he is more attractive as a sexual partner than his father. As Elisabeth Kuhn discusses in regard to seduction strategies in blues lyrics, 'Flattery comes from the repertoire of strategies catering to positive face needs<sup>8</sup> of the hearers. A singer who croons "Girl you're so fine" tries to make the addressee more receptive' (529). In their post-coital conversation Fess asks, 'Aren't I supposed to be a man now?' Inara again echoes Fess's words and placates his fear with another proverbial saying: 'A man is just a boy who's old enough to ask that question.' Sex, she says, is 'a ritual, a symbol. . . . But it doesn't make you a man. You do that yourself.' In reference to this exchange, Joy Davidson argues, 'Inara's kind and skilled response illustrated the delicate balance of qualities she brought to her encounters. Like the sacred prostitutes of old, erotic pleasure was only a fraction of the services she rendered' (121). Inara is trained to read and respond to the client's needs, both physical and emotional.

When compared rhetorically to the scene between Inara and Fess, the lesbian love scene in 'War Stories' between Inara and the Councilor can be read as another example of Inara's skills with rhetorical seduction. The Councilor, as she is being massaged by Inara, says, 'That feels amazing. . . . That's perfect. I should have done this weeks ago.' Inara responds with a verbal echo: 'I wouldn't have been here weeks ago.' Shortly thereafter, Inara uses what appears to be a stock phrase of flattery: 'You have such beautiful skin.' At this point, the Councilor

suspects Inara is merely doing her job: she recognizes the compliment as artifice and tells Inara, 'There's no need for the show.' However, the Councilor also states her emotional need immediately thereafter: 'I just need to relax with someone who's making no demands on me.' This is the point at which Inara *appears* to open up and be honest, but her words to the Councilor comprise the very sentiments the Councilor needs (indeed, has all but directly requested) to hear. Moreover, they are a mere variation of the reassurances she gave to Fess. Whereas with Fess, Inara had to stress her preference for, and choice of, him over his father, here Inara has to stress her preference for, and choice of, a woman over a man: 'Most of my clientele is male. Do you know that? . . . If I choose a woman, she tends to be extraordinary in some way. And the fact is, I occasionally have the exact same need you do. One cannot always be oneself in the company of men.' It's the *speech* that's extraordinary: first Inara flatters the Councilor by emphasizing her uniqueness, then she bonds with her by acknowledging that their needs are identical, and finally she concludes with a gender-centered statement that she knows will be met with approval (one, I might add, that could be a stock proverbial phrase from her lesbian seduction repertoire). In her seduction of both Fess and the Councilor, Inara uses a technique similar to what Nicholas Hudson calls Lovelace's 'great strength': that is, his skill at 'disguising his artful control of drama—the art of making a focused act of rhetoric *appear* dialogic' (31). Though the Councilor was not fooled by Inara's compliment about her skin, she is unable to tell artifice from sincerity in the midst of skilled flattery and emotional bonding. 'You are so lovely,' the Councilor says, and they kiss. Thus, although Dee Amy-Chinn convincingly argues that 'this exchange . . . indicates a less pro-active style of performance,' I nonetheless contend that Inara's rhetorical strategies allow her 'once again' to *perform* rather than purely be 'cast in the role of whore as social worker' (180–1, emphasis added).

Saffron too is particularly skilled at ferreting out emotional needs. She is, as Inara explains in 'Our Mrs. Reynolds,' 'well schooled' in 'seduction. . . . She's had training, as in Companion, as in Academy.' But while Inara uses her Companion training to flatter or aid official clients, Saffron uses hers to deceive and rob unwitting victims. Mal, of course, is Saffron's principal con in this episode. Saffron immediately takes rhetorical control with Mal in a way that establishes her authority while simultaneously making herself appear vulnerable. She does this through the use of *philophronesis*<sup>9</sup> (and, arguably, *oraculum*<sup>10</sup>) in the form

of a rhetorical question. With feigned innocence in tone and physical stance, she asks Mal during their first encounter on Serenity, 'But . . . you know I'm to cleave to you?' The word 'but' and the brief pause suggest hesitancy and vulnerability; however, the words 'I'm to cleave to you' suggest a commandment of sorts, a quotation taken from another source rather than a statement of current desire. The wording puts Mal immediately into a weaker rhetorical position since he has no idea from whom or whence Saffron took this commandment and, therefore, has no idea how to respond or make a logical rebuttal. His nonsensical reply ('To-whubba-who?') indicates his complete lack of ability to respond with verbal authority. Saffron then asks, 'Did Elder Gommen not tell you?' This question again leaves Mal in the weaker position since he does not have the knowledge that Saffron clearly does. Both questions, while they appear innocent, work to discomfit Mal by implying that Saffron is knowledgeable where Mal is ignorant. Thus within mere seconds of their first encounter in Mal's territory, Saffron has achieved the upper hand.

Saffron uses another rhetorical strategy to feign submissive vulnerability and, thereby, manipulate Mal into being protective of her feelings. As a response to Mal's insistence that they are not married, Saffron says, 'I'm sorry that I shame you.' Thus, she does not argue with him by insisting they are indeed married. Instead she makes a statement that, through apology and implied embarrassment, suggests her submissiveness. In doing so, she employs both pathos and ethos in that she appeals both to Mal's emotions and character. Mal's reply, of course, is an emphatic and reassuring 'You don't shame me!' Likewise, in a subsequent conversation about their marriage, Saffron asks Mal, 'Are you gonna kill me?' She does not beg or otherwise attempt to persuade him not to kill her. Doing so would appear more assertive than asking whether he plans to kill her. Her question implies that she is willing to be killed and, thereby, emphasizes her complete submissiveness to him. This, of course, elicits another emphatic response of reassurance by Mal. Having made it clear he will not kill her, he then suggests she become more assertive: 'Someone ever tries to kill you,' Mal advises her, 'you try to kill 'em right back.' In order for Saffron's plan to work, Mal must be vulnerable enough to believe that *she* is vulnerable and that he must protect her. His susceptibility to Saffron is evident in his reply to Zoe's pointed comment about the meal Saffron has made for him: 'You know, I didn't want to make her feel— It's damn tasty!' Saffron's words and behavior have been so

effective on Mal that he uses her vulnerability (her feelings, in this case) as an excuse for his own actions.

Like Inara, Saffron is skilled at determining emotional vulnerabilities and at exploiting those vulnerabilities through skilled conversation. With a few carefully placed questions, Saffron is able to steer a conversation about work around to one about Mal's childhood. She thereby gets Mal to open up to her in a manner contrary to his general demeanor: 'Well that is odd,' Mal admits to her. 'I just don't—I'm not one talks about what's past, and here you got me—.' Though he claims here to be more verbose with her than with others, he nonetheless has lost his ability to complete his sentences or even to control what he reveals. Saffron responds to his awkwardly worded admission with yet another manipulative rhetorical question: 'Does your crew never show interest in your life?' (This question, furthermore, would be considered an example of *epiplexis*.<sup>11</sup>) The question requires Mal to consider (even if fleetingly) that his crew has let him down and to admit the possibility that Saffron can meet needs the crew cannot.

Indeed, Saffron's final seduction will include an offer to fulfill another such unmet need: sex. For this, she uses a combination of physical suggestion and rhetorical skill. Mal finds her naked in his bed, but her body is not enough of a temptation. Saffron thus reverts to textual authority (via *oraculum*) to seduce him through sexual metaphor: 'I do know my bible, sir. On the night of their betrothal the wife shall open to the man as the furrow to the plow, and he shall work in her, in and again, 'til she bring him to his full and rest him then upon the sweat of her breast.' His reply shows that he has listened to her words and appreciates the metaphors: 'Whoa. Good bible.' Notably, she uses an identical rhetorical ploy on Wash, which bears looking at for direct comparison. With Wash, rather than quoting her bible, she outlines a myth about Earth-That-Was: 'That when she was born, she had no sky, and was open, inviting. And the stars would rush into her, through the skin of her. Making the oceans boil with sensation. And when she could endure no more ecstasy, she puffed up her cheeks and blew out the sky.' Wash's reply echoes Mal's: 'Whoa. Good myth.' In both cases, Saffron uses textual, sexual metaphor to invite erotic response, leaving the men without the ability to utter more than a few words of awe; thus, she succeeds at capturing each victim's attention and attraction through rhetorical seduction.

The seduction of both Mal and Wash continues with yet another rhetorical strategy: the pathos of autobiographical story-telling. With



Mal, her story begins, 'I lived my life in the maiden house waiting to be married.' With Wash, she explains, 'My whole life, I saw nothing but roofs and steeples and the cellar door.' The autobiographical details work to make the men pity her. According to Kuhn's theories on blues lyrics, seduction strategies include those 'designed to make the addressee feel sorry for the singer: "I had no love in such a long time"' (529). Faced with Saffron's latest emotional appeal, both Mal and Wash are more vulnerable to Saffron's subsequent requests. To Mal, she says, 'Leave me at the nearest port. Never look upon me again. I'll make my way with the strength that you've taught me. Only let me have my wedding night.' To Wash, she says, 'A few days I'll be back to that life and gone from yours. Make this night what it should be. Please. Show me the stars.' Having won their pity, Saffron is able to use emotionally and grammatically imperative pleas on the men, convincing each in turn that he alone can provide her with the one moment of happiness for which she has waited all her tragic life. Placed side-by-side for comparison, these passages illustrate the repetitive rhetorical artifice of Saffron's seduction strategies. Neither man, however, has the advantage of such comparison; for both Mal and Wash, Saffron's words work effectively to elicit their pity and weaken their defenses. Mal kisses her (and is thereby drugged), and Wash, though able to resist her sexually because of his commitment to Zoe, turns his back just long enough to be rendered unconscious.

Only Inara can see beyond the artifice of Saffron's words to her true intentions. When she unexpectedly runs into Inara, Saffron attempts to seduce *her* through flattery: 'A Companion's life is so glamorous and strange. I wish I had the skill for such a trade.' Inara's responses to Saffron's words initially seem genuine—that is, she appears to be engaged in sincere conversation with Saffron. However, acknowledgment that Inara has seen through Saffron's deception comes as a play on words: to Saffron's question, 'You would lie with me?' Inara responds, 'I guess we've lied enough.' Thus Inara uses a pun (or, more technically, *antanaclasis*<sup>12</sup>) when she shifts the meaning of 'lie' away from the sexual innuendo implied by Saffron. In doing so, Inara momentarily takes rhetorical control from Saffron and, consequently, shatters Saffron's ability to seduce her. Of course, Saffron nonetheless manages to trick Inara one final time when she answers Inara's question—'Who are you?'—with 'Malcolm Reynolds' widow.' This, too, is a rhetorical maneuver in that Saffron's answer is unexpected and (ironically, given Inara's pun) another lie that successfully stuns

and fools Inara (who, shortly thereafter, kisses the unconscious Mal's lips and passes out beside him). Saffron's lie works on Inara because it plays on her feelings for Mal. Though Inara later tells the crew, 'You don't play a player,' she neglects to add the proviso witnessed by the audience: unless the player is emotionally vulnerable.

In 'Trash' (1.11), Mal initially appears to hold the rhetorical upper hand with Saffron. When he frisks her to check for weapons, she says suggestively, 'Mmmm. You missed a spot.' Mal responds with verbal wit, 'Can't miss a place you've never been.' As with Inara's pun on 'lie,' Mal's response here effectively denudes the sexual energy of Saffron's innuendo. Nonetheless, Mal is duped again by Saffron's 'feminine wiles,' his synonym for 'Companion training' in this episode. He even accuses Inara of using such wiles on him when she invites him into her shuttle for tea (an event, as Mal says, 'without precedent'). His definition of feminine wiles/Companion training in this scene is notable: the 'uncanny ability to make a man sweaty and/or compliant.' Having experienced Saffron's strategies firsthand, he recognizes his vulnerability to Companion seduction and thus requests of Inara, 'You just talk plainly is all.' Of course, Inara is not attempting sexual seduction here—'I'm not sleeping with you,' she reminds him—but Mal makes it clear that he knows she could seduce him with her words and that he is not going to fall victim to Companion wiles again. Ironically, Saffron is the one who manages to dupe Mal yet again in this episode. His knowledge of Companion strategies appears not to include the means to detect or resist them.

Knowing that her usual rhetorical strategies are unlikely to work on Mal this time, Saffron resorts to physical tears to convince him, once again, of her vulnerability. When he sees Saffron cry, Mal says, 'I seen you without your clothes on before. Never thought I'd see you naked.' Saffron appears worried about her reputation when, a few moments later, she requests, 'You won't tell anyone about me breaking down?' In asking this question, Saffron implies that Mal holds power over her (in the form of information that could affect her reputation). However, her artifice is shortly revealed: when Mal replies, 'I won't,' she regains the upper hand by replying, 'Then I won't tell anyone how easily I got your gun out of your holster.' Here she repeats the words 'won't tell' yet shifts the pronoun from 'you' to 'I,' thereby emphasizing her re-establishment of rhetorical and situational control. Obviously Saffron is still able to manipulate Mal long enough for him to let down his guard. She calls him 'the most gullible fool I have ever

marked' and claims, 'I played you from minute one.' Of course it is Inara (Mal's 'fail-safe') who finally foils Saffron's plan. With implied sarcasm, she says to Saffron (who is trapped in a dumpster), 'I'm a little disappointed. Some of the crew's performances weren't quite as nuanced as they could have been. I thought they might've tipped the fact that we were playing you from the second Mal took you out of that crate.' Inara gets revenge here: now she too has played a player, with the help of a good supporting cast.

Yet another player, Nandi, is introduced in the episode 'Heart of Gold' (1.13). Although Nandi is not officially a Companion (but instead runs a whorehouse), she nonetheless has Companion training. Her rhetorical skills are particularly notable in her conversations with Mal. Shortly after asking Mal if he plans to 'avail [himself] of some of our trade,' Nandi reminds him, 'I trained as a Companion,' and admits, 'I read people pretty well.' This is a power play of sorts: in acknowledging her skill, Nandi is telling Mal she can read him pretty well. Given that the next thing she brings up is Mal's emotional trigger—Inara—one assumes Nandi's skills are quite well honed.<sup>13</sup> 'She's a hell of a woman, ain't she?' Nandi asks him of Inara. Note her use of a question here, one whose goal is to elicit an emotional response from Mal. She wants to bond with him over something—the way Inara did with Fess and the Councilor—in order to build a level of trust that will eventually allow for seduction.

Moreover, Nandi, like the other Companions, uses her rhetorical skill to move verbal conversation toward physical consummation. In this episode's seduction scene, Nandi responds to Mal's remark, 'I have a confession to make,' not with an inquiry about the nature of the confession but with the witty remark, 'Maybe I should get the Shepherd.' Though she has fostered sexual insinuation throughout the dialogue in this scene, she plays on the word 'confession' to suggest a religious context. (This, as with Inara's pun on 'to lie,' is an example of *antanaclasis*.) Thus she makes an implied connection between sin and sex—ironic rhetorical foreplay given that she runs a whorehouse. Mal says, 'I ain't sinned yet,' and, shortly thereafter, Nandi admits, 'I been waiting for you to kiss me since I showed you my guns,' thus adding to the mix of sex and religion a reference to her own phallic power. Notably, Mal makes a religious reference just prior to physical intimacy in both his seduction scenes—here and back in 'Our Mrs. Reynolds.' In 'Our Mrs. Reynolds,' just before giving in to Saffron's temptations, Mal says, 'Oh, I'm gonna go to the special hell' (the very

hell mentioned earlier by Shepherd Book). Though Nandi has no way of knowing what Mal discussed in other pre-coital contexts, she is trained to read him and, here, realizes that he is willing to flirt with sin and confession as a precursor to physical pleasure. Thus, she continues to play his game by asking, 'So, my child, how long has it been since your last confession?' Perhaps such rhetorical role playing is a fetish of sorts for Mal, one that Nandi is more than willing and able to exploit.

One noticeable difference between the seduction strategies used by Companions and the seduction attempts made by other characters with one another is the degree of rhetorical success or failure. Kaylee and Simon, for example, regularly fail to advance their relationship from colleagues to lovers because they fail to communicate effectively. Take, for example, this exchange in 'Safe' (1.5), which occurs after Simon has called Serenity 'a piece of *luh-suh* [crap]':

- Kaylee:* Serenity ain't *luh-suh*.  
*Simon:* No, I—I didn't mean—  
*Kaylee:* Yeah you did. You meant everything you just said.  
*Simon:* Well, no. Uh, actually I was being ironic, so in—in—in the strictest sense—  
*Kaylee:* You were being mean . . .

What Simon understands as ironic, Kaylee understands as literal. If Simon was indeed attempting to be ironic, his use of this rhetorical technique clearly failed. Moreover, he feels the need to name (and thereby justify) the artifice of his language—something that never occurs in the Companion scenes, where the rhetorical strategies remain artfully undetected. A similar rhetorical blunder occurs in 'The Message' (1.12):

- Simon:* You're kind of a genius when it comes to machines. You always say what you mean. And your eyes are—  
*Kaylee:* Yeah? Eyes. Yeah?  
*Simon:* . . . Oh, plus, every other girl I know is either married, professional, or closely related to me, so you are more or less—you're literally the only girl in the world.  
*Kaylee:* Hmm. That's a hell of a thing to say.  
*Simon:* I was joking.

Though he not only implies literal meaning but actually uses the word 'literally,' Simon claims to have been speaking figuratively.

These scenes of miscommunication between Kaylee and Simon offer remarkable contrast to the skilled techniques of the Companions' art of seduction.<sup>14</sup>

In his discussion of the dialogues in Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, William G. Kelley sets rhetorical seduction against the commitment to Truth: 'Through the two dialogues recurs the ultimate image of untruth—false love, fakery, seduction. The ratio developing out of both dialogues is this: Love is to seduction as Truth is to rhetoric. Rhetoric is the semblance of wisdom as seduction is the semblance of love' (79). As opposed to the affection arguably displayed between Zoe and Wash, Kaylee and Simon, or even Mal and Inara, Companion seduction rhetoric reveals merely the semblance of true feelings. With regard to rhetorical seduction, Companions maintain power over their lovers. Joss Whedon and his team of writers are acutely aware of language and its power both on their shows and for their audiences. Rhetorical analysis of *Firefly's* Companions illustrates that Whedon's linguistic flair did not end with *Buffy* and that 'no power in the 'verse' is quite as powerful as well-scripted seduction.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. Representing the Future

### Chinese and Codeswitching in *Firefly*

SUSAN MANDALA

*Firefly*, Joss Whedon's innovative space Western, is set some 500 years in the future in a universe where space has been colonized and the United States and China are the two remaining superpowers (Havens 132, 134). They have formed the ruling AngloSino Alliance (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:19), a totalitarian regime that recalls the evil Empire of the *Star Wars* films. While academic criticism on the series has only recently begun to appear, a clearly emerging issue of interest is the use of untranslated Chinese. The principal characters, and others they meet on their travels, are shown to engage in bilingual codeswitching between English and Mandarin Chinese<sup>1</sup> as illustrated in these examples:

*Mal:* So what does it say in there about divorce? (Saffron runs from the room, to the infirmary.)

*Kaylee:* *Nee boo go guh, nee hwun chiou* [You don't deserve her, you fink]<sup>2</sup>

*Mal:* *Gwan nee tzi-jee duh shr* [Mind your own business] (starts after her) Everyone go back to . . . whatever.  
(‘Our Mrs. Reynolds,’ 1.6)

*Wash:* Well, that's *kwong-juh duh* [nuts], that's suicide . . .  
(‘Serenity,’ 1.1)

What do such switches mean? What do they tell the audience, viewers who may not speak Mandarin, nor have frequent experience with bilingualism and codeswitching, about the future world in which we

are invited to believe and the characters who live there? Before these questions can be addressed, it will be useful to consider a brief account of codeswitching and some of the many things it is thought to mean.

### *Codeswitching*

Codeswitching is generally defined as the alternation of two languages in the same conversation.<sup>3</sup> It is often distinguished from *diglossia*. In diglossic communities, different languages (or different varieties of one language) may co-exist, but their use is kept situationally separate with only one language being used ‘at any one time’ (Gumperz 60). In such situations, for example, one language would be reserved for use in the home, another for religious ceremonies, and so forth. Speakers in diglossic contexts are generally aware that they have switched languages (Wardhaugh 107), which is not always the case with codeswitching, where speakers tend to treat both their languages as a single entity (Gumperz 59–60).

Linguists have been interested in codeswitching for many years. As is frequently pointed out (Lipski 191; Myers-Scotton, *Social Motivations* 48; Wardhaugh 108), early speculative accounts (now long since discredited) considered it to be little more than a random performance error, a chance consequence of bilingualism. The field has moved on considerably since then, and, as Wei points out, there is now extensive literature on structural factors influencing codeswitching (‘Starting from the Right Place’). While this is a valuable field of inquiry, accounts that explore what kinds of social and interpersonal meanings speakers convey when they codeswitch are of greater interest here.

Codeswitching has been shown to convey a range of meanings that go well beyond the sense and reference of the switched items, and the fact that it occurs at all is thought to be communicatively significant (Gardner-Chloros et al.; S. Gross; Myers-Scotton, *Social Motivations*). That is, codeswitching does not occur simply because it can (Gardner-Chloros et al. 1309). Rather, speakers choose to use it strategically to achieve specific communicative goals.<sup>4</sup> These goals, many and varied, widely discussed, and often arrived at through contrasting methodologies,<sup>5</sup> can nevertheless be grouped into three broad categories: 1) affirming or negotiating greater intimacy or distance between speakers (Brown and Levinson; Gumperz; Myers-Scotton, *Social Motivations*; Wei, ‘How Can You Tell?’; Williams); 2)

asserting or yielding power or status (Brown and Levinson; S. Gross; Myers-Scotton, 'Explaining'; Williams); and 3) claiming or affirming membership in bilingual and bicultural communities (Myers-Scotton, *Social Motivations*, 122–3).

*Chinese and codeswitching in Firefly: The representation of character and interpersonal relationships*

Given that codeswitching is not a mistake or an accidental outcome of bilingualism but a communicatively meaningful choice in conversation, what does its representation in *Firefly* communicate to the audience? What are viewers invited to infer when they encounter untranslated Mandarin in the dialogue? Short's observation that drama dialogue is 'arranged to be overheard on purpose' is useful in this discussion of represented codeswitching (149). As Short suggests, drama dialogue embeds one level of discourse within another, and thus works on at least two levels. At one level, 'character speaks to character' and messages go back and forth between them; at the same time, however, 'this discourse is part of what the playwright "tells" the audience' (149).<sup>6</sup> When the main characters in *Firefly* codeswitch, sometimes what they tell the audience is the same as what they tell each other, and many of these meanings are to do with how the characters relate to each other in terms of interpersonal intimacy, distance, and status. The folk of Serenity are not the well-oiled, highly disciplined *Star Trek* crew who follow the quasi-militaristic procedures of the Federation, but more of a family (Whedon, in Havens 141), and many of their interpersonal relationships are correspondingly intimate. Kaylee is not only the ship's mechanic but also a daughter-figure to Mal, and codeswitches into Chinese as instrumental in affirming this dynamic. In the example below, for instance, Mal switches into Chinese for what Brown and Levinson would term a 'positively polite' endearment. It is positively polite because Mal's expression conveys speaker closeness and friendship in order to soften the potential effect of his request:<sup>7</sup> 'Don't go working too hard on that crush *xiao mei mei* [little sister]. Doc won't be with us for long' ('Serenity'). Notice, however, that this same strategy is employed, and the same dynamic signaled, when only English is used: 'You tell me now, *little Kaylee*—you really think you can do this?' (Mal, in 'Bushwhacked,' 1.3).



Gestures also signal this relationship. Mal hugs Kaylee in a familiar non-sexual way, and is apt to kiss her on the top of her head. The convergent strategies ensure that an understanding of the relationship between Mal and Kaylee is not dependent on codeswitching alone.

Other character relationships are similarly conveyed. Inara and Kaylee are more like sisters than just shipmates. Their topics of conversation are often personal, and switches into Chinese take their place among other positively polite features, such as hearer-involvement tag questions, to affirm their closeness. This is evident when Kaylee confesses her feelings for Simon to Inara: ‘He’s just so *swai* [cute, handsome]. You wanna take a bite out of him all over, *you know?*’ (‘Safe,’ 1.5, emphasis added). Again, however, their sisterly friendship is equally well indicated in English. The first time we see them, they signal their status as warm friends with the reciprocal use of the second person singular pronoun *you*. When accompanied by gestures of warmth and sincere smiles (as on screen), this strategy is positively polite (even though it may look cold when decontextualized on the printed page):

<i>Kaylee:</i>	Hey you.	
<i>Inara:</i>	Hey you.	(‘Serenity’)

As the shooting script in *Firefly: The Official Companion* makes clear, ‘there is a sweetness between [these] two’ (1.30), and they affirm their relationship in English as well as Chinese.

Codeswitching between the characters can signal shifts in interpersonal relationships as well as affirmations of the status quo, and here too the messages that the characters exchange when they talk to each other are the same as the messages that the audience receive when they ‘overhear’ this talk. When Zoe, Mal, and Jayne leave the ship for a job, Wash initiates the following exchange:

<i>Wash:</i>	Zoe. <i>Zhu yi</i> [Watch your back]	
<i>Zoe:</i>	We will.	(‘Serenity’)

He begins with a summons that refers only to Zoe, and then switches to Chinese to express his concern with a warning addressed primarily to her. A point of conflict between Zoe and Wash, who are married, is Zoe’s respect for and deference to Mal as the captain, and this conflict emerges in Zoe’s response. She does not reciprocate Wash’s

interactional terms, but answers in English instead, taking care to include Mal (and Jayne) as well as herself in her response—‘We will.’ As with the previous interpersonal negotiations discussed, though, English-only portions of the dialogue also reflect this issue.

- Wash:* What if we just told Mal we needed a few days, 'stead of asking him?  
*Zoe:* He's the Captain, Wash.  
*Wash:* Right. I'm just the husband. (‘Serenity’)

In terms of character–character relationships, codeswitching into Chinese does not reveal anything that is not also signaled in English. This is also true of switches that assist in portraying character personality attributes.

According to one of Whedon’s own stated aims for the series, *Firefly* ‘is about nine people looking into the blackness of space and seeing nine different things’ (qtd. in Havens 147). When the nine protagonists codeswitch at the character–character level of discourse, messages about their particular traits as people are additionally conveyed at the text–audience level. A case in point is Mal. As captain, he has to make difficult decisions, and some of them have unpleasant consequences—he will, if he must, ‘shoot someone to protect his people’ (Havens 141). He is forced by circumstances to engage in activities such as smuggling, but he draws the line at human trafficking (‘Shindig,’ 1.4; ‘Our Mrs. Reynolds’) and stealing medicine from the sick (‘The Train Job,’ 1.2). He is presented as a fundamentally decent man (he comes back for Simon and River in ‘Safe,’ an episode in which we find out their own parents abandoned them), but an angry one—angry that his side lost in the interstellar civil war, angry that he now has to live in the world of the victors (Havens 140). Mal’s ‘anger issues’ make him short-tempered and liable to snap, and these traits are apparent to viewers in his linguistic behavior. He spends a lot of time cursing himself in negative assessments, such as ‘*tee wuh duh pee-goo* [kick me in the bottom],’ for hurting Kaylee’s feelings in ‘Shindig’; cursing the world at large in similar assessments, ‘*Ni ta ma de. Tian xia suoyoude ren. Dou gaisi* [Everyone under the heavens ought to die]’—said in reaction to finding out they have an Alliance spy on board in ‘Serenity’; and barking out aggravated commands that are, as Brown and Levinson would term them, ‘face-threatening’ (apt to cause offense or injury to the addressee’s positive sense of themselves), as in ‘*Ta ma de! Nimen de*

*bizui!* [Everyone shut the hell up]’ (‘Serenity’), or ‘Wash! Get down to the infirmary! *Ma-shong!* [Now, on the double]’ (‘Safe’). As Sullivan has noted, however, Mal is just as likely to behave this way in English (199): ‘What would you do in that rig? Flounce around the engine room? Be like a sheep walkin’ on its hind legs’ (‘Shindig’); ‘Just do it!’ (‘Bushwhacked’); or ‘Shut up.’ (‘Bushwhacked’).

Similar conclusions can be drawn with respect to how Wash’s personality traits are conveyed. As with much of Whedon’s work, humor is an important ingredient in *Firefly*, and Wash is self-referentially ‘the funny one’ (‘Heart of Gold,’ 1.13). As he interacts with other characters, his role as the ‘class clown’ is conveyed to the audience. As with previous examples, Chinese and English follow a convergent path here. Upon hearing a proximity alert during a futuristic basketball game the crew are playing, Wash pretends to hysteria: ‘Oh gawd! What could it beee? We’re doomed! Who’s flying this thing? (then, deadpan) Oh. Right. That’d be me. Back to work’ (‘Bushwhacked,’ stage direction as indicated in *Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:85). When he codeswitches into Chinese, this same sort of humor is evident, even during a rather serious argument with Zoe: ‘*Tai-kong suo-you duh shing-chiou sai-jin whuh duh pee-goo* [All the planets in space flushed into my butt], was I ever not asking what the Captain thought!’ (‘War Stories,’ 1.10). Wash’s use of Chinese here does not reveal anything new about his character. He is the ‘jockey’ one in both of his languages.

### *Chinese, codeswitching, and audience alienation*

Thus far, the codeswitching in *Firefly* has not told the audience anything that is not said or conveyed in English, and this has held true whether messages at the two levels of discourse (character–character and text–audience) are the same or different. What has been asked of codeswitching generally can also be asked of its representation in *Firefly*: what is gained by using two languages that cannot be achieved with one? For a number of commentators and fans,<sup>8</sup> the Chinese in the dialogue is in many ways ‘about’ multiculturalism and multilingualism and occurs to underline the vision of the future advanced in the series. For Leigh Adams Wright, however, this is something of a failed vision. She characterizes *Firefly* as ‘entertaining but curiously empty’ (31), suggesting there is no true engagement with Asian culture(s) or

Chinese in the show. While the AngloSino Alliance is the backdrop to the entire series, none of the main roles are filled by Asian actors (30), and the ‘sprinklings of Chinese’ (29) in the dialogue, along with other references such as chopsticks, Chinese lanterns, Asian-inspired dress, and pagoda t-shirts, are little more than tokenism (31). With reference to the theorist bell hooks, Wright suggests the Asian influence in *Firefly* is not truly challenging to viewers but contained, domesticated, and ‘made safe’ for consumption (31).

While tokenism is a legitimate concern in *Firefly*,<sup>9</sup> the representation of Chinese and bilingual codeswitching in the show achieves something far more profound. While *Firefly* can only with difficulty be considered a post-colonial text, its representation of codeswitching and use of Chinese more generally is usefully discussed in terms of appropriation and abrogation (Ashcroft et al. 37–8), textual strategies observable in post-colonial writing. Both serve to reject and resist the imposition of imperial linguistic norms by de-privileging the status of standard English as the primary (or most valued) form of communication (abrogation), and by employing varieties of the language (often significantly different from the standard variety) that arise from within local communities of speakers (appropriation). While the characters in *Firefly* are engaged in codeswitching in the various ways indicated above, the audience is confronted with a group of bilingual characters equally at ease in either of their languages. Whedon’s vision of the future 500 years from now is one in which universal Chinese–English bilingualism exists, in the terms Myers-Scotton would use, as a potentially unmarked choice: bilingualism is simply part of their daily existence (*Social Motivation* 1), and the expectation is that they will codeswitch with one another. As Sullivan (198–9) has noted, the characters take the use of Chinese almost entirely for granted: only once in the entire series is the use of Chinese mentioned explicitly (‘Trash,’ 1.11), and there are no instances where the use of Chinese presents problems of understanding at the character–character level of communication. Viewers are, I suggest, invited to believe<sup>10</sup> that the characters codeswitch in much the same way that their real-world counterparts would. As Gumperz observes, speakers who codeswitch ‘communicate fluently, maintaining an even flow of talk. No hesitation, pauses, changes in sentence rhythm, pitch level or intonation contour mark the shift in code. There is nothing in the exchange as a whole to indicate that the speakers don’t understand each other. Apart from the alternation itself, the passages have all the earmarks of ordinary

conversations in a single language' (59–60). At the character–character level of communication we are witnessing appropriation as the characters codeswitch unproblematically in order to negotiate greater intimacy or distance between themselves. Appropriation might also be said to be taking place when we watch them enact their personalities (as angry, funny, etc.) equally comfortably in Chinese or English.

These instances of Chinese, however, may also be communicating another, rather different message at the text–audience level of discourse. That is, the untranslated Chinese might be taken as an act of abrogation, a rejection of monolingual English as the primary or expected language of communication. As Kreml has noted in a study of the untranslated Spanish in Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, 'a writer who intends to be read by the majority of the American public is constrained to write in English' (43). By using untranslated Spanish in an otherwise English text, McCarthy in effect presents as unmarked linguistic behavior that will, for many readers of the text, actually be marked (Kreml), and a similar choice appears to have been made with *Firefly*.

This act of abrogation is heightened, perhaps aggravated, by a number of other factors. The characters are, as Whedon has explained, very purposefully just like us: they do not have superpowers, they are not aliens, they are not products of advanced genetic engineering (Havens 133). They are ordinary people with everyday problems who just happen to inhabit a world where everyone is as comfortable in Chinese as in English, even 'the last person you'd expect' (Whedon, qtd. in 'Here's How'). Chinese is used by the cultured and sophisticated characters like Inara, as well as by those who are perhaps 'less cultured,' like Mal (Sullivan 199);<sup>11</sup> it is used by the well educated (Simon) and the poorly educated (Jayne); by the powerful (officials in the Alliance), the wealthy (Simon's father, Inara's clients), and the average (bartenders); by our protagonists, their close friends (Nandi), and their enemies (an assortment of petty criminals, hijackers, and bandits).

Consider as well that Chinese is presented at the very least as a co-official language (the automated oxygen failure warning on Serenity is in both English and Chinese), or, more likely, as the majority language, the language of greater public presence and prestige. The subtitles for the hearing-impaired on the DVDs identify Chinese as 'the Galactic language,' and this kind of status would explain why it is used right across the social strata, and in such a wide range

of contexts (at formal parties, during gunfights, while chatting with friends, in arguments with lovers, in muttered asides). It is the majority language that is also more likely to occur in writing, especially public writing, and we do, as Sullivan has observed (204), see Simon's father reading a Chinese newspaper in the episode 'Safe.' Written Chinese can also be seen in a range of official public contexts throughout the series, as Sullivan further demonstrates (in warning notices, shop signs, advertisements, and insignia on the uniforms of various Alliance officials) (202–5). While many of the switches into Chinese are emotive (negative assessments, interjections, and face-threatening acts, for example), the characters also switch into Chinese to make utterances that encode 'negative politeness' (see note 7), the linguistic expression of respectful distance that typically emerges in interactions with strangers or acquaintances (Brown and Levinson 129): in answer to a knock at her shuttle door, Inara says, '*Quing jin* [Come in.]' ('Serenity'); Mal asks a bartender, '*Ching zie lie ee bay Ng-Ka-Pei?* [Can I have one more glass of Ng-Ka-Pei, please?]' ('The Train Job'); or Agent McGinniss, an Alliance official answering an intercom summons, '*Nee hao?* [Hello?]' ('Ariel,' 1.9). Such uses are further indication of the probable majority status for Chinese among the Chinese–English bilinguals in *Firefly*.

Ashcroft et al. have also suggested that post-colonial theory can be usefully extended to texts that represent and explore the experiences of Spanish–English bilinguals in the United States (201), and it is thus unsurprising that a linguistic study of codeswitching in this literature is relevant here. As Steven Gross points out in his study of codeswitching in several of the dramatic works of Luis Valdéz, switching into a code not known by one's interlocutor can be exclusionary, a face-threatening strategy for claiming status by asserting difference. For a number of viewers, the codeswitches into Chinese in *Firefly* may potentially constitute this kind of exclusionary act. This is done with care, certainly, as the dialogue must tread a fine line between comprehensibility and alienation. Thus, there is often a dependence on lexical borrowing and switching between sentences that would not characterize actual bilingual codeswitching. In addition, entire exchanges in Chinese are kept to a minimum, and English is almost exclusively the matrix language, the main language of expression into which the Chinese forms are embedded. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of the use of Chinese is on the whole convincing when it is remembered that no representation can ever pretend to absolute authenticity.

The possible face-threatening act of alienation at the text–audience level in *Firefly* is potentially very challenging. What Ashcroft et al. suggest as the possible effect of codeswitching in a number of post-colonial texts (45, 73–4) can also be applied to the codeswitching in *Firefly*: it represents a culturally syncretic linguistic form that can (and should) undermine monolingual, monocultural complacencies. At the text–audience level of communication, the codeswitched dialogue and other uses of Chinese in *Firefly* imply a prediction about the possible loss of English as a dominant world language. *Firefly* was canceled after just fourteen episodes, and Buchanan floats a number of reasons for this, including poor scheduling decisions; short-termist, low-risk thinking by programming executives; the Western format; and the show’s resolute refusal to cast itself in the mold of *Star Trek*. Alongside these reasons, or perhaps behind or beneath them, below the level of awareness, there may also lurk a discomfort with this prediction. It may be that the rejection of monolingualism—carried as an implicit message to the audience as characters codeswitch among themselves—has more to do with *Firefly*’s undeserved cancellation than is typically supposed.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. 'Much Madness is Divinest Sense'<sup>1</sup>

#### *Firefly's* 'Big Damn Heroes' and Little Witches

ALYSON R. BUCKMAN

*Mal:* It appears we got here just in the nick of time. What does that make us, Zoe?

*Zoe:* Big damn heroes, sir.

*Mal:* Ain't we just. Sorry to interrupt, folks, but you've got something that belongs to us and we'd like it back.

*Village Patron:* This is a holy cleansing. You cannot think to thwart God's will. . . .

*Mal:* Cut her down.

*Patron:* The girl is a witch.

*Mal:* Yeah, but she's our witch, so cut her the hell down.

(*'Safe,'* 1.5)

River Tam is simultaneously portrayed in *'Safe'* as a damsel in distress to be rescued by Daddy,<sup>2</sup> and as a threatening witch<sup>3</sup> who must be destroyed. The polysemic nature of Joss Whedon's texts allows both superficially simple and complex constructions to co-exist, the latter often interrogating the former.<sup>4</sup> So it is with both Malcolm Reynolds and River Tam, seemingly traditional characters—the cowboy hero and the hysterical girl, through whom the mythologies associated with these stock characters are challenged via language, cinematography, and story. Through his reconfigurations of conventions, Whedon deconstructs masculine discourse, including the male gaze of cinema, and constructs an exemplar of feminine subjectivity.

The leader of a group of societal misfits, Captain Malcolm Reynolds determines who will be on his crew, where they will seek their 'jobs,'



and how the ship will be run. From the very first scene of ‘Serenity’ (1.1), we viewers are focused on his actions, his command of situations and his gaze through framing, screen time, close-ups, and point-of-view shots. We are dropped into the middle of the action at the Battle of Serenity Valley; these cinematographic techniques encourage us almost immediately (thirty-two seconds in) to focus on Mal as leader. The quick cuts of the camera and its unsteadiness also ready us to identify with the Independent soldiers, aka Browncoats. The last shot of this scene focuses on Mal watching the enemy’s ships descend: shot full frontal and close up, his face is halfway in darkness; we cut to a shot from his perspective of Alliance ships descending, then back to the shot of Mal’s face. Dollying backward from the scene now playing in slow motion, music plays over the sound of the battle. We are distanced from the scene and Mal, preparing us for a cut to a scene six years later: Mal is now in a spacesuit, filmed upside down. His world has been completely turned around—hence the visual metaphor—and we are positioned visually to identify with him.

Even when not physically in a scene, Mal is often the subject of discussion. He is narratively and visually constructed as the isolated hero of a failed resistance movement, an outsider rebelling against an authoritarian society—in other words, a Western hero.<sup>5</sup> In turn, the women of the show are sexualized through visual and verbal means and removed from the role of hero in accordance with both the tools of cinema and the heroic monomyth;<sup>6</sup> included in the cast of sexy female characters are a lusty mechanic, a ‘warrior woman,’<sup>7</sup> a prostitute/Companion,<sup>8</sup> and a seeming hysteric.<sup>9</sup>

We first meet the latter, River, when Mal hurries to investigate a large crate that a passenger, Dr. Simon Tam, has brought on board in ‘Serenity’; in it, he finds River in suspended animation. Curled in a fetal position, which visually presents her as a child,<sup>10</sup> she is filmed from above in a high-angle full shot—a view matching Mal’s point of view. The use of a high angle visualizes River as a vulnerable object, authorizing Mal’s reading of the situation. Mal immediately asserts her status as object; he assumes she has been purchased as a sex slave for Simon or another buyer. At this point, the male gaze—the ways in which the camera envisions the world from the viewpoint of the male hero—seems validated. Mal has been established as the hero, and River has been relegated to the role of object.

Leaving the view paused upon this image by cutting to a commercial break,<sup>11</sup> upon return River bursts from the box in long shot to escape

and/or hide; Simon attempts to calm her, asserting his role as substitute father. 'What the hell is this?' Mal asks, perplexed by the care Simon shows her, since it does not fit with his vision of the situation. 'This is my sister,' responds Simon, desexualizing the narrative verbally and through his position and body language on screen.<sup>12</sup>

We soon learn that River has been the victim of a program of experimentation by the Alliance, the patriarchal and fascist government that won the war against the Browncoats. Over the course of the series, the audience and crew gradually find out more about the modifications made to her brain, her high IQ, and psychic abilities. Although viewers' investigation of River as a mystery might suggest her objectification, as per Laura Mulvey's essay on 'Visual Pleasure,'<sup>13</sup> the process by which we learn about River works against this objectification. Even as her brother/father, Simon, is befuddled by her mysterious behavior, attempting to diagnose and hoping to 'fix' her, the audience is enabled to deconstruct this vision of River and patriarchal discourse such as the gaze.

In 'The Train Job' (1.2), for instance, Mal assures Simon he isn't worried about Simon's abilities to fend for himself; however, he asks, 'How's your sister?' Simon begins: 'One moment she seems perfectly cogent, the next . . . she speaks nonsense. It's like a child . . . so difficult to diagnose.' River is again presented as an hysterical child. However, although Mal only hears Simon's response, viewers are granted knowledge the captain and doctor do not possess, and this knowledge questions their readings of River. The camera pans out of the infirmary and moves down a corridor as River and Simon each speak in voiceover:

*River:* Two by two.

*Simon:* I still don't know what the government was trying to do with her . . .

*River:* Hands of blue.

*Simon:* So I have no idea if they succeeded.

*River's voice overlaps Simon's speech:* Two by two.

(The camera tracks in towards River in an upright fetal position in the corner of her room, muttering, 'hands of blue . . .')

Simon is the author of River's narrative at this point, constructing her as pre-symbolic (and thus lacking the subjectivity gained through language) and as a victim to be cured; the visuals seem to support this

view. However, Whedon (director and co-writer of this episode) cuts from River to an Alliance cruiser and two unknown men for the last scene. They ‘are looking for a girl—this girl.’ Whedon cuts to a shot of the blue hands of both men, one of whom is holding River’s picture, thus substantiating River’s discourse not as lunacy but as an articulation of danger; it also gives the viewer more information than either Simon or Mal, who are shown to be lacking in their understanding of River and her subjectivity.

An additional example of this gradual re-visioning of the traditional patriarchal narrative comes from ‘Bushwhacked’ (1.3). River intuits that the crew of the spaceship they encounter has been slaughtered before *Serenity* even docks with the ship. Simon does not understand her talk of ghosts and screaming, although the narrative is structured so that viewers later understand River’s prescience. Viewers again are enabled to put the pieces together more quickly than the crew due to the structure of narrative and cinematography. We also see the failure of Mal’s vision in ‘Safe,’ when he orders Simon to take a walk with his sister: ‘Don’t worry. We won’t leave without you.’ When Shepherd Book is critically wounded and Simon and River are kidnapped, the crew must leave without them, though they later return.

As in these examples, our understanding of River gradually increases, as does that of the crew. However, the audience continues to be placed in a position of greater knowledge, enabling us to identify with River and more quickly understand her gifts. Although Simon labels River a paranoid schizophrenic in ‘Safe,’ viewers are enabled to realize River’s subjectivity goes beyond this label as well as Simon’s understanding, thus undercutting Simon’s authority just as Mal’s has been undercut: neither the man of science nor the man of action is able to understand River fully. While we may initially believe Simon’s diagnoses of his sister, when we look again we see that what seemed to be nonsense in River’s discourse made perfect sense (see notes 1 and 2). In ‘Ariel’ (1.9), for instance, the crew reads River’s slashing of Jayne with a knife as a mark of her violent instability. Mal asks if River is ‘getting worse,’ and Simon nods. By the end of the episode, however, she is justified in her attack on Jayne by his betrayal. Her attack is not only a symbolic erasure of those who threaten her (Jayne is wearing his Alliance-associated ‘Blue Sun’ t-shirt<sup>14</sup>), but is also an indication of her non-linear understanding of reality. In addition to being tuned in to Jayne’s betrayal, she forecasts several events, including the presence of

the men with blue hands. These elements enable the deconstruction of the male gaze and its authority as well as strengthening River as subject.

While the possibility exists for a simple, traditional, sexist representation of River as disabled madwoman (see note 9), instead, she is represented as a Cassandra figure with knowledge that is unacknowledged: the audience and then the crew gradually come to realize that River is not insane but gifted.<sup>15</sup> Simon begins to acknowledge this in 'Safe,' when River is able to tell the story of a girl made mute through trauma. When asked how River could know Ruby's story, Simon attempts to explain: 'Um, uh, my sister . . . She's very good at . . .' While he seems to have some inkling of her abilities, Simon is unable to put his sister's skills into words; they still seem to be beyond his understanding, or at least his articulation.

It is understandable that Simon would have difficulty expressing River's talents, since, through her representation, she enacts resistance to the Western system of language and logic; this system is anchored in patriarchy and may be referred to as masculine discourse.<sup>16</sup> To speak of River is to communicate the unspeakable within a patriarchal culture; rather than taking up a masculine position—the only position for a woman to inhabit if she is to speak within a system that denies her subjectivity<sup>17</sup>—River takes up the feminine position and thus refuses the former. As a result, she is an exemplar of *l'écriture féminine*, or feminine discourse.<sup>18</sup>

This mode of communication and the pleasure (*jouissance*) enabled by it is unrepresentable in (masculine) language since it disrupts language and representation. Binary oppositions, fixed meaning, and the 'linear flow of language and narrative' (Klages) are broken down through the multiplicity and fluidity of women's language: the woman who utilizes this means towards subjectivity does not make (phallogocentric) sense. The bodies of hysterical women, Cixous argues, write *l'écriture féminine*, enacting what the conscious mind cannot express. So, too, for River: Simon tells Inara that River still can't tell him what they did to her. However, River has nightmares, enactments of the unspeakable by her unconscious mind. Meaning also seeps out through her seemingly incomprehensible language and action. Her desire, like that of the women of *l'écriture féminine*, is 'often interpreted, and feared, as a sort of insatiable hunger, a voracity that will swallow you whole' (Irigaray 30). Irigaray argues this woman

is indefinitely other in herself. This is doubtless why she is said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious . . . not to mention her language, in which she sets off in all directions leaving 'him' unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand. (28–9)

She does not speak in linear fashion; she collapses the boundaries of speech and text, order and chaos, sense and nonsense (Klages). This woman is River.<sup>19</sup>

Through this construction of River and Simon's construction as a son of privilege and man of science, Whedon also criticizes the patriarchal Alliance. When her brother steps into the role of doctor, a role that emphasizes rational, linear discourse, River is afraid of his actions, and, as I have shown, he often dismisses her non-linear, intuitive perception of the world around her. Due to his background, including his former Alliance affiliation, Simon represents the patriarchal system that experimented upon her. Within this system, River is an object, a guinea pig, a weapon to be wielded. However, she undercuts the authorship of her being by the male hero (Mal), her brother, and that of the mercenary Jayne, seeing through the latter's lies and betrayal. She even 'edits' Shepherd Book's Bible, taking out what doesn't make literal sense to her ('Jaynestown,' 1.7). Ironically, River is like the Bible—she 'doesn't make sense,' and her brother attempts to fix her as she attempts to fix the Bible. As Book says about the Bible, the crew of *Serenity* must come to have faith in River, which they do by the end of 'Objects in Space' (1.14).

Whedon provides another blow to masculine discourse through his resistance to sexualizing River. Since River is seventeen, she is able to function both as girl and woman. She is not inscribed as romantic object for any of the characters. Jubal Early's suggestion to Simon ('Objects in Space') that River is secretly sleeping with one of the crewmembers seems absurd. River is not sexualized by the camera nor the narrative as are Kaylee and Inara.<sup>20</sup> Her visual construction is waifish; she primarily wears oversized skirts, long sweaters, and dresses. She often goes barefoot, maintaining her tactile contact with the ship. Significantly, at least to the discussion of narrative and cinematographic discourse, River's point of view is privileged in one of the most touching—and revealing—episodes: 'Objects in Space,'

the last of the series. Here is a reversal of the first episode, in which Mal’s point of view was established; however, River’s point of view is not undercut. In this episode, our sympathies are aligned with River. As discussed, throughout the series viewers are allowed to know more about her than the other characters do; while we are a step ahead of the other characters, we are a step behind River. This episode does not change the pattern—whether or not viewers temporarily believe River has become one with the ship.<sup>21</sup>

At the beginning of the episode, River wanders the corridors of *Serenity*, hearing the unspoken reality behind the pleasant banter of the crew. As they speak, the camera depicts them from River’s perspective: they seem to turn toward her and speak their inner thoughts, granting viewers a visualization of River’s ability to read thoughts and establishing identification with her through subjective camera. Although they do not consciously voice their dis-ease with her, she is able to read it in their minds. She hears her brother bemoaning his loss of Alliance security in his rescue of River; surprisingly, she also hears Book vehemently stating that he doesn’t ‘give half a hump’ if she’s ‘innocent or not’ while Jayne proclaims he betrayed the Tams to the Alliance out of greed. She comes down the stairs into a cargo bay covered in autumn leaves and picks a stick up from the ground. ‘It’s just an object,’ she states, ‘it doesn’t mean what you think.’ The stick, we find, is actually a loaded gun with the safety off, and it is pointed in the direction of crewmembers. We again are given River’s perspective; we initially see the gun as she does. Like the gun, River doesn’t ‘mean anything.’ Her essence isn’t predetermined: she doesn’t have to be the paranoid schizophrenic her brother has labeled her—or the victim, the aggressor, or . . . . It is this indeterminacy that allows the temporary possibility that she has indeed melted into the ship, become *Serenity*. Of course, she’s actually buying time for the crew to work against bounty hunter Jubal Early. But she is able to read his secrets, and the cinematography again supports her point of view: we get quick cuts from the ‘reality’ of Early to River’s visualization of his mind. River contests the narrative of both crew and Early, rewriting herself into action, plotting a scenario for the escape of both crew and herself, and speaking truth to Early’s proclamation of allegiance to a code he actually does not keep.

River cannot be encapsulated by traditional emplotments of women as lunatics or witches. She is far too complicated, and her excesses enable the transgression of these limits. While the community in ‘Safe’ sees

her as witch, the community of Serenity eventually moves beyond its fear and misunderstanding and is rewarded. While Mal's crew struggles to understand her, the indeterminacy allowed by character, story, and cinematography eventually allows them to re-evaluate their judgment and understand she is unknowable, unthinkable, unimaginable. For instance, while Jayne cannot understand her indeterminacy when Mal states that River 'knows things she shouldn't. Things she *couldn't*,' ('Objects in Space') and thus asks, 'What, are you— are you sayin' she's a witch?' the others are able to go beyond defining her simplistically as madwoman or witch. At the end of 'Objects in Space,' Wash and Zoe have a conversation about River in which they seem to have accepted her indeterminacy, although that means giving up some of their own power in the form of control:

- Wash:* Little River just gets more colorful by the moment. What'll she do next?
- Zoe:* Either blow us all up or rub soup in our hair. It's a toss-up.
- Wash:* I hope she does the soup thing. It's always a hoot, and we don't all die from it.

River challenges not only the male gaze and the heroic monomyth through her embodiment of *l'écriture féminine*, but also those who represent a 'logical' extension to the violence of patriarchal society (represented by the Alliance, the Patron, Jayne, Niska, Jubal Early, and the Reavers—see note 21). As in Joss Whedon's other series, what truly distinguishes River is the force of community. Through community, her physical ability and estrangement from others is developed into a force that illustrates the shortcomings of masculine discourse and de-centers it, opening up spaces for revision. Unlike River, the outcast Reavers remain victims, though vicious. River will sacrifice her safety and happiness for that of the crew if necessary, becoming, for instance, River the Reaver Slayer in *Serenity*. She makes her decisions from a communal perspective rather than an isolated one and uses violence only to protect the crew and herself.

Whedon's titular character Buffy is also part of a movement in which women are increasingly represented as (s)heroes rather than damsels in distress, but River takes the deconstruction of traditional ideology even further. She is not simply an alternative universe reconstruction of Buffy; she is far more of an outsider than even Buffy—in whom her

circle of friends quickly place their trust. She stands further outside the system of masculine discourse than Buffy and is more easily perceived as damaged, as hysterical, as dangerous to the community. Like Buffy, however, she is able to question both simplistic binaries and traditional emplotments of women, as well as story, because of her liminal location and self-authorship.





GENDER



# 4. The Threat of the 'Good Wife'

Feminism, Postfeminism, and Third-Wave  
Feminism in *Firefly*

LAURA L. BEADLING

*Personal choices, personnel decisions*

In 'War Stories' (1.10), Mal and Wash find themselves captured and tortured by Niska, a Mafioso-like businessman whom they have crossed before. After gathering money from the crewmembers, Zoe goes to bargain for 'her men.' Niska, hoping to inflict more pain, declares she can only purchase one. Denying Niska the sadistic pleasure of watching her struggle, Zoe immediately points at Wash and impassively says, 'him.' She then says, 'I'm sorry. You were going to ask me to choose, right? Do you want to finish?'<sup>1</sup> The episode illuminates Zoe and Wash's relationship by beginning and ending with discussions about who should go on particular missions. In the beginning, Zoe and Wash argue over who will accompany Mal to sell drugs the crew stole in the previous episode. Upset by Zoe and Mal's close, war-forged bond, Wash refuses to wait behind as usual and instead insists on going with Mal.

In contrast, the mission that closes the episode involves Zoe and Wash, both of whom want and need to rescue Mal, leading the crew back to Niska's space station. Zoe understands that Wash must participate because Mal kept him from breaking under torture. She tells Wash that she 'got a good look at the layout on my way in last time. You let me lead,' but then adds that she expects him to cover her back, which requires complete trust. Zoe is willing to take Wash into battle although she claims point for practical reasons; Wash agrees

instantly. The episode ends with Zoe cooking for Wash, tucking a napkin in his shirt, and serving him what he calls ‘wife soup,’ inferring from this that he ‘must have done good.’ She agrees and kisses him. The gender roles in their marriage are unconventional and flexible, and both partners, despite Wash’s earlier insecurity, are satisfied. The differences between the two missions highlight the strength of their marriage: both respect the other’s strengths and, even when they disagree, their love and commitment are strong.

‘War Stories’ foregrounds Zoe and Wash’s relationship in a way that not many other episodes do, and looks into the dynamics between them. While she may not often cook or serve food to her husband, these actions can sometimes play a part in their marriage: when they are reconciling after a disagreement, when she saves him from imprisonment, when he is surely still recovering from his wounds, then she cooks for him and he feels nurtured. This moment also comes after she has led Wash into battle; this is no indication of inferior status or assumption of traditional gender roles.

This stands in contrast to ‘Our Mrs. Reynolds’ (1.6), an earlier episode in which Saffron, Mal’s unwillingly acquired wife, seems to assume that cooking—along with washing her husband’s feet and serving him sexually—are essential components of the role of a ‘good wife.’ After cooking for Mal, she tells Zoe that everything is ‘laid out if you’d like to cook for your husband.’ Zoe declines. In fact, during Saffron’s attempted seduction of Wash, she claims that Zoe ‘didn’t seem to respect you.’ Wash doesn’t take the bait; Saffron must resort to physical violence to overcome him: a moral victory for Wash if not a physical one. Similarly, Mal and Inara are conquered only by Saffron’s drugs, not her manipulation (Mal has reinitiated his resistance before he passes out). Indeed, the regular characters (except Jayne), rather than seeing Saffron’s ‘good wife’ role as normal, perceive Saffron as being in need of re-education; Mal tries to teach her to stand up for herself. A submissive woman tempts many of them, but the ‘good wife,’ it turns out, is a threat to the moral order of the ship.

These examples demonstrate *Firefly*’s complex negotiations of gender and sexuality within a context of our own moment of feminism and postfeminism, even though the show never explicitly uses those terms. In order to illuminate how the series can be used to delineate the complicated relationships between feminism, postfeminism, and third-wave feminism, I analyze three female characters—Zoe, Saffron, and Kaylee.

*Feminism, postfeminism, and third-wave feminism*

Several shows that aired around the time of *Firefly* explored issues of feminism, either directly or indirectly. For instance, *King of the Hill* (1997–present) has Peggy, the main female character, explicitly declare that she's not a feminist, although she sometimes acts in functionally feminist ways, such as agitating for working women's rights in the episode 'Just Like a Woman.' On the other hand, *That 70s Show* (1998–2006) has Midge and Donna explicitly engage in feminist actions like attending feminist rallies and feminist classes. Unlike these shows, *Firefly* presents itself as entirely outside the contemporary moment of feminist/postfeminist consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Set in 2507 CE, *Firefly*'s female characters, as complexly gendered as they are, seem blissfully unaware of any feminist concerns as such in their actions, lifestyles, and gender expression. Many other television shows that have garnered 'feminist' buzz—both pro and con—are postfeminist as the term is used by critics like Charlotte Brunson, who demonstrates how *Pretty Woman* (1990) and *Working Girl* (1987) are shaped within the discourses and legacies of second-wave feminism, while simultaneously rejecting feminism.<sup>3</sup> *Firefly* is more complex; created by Joss Whedon, an avowed feminist, the show never directly addresses feminism per se, but does create some of the most diverse, powerful, and interesting female characters on television. Although they probably wouldn't describe themselves as feminists (a word apparently not in use in 2507), many of the *Firefly* characters could be described as feminists in the second-wave sense: they believe in and enact equality in opportunity, ability, and rights while pursuing self-defined emotional and professional satisfaction.<sup>4</sup>

The very word 'postfeminism' itself can be used in contradictory ways. On one hand, it can mean a rather regressive vision in which the goals of second-wave feminism have been achieved; therefore, women should overcome the alleged victim mentality that is, according to writers like Katie Roiphe, the legacy of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>6</sup> The same term can simultaneously indicate a stance in which feminism can no longer be theorized as entirely separate or separable from other postmodern discourses that question what Jean François Lyotard calls the metanarratives of Western society—those schools of thought that posit one underlying structure of oppression that is 'the root' of all other problems and therefore theorize one solution. Rather than try to state definitively what postfeminism is or is not, I prefer to use the term

to identify those representations that enact these very contradictions, as I believe *Firefly* does.

Despite the lack of explicit feminist/postfeminist discourse in the show, it nevertheless participates in current and enduring debates surrounding women's roles, particularly that of wife. Zoe and Saffron are the only two wives that are given much narrative space and, as such, highlight my central question: what makes a 'good wife' in the *Firefly* 'verse? These two versions of wifehood illuminate the show's generally positive, though occasionally ambivalent or problematic, gender relations by examining two competing narratives of wifehood—egalitarian versus helpmeet<sup>7</sup>—that have again surfaced. As Elspeth Probyn notes, when non-academic writers discuss postfeminism, they often cast it as allowing women either to compete in the public realm with men or to be 'truly' cutting edge by following a more traditional model of woman as homemaker (151). These debates continue with books like Steiner's *The Mommy Wars*, which contrasts stay-at-home mothers with working mothers, and *New York Times* articles like Story's 'Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Course to Motherhood,' which interviews privileged young women who plan to quit work to stay at home.<sup>8</sup>

*Zoe, married warrior woman; Saffron, very married white devil woman*

Zoe's version of 'good wife' involves being a partner and companion; she offers Wash playful affection, a steady hand at his back, and passionate sex. In the words of Michelle Sagara West, 'they fill a need for each other that isn't based on need alone' (100). Zoe's tasks often necessitate leaving Wash on the ship, going with Mal and Jayne to face danger. In theory, this is fine with Wash, who understands his role as pilot is crucial in making their outlaw existence work: he often flies to their rescue or manages to accomplish a difficult escape. However, theory does not always match reality, as seen in 'War Stories,' in which Wash is both jealous of Zoe's close relationship with Mal and appalled that Mal would put her in such dangerous situations (of course, Mal doesn't drag Zoe along; she chooses to put herself in harm's way, which Wash well knows, although he briefly forgets this in Niska's torture chamber). Zoe's version of wifehood is based on the egalitarian model particularly, though not exclusively, embraced by second-wave

feminists like Betty Friedan and Alix Kates Shulman, who critiqued gender roles and inequality in marriage.<sup>9</sup>

Saffron, who (we learn) is married under many names to many men, performs the role of wife differently from Zoe. On one hand, Saffron overtly assumes the guise of 'good wife,' a concept often endorsed by those who celebrate what they usually call 'traditional family values,' which typically denotes a man-as-breadwinner and woman-as-home-maker family structure. Saffron appears eager to serve as dependent helpmeet to Mal and assumes the pose of submissive femininity.

Unlike Serenity's crew, Saffron is a woman without enduring relationships. In the two episodes she appears in—'Our Mrs. Reynolds' and 'Trash' (1.11)—Saffron has three husbands: Mal, Mal's old buddy Monty, and Durran Haymer, the rich Alliance officer whose antique gun is the target of Saffron's most recent plotting. Despite her guise of helpmeet wifedom, her multiple marriages mount a critique of this version of wifedom. Saffron assumes different identities for each husband; with Mal she is Saffron; with Monty, Bridget; and with Durran, Yolanda. This leads Mal to refer to her, in 'Trash,' as Yo-Saf-Bridge, an acknowledgment of her multifaceted self. None of her husbands knows who she 'really' is; therefore, none of the relationships is 'real,' though there is some indication that Saffron might care about Durran's opinion of her. When Mal realizes that Saffron could have freely accessed Durran's house, he knows something is amiss. The calculating Saffron he knows would have walked in, been welcomed, and then coldly knocked Durran on the head and taken the antique herself. He tells her 'unlike all the other—I'm gonna go with—hundreds of men you've married, you actually want this one to think well of you when you've gone . . . My god, could it be I've actually met your real husband?' However, when we finally learn that Saffron has again double-crossed Mal and the crew, all of Saffron's motivations and statements become questionable. The multiplicity of Saffron's marriages negates the permanent pair-bond dynamic of helpmeet marriage and instead echoes Inara's profession as a 'Companion,' who entertains numerous clients. In fact, both women were trained as Companions. The model of helpmeet marriage was often critiqued as institutionalized prostitution by second-wave feminists, and *Firefly* makes this explicit by depicting Saffron's exploitation of marriage and sexuality for her own gain.

Saffron, like postmodern theory, refuses to espouse (you should excuse the pun) one final subject position that claims 'mastery.' A



more academic usage of the term postfeminism, as mentioned above, posits that it results from the crossing of feminism with other postmodern discourses that refuse totalizing gestures. Saffron enacts a postmodern embrace of the play of surfaces in service of her goals, which emphatically reject ‘traditional family values.’ As part of this slippage, she assumes the very traditional role of ‘good wife’ strategically as a disguise, thus playing Mal and the other crewmembers’ assumptions about gender against them, though they try to avoid engaging in the ‘good wife’ paradigm. The crew underestimates her and thus allows her to take them by surprise and initiate her nefarious plan to steal their ship, their home. Saffron likewise refuses any easy answers as to her motivations; unlike many villains, her character is not driven by any particular overarching goal or desire. When Mal corners her at the end of ‘Our Mrs. Reynolds,’ he asks her why she bothered with all the machinations; after all, there must be an easier way to steal. Her reply, ‘you’re assuming the payoff is the point,’ is no answer. Rather than provide a key to her character—troubled childhood, mental illness, Iago-like spite—she cannot be pinned down to any one identity but instead cycles through numerous possible identities that deny the surface/depth model in favor of contradictory and strategic surfaces.

The rest of Saffron’s relationships are more clearly designed to further her own ends while taking advantage of those who trust her. Despite its brief time on screen, her relationship with Monty is clearly exploitative. She never mentions Monty again; not exactly the love that spanned the ages. Saffron’s presumed village seen early in ‘Our Mrs. Reynolds’ is nothing of the sort. Neither does she have any clear relationship with the men whose ship-trap is finally destroyed; even her villainous associates aren’t loyal sidekicks.

Saffron’s rootless, lone existence is contrasted with the development of family ties between Serenity’s crewmembers: while Mal and Zoe have a long-standing bond, the series also depicts the trust and affection that slowly grows among (most of) the crew.<sup>10</sup> Jayne never really gets along with River or Simon. Even after Simon finds out that Jayne sold them out on Ariel, he assures Jayne that he will never be harmed while on Simon’s table:

I’m your medic, and however little we may like or trust each other, we’re on the same crew. Got the same troubles, same enemies . . . Now, we could circle each other and growl, sleep with one eye open

but that thought wearies me. I don't care what you've done. I don't know what you're planning on doing, but I'm trusting you. I think you should do the same. ('Trash,' 1.11)

After this speech, however, River cheerfully reminds Jayne that she can kill him with her brain. Simon is no dummy—he means his speech but also knows that, with Jayne, nothing works like a believable threat. This is not the only difficult relationship. Mal and Inara argue frequently. Mal and Book have their issues. Despite all this, though, they often operate as a family. After discovering Jayne's treachery, Mal is fully prepared to blow him out of the airlock; Jayne agrees death is the appropriate punishment. Mal only relents when Jayne begs Mal not to tell the others of his perfidy. Despite his betrayal, Jayne's shame indicates to Mal that Jayne can operate as part of the family because he cares about the others' opinions. Love for every other member is not required; trust and ability to work together is.

The ending of 'Our Mrs. Reynolds' further differentiates Serenity's crew from Saffron. The crew must work together to repair the ship and disable the trap. While Kaylee and Wash attempt to restore navigation, Zoe preps spacesuits for Mal and Jayne. Simon and Book hook Simon's encyclopedia to the com console to provide visuals. Mal opens the hatch; Jayne fires his favorite gun, Vera. The trap is disabled and the navigation controls are repaired. All must work together to survive; each member has a role and must trust the others to cooperate. In contrast, Saffron has no one to watch her back, and Mal eventually catches up with her. After his warning about not playing him again, she retorts: 'Everybody plays each other. That's all anybody ever does. We play parts.' Her postmodern play of surfaces does not serve her well here; her role-playing comes to nothing, despite her cunning. As Mal says, 'You got all kinds of learnin', and you made me look the fool without tryin', and yet here I am with a gun to your head. That's 'cause I got people with me, people who trust each other, who do for each other and ain't always lookin' for the advantage.' Mal's assertion of the importance of what sounds very much like a family rejects Saffron's player mentality. Saffron's deceptiveness can be read as an extreme version of the distortion of personality that can result from the submission of the 'good wife'; and the crew of Serenity successfully refuses the temptation such a character offers.

*Kaylee: SWF, likes sex, likes engines, abhors conflict*

In contrast to Zoe and Saffron, Kaylee is no one's wife. Through Kaylee, *Firefly* also engages with third-wave feminism,<sup>11</sup> which asserts female sexuality openly, playfully, and boldly. For instance, in 'Out of Gas' (1.8), viewers discover that Kaylee was not Serenity's original mechanic but, instead, was on board for a sexual rendezvous with the original mechanic. Despite catching the two *in flagrante delicto*, Mal nevertheless listens to Kaylee's diagnosis of Serenity's engine problems and, after a short but convincing demonstration, hires her immediately. Kaylee's healthy, unashamed sexuality is on display through both the series (via her long-standing crush on Simon) and, more overtly, in the film *Serenity*; in mortal danger and on the brink of losing her nerve as the crew prepares to hold off the Reavers, Kaylee is overjoyed to hear Simon finally admit that he regrets not 'being with' her. His admission revitalizes Kaylee's flagging courage, and she returns reinvigorated to the fight; in the 'verse, sex is not just fun, it's a reason to live. Furthermore, Kaylee appears to have no plans to be anyone's wife. As Nancy Holder notes, Kaylee is 'not hoping that Simon will marry her so she can stop working and make strawberry pie and calico dresses' (152). Kaylee seems happy with her family on Serenity, provided she can enjoy sex now and again.

Kaylee's standard coveralls and stereotypically masculine job notwithstanding, she nevertheless demonstrates many stereotypically feminine, even 'girlie,' traits that in no way diminish the respect she commands from the others. While she is a natural-born mechanic, Kaylee also likes feminine clothes and accoutrements; in 'Shindig' (1.4) she admires a pink, ruffled dress and takes obvious glee in wearing it, despite the catty mockery from the other women at the party. Kaylee's taste runs, as does that of many girlies, to overdone and exaggerated femininity: not only is the gown in 'Shindig' bubble-gum pink, with tiers of layered ruffles, but it also includes little white gloves and a parasol.<sup>12</sup> Still, Kaylee's reveling in her girlish clothes takes nothing away from her competence. Even in her frilly gown, she is shown at the party engaging knowledgeably, even expertly, with fascinated men about various spaceships. In this respect, Kaylee's tastes resonate with third-wave feminism's ideal of reclaiming stereotyped versions of femininity in the name of subverting and complicating them.

Another traditionally feminine quality that Kaylee possesses is seen in her role of ship peacemaker. Kaylee treats the crew as a contentious

family, and she often soothes hurt feelings. For example, in 'Serenity' (1.1), when Mal attempts to needle Shepherd Book and simultaneously humiliate Inara by sarcastically introducing her as an 'ambassador,' Kaylee smooths everyone's ruffled feathers and keeps Mal in line: she glares at Mal and declares that his joke isn't funny, informs Book that Inara's official title is 'Companion,' and walks away with Inara while engaging her in a conversation.

Despite her stereotypically feminine traits, Kaylee is nonetheless shown as a capable crewmember. However, it is also noteworthy that Kaylee's femininity not only includes the reclaimed, postfeminist type but also the stereotypical variety of femininity that mandates passive and mild-mannered women—precisely the version of femininity enacted by Saffron's downcast eyes and deferential speech. These traits compromise Kaylee's ability to stand up for herself, although she can defend others. Despite her reticence on her own account, she vigorously defends Serenity, even against Simon's derision. Kaylee's bravery, which she displays so vigorously to defend those in her family, does not extend to her own needs and feelings. Instead, she often hopes for, if not necessarily expects, other people to speak up for her. In the pilot, when Jayne humiliates her by crudely noting that she is 'lubed up' over Simon, Kaylee is shown looking silently down at her plate rather than angrily retorting or even glaring at him; it is Mal who responds quickly by ordering Jayne from the table.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, although Kaylee twice tells Jayne to be polite to Simon, she is unwilling to do the same for herself.

Kaylee's stereotypically feminine traits sometimes paralyze her ability to act decisively to defend Mal and the other crewmembers: she simply cannot bring herself to shoot at a person even under dire circumstances. In 'War Stories,' she is the only one unable to pick up arms to rescue Mal. Left to hold the entrance to Serenity, she cannot fire her weapon, even to protect herself. She retreats into Serenity's cargo bay where she hides. River demonstrates a thus far unseen talent and manages to shoot all three of Niska's henchmen—a talent that frightens Kaylee. Kaylee's girliness and playful sexuality mix with her mechanical competence to create a complexly gendered character who cannot be adequately described via essentialist notions of masculine or feminine.

*Firefly's* complex representations of gender can illuminate current debates about feminism, postfeminism, and third-wave feminism. Whedon's work continues to provide not just 'good' or 'bad' images of

women but, as Patricia Pender shows in her work on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, complicated representations of women who fall into different categories of feminism. The characters are multivalent and can be read, depending on the viewer's perspective, in contradictory ways and thus encourage debate. An embracing of contradiction is, I would argue, the very heart of postfeminism. One such contradiction surrounds Inara: is she the typical hooker with a heart of gold who has it bad for the leading man? Or is she an empowered woman deploying her sexuality for monetary gain, yet doing so as a member of a dignified profession? Both, really. Is Kaylee a girlie girl who lets others fight her battles for her (see note 5)? Or is she an example of the third-wave feminism reclamation of girliness that does not lessen her mechanical competency and her own confidence in her chosen role? Both, really. Is Saffron a 'good wife,' or is Zoe? While Zoe is a 'good wife' to Wash, Saffron, who seems at first to be the ideal pre-feminist 'good wife,' is not a good wife, to Mal or any of her many husbands—although she undermines the very notions of identity in a postmodern way. *Firefly* offers rich ground for continuing discussions about how media can shape perceptions of the possible and the desirable for the future of feminism.

# 5. The Companions and Socrates

Is Inara a Hetaera?

ANDREW ABERDEIN

Inara's character originally was a whore, something very *Deadwood*. My wife said, 'Why not do something more in the style of a geisha and make her the most educated person on the ship, instead of just an oppressed pathetic creature?' And then, of course, people [said], 'What a typical boy fantasy.' And I thought, 'Yeah, that's my wife!' (*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 11)

In our world, prostitution is not a source of high status. That is not to say there are no high-status prostitutes; clearly they exist. They may even owe their status to their profession (for example, if they have made a lot of money or have influential clients) but their status would be even higher if, all other things being equal, they were not prostitutes. Hence prostitution appears inseparable from shame. The situation in the 'verse seems different. Is this difference feasible? Perhaps the question can be answered through a comparison between Companions and hetaeras, their counterparts in ancient Greece, a society confronted by several such status anxieties, including one resulting from Socrates' reinvention of philosophy.

## *Companions and hetaeras*

The hypothetical respectable prostitute is surprisingly conspicuous in Joss Whedon's vision of the future. Inara is a regular character on *Firefly*, appearing in every episode, as well as in *Serenity*. Two former Companions, Nandi and Saffron, also appear. The closest Whedon

comes to defining the Companion is in 'A Brief History of the Universe, Circa 2507 AD':

Prostitution as we understand it had long since been abolished by the legalization and strict federal regulation of the sex trade. 'Companion' houses were set up throughout the central planets. No house could ever be run by a man. No Companion could ever be coerced into accepting a client. Companions trained in all the arts, extremely well-schooled. They lived not unlike nuns, worked not unlike geishas, and often rose to political or social prominence when they retired. (*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 12–13)

Several, if not all, of these positive attributes also apply to hetaeras. But first, a few words about geishas. In the passages quoted above, Whedon twice references geishas, not hetaeras. So why focus on hetaeras? Companion is the standard translation of the Greek word ἑταίρια, but there are stronger motivations. Despite definite resonances between Companions and geishas, Whedon's appropriation of these details seems ornamental. There is little detail in his allusions to geishas, and what there is misleads. Geishas could not rise 'to political or social prominence when they retired,' for instance. Moreover, while geishas are of marginal significance to the origins of Western civilization, hetaeras were an essential component of the society that invented many concepts we hold dear, including democracy and philosophy itself. A deeper resemblance between Companions and hetaeras is that, in each case, the gaps in our knowledge engender similar interpretative dilemmas. Inara has an air of mystery which is part of her allure, both to her clients and the viewers. Much about her past, and about the status of Companions in general, was left obscure by the truncated duration of the series. Moreover, as many dramatists (and courtesans) have realized, from Shakespeare to the writers of *Lost* (2004–present), leaving some mysteries unresolved helps to hold the audience's attention. Similarly, the incomplete traces left by the lives of the hetaeras have piqued the curiosity of many modern scholars. There is lively debate over how hetaeras should be understood and on how every scrap of evidence should be read.

But there is enough common ground to determine that Whedon's definition of Companions could also cover hetaeras. Greek city-states tended to regulate, not criminalize, their sex trade. In the best known, Athens, the legal reforms of Solon (c. 594 BCE) introduced

strict regulation, including price controls, under which the trade flourished (James Davidson 82). These regulations reinforced a complex hierarchy of different types of prostitute. Although brothels were usually run by men, hetaeras, as a professional elite, were found elsewhere. Like Inara, they were mostly sole proprietors, but sometimes several younger women worked under the tutelage of their ‘mother’ (McClure 76). Presumably, as with many trades, training up successors was the pension scheme. Although coercion was a very real part of the working life of most lower-status Greek prostitutes, many of whom were slaves, hetaeras were noted for their independence. Numerous stories attest to the disappointment of frustrated suitors (James Davidson 126). Education is perhaps the quality for which hetaeras are most celebrated, especially by later Greek writers nostalgic for the glories of classical Athens. Nor is their political and social eminence in doubt: Aspasia was not only the mistress of Pericles, who ruled Athens for much of its golden age, she is said to have had political influence of her own, whereas Phryne, the model for Praxiteles’ revolutionary Venus of Cnidus, ‘shared with him the credit for the beautiful figures with which he enriched the Greek world’ (Clark 74). Beyond these basic points of similarity, much rests on interpretation, which may be positive or negative.

### *The Harvard of whore academies*

Few people have thought deeply about prostitution in the distant future, except perhaps to deny that it would exist. One exception is the commentator and former sex worker Pat Califia. Many proposals in her essay ‘Whoring in Utopia’ reflect themes subsequently taken up in *Firefly*. Specifically, she stresses that such prostitutes would require a wide-ranging education and wonders if sex work might ‘find its spirituality restored’ (246). Both aspects can be read into the historical record of hetaeras, just as they can be read from the depiction of Companions.

Education is one dramatic way in which Inara defeats the audience’s preconceptions about prostitution. Inara’s first scene is with a client, a young man from an influential family. The shooting script has him remark, ‘My cousin hopes to become a Companion. But I don’t think the academy will take her unless her scores come up’ (‘Serenity,’ 1.1). Wealthy young men of good family do not usually support such



aspirations in their relatives. Nor do prostitutes normally need good grades. Inara replies, 'It was the languages I struggled with. And music, at first.' Later in the episode Shepherd Book reveals that Companions are required by law to study literary arts and philosophy. Subsequent episodes add additional skills to Inara's resume; as Jane Espenson jokes on the DVD commentary to 'Shindig' (1.4), hers must have been the 'Harvard of whore academics.'

Some authorities attribute a similarly extensive curriculum to the education of hetaeras. According to Paul Friedrich, those who studied at the Temple of Aphrodite in Corinth learned 'the varied positions and movements of lovemaking . . . styles of singing and dancing, the arts of coiffure, the use of oils and cosmetics . . . lore about aphrodisiac drinks and foods . . . skill in reciting and composing certain kinds of poetry' (qtd. in Roberts 25). Some took their education further, becoming pupils of noted scholars, the closest activity the ancient world had to tertiary education (McClure 82). Other hetaeras are reputed as educators: Aspasia is said to have kept a *gynaceum*, or school for young women, in which they 'perfect[ed] the art of love-making [and] studied the arts and sciences of literature, philosophy and rhetoric' (Roberts 24). According to Plutarch, Aspasia's knowledge was valued by men as well as women; indeed, it was her political skill which first attracted Pericles. In *Menexenus*, Plato has Socrates profess that Aspasia is his tutor in rhetoric (236a).

Hetaeras were particularly praised for their exhibition of *paideia*. This Greek word is often translated as 'education,' although its use was broader, encompassing our sense of 'culture.' For Greek speakers of later centuries, it was redolent of the literature of classical Athens, and the Attic Greek in which this was expressed. Witticisms of hetaeras were thus preserved as examples of this style of learning. Collections survive from which we can infer the ideal: a witty putdown combining a double entendre with an allusion to an apposite work of literature (McClure 82 ff.). Literary puns were admired by the Greeks: not only were those of hetaeras preserved, but their use in oratory was thought especially persuasive. Full-length works are credited to some hetaeras, although only fragments survive. Leontion is said to have studied with the philosopher Epicurus and written a book contradicting Theophrastus, the successor of Aristotle (McClure 104). More extensive are the reputed erotic writings of the hetaeras. The erotic manuals of Astyanassa, Philaenis, and Elephantis, although long since lost, were remembered as pioneering works of pornography (literally,

the writings of prostitutes), especially by male authors reviving the genre in the early modern era (Cryle 11 ff.). Suetonius tells us that the Emperor Tiberius kept the works of Elephantis constantly within reach during orgies.

There is also a spiritual side to ancient Greek prostitution. Hetaeras participated in the same religious ceremonies as other women, although sometimes to more spectacular effect: Phryne's ritual bathing at the Posidonia seems to have transfixed a large crowd (James Davidson 134). They were also specifically linked to the worship of Aphrodite. Temples of Aphrodite the Hetaera or Aphrodite the Prostitute are recorded at several places, including Athens (McClure 139). These temples have been linked to sacred prostitution: the geographer Strabo, for example, claimed that a thousand *hieroduli*, or temple slaves, were engaged in this practice at Corinth. The Greeks themselves associated temple prostitution with deities originating in the Middle East, in which category they included Aphrodite, seen as a late addition to the pantheon. Sacred prostitution is certainly a rich theme in authentically Middle Eastern religion: our earliest surviving literary source, the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, relates how the wild man Enkidu is civilized by congress with the prostitute Shamhat, a votary of the Goddess Ishtar, or Inanna.

Inanna's near namesake Inara also exhibits a strong spiritual side. She is frequently associated with religious iconography, primarily Buddhist, and both she and Nandi invoke the Buddha in Chinese imprecations. Moreover, Inara explicitly links the sacred to her practice as a Companion, referring to her shuttle as 'a consecrated Place of Union' ('Jaynestown,' 1.7). More specifically, she fulfills another of Califia's prophecies, that 'in a better world, virgins and novices would probably resort to prostitutes who specialized in rituals of initiation and education' (245). This may be Inara's specialism: of the small number of her clients and prospective clients to have speaking parts, more than half are nervous young men, and at least one, Fess Higgins in 'Jaynestown,' is a virgin. If so, it would serve a useful purpose, both for Inara and for her writers. Inara avoids the potential 'complications' of romantic entanglement (cf. 'Ariel,' 1.9), and the writers are able to present her in a more positive light than if she specialized in, say, married men.

Education and spirituality are two of the ways Companions and hetaeras differ from conventional prostitutes; another is economics. Xenophon describes a subtle exchange between Socrates and a

beautiful woman called Theodote. Her profession is not explicit, but she is clearly a hetaera. After playfully affecting to guess her means of support, Socrates elicits from her an important statement: ‘My livelihood comes from friends I pick up who want to help me’ (Xenophon §3.11.4). This characterization of the hetaera articulates the important distinction between her and the common prostitute. Hetaeras, operating far above the two-drachma limit imposed on their less fortunate sisters, had to be careful not to be confused with prostitutes, lest they fall foul of Solon’s laws and be prosecuted for over-charging. One important strategy was to emphasize the element of caprice in the hetaera’s relations with her clients. On occasion she may refuse a generous, wealthy client in favor of a poor man who could offer her little. A modern anthropological characterization of this distinction might be that hetaeras sought to operate within a system of gift exchange, not commodity exchange (James Davidson 109; Kurke). Inara is never shown directly discussing money either: presumably prospective clients make their bid when they contact her over the cortex. By one account, hetaeras had a surprisingly similar system. Clients would write compliments (and offers) on gravestones in the Ceramicus, Athens’ main graveyard and red-light district, which would be relayed to the hetaeras by their slaves (Roberts 21). Moreover, Inara’s choice of client is often made for personal, not purely commercial, reasons. And on occasion, she explicitly secures gifts or favors from influential clients by which Mal or his crew may be rescued from some predicament.

### *Everywhere?*

As Joy Davidson remarks, Inara is ‘a contemporary . . . *Everywhere*: liberalism’s enterprising dream-girl, radical-feminism’s oppressed victim, the conservative right’s sinful temptress . . . and, let’s not forget, popular culture’s love-struck, intimacy-phobic, “I-gotta-be-free” girl, too’ (114). Whereas Davidson accentuates the positive in her discussion of Inara, other commentators have stressed that her ‘power comes at a steep price’ (Holder 148). Indeed, for Dee Amy-Chinn, ‘Whedon re-writes whoredom to circumvent any challenge the profession might offer’ to the ‘traditional pre-feminist representation of femininity’ (182). Aspects of Inara’s portrayal which undercut the positive elements emphasized above are explored below.

Similar problems afflict hetaeras and the scholarship about them. Some feminist critics have dismissed the positive account of the hetaera as a ‘typical boy fantasy,’ complaining that ‘otherwise dry academics can become as eager as schoolboys’ (Roberts 12). Nor are the eager schoolboys confined to recent centuries. The heyday of hetaeras was fourth- and fifth-century BCE Athens, but we know about them chiefly from later writers, especially those of the Second Sophistic, a revival of Greek learning in the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries CE (McClure 3). Some of these writings are historical fiction, others are scholarly works, replete with quotations from original sources. But, since the quotations were chosen to make a case and the sources are now mostly lost, the impression is one-sided. Few contemporary sources have survived intact, and many of those that have survived present a bleak view of the hetaera’s life (such as the prosecution speech at the trial of the hetaera Neaera [Hamel 159]) or are not as positive as they first seem. For example, when Socrates claims to be the pupil of Aspasia, his tongue may be in his cheek—or Plato may have put it there. Plato was no enthusiast of Pericleian radical democracy, which was indirectly responsible for Socrates’ execution, so a dialogue in which Pericles’ most celebrated speech is alleged to have been ghost-written by his mistress must arouse suspicion. Moreover, references to events after Socrates’ death indicate that *Menexenus* cannot be strictly historical. Many other positive claims in the preceding section of this chapter can be similarly debunked.

The situation in the ‘verse is not as simple as may have been suggested either. Even the young man whose cousin was set on becoming a Companion remarks, ‘Your clock’s probably rigged to speed up and cheat us out of our fun’ (‘Serenity’). Inara’s face drops at this crude insistence on reducing her flirtatious claim that ‘The time went too quickly’ to the time-is-money economics of commodity exchange. This reduction could indicate the limits within which Companions operate throughout the ‘verse. However, that would overlook the explicit location on Persephone, one of the outer planets: Inara and her client had been discussing the central planet of Sihnon, where she was born and he has never been. As she remarks in a scene deleted from *Serenity*: ‘These worlds are not like the Central Planets. There is barbarism dressed up in the most civil weeds. Men of the highest rank who don’t know the difference between a Companion and a common whore. It’s unsafe’ (*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 82). On worlds such as Persephone, the institutions supporting the

status of Companions are insecure. This problematizes, but does not negate, the status they enjoy on the Central Planets. After all, even the rude young man was happy to boast of his cousin's plans to become a Companion, a pleasure he would presumably not have shared had she hoped to become a common whore.

The tension here is between two competing but co-existent status systems, which can arise when independent hierarchies from different cultures interact. Consider the predicament of the Hon. Mrs. Arthur Hamilton Gordon, wife of a late nineteenth-century governor of Fiji, and her children's nanny, or nurse. The historian David Cannadine tells us that Mrs. Gordon

thought the native, high-ranking Fijians 'such an undoubted aristocracy.' 'Their manners' she continued 'are so perfectly easy and well bred . . . Nurse can't understand it at all, she looks down on them as an inferior race. I don't like to tell her that these ladies are my equals, which she is not!' (59)

A system assigning high status to certain members of a group can co-exist with more general deprecation of that group. Cannadine argues that such a system was indispensable to the British Empire: its elite treated the elite within subject nations as their social equals, thereby co-opting them into the empire's administration. Many lower-status British subjects were unconvinced by this approach, preferring a racially based status system by which their white skin would receive a higher valuation. In this manner, intermittent deprecation of Companions (or hetaeras) could be reconciled with their ostensible high status. Tellingly, higher-status individuals in the 'verse show Inara greater respect, whereas abuse is most likely to come from individuals of ambiguous status, such as the bourgeoisie of the outer planets, or no status at all, such as Mal Reynolds.

Mal, of course, would not accept this explanation. As far as he is concerned, the upper class are engaged in a hypocritical conspiracy, which Inara won't let herself see:

While this . . . the lie of it . . . that man parading you on his arm as if he actually won you, as if he loves you, and everyone going along with it. How can that not bother you? . . . He treats you like an ornament. Other men look at you and discuss if you're worth the cost. The women talk behind their fans, picturing you with their husbands. And to your face, they're sweet as pie. ('Shindig,' 1.4)

Of course, Mal could be wrong. Inara certainly thinks so, and this is her world, not his. But the writers never provide definitive proof that the traditional association of prostitution and deceit has been broken in the 'verse. Instead we hear the Councilor tell Inara 'There's no need for the show' ('War Stories,' 1.10), suggesting the inevitable element of pretense.

Furthermore, it remains mysterious why Inara left Sihnon, despite, by Nandi's account, her long-held ambition to become House Priestess. It seems most likely that the 'I-gotta-be-free' girl was fleeing the 'complications' of a love affair. Given the integration of the Guild into the conspiratorial world of Alliance government, however, Inara's political ambitions may have led to dangerous enemies or compromising secrets. Indeed, Whedon says little about the Guild, except that they provide 'strict federal regulation' (*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 14). This would not impress campaigners for prostitutes' rights. As Califia puts it, 'there is no guarantee that making the federal government the greatest pimp of all would do a goddamned thing to make sex work a better career or to protect the health and safety of the customer. In such a system, prostitutes would be like mill workers in late nineteenth-century England' (248). Or, one might add, like prostitutes in late nineteenth-century England, regulated as they were by the invidious Contagious Diseases Acts (Spongberg 63 ff.), which finds an uncomfortable echo in Inara's mandatory two-day medical in 'Ariel.' The history of government-controlled prostitution has not been a happy one; it seems unlikely to become so in the next five centuries.

This point turns on gaps in our knowledge of the 'verse, so perhaps the benefit of the doubt should go to Whedon's conception of shame-free prostitution. The earlier point is more troublesome: if prostitution is inherently deceitful, how can it not be shameful? Socrates' discussions with hetaeras may help to answer this question.

### *Socrates and sophists*

Socrates never wrote anything: his thought survives in dialogues written by others. Like the hetaera witticism, the Socratic dialogue flourished for a time as a popular genre of Greek literature. The most philosophically substantial dialogues are those written by Socrates' disciple and fellow philosopher Plato. But others survive,

including those of another disciple, the historian Xenophon. Socrates' great achievement was to reorient philosophy from cosmological speculation to ethical questions and the pursuit of truth. In this last respect, he was at odds with professional rhetoric teachers, known as sophists. Since Athenian society was very litigious, but required its male citizens to speak in their own cause, the sophists had a profitable business writing speeches and teaching how they should be delivered. Athenian juries were very large—that which convicted Socrates numbered 501, and others several times larger are known—and jurors delivered their verdicts without conferring. Hence, successful methods of court oratory emphasized style over substance, and the sophists were sometimes deprecated as indifferent to the justice of the cases on which they worked. However, the sophists were amongst the few Greeks to have thought seriously about argument and their skepticism about conventional morality was often well founded, so although Socrates did not write speeches for others, nor charge for his teaching, and condemned many sophistic techniques, he was often taken for a sophist. In this respect, Socrates and his followers may be seen as doubles of the sophists: superficially similar in behavior, but fundamentally divergent in motive.

Such 'shadow-double relationships' are also remarkably prevalent amongst the characters of Joss Whedon's television shows (Kaveney, 'She Saved the World' 10). *Firefly's* most conspicuous doubling is perhaps that of Inara and Saffron, who despite many similarities are divided by a fundamental ethical difference. Saffron shares Inara's skills but uses them to perfect amoral confidence tricks. In particular, she has a formidable talent for rhetorical persuasion. Her seduction of Mal, for example, turns on a devastating combination of rhetorical figures: 'I've cried for those girls, but not half so hard as I cried the night they gave me to you . . . I cried for I'd not dreamed to have a man so sweet, so kind and beautiful' ('Our Mrs. Reynolds,' 1.6; see Chapter 1). Saffron also embodies the ancient archetype of the 'poison damsel,' able to kill, or in this case incapacitate, through intimate contact (Penzer 35), itself a sort of shadow-double of the sacred prostitute. Lastly, we might say that Saffron doubles herself: her specialty as a con artist is the pitch-perfect impersonation of respectable married women of various types, from abject and submissive 'Saffron' to trophy wife 'Yolanda' ('Trash,' 1.11). Law-abiding Companions like Inara seek to occupy the middle ground between these two extremes of outlaw and housewife; between Saffron and 'Saffron,' as it were.

As discussed above, critics of the positive interpretation of hetaeras see it as ‘an attempt by male fantasists, ancient and modern, to romanticize an inherently obnoxious institution [and, thus, that Athenian] women had two roles available to them: the wife or the prostitute; there was no room for any equivocating courtesan in between’ (James Davidson 75). This pushes the hetaera to the prostitute side of a binary division between wives and whores. However, other feminist commentators have been sufficiently impressed by the similar exploitation of both classes to suggest that the real binary opposition was between hetaeras and all other women (Bell 24). This difficulty in pinning down hetaeras might plausibly result from their own artifice (James Davidson 135). The hetaera sought to elude both the cloistered world of married and marriageable women and the brutal exploitation of the brothels and streets. This task would not have been made easier by stating her identity too explicitly.

Socrates and his followers faced a similar predicament as they sought a middle way between the conventional pieties that passed for Greek moral wisdom and the moral relativism and clever rhetoric of the sophists. Several Socratic dialogues openly acknowledge this similarity between philosophers and hetaeras. The definition of the hetaera which we saw Socrates elicit from Theodote—‘My livelihood comes from friends I pick up who want to help me’ (Xenophon §3.11.4)—might as readily apply to Socrates himself. Indeed, their conversation concludes with an ironic reversal in which he affects to rely on love potions to secure the loyalty of his followers. In later literature, dialogues between hetaeras and philosophers or sophists are common (McClure 102). Typically, as in Xenophon, the underlying analogy is that the philosopher is to the sophist as the hetaera is to the whore, but sometimes the difference on one side is diminished to emphasize that on the other. Dialogues written from the hetaera’s perspective make the philosopher resemble the sophist to stress the difference between the hetaera and the whore, whereas dialogues valorizing philosophers collapse the distinction between hetaera and whore to exaggerate the inferiority of the sophist.

Thus both philosophers and hetaeras seek to occupy similarly contested middle ground. The philosopher’s success is an historical fact; the hetaera’s depends on transcending the association with deceit that I raise in the next section. I explore how that might be achieved through a reading of one of the most structurally complex episodes of *Firefly*.



*'I tore these out of your symbol, and they turned into paper'*

'Jaynestown' comprises three intersecting narratives, which remain mostly separate, although telling essentially the same story. Jayne discovers he has become a hero to the people of Canton, because they have grossly misinterpreted his past actions. But even when the truth comes out, the legend survives. As Mal puts it, 'Ain't about you, Jayne. It's about what they need.' Jayne's legend is important to the Mudders, despite its exposure, because it gives them hope. Meanwhile, River has been engaged in an increasingly frenetic attempt to render Book's Bible consistent through editing and rewriting. But, as Book tries to explain, 'It's not about making sense. It's about believing in something and letting that belief be real enough to change your life. It's about "faith".' The Bible is important to Book, despite its inconsistencies, because it gives him faith. Lastly, Inara is with a client, Fess Higgins, whose father has hired her to 'make a man' out of his son, who is still a virgin at twenty-six. Fess is disappointed not to feel any different afterwards, but Inara makes him realize that becoming a man is something he has to do for himself. Losing his virginity is important to Fess, despite not feeling any different, because it allows him to stand up to his father (which turns out to be rather important to the crew of *Serenity* too, as Fess allows them to escape.) In all three stories, a symbol fails to be what it purports to be but succeeds in representing something much more important (see Chapter 13).

Reality and appearance are important to philosophers, especially Plato. The central conceit of 'Jaynestown,' that a false appearance may produce something real and true, is an especially volatile combination. By an intriguing coincidence, this situation receives two contrasting interpretations in the two dialogues in which Plato has Socrates claim to be the student of women, indeed apparently of hetæras. In *Menexenus*, Plato has Socrates relate a funeral oration which he says he heard from the hetæra Aspasia. Although Socrates affects to praise Aspasia's speech, it contains many of the sophistic techniques he condemns elsewhere. Moreover, he notes that, despite containing many falsehoods, the bewitching effect of such eulogies produces an elevated but undeserved national pride, a 'majestic feeling' which stays with him 'for over three days' (235b). This clearly states the dangers inherent in this sort of myth-making. However, in his *Symposium*, Plato has Socrates credit some of his best ideas to a mysterious woman named Diotima. Since she initiates Socrates into knowledge of love, it

is tempting to see her as a hetaera, although there is no direct textual evidence for this claim (Bell 27). She may also be a construct, a figure invented by either Plato or Socrates. The account of love which Diotima offers to Socrates culminates in a ladder of steps by which mere lust, infatuation with ‘human flesh . . . and all that mortal rubbish,’ may lead by repeated abstractions to knowledge of ‘absolute beauty, divine and constant’ (211e). Here we see the same process, deriving a true belief from a false appearance, in a more favorable light.

If we accept the legitimacy of this process, as having the support of both Socrates and *Firefly*, we may employ it to resolve two problems that beset us above: that the positive interpretations of the hetaera and the Companion may be illusions and that prostitution is inherently shameful, since inextricably linked to deceit. In the first case, we can see that even if historical hetaeras and fictional Companions do not live up to the image presented by their most enthusiastic supporters, we may still derive from their beguiling appearance a true belief in the possibility of a system of female intellectual and libidinal autonomy. In the second case, we can see that, although the Companion or hetaera presents her client with what they both know to be a performance, and thus an illusion, it is an illusion from which he can derive not merely physical gratification but genuine aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional insight. Xenophon has Socrates explain how this might work:

In [your] body is a soul with which you have learnt to please with a glance, and to say what delights; to receive gracefully the suitor who cares, and to get rid of the voluptuary; to be thoughtful enough to visit a friend when he is sick, and to congratulate him on his successes; and, if he cares for you a great deal, to gratify him with your whole soul. I well know that you know how to make love gently and affectionately and that your friends satisfy you. I am sure also that you win them over by deed, not by word. (§3.11.10)

This idealized portrait of the Athenian hetaera Theodote might as readily describe Inara, another hetaera from three millennia later.<sup>1</sup>

# 6. 'I Aim to Misbehave'

## Masculinities in the 'Verse

DAVID MAGILL

At a crucial moment in Joss Whedon's film *Serenity*, Captain Mal Reynolds must decide how to proceed with the knowledge he has gained about the Alliance's nefarious and illegal activities. His response is simple and direct: 'I aim to misbehave.' In fact, his entire character is based on misbehavior; his actions and ideals represent a challenge to dominant forms of masculinity defined within his culture. Thus *Firefly* and *Serenity* constitute an extended treatise on contemporary masculinities. Of course, Whedon's television shows have consistently grappled with issues of gendered identity and power through their generic form and weekly content. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* rewrote Gothic fiction's centerpieces of powerfully seductive vampire males and helplessly desirous human females as a way into postfeminist debates on women's identities and social roles. So it is no surprise that Whedon should use his latest vehicle as a means of again entering the fray.

But while *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* spotlighted strong female characters, *Firefly* focuses on a masculine hero and group leader in a fantastic (yet not unrealistic) world. Whedon's amalgamation of science fiction and Western genres in his *Firefly* series and *Serenity* film revises Gene Roddenberry's 'Wagon Train to the Stars' approach to televisual science fiction (Whitfield 23) as it interrogates masculine identities within the structure of his space Western. *Firefly/Serenity's* characters expose the social construction of masculinities and articulate an ethical ideal of American manhood.

*Firefly/Serenity's* gender issues arise from contemporary concerns about masculine identities. Whedon destabilizes traditional definitions of masculinity by widening the range of individuals who can access

masculine characteristics and by exposing gender's social creation, then interrogates various possible formations within contemporary masculinity as a means of supporting his vision of ethical manhood, which he defines as using the authority and power associated with masculinity in a socially responsible manner.<sup>1</sup> *Firefly's* male supporting characters represent the breadth of masculine possibilities seen in contemporary America, similar to the ways in which *Buffy's* men represent the instability of identity through their overt construction of postfeminist identities, as Lorna Jowett has noted.<sup>2</sup> Jayne Cobb, for example, is the primitive misogynist of the crew. He is strong, selfish, resolutely heterosexual, and obnoxiously crude in his dealings with women. For example, when Inara greets a woman client, Jayne stares slack-jawed, then announces, 'I'll be in my bunk' ('War Stories,' 1.10). But he respects authority and offers the masculine violence necessary for the ship and crew's survival and criminal gains. Genteel aristocrat Simon Tam is the opposite of Jayne.<sup>3</sup> He has manners and education derived from his family's elite position in the Alliance and his own brilliant career as a surgeon. He focuses his morality toward helping his sister, which causes him trouble connecting to the rest of the crew. While he is also marked as heterosexual through his relationship with Kaylee, his awkwardness around women represents a strong contrast to Jayne's easy-going misogyny, and his lack of violence starkly opposes Jayne's viciousness toward his enemies. For example, Simon is beaten soundly by Jayne's former partner, but Jayne murders the man with his bare hands ('Jaynestown,' 1.7). That these opposites co-exist on the same ship (though not without conflict) undermines the static notion of an idealized masculine identity for all men.

Book and Wash further destabilize traditional masculinity as masculine border figures within the crew, akin to *Buffy's* 'new men.'<sup>4</sup> Book is a religious figure whose lack of clear heterosexuality and pacifist morality conflict with dominant forms of masculinity. He has trouble accepting the violence that Mal and Jayne represent, but he does use violence on occasion and participates in masculine activities such as weightlifting with Jayne.<sup>5</sup> Wash's comedic attitude makes clear his insecurities about Mal as well as his inability to take part in the physical violence endemic to the crew's line of work. Yet as Dee Amy-Chinn argues, Wash's marriage to Zoe masculinizes him: '[Zoe's] sexual relationship with Wash enhances his status within the show (where he is coded as less masculine than the other two core male crew members Mal and Jayne, both of whom are soldiers) by virtue of

his prowess in being able to “satisfy” a black lover’ (187). Wash even brags to an Alliance commander about her: ‘Have you ever been with a warrior woman?’ (‘Bushwhacked,’ 1.3).<sup>6</sup> Yet Whedon arguably depicts him as the lesser figure in their relationship: she must intercede on his behalf with the captain, she dominates their sexual relationship, and she controls their decisions. Wash and Book, then, represent alternative masculinities challenging traditional definitions.

The female supporting characters offer a complementary vision of masculinity in *Firefly* in two ways: challenging the biological imperative of gender and revealing the social construction of masculinity in a way that supports Mal’s ethical humanity as a viable alternative for all.<sup>7</sup> Kaylee and River represent expanded visions of access in that they are typically feminine and yet take on masculine positions in the heterosocial network of *Serenity*. Kaylee is the ship’s mechanic, a job she gets through her superior abilities as she diagnoses an engine problem during sex with Mal’s previous mechanic and then fixes it as the men look on in confusion and wonder (‘Out of Gas,’ 1.8). In ‘Shindig’ (1.4), she does not fit in with the other women at the ball she attends, yet she transfixes a bevy of men with her ability to discuss engines. River, also feminine in appearance and attitude (her clothing as well as her dancing in ‘Safe,’ 1.5, suggest her femininity, and Simon’s protection casts her in a similar role), nevertheless turns out to be an assassin powerful enough to wipe out an entire group of Reavers (*Serenity*). But the most important character in this regard is Zoe, who inhabits a form of female masculinity.<sup>8</sup> Zoe is stoic like Mal, and she also mirrors Mal’s and Jayne’s fighting abilities. She takes on an authoritative role on the ship as second-in-command, and she is able to keep Jayne in check not only through words but implied violence. Zoe is the strongest challenge to the assumed correlation between gender and biological genitalia; her masculine abilities support Whedon’s vision of socially constructed gender roles, a definition essential for his project of advancing ethical behaviors for both genders.<sup>9</sup>

Through their various claims to masculinity’s attributes and roles, the supporting characters of *Firefly* and *Serenity* demonstrate that gender is not naturally biological but socially constructed.<sup>10</sup> The women expose the social machinery of gender, while the men demonstrate the range of gender’s flexibilities. Yet Whedon also defines a preferred ideal of masculinity through Malcolm Reynolds, the show’s avatar for masculinity through his interactions with the other crewmembers and his ethical code for the world.<sup>11</sup> Further, Mal’s masculinity derives

support from the social relations aboard *Serenity*: Mal not only holds himself to his moral code but he also teaches the others to live by it, and their recognition of his identity and authority further support his ethical manhood as the show's primary referent.

In many ways, Mal is the typical masculine hero: strong, independent, and stoic, refusing to show his emotions or voice his true feelings except under duress. The show further accentuates his masculinity through the requisite scenes that demonstrate his heterosexuality: his love interest in Inara throughout the show, his 'marriage' to and seduction by the con artist Saffron ('Our Mrs. Reynolds,' 1.6), and his lovemaking with former Companion Nandi ('Heart of Gold,' 1.13). In addition, Mal is depicted as a man of action, able to size up a situation and make the correct decisions to protect his crew and achieve their goals. For example, when Reavers threaten *Serenity* during a planetary landing, Mal returns to the ship to find a life-threatening standoff between Alliance agent Dobson and his crew; Mal shoots Dobson without hesitation as he enters the ship and throws the agent off the ship so they can depart. Similarly, he controls Jayne through implied physical threat and keeps the passengers in line. There is rarely a direct challenge to his authority on the ship. In addition, his background as a former military officer, albeit on the losing side, contributes to his initial classification as the hero.

Mal combines physical power and structural authority with a strict ethical code that guides his actions; Whedon writes Mal as 'a man of honor in a den of thieves' ('*Serenity*,' 1.1). While critics John C. Wright and Scott Farrell have debated the show's use of chivalry, I would argue that we must discuss that term within the context of the show's intervention in contemporary debates on masculinity.<sup>12</sup> Whedon's depiction of Mal ultimately suggests that the crisis among men is not a crisis *of* masculinity but a reaction *against* masculinity's unacknowledged links to power. Mal's ethical vision acknowledges these links and directs its power toward the common good through productive behaviors. The series makes it clear that within the larger social networks of the 'verse, Mal may not have political power; however, Whedon's display of the Alliance's corruption and the 'verse's constantly shifting allegiances make it clear that Mal's localized authority is superior to the traditional political ideologies promoted by the Alliance and other leaders through such networks. From his protection of fugitives and whores ('*Heart of Gold*') to his demands on Jayne's loyalties ('*Ariel*,' 1.9), Mal demonstrates by words and actions

the proper behaviors for a man. And Whedon clearly connects ethics and manhood through the show's consistent connections of authority, power, and gender identity.

Three main beliefs comprise Mal's ethics, all depicted in the series pilot: take care of your crew; protect the weak and help the needy; exercise lethal violence with restraint. Mal defends his crew against Reavers, the Alliance, and the lawman Dobson. When Dobson shoots Kaylee during his first attempt to capture River and Simon, Mal agrees to run from the Alliance so that Simon will agree to save Kaylee's life. At Dobson's second attempt, Mal shoots Dobson only when the ship is endangered by Reavers, and this after he has stopped Jayne from killing the lawman for infiltrating Serenity. He limits his violence to achieving necessary goals.

Mal takes on Simon and River as crew even after they cause such trouble because he recognizes their need for protection and because 'It's the right thing to do' ('Serenity'). Mal's code requires him to defend the weak and helpless, though he does get the secondary benefit of interfering with Alliance plans. But Mal makes clear that his primary reason lies with his ethics, and the fact that they join his crew makes it doubly imperative for him to protect them.

'The Train Job' (1.2) further develops Mal's ethical vision. The crew takes a job from arch-criminal Niska to steal an Alliance shipment, which they learn upon further inspection comprises medicines needed by the planet's mining colony to fight a fatal disease. Mal returns the medicines rather than complete his mission for Niska because he understands the ethical implications of his actions; when the sheriff comments, 'Man learns all the details—well, then, he has a choice,' Mal responds, 'I don't believe he does.' Mal's ethics provide him no choice; he believes the medicine should stay with those who need it, so he does not steal it, knowing that he will cross a dangerous man by this choice. When Niska's henchman Crow refuses to accept Mal's 'resignation,' Mal kicks him into the ship's engine because Crow has made an open-ended threat.

Perhaps the most overt comment on Mal's ethics comes in the episode 'Shindig,' where Mal enters an old-fashioned duel with Atherton Wing to defend Inara's honor, having punched Wing for treating Inara as property. As Mal later tells Inara, 'I might not show respect to your job, but he doesn't respect you.' Mal's ethical standards reflect a strong value for individual persons and their rights; thus, his actions to defend Inara's person make sense despite his insults about

her work as a Companion. Yet Mal must then fight a duel because he has not comprehended that this culture's social codes takes his action as a challenge to Wing's honor. Whedon uses this lack of knowledge as a means of positioning Mal's masculine responses against the hegemonic definitions represented by Wing (e.g. ownership of property and women, social and economic dominance).

Mal's actions reflect his desire to protect Inara, whom he sees as unable to respond because of her status as Wing's Companion. Yet he chooses to exercise restraint even though the duel's cultural protocols sanction killing Wing. Mal's refusal to kill Wing reflects his differing values (Wing has reportedly killed a dozen men) and supports his ethical vision, defending the person while disdaining the institution. 'Shindig,' then, highlights Mal's masculine honor: he defends a woman whose social standing (not her person) has placed her in a weakened position, he uses violence with restraint to defend her, and he protects Inara in the process, refusing help from his crew to rescue him from what seems to be a certain defeat.

We see a similar ability and desire to aid individuals in weakened positions in two other episodes. In 'Our Mrs. Reynolds,' Mal defends Saffron, a young woman who claims to be betrothed to him because of his work protecting her village. Mal refuses to take her virginity, protects her from Jayne, and repeatedly offers her advice designed to make her see herself as a person. Saffron turns out to be a con artist trying to steal *Serenity*; this fact, however, only further establishes Mal's credibility as he takes her at her word. He manages to save his ship from capture and hunt her down, but he does not kill her for revenge; he merely takes back his stolen shuttle.

'Heart of Gold' depicts the *Serenity* crew protecting prostitutes in a brothel from their town's patriarchal leader Rance Burgess, who demands ownership of a child he fathered with one of the prostitutes and who treats the brothel's inhabitants with contempt, even forcing one to fellate him in public as a means of demonstrating his authority over women. Mal agrees to fight for these women because he sees that Burgess's actions are wrong and that the women cannot stand alone against him. Unlike the traditional practices of chivalry, Mal defends not only virgins but also other women without power. As important, however, is the fact that Inara's friend Nandi runs the brothel; thus, Mal offers to assist them without pay (though Inara insists on a business relationship). He does make love to Nandi, but the episode clearly shows that Nandi is the initiator and that there is mutual attraction.



This is not a business arrangement. Thus 'Heart of Gold' extends Mal's ethics to include not only his crew but those whom he agrees to fight alongside. So when Rance Burgess kills Nandi during the final gun battle, Mal chases him down to serve justice. He does not kill Rance Burgess, however; rather, the baby's mother shoots Burgess to protect her child, whom he has tried to steal. These various situations clearly depict Mal Reynolds as a person who derives his identity as a man from his ethics.

Whedon contextualizes Mal's identity and behavior within the larger social networks of the 'verse as further means of demonstrating his preference for this vision. Mal and the Serenity crew inhabit a universe dominated by a centralist government known as the Alliance, also populated by pioneers on the frontier planets, and haunted by 'Reavers'—savage, cannibalistic humans living on the edge of occupied space. The Alliance functions as a military-industrial patriarchy, run completely by men who define the laws (to their benefit), hoard resources for the Central Planets, and control women (and men) through legal regulation, such as the Companions, or illegal extradition (as when they kidnap River Tam and surgically alter her brain to create a psychic assassin). We typically only see Alliance women in domestic positions (Simon and River's mother in 'Safe') or education (*Serenity*), supporting the Alliance from a subordinated position. Thus, the Alliance represents an abusive masculinist power against which Mal compares well. He even remarks upon this conflict when asked about his service to the Browncoats (opponents of the Alliance): 'May have been the losing side. Still not convinced it was the wrong one' ('Bushwhacked').

While the Alliance represents hegemonic patriarchy against which Mal's individualist identity stands clearly superior, the Reavers represent the opposite end of the spectrum: savage primitivism combined with an individual anarchy that disclaims all social responsibilities or ideals, though again the Reavers all seem to be men. The Reavers break every social taboo: self-mutilation, cannibalism, rape, and torture. They represent ethically unconstrained power, allowing Whedon to critique unchecked individualism as a social danger similar to the Alliance's coercive collectivism. The film furthers this comparison by revealing the Alliance's complicity in creating the Reavers through scientific experimentation gone awry. Thus, the Alliance and the Reavers become two sides of the same coin: both represent socially destructive alternatives rooted in a lack of individual ethics.

Situated on the border between the Alliance and the Reavers, *Serenity* thus represents a middle space in the 'verse, marginalized within the narrative yet centralized for the show's viewers in the same manner as Mal's masculinity.<sup>13</sup> Mal represents individualist ethics that stand at odds with the Alliance's authoritative structure, yet he combines this vision with a strict ethical code of conduct that the Reavers and most of Mal's criminal brethren obviously lack. Niska, for example, sees no problem in torturing Mal and Wash for double-crossing him; their crime is returning his money and refusing a job that he has commissioned solely for his financial benefit ('War Stories'). Similarly, in 'Out of Gas,' a salvage ship captain offers Mal a needed spare part to repair *Serenity*, but betrays Mal by shooting him and trying to steal *Serenity*. Mal manages to get a gun and turn the tables, at which point the two captains' philosophies become clear, with the first captain claiming, 'You'd've done the same,' and Mal retorting, 'We can already see that I haven't.' Mal thus promotes a socially responsible manhood that does not wield power uncontrollably, whether for individual gain or collective coercion. He also does not threaten women, such as Jubal Early does in 'Objects in Space' (1.14).<sup>14</sup> Reynolds is a figure of 'misbehavior'—he repudiates the dominant gender structures within the show to support his behavioral code.<sup>15</sup> Drawing on the generic legacy of Westerns as well as the historical legacy of American individualism, Whedon creates Mal Reynolds to advocate individual freedom combined with ethical action.

The most important social network on the show is *Serenity*; while the supporting characters serve to highlight Mal's masculinity, as noted earlier, they also learn from Mal's masculinity. Michael Kimmel notes that men teach other men how to be masculine, primarily through homosocial relations.<sup>16</sup> Mal not only defines ethical manhood, he also teaches it to the other members of the crew (and other characters as well), offering his ideals to the heterosocial community of *Serenity*.<sup>17</sup> We hear such a story when former soldier Tracey tells the *Serenity* crew that he remembers Mal's 'homilies and stories of glory and honor' ('The Message,' 1.12). Tracey's labeling of Mal's lessons as 'stories' demonstrates that he has not internalized them, a fact reinforced at the end of the episode when he takes Kaylee hostage in order to escape bounty hunters. Mal does not make Tracey take on his definition of manhood, but Mal does defend his crew from harm by shooting Tracey. Yet despite Tracey's betrayal, Mal and the *Serenity* crew still deliver Tracey's body home for burial by his parents. Mal recognizes

the importance of family bonds and supports them through his actions, even if the recipient does not recognize the value of his code.

Mal teaches the other male characters the importance of this ethical vision; he demands that the crew take care of one another, supporting that individual justice which he holds dear. Simon learns this lesson when Mal invites the doctor to stay on the ship; Simon wonders, 'How do I know you won't kill me in my sleep?' to which Mal responds, 'You don't know me, son, so I'll explain this to you once. If I ever kill you, you'll be awake, you'll be facing me, and you'll be armed' ('Serenity'). Mal's ethical stance is apparent here; he only uses lethal violence in certain clearly defined circumstances, and he won't turn this violence against a crewmember unless that person betrays others. Mal continues to reveal his ethics to Simon in 'Safe.' Local townspeople kidnap the Tams as Book is shot, and Serenity must leave to find medical help. But they return in time to save River and Simon from death by burning. When safely on the ship, however, Simon questions the captain's tactics: 'Captain, why did you come back for us?' Mal, who was himself left behind in the Battle of Serenity Valley, must repeat his claim 'You're on my crew' because Simon does not believe it at first. Yet that disbelief is surprising given Mal's consistent regard for those under his tutelage and care. He tells Jayne, 'No one's getting left. This is my boat, my crew. No one's getting left' ('Ariel'). Mal's stance, though, carries over to Simon; even after finding out that Jayne had betrayed them to the Feds, Simon, reflecting his incorporation of Mal's ethics, assures Jayne's safety on his medical table because they are crewmates ('Trash,' 1.11).

Jayne's betrayal of Simon and River marks another opportunity for Mal to define his ethical standards for the crew and himself. Upon realizing that Jayne had informed the authorities of Simon and River's whereabouts, Mal assaults Jayne with a wrench and places him in the airlock. When Jayne claims that he has not betrayed Mal in his actions, Mal replies, 'Oh, but you did! You turn on any of my crew, you turn on me! But since that's a concept you can't seem to keep your head around, you got no place here. You did it to me, Jayne, and that's a fact' ('Ariel'). Mal articulates his central principle of crew solidarity to Jayne, making clear that the betrayal is a challenge to his ethical authority. Yet, though he could easily leave Jayne in the airlock to suffocate, Mal relents and gives Jayne the opportunity to change because Jayne demonstrates concern for the crew's opinions and feelings when requesting that Mal lie about Jayne's impending death.

Mal also offers Jayne a message of empathy for others in 'Jaynestown' after a young man takes a bullet for town hero Jayne, who finds the sacrifice inexplicable: 'It's my estimation that every man ever got a statue made of him was one kind of sommbitch or another. Ain't about you, Jayne. It's about what they need.' Mal understands the Mudders' need for a hero upon which to drape their hopes and dreams of future escape from the dreary life they lead. His words to Jayne communicate the need for such heroes to accept this role, one that Mal holds for his crew in many ways.

Mal teaches Wash about manhood as well, despite Wash's vision of Mal as a threat to his masculine identity and to his marriage. These two anxieties come to a head when Niska kidnaps and tortures them both. Mal spends his time and energy keeping Wash focused and alert so that Wash will survive. In fact, the effort technically kills Mal, though Niska's torturer revives him for more pain. As Zoe leads Wash out of the room, having paid for his freedom, he tells her, 'He's crazy. He wouldn't break, Zoe. He kept me from . . .' ('War Stories'). Mal's performance offers Wash a new vision of manhood, one rooted not only in the physical ability to endure and survive but also the ethical vision that Mal exhibits in prioritizing Wash's survival over his own. Wash's response reflects his amazement at Mal's sacrifice; he returns to the ship and, in an uncharacteristic show of bravado, straps on weapons and helps lead the charge to rescue Mal. Importantly, Zoe must teach him the strategy of fighting and the details of the weapons, but Wash's taking on of a more active violence reflects his understanding of Mal's message.

Even Book learns from Mal: while the preacher does have an ethical code as the result of his order's religious beliefs, his vision of the universe is tested by his entrance into Serenity, where he must contend with Mal's violence, Inara's Companion status, and River's disbelief. For Book, whose religious path may have succeeded a violent past, Mal represents a means of adapting his ethics to the realities of the 'verse, though Book does teach Mal life lessons as well. As the show goes on, Book becomes more willing to use selective violence, including his role in Mal's rescue from Niska as armed cover for Zoe's advance team. Each of the male characters, then, learns from Mal how to be an ethical man in a universe of violence and chaos, and each recognizes Mal's masculinity by acknowledging his ethical authority. The female characters also recognize this authority: Zoe follows the captain without question, disobeying orders only to save

his life ('Out of Gas'); Inara's previously mentioned assertion of his strength is complemented by her recognition of his vision of honor (most notably in 'Shindig' and 'Jaynestown') and by her saving his life and helping him with his capers; Kaylee, representing the moral center of the ship, remarks that Mal is 'a good captain' ('Serenity'). Thus, as Farrell has observed, 'Serenity's crew struggles toward honorable deeds—sometimes uncertainly and often reluctantly, but in the end they are all changed for the better by a greater awareness of chivalry' (4). And the proponent of that ethical philosophy is Mal, who becomes a leader not just by his position as captain but also by his words and deeds. By making this ideal available to his entire crew, he undermines the biological imperative of gender ideology, allowing more egalitarian access to masculinity's benefits and powers. He leads *Serenity* and its crew toward freedom, showing them by example how to act in a 'verse that has abandoned his ethical way of living.

Joss Whedon incorporates in his vision of the future a set of guidelines for masculinity today. Malcolm Reynolds harkens to previous Western heroes such as those portrayed by John Wayne (*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, 1962) and Gary Cooper (*High Noon*, 1952) as well as previous science fiction heroes such as Han Solo (*Star Wars*) and James Kirk (*Star Trek*), updating their ethics to the contemporary moment. *Firefly* and *Serenity* remake manhood as a set of 'mis-behaviors' against hegemonic masculinity, offering a more progressive, justice-based vision of masculinity for men and women to claim.

GENRE



# 7. 'The Alliance Isn't Some Evil Empire'

## Dystopia in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*/ *Serenity*

SHARON SUTHERLAND AND  
SARAH SWAN

In every television series he has created, Joss Whedon has shown himself a master of genre-blending. Each features a creative, surprisingly successful fusion of genres as well as an inversion of the norms typically associated with them. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Firefly* all employ unusual combinations of two or more genres, and each develops a unique voice through inversion and juxtaposition of genre-driven expectations. *Buffy* established its voice through inversions of the generic expectations of high-school teen drama and the horror show.<sup>1</sup> *Angel* mixes motifs and allusions from the horror and film noir/private investigator genre with the archetype of the individual facing corporate evil.<sup>2</sup> In *Firefly*, Whedon locates his cast in the combined world of horror, science fiction, and Western,<sup>3</sup> describing the fictional world of the series as 'Western noir' with 'a kind of a Hong Kong sensibility' (*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 25). Yet a tradition more specific than the broad category of science fiction also informs *Firefly*'s world: *Firefly*, and its cinematic sister *Serenity*, fit comfortably within the tradition of twentieth-century dystopic fiction. In this chapter, we situate *Firefly* within the dystopic tradition and explore its debt to the classic and feminist dystopic themes of the twentieth century, as well as its contributions to twenty-first-century post-9/11 dystopic discourse. As part of this exploration, we consider the uniquely Whedonian concerns and inversions that are overlaid upon the traditional genre norms.



*Dystopia defined*

A dystopia has been defined as a text with ‘a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived’ (Sargent 9). Most scholarly examinations of dystopias emphasize their political aspects: dystopias present less than perfect ‘sociopolitical institutions, norms, and relationships between . . . individuals,’ from the perspective of ‘a representative of a discontented social class or faction, whose value-system defines “perfection”’ (Suvin 170). A dystopia, then, is a view of an imperfect fictional society that utilizes the perspective of the outlaw to examine the political ramifications of its social ordering. As a preliminary observation, it is simple to see that *Firefly* fits well within this basic premise. Since losing the war, Mal and his crew (with the possible exception of Inara) live as outlaws, doing legal or illegal jobs for anyone willing and able to pay and constantly trying to avoid the Feds.

*‘You can’t take the sky from me’:<sup>4</sup> Dystopic settings*

The dystopic setting is commonly a post-apocalypse or post-holocaust world—the barren landscapes of *Logan’s Run* (1976)<sup>5</sup> or *Planet of the Apes* (1968), for example. In the rebuilding of civilization from a disaster or war, we see a reversion to the image of the frontier. In non-urban settings, it is common to see the forbidding landscapes that lend themselves to the Western genre. In this case, the selectively told backstory (another common conceit of dystopic fiction) tells us that ‘Earth-That-Was could no longer sustain our numbers, we were so many’ (*Serenity*). Emigrants from Earth-That-Was traveled to a new system where planets were terraformed to support human life. The lack of support for further development of the outlying planets resulted in unwelcoming ‘Western’ environments like those seen outside the dome in *Logan’s Run*.

In *Firefly*, Whedon visually and thematically connects the post-apocalypse worlds of dystopic film and the frontier plains of the Western. Combining the barren, open imagery of the two genres viscerally underlines the thematic links between two genres that examine the individual on the outer fringe of society. To this mix, in his typical fashion, Whedon also imparts a ‘Hong Kong sensibility’

(*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 25). He describes that sensibility as a mixing of genres without the predictability of clichés:

There is a convention in American cinema to fall back on clichés—or on time-honored structure . . . And in these [Hong Kong] films, where you thought you were going to be terrified, the broadest comedy might appear. Wherever you thought this guy has been defeated, he might suddenly come back and kill everybody in the room and *then* suddenly be defeated. You just never knew. (25)

The ‘Hong Kong sensibility’ is imparted into the setting of *Firefly* through the Asian influences in the city scenes. The visual cues suggesting a strong Asian influence are many and various—everything from the animated characters that speak subliminally to River Tam via a giant screen to the kimonos seen on some of the female characters and the repainted lettering of *Serenity*—reminds the reader of this Asian inspiration. The Asian influence also spills over into the language of *Firefly*, which is uniquely and evocatively flavored with Mandarin.<sup>6</sup>

*‘Ten percent of nuthin’ is . . . Let me do the math here’:<sup>7</sup> Classic dystopian themes*

Usually a dystopic society is specifically linked to the society of its creator: the dystopic society carries tendencies from current society to their logical, and usually terrifying, extreme (Harmon and Holman 171). Dystopias reflect and examine current power structures that create and maintain social organization. The classic dystopias—e.g. the early novels of Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell—resonate with the concerns of the early to mid-twentieth century. In particular, those works were deeply connected to a fear of totalitarianism: the European experience during the wars and fears concerning the rise of fascist and socialist states led to a focus on totalitarianism and societal evils like the repression of minorities, gender disparity, state violence, war, and genocide. The dystopic visions of later times impeach similar evils, but the shape of the repression and social ills shifts through the century in response to the specific concerns of each era and place. Themes that reappear in dystopias throughout the century include state control of economic activity; social stratification, often including rationing or food shortages for some parts of the population; militarized police forces;

the state's insistence that 'outlaws' are causing problems through their own actions; and state propaganda and control of education.

Each of these classic dystopic concerns is part of *Firefly*'s world. The state's control of economic activity is evident in the contrast between the wealthy inner planets and the impoverished outer planets. The inhabitants of the inner planets, who supported the ultimately victorious Alliance in the war, are rewarded, while those on the outer planets, who fought against the Alliance, are cut off from supplies, economically depressed, and often enslaved by whoever has adopted the most successful 'might-makes-right' approach. The rationing and food shortages for these inhabitants and for the crew of *Serenity* are obvious: we see the preciousness of a single strawberry when Shepherd Book is able to barter it (and a little money) for passage onto *Serenity* ('*Serenity*,' 1.1), observe the crew's lusty satisfaction when Book serves them fresh tomatoes ('*Serenity*'), and hear Kaylee's apologies to Simon for the taste of the birthday cake she made without benefit of flour ('*Out of Gas*,' 1.8).

The militaristic enforcers of the regime police the borderlands with a goal of capturing smugglers like the *Serenity* crew who try to service this disregarded frontier land. Those enforcers and the Alliance itself believe it is smugglers like Mal and his crew who are the cause of problems in the outer planets and consider them carrion eaters. More than once, the Alliance members refer to *Serenity* and its crew as 'vultures' or describe them as picking off the bones of the dead ('*Serenity*'; '*Bushwacked*,' 1.3; *Serenity*).

State control of education is vividly rendered through the opening scene of *Serenity*. The film begins with a voiceover from a woman we soon see is a teacher. The teacher explains to her students,

The Central Planets were the first settled and are the most advanced, embodying civilization at its peak. Life on the outer planets is much more primitive and difficult. That's why the Central Planets formed the Alliance, so everyone can enjoy the comfort and enlightenment of true civilization. That's why we fought the War for Unification.

After some discussion amongst the class, the teacher asks why the Independents would want to fight against the Alliance which brought them so many social and medical advancements. A pupil (our heroine River Tam) replies that the Alliance 'meddles' and 'people don't like to be meddled with.' Her teacher corrects her and explains that they

are not telling people what to think; they are showing them how. The teacher then suddenly and violently plunges a stylus into River's head, and the scene flash-cuts to River strapped in a chair with needles in her head as technicians monitor her. The message is abundantly clear: the state has won the war and will not tolerate questions as it teaches its children its version of history.

For readers of classic dystopias, this scene resonates with the dystopic vision of Orwell's *1984* and its central character's concerns about the rewriting of history by the ruling party. A common concern of dystopic fiction is the construction of a fictionalized view of reality that the population is coerced to believe or raised from childhood to accept. Jowett refers to this as the 'traditional dystopian regime's alteration of history to produce a sugarcoated utopian version of events' ('Helping' 81). Early education is a common means of controlling the population's view of reality, and it is common for dystopias to present a populace—here represented by the obedient children in River's class—that is generally accepting of the state's version of reality. Mal, himself, is aware of the dynamic between the elite ruling class and history. When the crew seems surprised that they cannot find an accurate record describing the planet Miranda, he reminds his crew: 'half of writing history is hiding the truth' (*Serenity*).

*Serenity* provides a more dramatic exposition of the evils of state control, and the control of information, through the Reavers. Throughout *Firefly*, Reavers are the dark and little-known evil of the star system. As is their pattern, the totalitarian Alliance government denies their existence, but those who live at the outskirts of the system know that Reavers are real and that they are so animalistic in what they do to their captives that their victims will almost always attempt suicide: the murder of a person who has been captured by Reavers is viewed as a mercy killing. When *Serenity* successfully sneaks around Reaver warships to land on the outer-rim planet Miranda, they find amongst a mass of dead people a videolog describing the creation of Reavers. Reavers are the result of Alliance experiments in controlling an entire planetary population with a chemical substance to suppress aggression. Instead, the chemical caused the majority of the population to simply stop everything and let themselves die. A small segment of the population had the opposite reaction: those who turned hyper-violent became Reavers.

The horror of mass behavioral control like that attempted by the Alliance on Miranda and individual mind control as attempted on

River are important themes in countless dystopias. This is the primary concern of the film adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), for example, which uses the aversion therapy its delinquent protagonist undergoes to explore the morality of removing free will, even where free will is used to choose evil. Scenes of River strapped to chairs and connected to machinery for Alliance experimentation evoke scenes of Alex similarly strapped down for experimental therapy in the screen version of *A Clockwork Orange*. In *Serenity*, however, Whedon changes the question from whether it is moral to remove one's free will to choose to do evil to the even murkier question of whether it is moral to deny an individual's free will in an effort to accomplish a greater good.

*'Start with the part where Jayne gets knocked out by a 90-pound girl . . .':<sup>8</sup>  
Feminist dystopias*

Given that dystopic literature reflects the political and social concerns of its time, it is not surprising that by the 1970s and 1980s, dystopic themes began to fall into two dominant categories of work: feminist dystopia and cyberpunk. Feminist dystopia is distinguished by its focus on genderized power structures and repression, whereas cyberpunk explores concerns of rapidly developing technology and the social structures emerging in this hi-tech world. Jowett examines the cyberpunk aspects of *Firefly* in the following chapter, so we focus only on Whedon's debt to feminist dystopias.

It is not novel, of course, to suggest that Whedon's work has strong feminist elements. In addition to his playful use of genres, his feminist themes are among his most characteristic traits.<sup>9</sup> In *Firefly*, Whedon draws on prevalent feminist dystopic themes in much the same way that he uses the classic dystopic themes: he chooses to evoke the genre, but inverts some aspects to avoid the cliché. For example, the feminist dystopia is almost always characterized by a world in which genderized repression forms an aspect of the social ills depicted. A natural consequence is that the protagonist—the person struggling against the unjust system—is nearly always female, drawing attention to the female perspective on social ordering in the world. If we view *Firefly* as a feminist dystopia, then the female protagonist of the greater dystopic tale that flows through the series and film is River. River offers a typical voice for this form: a young woman

victimized by the repressive society. But whereas the protagonists of dystopias like Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* or Tepper's *The Gate Into Women's Country* remain weak and find hope only in the existence of a small and hidden resistance movement, River breaks loose of genre expectations in butt-kicking, Reaver-slaying glory. Admittedly, after seven television seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Whedon fans would have been more surprised had River not had hidden strengths to draw upon. Nonetheless, through River's unusual skill set, Whedon makes use of the genre's traditional protagonist in non-traditional ways.

Whedon also chooses his other female characters to make specific statements and to ensure a balanced female and male perspective to the crew's adventures: the audience hears the voice of River, and Zoe, the soldier and highly competent fighter; Kaylee, the girlie gifted mechanic; and Inara, the Companion who holds the most ambiguous of the female roles as a member of a generally honored profession. Each of these characters plays with specific expectations around the character; however, Inara is one of the women whose characterization draws most strongly from feminist dystopia.

Like many characters in feminist dystopias where reproductive politics are often an issue, Inara acts as a courtesan. She is respected in society because she is a highly placed Companion able to select her partners and to control her relationships with them. Yet in 'Heart of Gold' (1.13), we see the other side of her choice of careers, and a more typical depiction of the courtesan in feminist dystopia (and Westerns, for that matter), which speaks to the inequalities of women's positions in some parts of this universe. The women who inhabit the brothel in the episode are whores because, unlike Companions, they are not registered with the Guild. The parallels between women in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the women in 'Heart of Gold' are obvious: in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the few fertile women that still exist are sent to live with elite men and their wives so that the handmaids can become pregnant and carry the children as surrogates for the infertile wives. In 'Heart of Gold,' Pedaline serves as a handmaid: a powerful man impregnates her in lieu of his 'barren prairie shrew' wife, and he intends to take the baby, even if he has to 'cut it out' of her. In the Whedonverse, the women are able to fend off the attack through a violent war with many casualties and much sacrifice. Pedaline and the other women emerge victorious and reclaim their reproductive rights when Pedaline un sentimentally shoots the man who fathered the child. Although their position is certainly improved at the episode's end, the

women are still very much on the outskirts of society, both literally and figuratively. We do not gain a picture of frontiers where women's places are secure and equal. Similarly, while in 'Our Mrs. Reynolds' (1.6) Saffron ultimately shows herself to be a wily and dangerous villain, she begins by 'marrying' Mal and relying on his sense of duty driven by very pre-feminist notions of marriage to trick him further. The ploy simply couldn't work in a world in which marriage is always like Zoe and Wash's. Instead, we see the gender differences that do exist in this star system.

### *Firefly and post-9/11 American society*

Ultimately, a dystopia provides social commentary on the ills of the contemporary world by ensuring that, however dire and exaggerated, those ills are recognizable to its audience. Given its development shortly after the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11 2001, we would expect *Firefly*, in the tradition of dystopias, to reflect the sociopolitical concerns of that specific time. As Hillegas writes of earlier dystopic works, our visions of dystopia are 'one of the most revealing indexes to the anxieties of our age' (3). *Firefly* is no different. In addition to its references to typical, twentieth-century dystopian themes, the worlds of *Firefly* and *Serenity* also link specifically to the society their creator and first audiences live in: post-9/11 American society. The events occurring in America after the terrorist attacks have been the source of much criticism, thought, and debate. Some of the actions of the Alliance can be viewed as a horrifying extension of the allegations of outsourcing torture, mistreating prisoners of war, and initiating devastating wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have been levied against the American government. *Firefly* taps into the concerns prevalent in the post-9/11 world: through its portrayal of a fictional world, the series explores today's power structures and comments on our current preoccupations with just leadership, laws and legal systems that create or maintain injustice, and the conflict between individual rights and the protection of society. Through the subversion and inversion of the antagonist and protagonist of the series, *Firefly* and *Serenity* also reflect a moral ambiguity common in post-9/11 television series. Whereas the lines between good and evil were previously clear, the shows of the new millennium take place in gray areas where the distinction between right and wrong is slipperier.<sup>10</sup>

*A Whedonian dystopia: Inverting the antagonist*

An important Whedonian feature of the *Serenity/Firefly* dystopia is that the government is not completely evil. In a recent interview, Whedon downplayed the sinister nature of the Alliance. While he acknowledged that the audience reads the series as a show in which the crew fights against an evil empire, he commented:

And I'm like, 'Well, it's not really an evil empire.' The trick was always to create something that was complex enough that you could bring some debate to it—that it wasn't black and white. It wasn't, 'If we hit this porthole in the Death Star, everything will be fine!' It was messier than that, and the *messiest* thing is that the government is basically benign. It's the most advanced culturally . . . (qtd. in Russell)

The fundamentally good intentions of the Alliance are evident in the ideologue discovered on Miranda. The Alliance worker insists that the scheme was a way to help people, not hurt them ('We meant it for the best, to make people safer'). Even Mal knows that most of the harm the Alliance causes derives from its belief that it can make people better, which is why he also knows he must alert the public to the realities of what happened on Miranda before the Alliance decides it can make more people better through a similar protocol (*Serenity*). Other Alliance citizens clearly believe in the good of their governing bodies, and we learn that even members of the crew's inner circle, like Inara, supported Unification ('Out of Gas').

It is not the Alliance's end of bettering people and their lives that makes it terrifying; rather, it is the means the Alliance chooses to employ which are indefensible. The act of sending an Operative forth to kill River is appalling, as are the many killings he commits in pursuit of her. The indiscriminate mass killing of every man, woman, and child on the planet that Shepherd Book resides on, the brutal slaughter of Mr. Universe, and the tragic death of Wash all demonstrate that the Alliance has no qualms about killing innocents to achieve its ultimate purpose. As the Operative insists while murdering the doctor responsible for the failure of the River project, the Alliance believes 'we're making a better world. All of them, better worlds' (*Serenity*). The cost of the Alliance's mission is simply unacceptable to the crew of *Serenity* as well as to the audience.



*A Whedonian dystopia: Inverting the protagonist*

In addition to its theme of moral ambiguity, *Firefly* also connects to another prevalent post-9/11 concern, the trampling of individual rights for the perceived benefit of society as a whole. A concern over the conflict between the rights of the individual and the protection or benefit of society is not unique to post-9/11 thought, though the counter-terrorism measures implemented in the wake of 9/11 have given the debate new significance. River's plight when she has been taken away for scientific experimentation against her will is a vividly dystopic vision similar to images we see repeated through the dystopic canon: Winston Smith's helplessness to retain his beliefs against physical and mental tortures in *1984*, the efforts of the Valans to torture the Sharers into conceding their values in Slonczewski's *A Door Into Ocean*, and Alex's 'rehabilitation' by the Ludovico technique in Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. Dystopic novels and films are rife with images of individuals immobilized and facing forced reconditioning. In these works, individuals are not permitted their personal beliefs, and may be made into agents of the state—as is clearly the intention of River's captors. Although we do not learn until the end of *Serenity* that River's captors have created in her a tool against the Reavers (and even then their target is uncertain), we have many clues that she has been programmed for some purpose she cannot access.<sup>11</sup>

Whedon's world makes use of the dystopic trope of individual versus collective, but interestingly inverts the perspective by presenting us with a collective of outsiders—rather than River—as the lens for our examination of the world. We only slowly begin to see that River's personal story is central to the overall narrative. Interestingly, one of the objections to *Firefly* that the Fox network reportedly had was that the 'nobodies' who 'get squished by policy' are the focus of the show (DVD commentaries for 'The Train Job' (1.2) and 'Serenity'). For Whedon's many admirers, it is the fact that he uses these nobodies as his lens that is most interesting. Jowett makes the point in reference to *Angel* that an element of both the Whedonverse and the critical dystopia is collectivity. In a dystopic world where individual rights are at stake, *Firefly* continues the Whedonian fascination with 'collective heroism and teamwork' as the source of hope for change (Jowett, 'Helping' 82).

Whedon's characterizations inevitably contain some elements of moral ambiguity: in *Firefly*, this aspect of his heroes is emphasized. Losers in the Battle of Serenity Valley, Mal and Zoe set the tone against

a backdrop of frontier justice: they do what they have to do to survive, not always taking the moral high road. For example, Mal shows his utilitarian colors in the duel scene from 'Shindig' (1.4) where he succeeds in bringing down the superior swordsman, Atherton Wing. With Atherton pinned to the ground, Mal is told he must 'finish it':

*Harrow:* . . . For a man to lay beaten . . . and yet breathing? It makes him a coward.

*Inara:* It's humiliation.

*Mal:* Sure. It would be humiliating. Having to lie there while the better man refuses to spill your blood. Mercy is the mark of a great man.

*(Very quickly, offhandedly, Mal STABS Atherton!)*

Guess I'm just a good man.

*(He STABS him again!)*

Well, I'm all right.

*(Firefly: The Official Companion 1:124)*

Mal does not kill Atherton as Harrow suggests would be both wise and appropriate in the circumstances. Instead, he chooses to humiliate him. When Harrow tells him 'You didn't have to wound the man,' Mal replies, 'Yeah, I know, it was just funny.'

In numerous other scenes throughout the series, we see Mal making rather unheroic choices (e.g. his killing of Niska's henchman in 'The Train Job'). His choices, though, are in line with the tradition of morally ambiguous Western heroes like Clint Eastwood's William Munny in *Unforgiven* (1992). *Firefly's* 'leading man' is a soldier, a killer, and a 'petty crook' ('Heart of Gold'). When he protests the choices of the Alliance, he does not speak from the moral high ground. With Mal as the example of Browncoat ethics, one cannot easily conclude that the star system would be better for all if the resistance had won the war.

*Firefly* is squarely grounded in the dystopic tradition. The series reiterates many of the themes of the classic dystopias, including state control of the economy and education, state violence and militarized police forces, and the scapegoating of the fringe population for any shortcomings of the state. Additionally, *Firefly* connects to the late twentieth-century feminist dystopia, through characters like River, Inara, Saffron, and the whores of 'Heart of Gold,' who each highlight issues of gender inequalities and repression. Yet *Firefly* is also the product of its unique age: the series speaks directly to a new set of

concerns and preoccupations prevalent in post-9/11 America. Of paramount concern in this era is the tension between means and ends, between a laudable goal and the less laudable path that leads to it. In the spirit of the moral ambiguity currently imbuing politics and popular culture, Whedon gives us a benevolent government using means we cannot approve of, opposed by heroes who also use means we cannot fully support. *Firefly* captures the moral ambiguity inherent in a world of polarized politics where no one is a simple villain, and no one is a pure hero. It does so by making use of characteristic elements of the dystopic genre, but twisting some of its norms and combining others with the traditions of typically unrelated genres in a creative pattern that has become a signature of a Whedon series. Whedon says of his usual mixing of genres: 'This is both my gift and my curse. I'm never satisfied with one genre. I never want to do one thing for two hours. The movies I make are bits of genre mashed up' (*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 24).

The dystopic bits mashed up in *Firefly* allow Whedon to critique society in a special way: framing the show within a genre that questions social structures allows him to raise questions of social ordering, feminist philosophy, and human nature, while Whedonian elements ensure that the audience will be challenged, and as always, thoroughly entertained.

# 8. Back to the Future

## Retrofuturism, Cyberpunk, and Humanity in *Firefly* and *Serenity*

LORNA JOWETT

### *Retrofuturism*

For decades, science fiction has used ‘retrofitting’ to create its estranged worlds (Kerman). Steampunk <sup>1</sup> is a literary variant of this practice: Dani Cavallaro explains that William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *The Difference Engine* (1990) ‘does not merely project the present onto the future (as cyberpunk generally tends to do) but actually takes the present and future back into the past, by projecting the cybernetic age onto the cultural reality of the nineteenth century’ (200). *Blade Runner* (1982) is a more familiar visual example of retrofitting, melding a future setting with clunky-looking technology, 1940s styles (in keeping with its noir elements), and a range of architecture. In this discussion, I have adapted Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska’s term ‘retro-futurism’ (76) to describe the *Firefly* universe of 2507.

Joss Whedon’s *Firefly* adopts a distinctive Western iconography alongside iconography, themes, and narratives from science fiction. Vivian Sobchack argues that while science fiction ‘is unfixed in its dependence on actual time and/or place . . . [other] genres [like the Western] play out their narrative in a specific, visually identifiable and consistent context’ (5). The combination of Western and science fiction in *Firefly* offers both a familiar past detached from its historical period and a recognizable future (that is, recognizably science fictional) unsettled by anachronism.

Setting helps create the estrangement that is a key part of science fiction, and the way *Firefly*’s universe incorporates the Western enhances this. *Firefly* melds past and future through costume, set, and

props, offering a hybrid visual style that may be a smooth ‘fusion,’ as Whedon and Tim Minear call it in the commentary for ‘The Train Job’ (1.2), but where the hybridity draws attention to its novelty. In this way, the show attempts to present ‘a whole new universe that [does] not fall into any kind of science-fiction cliché’ through one of the genre’s primary functions: estrangement.

The Western elements make a contribution to *Firefly*’s retrofuture in other ways. Deliberate parallels are drawn here between *Firefly* and cyberpunk-influenced science fiction because from different vantage points they address similar issues and encounter similar problems. One criticism leveled at cyberpunk literature is that the virtual possibilities of cyberspace are often preferred to the prison of the ‘meat,’ reworking the old dichotomy of body/soul or body/mind. Some variations, however, do something slightly different. Stacey Gillis argues that the ‘*Matrix* films offer a notion of cyberspace in which the body and technology can be understood as not in opposition to one another, but in a continuum’ (6). That the first *Matrix* film (1999) is action science fiction reinstates the physical body on a basic level. *Firefly* and *Serenity* also work as action, but Western elements help to present the human as physical within a science fiction context. The *Matrix* movies, like *Blade Runner* and other cyberpunk-influenced science fictions, deal with questions of reality and authentic humanity. *Firefly* and *Serenity* address these issues by presenting a retrofuture in which opposing factions stand for particular sets of values relating to humanity, material authenticity, and physical embodiment.

### *Alliance alienation*

*Firefly*’s Western/science fiction hybrid contrasts physical humanity, often on the frontier planets, with alienation and dehumanization under the Alliance. ‘Primitive’ frontier planets have their own forms of dehumanization, such as burning ‘witches,’ but Alliance alienation is related to technology and progress. In a climate of anxiety about how scientific and technological development can distance us from our physical selves, *Firefly* reinstates the human as corporeal. The Alliance is about alienation, sterility, the manufactured or artificial, and control. (This is not to say it is all bad. Moral judgments and binary oppositions are never straightforward in Whedon’s creations.) Conversely, the marginal/resistant space inhabited by *Serenity*’s crew is about intimacy,

the natural or homemade, authenticity, and freedom. The Alliance sees people as objects, leading to dehumanization; crewmembers identify humanity through community and rehumanize River. Objects are given meaning ('imbued' as Jubal Early from 'Objects in Space,' 1.14, puts it) by humans and their lived experience. In an extreme case this allows River to see Jayne's gun as the branch of a tree ('Objects in Space'): more generally, it makes *Serenity* a home, and Whedon describes the ship as 'obviously the tenth character' in the ensemble (*Serenity* DVD commentary). People are not objects here; instead, objects become people.

This contrast plays out across both genres. Science fiction (re-) presents the frontier as a site of freedom, since the uninhabited space of this retrofuture enables a guilt-free colonization scenario with no indigenous population to suffer from expansion. Such representation can seem like a regression valorizing 'nature' above technological development with frontier planets functioning as a natural environment for real (authentic) life. But the frontier is about progress, about moving the boundaries of 'civilization' forward. The Alliance version of progress attempts to 'make people better' (as Mal says in *Serenity*) through control, force, or invasive medical procedures. Mal suggests that imperfection is human, implying that attempts at perfection lead to sterility: 'a world without sin' is a dead world. Competing versions of progress are sidestepped in favor of competing values, conveyed through a set of established science fiction conventions; and design, narrative, and theme work together to present contrasting environments.

Objectification of humans by the Alliance is demonstrated through River. Startling images (either flashbacks or nightmares) of her 'strapped to a chair, with electrodes on her, needles attached to wires stuck into her head, ears, nose, blood trickling from each wound, terror in her eyes' link Alliance alienation directly to technology ('The Train Job,' shooting script; *Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:56). *Serenity*'s crew eventually accepts River, overcoming doubts that she might not be 'a person' because of her psychic and other abilities, the result of Alliance experimentation ('Objects in Space'). Earlier, in 'Safe' (1.5), they rescue her from being burned alive because she is *their* witch, meaning part of the crew, of their community. To the Alliance, however, River is 'theirs' in the sense of being a commodity (not a person). In *Serenity*, after River is triggered to violence by a television advertisement, Mal asks, 'Who we gonna find in there when she wakes up? The girl? Or the weapon?' The Alliance has invested in

her education and the enhancement of her abilities, making River ‘a living weapon,’ a product (like RoboCop [1987], or Max of *Dark Angel* [2000–2]). Their determination to reacquire her indicates a disregard for human life, and even government employees are slaughtered by the operatives pursuing her.<sup>2</sup> While this might sound like a typical science fiction plot, as Michael Coyne points out, the Western genre also traditionally included ‘money-worshipping overreachers’ who ‘were exposed and prevented from wielding power in a society which valued people over profit’ (9): this critique of capitalism is based in both genres.

Similarly, the Alliance belief that they can ‘make people better’ is a hi-tech version of manifest destiny and an assumption that people can (should?) be ‘made’ to fit society. In *Serenity* the Reavers are revealed as products of Alliance experimentation. While River seems designed for hostile action, the Reavers are a by-product of the desire for peace; tests on planet Miranda for the drug Pax resulted in 99.9 percent of the population (disposable settlers) giving up ‘everything’ and dying, while the rest turned into mindless aggressors, the cannibalistic Reavers.<sup>3</sup> Leaving aside the contentious notion that removing aggression might remove desire to live, unethical testing to try and ‘make people better’ is a flagrant violation of human rights and results in a threat that spreads across the ‘verse. The crew broadcasts the recording found on Miranda, subverting Alliance technology in order to reveal its tendency to see people as objects.

Just as it dehumanizes people, so the Alliance removes human elements from its spaces. King and Krzywinska note that science fiction film ‘often entails the creation of a cold, clinical and alienating environment,’ that contrasts ‘the softness, cosiness, mess or diverse colours of more “human” domestic spaces’ (77). *Firefly* and *Serenity* include both. *Serenity* herself is ‘not “antiseptic spaceship”’ (Whedon, ‘*Serenity*’ DVD commentary), leaning more to a post-*Blade Runner* retro/grungy style. The ship’s kitchen/dining room is a key example of domesticity, but Kaylee’s quarters, Inara’s shuttle,<sup>4</sup> and even many street scenes on core planets that include chickens and vendors selling ‘good dogs’ beside hi-tech screens demonstrate the material and domestic, the ‘human’ side of this retrofuture (see Chapter 16).

Color and lighting construct distinctive styles, with the Alliance tending to cool blues and purples and the crew and ship mostly in warm earth tones. This contrast is underlined by changes in camera work. Whedon states that in filming the *Serenity* crew ‘everything is

zoom lens, hand-held, lived in,' whereas on the Alliance ships 'everything becomes very tracking and steadicam and art . . . old school sci-fi' (*Serenity* DVD commentary), and notably, Alliance environments *are* 'antiseptic spaceship,' though our view of them is restricted to workspaces.

Alliance spaces are manufactured and controlled. Mal suggests that everyone on Alliance planets is content: 'Why wouldn't they smile? It's the Core. Everyone's rich and happy here' ('Ariel,' 1.9), but Zoe is openly critical. 'It's spotless, it's got sensors, and when there ain't sensors, there's Feds,' she complains of Ariel, highlighting the surveillance and control inherent in this 'happy' world. Mercedes Lackey argues that 'though [Alliance planet dwellers] will never publicly acknowledge the constraints by which they live, they are, for the most part, acutely aware of them' (65). In other words, this level of control is the price for a safe, comfortable environment. Zoe also notes the homogeneity of Alliance worlds; despite the cultural hybridity of this universe, 'All Central Planets are the same.'

The Alliance manufactures environments in other ways. *Serenity's* opening scenes introduce layers of reality: River's dream fills viewers in on Alliance control, then turns out to be part of a holographic recording of her rescue. Whedon says it is important that the Alliance Operative walks through the hologram (*Serenity* DVD commentary); he emerges from and is merged with an artificial reality, part of Alliance manipulation from the start. Alliance 'security feeds' monitor locations via television screens—these are watching as they are watched, and can send out signals, as with the broadcast that triggers River. More generally, the homogenization of Alliance worlds and their control over the media imply that they can change reality via history and propaganda (a classic dystopian strategy—see Chapter 7), as River's dream indicates. This use of technology to (re-)produce reality is contrasted with a more authentic version of humanity that values (and valorizes) the material and physical as real, something many would assume contradicts a cyberpunk ethos. As noted, however, some cyberpunk texts use technology to debate these very issues.

### *Authentic materiality vs. the inauthentic frontier*

Because of its retrofuturism, *Firefly's* universe is full of material objects that are touched, tasted, and handled; they are tangibly real. Many of



the payments Mal and the crew receive are hard currency in leather pouches, solid and weighty. Other transactions involve exchanging goods for services, as when Book makes part payment for his berth on *Serenity* with a single strawberry. Food and fresh fruit are highly prized and the meal made with Book's gift of garden produce is described in the shooting script as "To us, not much. To this crowd, a banquet" ('*Serenity*,' 1.1; *Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:31). Later in '*Serenity*' an apple and old-fashioned apple peeler are seen on criminal lowlife Badger's desk. Actor Mark Sheppard explains, 'having fresh fruit meant [Badger] had some power and influence; he also wasn't that interested in opulence, he was interested in enjoying the fruits of his labors' (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:110). The valuable cargo the crew transports in this episode turns out to be food bars (in '*Shindig*,' 1.4, it is a herd of cows, with a similar emphasis on the physical, though ironically the cows are inserted via CGI). In a later episode ('*War Stories*,' 1.10) Jayne, motivated by guilt at trying to sell out fugitives Simon and River, uses part of his pay to buy a crate of apples as a luxury treat for the crew.

The real is equated with the physical and material and, just as the mean streets of cyberpunk contrast with virtual space, 'keeping it real' means living life on the edge, in this case literally at the frontier. Veronica Hollinger describes the 'evocation of popular/street culture and its valorization of the socially marginalized, that is, its "punk" sensibility' as 'important defining characteristics' of cyberpunk (205). *Serenity*'s crewmembers are equally at home in the streets of frontier or core planets and their status as (symbolic if not literal) outlaws situates them on the social as well as the spatial margins. Many street scenes on core planets are influenced by *Blade Runner* and cyberpunk, partly in their fusion of different languages and cultures. Both William Gibson's community of Rastafarians in *Neuromancer* (1984) and Zion in the *Matrix* films valorize racially marginalized groups because they preserve 'authentic' (ethnic) cultural values and thus stand for real humanity. This use of ethnic and racial Otherness can result in an emptying out of cultural identity, as some have argued about *Firefly*, though it is open to a variety of readings.<sup>5</sup>

Despite this tension, it is clear that while Alliance planets are at the cutting edge of science and technology, the frontier planets are where real human development takes place because there people are forced to engage with physicality. In '*Serenity*' Mal relates, "They'll dump settlers on there with nothing but blankets, hatchets, maybe a herd. Some

of them make it—some of them.’ The notion of hard physical work allowing ordinary people to achieve extraordinary things is a familiar part of Western history, and Whedon argues that those on the frontier are simply ‘doing all the things people actually do when they don’t have all the amenities’ (‘Serenity’ DVD commentary). Here Whedon comes close to an endorsement of the ‘simple life,’ nostalgia for a time when our lives were less complicated by progress and ‘amenities’ and somehow more authentically human.

The division between core and frontier planets is rather more complex than that, however. Such representations directly contrast not just the more obviously futuristic Alliance planets but viewers’ lives in the present. Whedon emphasizes, ‘It’s like when life was physical. Which it was up to the beginning of this century *and isn’t any more for us*’ (‘Serenity’ DVD commentary, emphasis added). Coyne suggests that the Western functioned as a reminder of hard times in the past and therefore justified enjoying more affluent lifestyles now (3). This positions many viewers as enjoying Alliance-type luxuries, indicating complicity in the retreat from a more physical existence. But does embracing physicality mean necessarily rejecting technological progress, or vice versa?

Discussing cyberpunk, Scott Bukatman notes that technology, ‘whether figured in the exaggerated modalities of the sublime or the cooler pragmatism of an elite technocracy, defines the American relation to manifest destiny and the commitment to an ideology of progress and modernity’ (4). The term ‘manifest destiny’ invokes the West, and in *Firefly* the Alliance functions as ‘an elite technocracy’ committed to progress through technology and science, as demonstrated in experiments on River and on Miranda. Actions like these are presented as unambiguously bad because they deny freedom of choice. Yet the frontier itself is about progress. It is the point where wilderness becomes civilization, and frontier inhabitants (or marginal operators like Serenity’s crew) are resistant to both civilization (epitomized by the Alliance) and to the wilderness and its ‘primitive’ attitudes (exemplified by the attempted witch burning in ‘Safe’ or the treatment of women in ‘Heart of Gold,’ 1.13). Lackey suggests that by smuggling, Mal and the crew are complicit in the dystopian regime of the Alliance (67). Certainly they help bring civilization and progress (food and medical supplies) to the frontier. The show is almost inevitably ambivalent about progress, especially since even the frontier worlds are built on an advanced level of technology.

We are told that old, worn-out ships are sold at government auction to settlers planning their one-way trip to the frontier worlds ('Bushwhacked,' 1.3). This evidences a divided society, yet it also demonstrates that settlement is only possible because of space travel. Furthermore, frontier planets are terraformed for habitation. Terraforming has its own problems, as 'The Train Job' reveals: 'Every planet that's been terraformed has its own little quirks,' in this case a chronic disease that affects residents and can only be kept in check by particular medication—not readily available outside the Core. Technology underlies even the frontier settlements; it is just that the technology is so old at this point in the future that it has become naturalized. (Just as a certain level of technology—cell phones, television, internet access—is naturalized in many of our own lives.)

In 'Heart of Gold,' Nandi tells the crew, 'Some places come up rustic 'cause they ain't got more than the basics. Rance Burgess has money enough to build a city, a *real* community. Keeps people living like this so he can play cowboy, be the one with the best toys. Turned this world into a gorram theme park.' In other words, the myth of the frontier appeals to those who want to 'play cowboy' without the hard work and risk involved for poorer settlers. Technological 'toys' are part of this play, as shown in Burgess's speeder, equipped with hi-tech weaponry. Nandi's comment is the first indication that the frontier is both reality and myth, that there can be an inauthentic version of it. The episode raises conflicting notions of frontier authenticity, creating tension between the simultaneously conservative (nostalgic) and libertarian values associated with it. Cyberpunk fictions similarly combine conservative and libertarian values, especially in relation to their negotiation of technology and the body.

### *Embodiment*

While the Western elements raise their own contradictions, the show uses the Western as a way to resolve a contradiction inherent in much science fiction. Bukatman argues that '*The body* has long been the repressed content of science fiction, as the genre obsessively substitutes the rational for the corporeal, and the technological for the organic' (19). Watching *Firefly* for the first time, I was convinced that River was a cyborg (another reading of 'not a person'), perhaps because the crisis of identity she undergoes has often been mediated through the part-

human, part-machine cyborg. On reflection, other science fictions have used the biological android (replicants, Cylons) or genetic engineering (as in *Dark Angel*) to deal with similar issues, and River's conception is perhaps closer to these. A cyborg River would enhance the contrast between the hi-tech Alliance and the physical frontier planets, but because the show valorizes the physical above the technological, the authentic above the artificial, this key character is not (from what we know so far) a cyborg. Invasive medical technology has altered her mind and, by extension, her body, but not by fusing technology with biology—her responses are simply enhanced to the point where she can shoot three men with her eyes closed ('War Stories'). While her abilities might appear supernatural, they seem to be purely physical.

Many DVD commentaries note that Summer Glau, who plays River, is a trained dancer, accustomed to physical expression. They also emphasize that this enabled her to do most of the physical 'stunts' herself. Such extra-textual glosses reinforce the importance of physicality for this character and the diegesis. River frequently walks around the ship barefoot, and in the *Serenity* commentary Whedon says that River's feet are 'probably the eleventh character' in the ensemble. Similarly, Lyle Zynda describes River as taking 'a sensual joy' in moving through the ship, feeling its space (91). Yet in 'War Stories,' River tells Simon about her day: 'I played with Kaylee. The sun came out and I walked on my feet and heard with my ears,' concluding, 'I hate it because I know it will go away.'<sup>6</sup> Her inability to enjoy her corporeality is part of what is 'wrong' with her.

The show places a great deal of emphasis on *all* the characters' physical bodies and on interactions between them. Sharing physical and tactile experiences allows them to enjoy real communication and community, rather than Alliance alienation. In 'Serenity' Shepherd Book tells Kaylee he has 'been out of the world for a spell. Like to walk it a while,' demonstrating that even a character with a spiritual calling feels the need to physically experience his environment. Book is often seen in the company of Jayne, a man of action, as if to accentuate this conjunction of spirituality and physicality,<sup>7</sup> and several scenes show them lifting weights together. In 'The Message' (1.12) Jayne tells Book, 'My kinda life don't last long, preacher, so I 'spect I'm invested in making good sport of it whilst I can,' a familiar philosophy that endorses physical/sensual pleasures and situates humanity as vulnerable in its embodiment. (The death of Wash in *Serenity* is an obvious example of this fragility. While Book's death is evidence of the

Alliance threat to community, Wash's is about the 'leaf on the wind' nature of the human condition, which allows for both transcendent flight and extreme vulnerability, often simultaneously.)

The crewmembers regularly play physical games like the basketball variant in 'Bushwhacked,' horseshoes, or jacks, and we never see them playing any kind of virtual/computer game, or even watching television. In *Serenity*, hacker Mr. Universe has a 'lovebot,' but this seems like the exception that proves the rule (and he uses technology differently from the crew; see below). Zoe and Wash are regularly shown in intimate situations, touching each other, and real sex is still in demand, as the status of the Companions demonstrates. (Though as a high-status profession within the Alliance it is another example of objectifying people.) Inara's role of Companion may take in elements of the therapist (see Joy Davidson, 113–14) but it is primarily sensual, and her friendship with Kaylee is often conveyed through tactile pleasures (brushing hair, for instance).

Food, as well as holding trade value, is prized for taste and texture and functions as another element in the progress versus primal (natural) structure. While the products of *Serenity*'s kitchen are mostly synthetic proteins, they are prepared traditionally and the crew eat around a wooden table, itself a familiar signifier of 'down home' family values. Whedon has stated that this emphasizes 'the tactile nature of things' in contrast to other science fictions: 'It's not "here's your blue gunk that comes from a tray" kind of thing'—it is familiar, recognizable food ('*Serenity*' DVD commentary). A classic science fiction film like *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) uses the lack of 'real' food to highlight the dehumanization of its characters, while *Star Trek*'s (1966–9) replicators divorce consumption from preparation. *Babylon 5* (1994–8) was careful to point out that space-faring characters would appreciate real food, especially fresh fruit and vegetables, and *Firefly* exaggerates this tendency. Communal mealtimes underscore the physical nature of life in this 'verse, and the shots of Kaylee savoring a single strawberry ('*Serenity*') stress the sensual pleasure of eating. When Book's garden produce is shared with others in the same episode, part of the pleasure comes from the knowledge that such food 'won't last' and is 'never the same' when it is frozen, as Book points out. The here-and-now nature of fresh, seasonal produce is a reminder of our own place in the physical/natural world, and current debates about the negative effect of year-round availability of food in supermarkets demonstrate that progress and technology is seen by some as undermining this awareness.

The embodied reality of the characters is also shown in relation to the sky, or ‘the Black’ of space. Characters in *Firefly* do not simply stay inside their ships, cut off from their surroundings; they experience space. When River and Simon go EVA to evade capture by Alliance Feds in ‘Bushwhacked,’ River looks out at the expanse of the Black and smiles; Simon winces and turns away, clinging to the ship’s side. He seems keen to return to a more controlled environment; River accepts her position in the Black and her wide-eyed expression suggests the sublime.<sup>8</sup> Fred Erisman points out that the crewmembers are familiar with this sometimes hostile environment; ‘They prepare themselves, mentally and materially, to deal with it’ (253).

In other science fictions, cyberspace and flight signify escape from the body’s physical limitations. *Firefly*’s theme song repeats the words, ‘You can’t take the sky from me’ in a conflation of space, freedom, and escape, but while the sky symbolizes freedom it also places us in our corporeal reality. When the cows are delivered to a planet in ‘Safe,’ River talks to them and Mal wonders why she ignored them all the time they were aboard ship. ‘They weren’t cows inside,’ she explains, ‘They were waiting to be but they forgot. Now they see sky and they remember what they are.’ Seeing the sky reminds us of what we are because it places us in our physical bodies, experiencing the world through our senses, rather than through the mediation of technology. It is a humbling, or exhilarating, reminder that we are a small part of a vast universe.

‘Objects in Space’ further demonstrates the significance of the physical and our relation to it and to the technological. As bounty hunter Jubal Early boards the ship in search of River, she eludes him and eventually states that she has merged with Serenity. She uses the science fictional trope of the sentient ship to confuse Early, and though *Firefly*’s universe attempts to reconcile physical embodiment with advanced technology, it stops short of this fusion. River’s apparent omnipotence actually comes from direct observation and relatively low-level communication technology. The end of this last episode in the series sees River rehumanized through acceptance by the crew (community triumphs over objectification). The subsequent film sees her brother, Simon, rehumanized as he finally accepts his place with the crew rather than regretting his lost career in the Core. Its conclusion shows him stripped to the waist doing physical work and enjoying sexualized contact with Kaylee (physicality triumphs over alienation).

*Productive tension?*

The frontier is the space between wilderness and civilization, natural and technological, the space where triumphs of community and physicality can occur. Richard Slotkin suggests that the myth of the frontier ‘located central redemptive values in the primitive and the outlawed, and . . . was as much in love with savagery (mythologically conceived) as it was ideologically opposed to it’ (499). Likewise, Coyne states that the Western holds ‘authoritarian and libertarian components in productive tension’ (3). Similar tensions underpin *Firefly*, which locates ‘central redemptive values’ in the physicality of a ‘primitive and outlawed’ way of life and moves between conservative nostalgia and libertarian resistance.

*Firefly* and *Serenity* seem to offer a way to negotiate a physical, embodied relationship with technology. Yet its heroes use only naturalized technology (for transport and communication) and valorize an emotional connection with it, as in Mal’s final speech from *Serenity*:

You can learn all the math in the ‘verse but you take a boat in the air that you don’t love, she’ll shake you off just as sure as the turn of the worlds. Love keeps her in the air when she ought to fall down, tells you she’s hurting before she keels. Makes her a home.

This sentiment sits alongside Wash’s near-mystical abilities as pilot, and mechanic Kaylee’s intimate and intuitive connection with the ship’s engines. (River’s abilities are not seen in quite this way and while she takes Wash’s place at the end of *Serenity*, her piloting skills are arguably come by differently.)

The crew’s most extensive use of technology occurs when they hack the Alliance network, and they need Mr. Universe’s help and equipment to do this. This character ties into cyberpunk’s street-level subversion of technology, implying that it is not inherently bad: control and purpose are key. Whedon suggests that ‘unlike Mal and the others [Mr. Universe] isn’t running away from [Alliance control] but immersing himself in it’ (*Serenity* DVD commentary). The crewmembers, on the other hand, resolve their differences with the Alliance on an individual basis and by violence, another problematic element of their physical lifestyle.<sup>9</sup> Mr. Universe is not one of the crew, and his character is caught up in the conventions of opposition

that have already been mobilized. He betrays them<sup>10</sup> and dies, and it is possible to read this as happening *because of* his use of technology and his rejection of (the limitations inherent in) physical embodiment.

Kate O’Riordan suggests that a film like *The Matrix* ‘reverses the “body as prison and matrix as freedom” equation found in [William] Gibson’s novels and represents the Matrix as the prison and the experience of the body as an existential, if not physical, locus of freedom’ (143). *Firefly* develops this idea of the body as freedom via its Western retrofuture. Yet this future (even on Alliance planets) makes no mention of the potential that technology and virtual reality might hold for those whose physical existence is restricted because of disease or disability.<sup>11</sup> Do we have to choose *either* emotion and the physical, *or* the technological amenities of progress? *Firefly*’s characters are arguably forced into this position because the Alliance gives them no alternative. Stepping back to the future creates all kinds of contradictions within the *Firefly* ’verse. In one way, however, this is a ‘productive tension,’ to borrow Coyne’s phrase. Stepping back from our negotiation with technology through the estrangement of science fiction can help us think about our own alternatives.



# 9. *Firefly's* 'Out of Gas'

## Genre Echoes and the Hero's Journey<sup>1</sup>

MARY ALICE MONEY

'Out of Gas' (1.8), written by Tim Minear and directed by David Solomon, is the fifth one-hour episode of Joss Whedon's *Firefly*, first screened on 25 October 2002. It is well known that the network pulled the original two-hour pilot 'Serenity' (1.1) out of the lineup, demanding the fast creation of a less dark episode (which became 'The Train Job,' 1.2) to introduce the series.<sup>2</sup> Thus, 'Out of Gas' should have been seen as the ninth hour broadcast. In *Finding Serenity*, Keith DeCandido identifies 'Out of Gas' as 'the episode that sets up the milieu' much better than the inferior 'Train Job' did but also recognizes that it 'relied too much on knowledge of the characters from previous episodes to really work as an introductory piece' (60). Minear himself agrees that the episode 'resonates' with viewers because they 'know the crew . . .' (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 2:40). Truly, whether the viewer first saw 'Out of Gas' on the network schedule or in its proper order on the DVD, the episode occurs at the right time in the life of *Firefly* for the devout viewer to appreciate the significance of each character's actions and reactions and to hang on every word of each backstory. 'Out of Gas' is what I call a 'prism' episode: all bands of light/theme and color/character meet here; standing near the middle of the existing episodes, it reflects the elements of earlier shows and foreshadows those to come.

The script by Minear (with Whedon as accomplice, as he fine-tuned each episode)<sup>3</sup> is a blend of archetypes, film and television genres, and classic motifs, each reinvented in Whedonesque style to make the episode much more than the sum of its parts. Briefly, an explosion

destroys the vital catalyzer (whatever that is—just think ‘widget,’ as David Gerrold suggests in *Finding Serenity* 184), rendering Serenity dead in space with only hours of air remaining. Captain Mal Reynolds sends the eight crew/passengers away in the two shuttles, hoping either that a shuttle might find another ship or that his jury-rigged signal might attract a rescuer before he dies. One ship miraculously hears the signal and consents to trade a spare widget to Mal, but instead, the boarding pirates shoot Mal and start to hijack the ship. He gets the drop on them, lets them leave alive, and barely manages to install the widget before collapsing. Mal saves the ship, the crew returns and saves him, and all is well. The real-time narrative covers the few minutes it takes the wounded captain to walk from cargo hold to engine room, install the part, return to the bridge to attempt to radio his crew to return, and, in a brief final scene occurring later, be reunited with the other eight. But that journey is perhaps the longest walk Mal has ever taken. Minear tells the story through two distinct layers of flashbacks, one layer lifted from the hero’s memories of building his crew five years ago and one from the camera’s view of the explosion and aftermath, all interspersed with mere moments of the real-time frame story. The editing and technical effects reinforce the sense of the story with repetitive sounds, differing qualities of light in different timeframes, and repetitive patterns in the sets. In addition, Minear succeeds in giving each of the nine people on the good ship Serenity a showcase scene revealing something of the core of his/her character. All the elements combine to reinforce basic themes of the series: the ship as microcosm and the passengers as family, all seeking freedom and survival in the brutality of silent space. Finally, the episode is revealed as a love story between man and ship and a full portrait of Captain Mal Reynolds, resident hero.

In the plot of ‘Out of Gas,’ Minear mines various literary lodes from drama to horror to comedy, but the science fiction and Western elements are most apparent. The plot is basically about the captain’s conflicts with friends, enemies, and ‘the Black’ to save his ship and crew. The setting is a spaceship with electronic communications systems and space shuttles, but we hear echoes of innumerable other settings and ordeals. Whedon has often gone on record as taking genre fiction very seriously. As he told Emily Nussbaum: ‘I wanted to create a fiction that would affect people’s lives . . . Every time people say, “You’ve transcended the genre,” I’m like: No! I *believe* in genre . . . I don’t want to create responsible shows with lawyers in them. I want to invade people’s dreams’ (59).

As Minear explains in the DVD episode commentary, Whedon started with the idea of telling ‘basically a submarine story.’ The plot could easily be translated into a story of a sea-going captain’s ordeal or an Arctic ordeal or a more primitive lifeboat ordeal recalling the classic 1944 film *Lifeboat*. Then again, *Serenity* could almost be a stagecoach passing through Apache territory, with assorted passengers including a doctor, a whore, and John Wayne as a rebel hero. The resemblance is obviously not accidental. Whedon himself has referred to *Firefly* as ‘a *Stagecoach* kind of drama’ (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:6). Fred Erisman analyzes many parallels between the ‘journey into hell’ of the nine Westerners through the Arizona desert with the passage of *Serenity*’s nine through the Black in *Firefly* including, briefly, ‘Out of Gas’ (52). *Stagecoach* (1939) is not the only John Wayne movie forming the matrix of this episode. According to Nussbaum, Whedon ‘encouraged [Nathan Fillion] to watch John Wayne films, aiming to help him capture elements of Wayne’s physical grace as well as his dark undertones’ (59). ‘Out of Gas’ also unavoidably recalls *The High and the Mighty* with its 1954 trans-Pacific airliner filled with archetypal passengers and crewed by a green pilot and the disgraced copilot ‘Whistling’ Dan Roman, played by John Wayne. When the plane is just past the midpoint between Honolulu and San Francisco, an engine dies; but they have passed the point of no return, the point at which they have too little fuel to go back to Hawaii. Then the flight engineer discovers that he made a slight miscalculation in fueling the plane, and they do not even have enough gas to reach California. As the pilot panics and the passengers dramatically reveal their innermost strengths or secrets or both, copilot John Wayne takes over, directs them to literally throw out all baggage and extra weight, and keeps flying. (Of course, they do coast to a safe landing in San Francisco—this is John Wayne.) Back in the Black, as Mal explains the shuttles’ hopeless mission, his allusion to the danger of passing their point of no return to *Serenity* could have come straight from copilot John Wayne. More than one movie-fanatic viewer must have heard the echo of Wayne whistling that Dimitri Tiomkin title song in the background. Surely, Whedon is one of those movie fanatics. In various interviews, he has discussed his Film Studies degree from Wesleyan and his early love of serial-viewing several films a day, and his wide knowledge of British and American television and comics.<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising that virtually every scene of ‘Out of Gas’ resonates with viewers.

But 'Out of Gas' shifts from the 'how will the passengers reveal their characters and who will emerge heroic' plot (*Stagecoach*; *Airport*, 1970; *The Poseidon Adventure*, 1972; and the rest) to the 'showcase the hero and make him earn his status by isolating him in an ordeal' plot. As Whedon has told one interviewer, 'I'm always interested in making things as difficult for my heroes as possible' (*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 25). The reason for making the hero suffer is, of course, to prove his worthiness for the post of hero/leader/captain. Therefore, in at least one episode of virtually every action adventure, Western, science fiction, and private detective series in popular literature, the hero undergoes a series of pass/fail tests, alone in some life-threatening wilderness or enclosure. Each series of trials recreates Joseph Campbell's monomyth of the hero's journey.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Whedon says of the writers of *Buffy*: 'We're doing these sort of mythic-hero journeys in our minds' (Golden and Holder 241); and the archetypal journey is also the framework of 'Out of Gas.' Minear establishes the Campbellian hero's ordinary world in the scene showing all nine characters—the family or tribe—sharing a meal, only to be interrupted by the disastrous explosion. The almost animate fireball plays the role of herald, manifesting the hero's call to adventure. Mal willingly answers that call and prepares to separate himself from his tribe while searching for the elixir/key/grail, the pesky widget, that will save his world. In a Whedonesque variation of the hero receiving aid from wise mentors and magical animals, Mal receives knowledge from his crew that will later help him complete his journey. After crossing the first threshold into his solitary quest, Mal defeats the shadow figures of an evil captain and crew, gains his reward (the catalyzer), resurrects himself with an adrenaline injection, walks the cold tunnel-like passage to the engine room, and restores life to his ship. The real-time narrative circles back to the beginning with the crew safely gathered together once more. Whedon consciously recreates the archetypal ordeal and journey just as he consciously echoes the genres and motifs of film and television.

The treatment of two particular elements may serve as examples of Whedon and Minear's use of genre conventions: the hero's use of deadly force and his choice of weaponry. First, Mal is obviously a darker hero than found in most adventures, just as the Black is a much darker universe than, for example, Captain Kirk's Federation space. In the *Firefly* universe, the phasers are never set on stun. There is no big build-up to a stand-up shoot-out; in this universe, when

you're ready to shoot, you shoot, and none of that nonsense about chivalry or fair warnings. Yet Mal commits violence and mayhem within certain self-imposed ethical boundaries (see Chapter 6). Tim Minear reveals that Joss Whedon's original idea for 'Out of Gas' was to have Serenity 'come across another ship of possibly pirates . . . and to show what makes our people different from your average ship of pirates' (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 2:40); and the episode does that. Captain 'Bluebeard' from the would-be pirate ship just pulls a gun, disarms Mal, announces that he is taking everything, and shoots Mal. This flashback is shown immediately after Mal's memory flashback in which he and Zoe meet Jayne, who is then just one of a crew of scruffy villains holding Mal and Zoe at gunpoint, planning to kill them and take Serenity. Mal (again disarmed and with hands raised) tempts Jayne with promises of better pay, food, and bunk to change sides. And Jayne simply shoots his former boss in the leg and crosses over to Mal and Zoe's side. Admittedly, Jayne's ethics are somewhat deficient, but he does not murder his boss. In contrast, Bluebeard is definitely bad; he lives by no code except to take whatever he can and damn the collateral damage. *Firefly's* universe is parallel to that of the 1950s and 1960s adult Western television series and films such as *Gunsmoke* (1955–75); *Wanted: Dead or Alive* (1958–61); *Tate* (1960); *Have Gun, Will Travel* (1957–63); and *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), many of which have mercenary gunslingers or bounty hunters as heroes. These heroes, not just the shadow characters, are willing to shoot to kill when killing is necessary, just as Mal is. When the fallen Mal retrieves a gun hidden in the hold, and threatens to kill Bluebeard, the pirates believe him. Granted, he could probably kill only two of the five before being killed, but they back down, leaving the vital widget to the victor. The retreating Bluebeard refuses to be embarrassed for attempting murder and piracy, telling Mal, 'You'd've done the same.' Mal answers, 'We can already see I haven't.'

Other episodes also make it clear that Mal is a man of honor even with blood on his hands; he is quite capable of serving as judge, jury, and executioner when necessary. In 'The Train Job,' Mal returns the life-saving vaccine he has stolen when he realizes that his lucrative job commissioned by the evil Niska would doom a frontier mining outpost. The sheriff says a man taking a dishonorable job has a choice to make, but Mal replies, 'I don't believe he does.' That line could have been spoken by Paladin<sup>6</sup> in any of several episodes in which he discovered his employer to be dishonorable and fought against him or

even killed him, just as Mal's crew eventually defeat Niska and kill his most vicious henchmen in 'War Stories' (1.10). And who could forget the moment in 'The Train Job' when Mal boots an uncooperative minion of Niska into the engine? Mal's somewhat unorthodox negotiation style achieves complete cooperation from the next villain. Mal also kills without hesitation at one point in 'Serenity' (1.1). He returns to the ship, where an Alliance agent is holding River hostage; takes in the situation in a split second, shoots the agent dead, keeps on walking, and organizes the escape from an approaching Reaver ship. And neither Mal nor the crew suffers a twinge of conscience. Leaving the West behind, either of these executions might also be worthy of another deep space smuggler, one Han Solo, who shoots a bounty hunter in the original *Star Wars* (1977) in the famous cantina scene. Han, with his tied-down faux six-shooter hidden under the table, kills the villain in a pre-emptive strike. In George Lucas's 2005 re-edited (and justly reviled) 'enhanced' version, the bounty hunter shoots first, thus ruining one of the major surprises and best character revelations of the entire film.

Choice of weapons is the second element that reveals Whedon's combining of genre elements to create *Firefly's* universe. The personal weapons carried like handguns by Mal and Zoe are significant. In *The Official Companion* to the series, Whedon explains his concept of designing Mal's handgun: 'I was looking for clunky, old-fashioned. I had Mal's gun designed very specifically after a Civil War-era pistol à la Clint Eastwood's 1976 film *The Outlaw Josey Wales* . . . yet at the same time in a casing that gave it a completely futuristic outer shape' (1:62). Both Zoe's and Han Solo's handguns look remarkably like Steve McQueen's 'mare's leg' sawed-off Winchester from the Western television series *Wanted: Dead or Alive*. Indeed, the resemblance is no coincidence. *Firefly's* armorer, Mike Wiggins, verifies that Josh Randall's gun and holster inspired Zoe's gun, which is very similar to those used in *The Adventures of Brisco County, Jr.* (1993–4) (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:104–5), a previous science fiction Western. As stated in *The Official Companion*, Mal's handgun is intended to recall both the Colts of the West (right down to the octagonal barrel) and the guns used in the science fiction series *The Wild, Wild West* (1965–9). Thus, the weapons evoke the American West of reality, classic movies and television adult Westerns, and television's science fiction West (1:78–80).

Whedon, along with his crew of such artists as Minear and Solomon, also makes *Firefly* remarkable for his revisions of the conventions and

expectations of various genres. From the beginning of *Firefly*, Whedon insisted that the vast deeps of 'his' space would absolutely exclude two staples of science fiction: sound (elementary physics: no air, so no sound) and aliens (humans are scary enough). Whedon was right. Few viewers of 'Out of Gas' would now trade the zing of photon torpedoes and the boom of exploding starships for that deathly silence of serpentine flame exuded from the cargo hold into the Black. And it would be difficult to create more horrific aliens than the 'human' Reavers when they finally appear in *Serenity* or when they do *not* appear in *Firefly*. Even at the end of 'Out of Gas,' Whedon continues to revise the conventions of genre heroics. Mal does save the day, the ship, and the crew; but he does not have enough superhuman strength to stagger back to the bridge and push that red button to call the crew back; the hero fails despite all his bravery. His crew returns in time to save him before he bleeds to death, but only because Zoe insubordinately commands them to go back for Mal. We know that Zoe will always go back for Mal, even though she does apologize for disobeying and promises him that she will never do it again.

Thus, *Firefly* is still in Joss Whedon's universe, no matter how far from Sunnydale or Los Angeles in time and space. Even extraordinary heroes still need a little help and loyalty from their friends. In each series, when the hero goes off alone or makes a unilateral decision, the consequences are often terrible. Whedon continually reminds us that the Scooby Gang (not just Buffy) and Angel Investigations (not just Angel) are the heroes. Repeatedly, the viewer sees that communication among heroes is a good thing; it is wise to gain the benefit of each hero's expertise and combine ideas and strengths in order to win the day, the battle, or whatever needs to be won. The same happens in *Firefly*. Erisman points out that 'Shipboard life is dependent upon an intricate network of interdependent systems to shut in air and refresh its oxygen' (254). I would say that life on *Serenity* is still more dependent on the intricate bonds of the characters. Even while Mal is totally alone on the dying ship, he wins not just because of his own courage but also because he uses Kaylee's mechanical knowledge to replace the widget, Simon's medical knowledge to inject adrenaline directly into his heart, and Wash's electronics knowledge to boost their radio. Without Mal's solitary persistence, guts, and ingenuity—that is, heroism—and the other characters' contributions, no one would have survived. In addition, 'Out of Gas' reveals Mal's skills as a captain and a leader. He adjusts his approach to get whatever is needed from each

crewmember to help keep the ship flying. First, he forces Wash to the bridge and away from the injured Zoe's side, then yells at him until he recognizes a way to boost the radio signal. Then he comforts Kaylee and prompts her to explain the engine problem. He can only check on Zoe's condition and make sure that Simon is doing what he can to save her. To all the crew he explains their options and commands them to leave in the shuttles and search for help. Of course, *he* will never leave *Serenity*.

In an interview for *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion*, Whedon calls his sudden shifts of genres from romantic comedy to Western noir to horror a 'high-wire act' that was inspired by his love of Hong Kong films (25). This technique of shifting genres and expectations is enhanced in 'Out of Gas' by the complex narrative structure of intercutting the real-time story with two layers of flashbacks, each with distinctive colors, moods, and other elements. Tim Minear and David Solomon discuss many of these elements in their DVD commentary of the episode; in *Finding Serenity*, Larry Dixon briefly summarizes some of the effects of textures and palettes (9). One layer is the camera's narrative of recent explosion and aftermath, the other is from Mal's subjective view, deep flashbacks to his own memories of gaining his ship/home and gathering the members of his crew/family—building his world. The pattern is set up in the teaser.

In all of the real-time scenes (until the final one) the cold light, the angular lines, and the dull colors suggest death. The teaser begins in real-time, set in the narrative present in the cold, blue-tinted light of the deserted ship *Serenity*. The camera pans across the cargo hold, devastated by some breach, bits of debris scattered here and there. Music swells, reminiscent of the *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) soundtrack. Mal falls into frame, his body crashing into the grill deck of the cargo hold with a harsh clang that is repeated at other, later moments of danger. The diegetic sound seems somehow familiar to the movie-adept audience, and well it should. It is the sound of a cell door clanging shut on many a character in countless prison, Western, action, drama, and police movies and television shows, from *White Heat* (1949) to *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), from *Gunsmoke* (1955–75) to *The Rockford Files* (1974–80). The crisscross pattern of the grill, while a perfectly real piece of the ship, also comes to imply prison bars, danger, and loss of freedom. Through some manner of prestidigitation, the grill reflects shadows of bars—prison bars, not cross-hatching—across Mal's face and body as he struggles to rise. The only color of life in



the scene is the crimson blood, photographed from below, dripping through the grill. The ship is now near freezing. The hard metallic edges and crisscross pattern are repeated or paralleled somewhere in each real-time scene of cold light and echoed in one recent flashback. In the video communication from the pirate ship, the bridge in the background also seems made of harsh metal angles, but these are jagged and almost chaotic instead of the regular lines and grills of Serenity. Just as Bluebeard is a shadow of Mal, the pirate ship is a disorderly shadow of Serenity, the hero's home. Throughout the real-time scenes, the light remains cold and the predominant colors are bleached to grays and blues. When Mal wraps himself in his old army blanket while waiting for a message, even the deep color of the heavy blanket is dulled by the cold. After Mal is shot, the jump cuts and overlapping scenes suggest his increasing disorientation and weakness. When he finally reaches the engine room, he is surrounded by hard metallic angles of the machinery as he drops the catalyzer. Only when the engines begin to turn again do we see free movement or a round metal construction instead of the sharp angles.

Thus, the opening of the teaser sets up the pattern of lines and colors to be used in the real-time narrative present; then, still in the teaser, present flows into past to establish the pattern for the deep flashbacks. The freedom/prison conflict is underscored as golden light floods into the hold. In the DVD commentary, Minear points out the 'color reversal tone' and 'blowout light' used in all the deep flashbacks to create a 'dreamlike quality.' In this hallucinatory memory or dream from five years ago, Mal shows his newly purchased, non-operative ship to Zoe for the first time. She says the ship is a piece of *feioo* or 'junk' (Sullivan 234); he says it is 'freedom,' a ship that will take care of him until the day he dies. That comment becomes increasingly ironic to viewers as well as to Mal as he struggles to keep *this* day, in real time, from becoming the day he dies. Even when any starship captain with the intelligence of peanut butter would give up on his dream and die, Mal refuses to relinquish his definition of the ship: Serenity equals life, not death; home, not trash heap; freedom, not prison. Only if something—pirate or blown engine—takes the sky from Mal is he dead.

The first scene following the teaser is a recent flashback from about a day before, shot in warmer tones, close to natural color. The camaraderie of a 'family' dinner, complete with Simon's pseudo-chocolate birthday cake, is interrupted by the explosion that wrecks

the engine. Now we see not a summer golden light, but a ferocious orange and yellow fireball ravaging toward the galley. The shift from idyllic respite to disaster is sudden and total. As the rest of the recent flashbacks play, the natural colors become more subdued, closer to the cold blues of the real-time scenes. Some of the brighter clothing in the dinner scene is concealed: Jayne's rich red t-shirt under a dark coat; Inara's apricot gown under a dark, full-length cloak. The only color that remains vivid in the recent flashbacks and the real-time scenes is the bright red button that Wash tells Mal to use to call back the crew.<sup>7</sup>

The final scene arrives, with all eight voyagers gathered around Mal in the infirmary as he awakens. The real-time scene immediately before this showed Mal alone, collapsing without reaching the red button. Now, shockingly, the scene is warm and golden and the people are clustered casually around him, their center. The only blood is Wash's blood being transfused into the captain, blood of life, given not spilled. There is movement and softness and love; no bluish light or intrusively hard metallic angles appear. All the colors are true and bright. The color of Inara's apricot dress now seems to be a warm peach, almost gold. And all the crew promise to still be there when Mal next awakes; the world is made whole again.

Throughout the fourteen assorted flashbacks, the viewer receives little or no explanation or interpretation of the action. Only when Mal introduces Zoe to his 'new' ship, their 'freedom,' does he provide any interpretation. The hero remains, ultimately, locked away, maintaining his status as loner even while we watch his memories unfold. The viewers still must do the work of drawing inferences; in both the real-time scenes and the others, the play tells viewers nothing except what they can see and hear. With changes in light and color, the tone snaps from family togetherness to deadly violence to suspense as each flashback cuts into another. The technique suggests Whedon's delight in mixing genres and genre heroes, shifting unexpectedly from drama to comedy to horror to romance to action in a 'high-wire act' without 'upsetting' the audience (*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 25). 'Out of Gas' never falls off that wire, and the viewer is entranced by the story.<sup>8</sup> Typically, Whedon and Mincear assume that the viewer will be intelligent enough to remember the details, follow the shifts in narrative time, bring his/her own subtext, and fit all the words, sounds, pictures, and people into the real story: the revelation of the hero's character. The individual scenes in which Mal persuades, coerces, bullies, commands each person to leave him reveal his ability

to command as no other episode has. All the elements reveal that Mal is a true officer though not always a gentleman; that he has the heart of a sentimental idealist who treasures his freedom, his ship, and his people; that he (fortunately) lacks the sense to quit when he doesn't have a chance in a million to win; and that he can survive the ordeal to bring back the elixir—or a widget—to save his people. Of course he will keep on flying.

# SOCIAL AND CULTURAL THEMES



# 10. Reavers and Redskins

## Creating the Frontier Savage

J. DOUGLAS RABB AND  
J. MICHAEL RICHARDSON

There can be no doubt that the Reavers represent ‘blood-thirsty Savage Redskins’ in Joss Whedon’s futuristic Cowboy-and-Indian narratives, *Firefly* and its movie sequel *Serenity*. Whedon has even been accused of reinforcing a negative portrayal of Native Americans in his depiction of the Reavers (Curry, ‘We Don’t Say Indian’). We argue, on the contrary, that far from reinforcing such negative stereotypes, Whedon is attacking and deconstructing the ‘savage Indian’ found in 1950s ‘B-Westerns’ and some early contact accounts of the Native Peoples of the Americas. It is, of course, necessary to present such stereotypes in order to deconstruct them.

On the DVD commentary to *Serenity*, in reference to the sudden arrival of Reaver ships, Whedon remarks, ‘Indians ride over the hill and surprise the cavalry.’ In *Firefly*, we never actually meet a Reaver face to face. However, we do see their ships, which are, in a sense, their face to the world—a face bedecked with war paint. Visual effects supervisor Loni Peristere notes: ‘Our Reaver ship . . . was painted with war paint and . . . belching dirty smoke, which made it a monster coming to get you’ (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:51). Whedon makes it clear that he has savages in mind: ‘Once it was a commercial space liner, now it’s a war machine . . . ornamented and painted . . . Everything about this vessel says “savage” (43). In *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion*, we are shown some preliminary drawings of Reaver weaponry (67), including a ‘Hand Held Arm Slinger,’ which looks suspiciously like an atlatl or a lacrosse racquet, both of which are pre-contact North American implements (Hoxie 323–4; Stoutenburgh 20).

When Mal and his crew encounter a Reaver ship, Zoe explains what will happen if the Reavers board them: 'If they take the ship, they'll rape us to death, eat our flesh, and sew our skins into their clothing. And if we're very, very lucky, they'll do it in that order' ('Serenity,' 1.1). These savages are vicious cannibals; this is confirmed when Mal and his crew come across a derelict ship that is a recent victim of a Reaver attack. The shooting script describes in gruesome detail the corpses the crew finds on this ship: 'THE BODIES are strung up from the ceiling. Three clumps of twisted flesh. The skin pale, almost luminescent (the bits of it we do see)' (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:89). They have obviously been cannibalized. As if to confirm this hypothesis, the first words uttered by the lone survivor as he regains consciousness in Serenity's infirmary are 'Cattle, cattle for the slaughter' ('Bushwhacked,' 1.3), clearly implying that the ship has become both abattoir and cannibal café. As Mal explains:

You call him a 'survivor'? He's not. A man comes up against that kind of will, only way to deal with it, I suspect . . . is to become it. He's following the only course that's left to him. First he'll try to make himself look like one . . . cut on himself, desecrate his own flesh . . . then he'll start acting like one.

The victim is described as 'scarcely human.' The shooting script details the 'HIDEOUS MUTILATED FACE, flesh peeled back, mouth pinned into a grimace by bits of metal. It SNARLS and SNAPS . . . it is terrifying' (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:103). It is important to remember that he is not a Reaver, but rather their victim trying to transform himself into a Reaver, having experienced the horror of their savage attack on his friends and relatives. In the metaphor of the B-Western, he is 'going Indian,' becoming one of the savages. Even in movies as sympathetic to Indians as *A Man Called Horse* (1970) and *Return of a Man Called Horse* (1976), the hero (Richard Harris) finds himself unable to live the life of a country gentleman back in England and is emotionally driven to return to America and the Sioux tribe that raised him. Less progressive movies such as *The Searchers* (1956) regard 'going Indian' as tantamount to going insane.<sup>1</sup>

In *Firefly*, theories are proffered as to the origins of the Reavers, but the matter is left hanging until well into *Serenity*. In 'Bushwhacked,' Jayne suggests that the Reavers 'ain't men,' but Shepherd Book counters, 'Of course they are. Too long removed from civilization,

perhaps—but men. And I believe there’s a power greater than men. A power that heals.’ Mal suggests, ‘Jayne’s right. Reavers ain’t men. Or they forgot how to be. Now they’re just . . . nothing. They got out to the edge of the galaxy, to that place of nothing. And that’s what they became.’ These theories are mere speculation, just guesses by Jayne and Mal. We would therefore disagree, for example, with Jane Espenson’s claim that ‘the mythology of the Reavers on *Firefly* is not quite the mythology of the Reavers in *Serenity*’ (17). As to Book’s belief that there is a healing ‘power greater than men,’ Mal responds, ‘Reavers might take issue with that philosophy. If they had a philosophy. And if they weren’t too busy gnawing on your insides.’

The fact that Mal doubts that the Reavers even have a philosophy further adds to the negative stereotype being presented of the Reavers and, by extension, of Native Americans. The claim that the Natives did not have a philosophy has been, and still is, used as a justification for the European occupancy of North America (cf. Flanagan 58–9). These ‘primitive savages’ were thought to have no more claim to land ownership than did flocks of migrating geese, herds of buffalo, or roving packs of wolves. The claim also perpetuates a view of Native Americans which is quite frankly false.

Though Native philosophy is not yet offered in many North American universities, the notion of a distinctive Native philosophy is certainly coming to be recognized, particularly as more and more Native students go on to post-secondary institutions including philosophy graduate schools. In fact, the American Philosophical Association sponsors an official journal dedicated to the subject: *The APA Newsletter on American Indians in Philosophy*. Another, entitled *Ayaangwaamizin: The International Journal of Indigenous Philosophy*, is dedicated to Native philosophy world-wide. The title (pronounced eyn-gwa-mizin) is derived from the Ojibwa language and actually gives us a glimpse into Ojibwa values. It means to tread carefully, not so much for your own sake as for the sake of others and the earth. The founding editors, Lee Hester (Choctaw) and Dennis McPherson (Ojibwa), as well as a number of other contemporary Native philosophers, use such indigenous values to question the European construct of the Savage Redskin. For example, Apache philosopher Viola Cordova argues: ‘The fact that the Native American sees himself as belonging to a specific part of the planet escapes the notice of many researchers. The concept of the “Four Directions” and its accompanying aura of sanctity . . . might have come about



through a recognition that others lived . . . in their own “sanctified” homelands’ (34–5).

Cordova’s point about respect for ‘place’ and ‘others’ in pre-contact America is confirmed by the editors of *Ayaangwaamizin*, who argue ‘It was, in fact, the acceptance (and even celebration) of a rich cultural and ethical diversity, of the *differences* between cultures, that made it possible for hundreds of cultures to flourish side by side “forever”’ (Hester et al. 278). This is far from the negative stereotype of ‘Savage Redskin Warriors.’ There are, unfortunately, still those who stubbornly refuse to give up such stereotypes. To give one example, the prominent environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott, Jr., in ‘Many Indigenous Worlds or *the* Indigenous World?’ pointedly attacks Cordova, Hester, and McPherson, making it abundantly clear that he believes life in pre-contact America was actually ‘ferocious and horrific’ (302): ‘A concrete instance of assertive historical revisionism is Hester et al.’s claim that ethnic conflict on the North American continent prior to European contact was not ferocious and horrific, that, to the contrary, pre-contact American Indians accepted and celebrated the differences between their cultures’ (302). Callicott goes on to assert, ‘No historical evidence whatever for this claim is offered; and the evidence that does exist supports an opposite conclusion’ (302).

In fact, Native scholars have drawn on a considerable body of historical evidence to support their conclusions, including early contact documents which show, for example, how ‘Christopher Columbus stresses the gentleness and generosity of the natives’ (McPherson 79). Just because the Native American peoples defended themselves from European invaders does not make pre-contact America ‘ferocious and horrific,’ whatever is written in the history books of the victors. As Cherokee philosopher Jace Weaver argues, ‘A fact of imperialism is that it systematically denies native people a dignified history’ (29). And as Mal in *Serenity* notes, ‘Half of writing history is hiding the truth.’

Whedon is quite familiar with this kind of debate. It is depicted humorously in the ‘Pangs’ episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (4.8). Though the episode was written by Jane Espenson, there can be no doubt that it deals with an issue close to Whedon’s heart. In discussing the writing of ‘Pangs’ with Roz Kaveney, Espenson insists ‘the core of it was something that Joss had wanted to do for a long time, which is have a dead Indian at Thanksgiving—a very poetic illustration . . . that we do kind of live in this country by virtue of some very ugly

conquest' (111–12). She goes on to admit that 'Pangs' was 'one of the most extensive rewrites that I have ever seen Joss do . . . much of Acts Three and Four are pure Joss not me' (112). In 'Pangs' Willow asserts of the Chumash, 'They were fluffy indigenous kittens, 'til we came along.' On this, Giles tends to agree. Yet in the episode we also see the Chumash Vengeance Spirit, Hus, along with his spirit warriors, attacking the Giles homestead—sometimes referred to as 'Fort Giles'—as Anya, Willow, and Xander on stolen bicycles rush back to Giles' place in a humorous parody of the U.S. Cavalry riding to the rescue. Because we discuss 'Pangs' in detail in *The Existential Joss Whedon*, there is no need to reiterate our arguments here. It is enough to note that the somewhat negative portrayal of the Chumash spirit warriors is balanced by Willow's more sympathetic attitude toward Native Americans. We suggest that a similar balance can be found in Whedon's treatment of the Reavers insofar as they represent a negative stereotype of Native American Indians. Whedon creates this balance by saying something very indirectly about most of us, about non-Native Americans. As usual, he encourages his viewers to work it out for ourselves (cf. Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters* 18).

We cited above the account of the Four Directions by Apache philosopher Viola Cordova as her explanation of the Native American respect for bounded "'sanctified" homelands' (305). This is confirmed and further explained by Mi'kmaq scholar Marie Battiste and Sa'ke'j Henderson (Chickasaw):

Indigenous peoples construct spiritual teachings around the belief that at certain places there is a sacred ambience that empowers human consciousness and spirituality. These locations range from burial grounds to mythic, legendary, or petroglyphic places; from places of purification, healing, and fertility to sacred plant, rock, and animal places; from medicine wheels and sun temples to vision and dreaming places. (107)

On the basis of this, they conclude that Native American people have an obligation to preserve such places, not abandon them: 'Protecting their ecologies and their biodiversity is an integral part of protecting Indigenous spirituality' (107). Cordova herself asks in her ironical way,

How can a non-Native American, a European with a very general 'sense of place,' understand the sense of a boundary? Their god gave

them an entire planet in which to ‘multiply’ and ‘dominate’: ‘one world one people.’ If they do not come equipped with a sense of bounded space, how can they come to recognize and respect the sense of place of the other? (35)

In Whedon’s futuristic space Westerns, this attitude of domination and colonization seems to have been extended from ‘one world’ to the entire universe. Other worlds, other planets and moons beyond our solar system, have been terraformed, colonized, and dominated, technologically forced to fit our needs and desires: ‘Through atmosphere processing plants, terraforming technologies, gravity regulation and the introduction of every known form of Earthlife, each planet became its own . . . Earth’ (Whedon, *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 12). There is a recurring reference to ‘Earth-That-Was’ throughout *Firefly* and *Serenity*, but no one seems terribly upset that planet Earth has somehow been lost or destroyed. Seen in the context of Native respect for the land, boundary and sacred places, *Firefly* and *Serenity* are every bit as much horror-comedies as *Buffy* (1997–2003) or even *Angel* (1999–2004). There is very little, if any, indication that anyone regrets the loss of Earth-That-Was. They obviously believe, to paraphrase Cordova, that their god gave them an entire ‘verse in which to ‘multiply’ and ‘dominate’—‘one ‘verse, one people.’

While there might not seem much harm in terraforming a previously lifeless planet or moon, by the end of *Serenity* we learn that the technocratic meddlesome mindset that permits such things does have negative consequences. We get hints of this near the beginning of the movie. We see a very young River Tam in school. Her teacher asks, ‘With all the social and medical advancements we can bring to the independents, why would they fight so hard against us?’ River responds: ‘We meddle . . . people don’t like to be meddled with. We tell them what to do, what to think . . . we’re in their homes and in their heads and we haven’t the right. We’re meddlesome.’ The meddlesome mindset does not—some might say cannot—restrict itself to things like terraforming lifeless planets. As Russell Means (Oglala Lakota), the cofounder of the American Indian Movement (AIM), explains in a somewhat different but relevant context, ‘If the feminist movement, or society in general, is to stop violence against women, it will first have to stop the initial rape and violence against our Mother Earth’ (xii). This may also suggest how the feminist Whedon of *Buffy* leads inevitably to the more environmentalist Whedon of *Firefly* and *Serenity*.

We soon find out just how meddlesome the Alliance is. Public television screens seem to work both ways (at least for the Alliance's secret police): television programs contain subliminal messages used to manipulate certain members of the populace, including River Tam herself. At around the age of sixteen she is put in a government-run 'school' for advanced students, which turns out to be a training institute for government operatives. The training is extraordinarily meddlesome, involving brain surgery and mental programming, without the knowledge or consent of parents. We see, for instance, 'a 16 year old RIVER sitting in a metal chair, needles stuck in her skull . . . being adjusted by a technician. A second monitors her brain patterns. The lab is cold, blue steel. Insidiously clean' (Whedon, *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 43). This visual aptly drives home the violence of the Alliance's intrusion into the heads of its helpless children. It calls to mind the violation of the minds and bodies of Riley Finn and other Initiative operatives in *Buffy*, despite Riley's desperate protest, 'I cannot be programmed! I'm a man!' ('Goodbye Iowa,' 4.14). Philosopher James South argues, 'There is present in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* a real worry about the uses of technology and the ways in which it can dehumanize humans' (98). Whedon continues to explore this worry throughout *Firefly* and *Serenity*. The Reavers are the worst result of technological dehumanization, and, as we will see, also represent the dehumanized image of Native Americans.

There is a further parallel between *Buffy* and these space Westerns. In both, the extensive government-sanctioned meddling and experimentation is done under a veil of secrecy. There seems to be a constant fear of being found out. In *Buffy* when Spike (labeled 'Hostile 17' by the Initiative) escapes from the Initiative's prison-like secret experimental facility where he had a behavior-altering silicon chip implanted in his brain, Riley explains to fellow commandos that they have to find him because 'as long as he knows about the Initiative, he's a threat' ('Pangs'). In *Firefly* and *Serenity*, Simon and River Tam are aboard Mal's ship because they are fleeing the Alliance after Simon has rescued his sister from the human programming facility described above. The Alliance is in hot pursuit because River, having had her natural mind-reading abilities neurologically enhanced, may have been exposed to sensitive government secrets. The doctor in charge of River's programming had allowed key members of Parliament to observe River: his 'greatest success, a prodigy.' The Alliance Operative charged with tracking down River sarcastically explains to the doctor

the implications of his actions: ‘The minds behind every diplomatic, military and covert operation in the galaxy, and you put them in a room with a psychic.’ Although ‘her mind is unquiet’ and whatever ‘secrets she might have accidentally gleaned’ are likely ‘buried beneath layers of psychosis,’ the Operative is unwilling to risk letting her and her brother escape. ‘Secrets are not my concern. Keeping them is’ (*Serenity*).

Though she does not at first consciously realize it, River has indeed somehow learned one of the Alliance’s most sinister secrets. It starts to come to consciousness in a bar as she utters the mysterious word ‘Miranda,’ when she is triggered by a subliminal code on a public television screen into an attack on the patrons of the bar, exhibiting a form of martial arts that Buffy would envy. She can even do backward kicks around pillars. We eventually learn that this mysterious ‘Miranda’ is the name of a remote planet that the Alliance has removed from navigation charts and official histories.

Partly to avoid the Operative and partly because there is ‘something on this rock the Alliance doesn’t want us to know,’ Mal and his crew decide to visit Miranda, slipping past the vast fleet of Reaver ships with all the tension of Cowboys disguised as war-painted Redskins sneaking through an Indian encampment. Upon reaching their destination, Mal and company learn the horrible secret of Miranda. Everyone on the planet is dead; dried, decayed corpses and skeletons lie everywhere, ‘bodies . . . in homes, in piles, gently dead’ (Whedon, *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 128). Mal and crew learn the cause from a message left on a holographic recorder in a crashed Alliance research ship.

It’s the Pax, the G-32 Paxilon Hydrochlorate that we added to the air processors. It . . . was supposed to calm the population, weed out aggression . . . it worked. The people here stopped fighting. And then they stopped everything else . . . breeding . . . talking . . . eating . . . There’s thirty million people here and they all just let themselves die. (*Serenity*)

The scientist on the recording goes on to explain how the Pax had the opposite effect on 0.1 percent of the population: ‘Their aggressor response increased . . . beyond madness. They’ve become . . . they’ve killed most of us . . . not just killed, they’ve done . . . things.’ As the full horror of the realization hits the crew, it is Wash who articulates

it: 'Reavers . . . they made them.' As if in confirmation, before anyone can turn off the holographic recorder, we see the scientist interrupted in her recording by a Reaver attack: 'She screams continuously as the Reaver tops her, biting at her and tearing at her clothes, at her skin' (Whedon, *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 129).

Although the recording and its revelation about the origin of the Reavers shakes up even Jayne, it is River's reaction that is of greatest significance. She simply cannot cope with the information: 'River falls to her knees vomiting' (Whedon, *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 130). We suggest that this reaction is due partly to River's being raised under the Alliance. She does not have the luxury of Wash's 'They made them,' which distances himself somewhat from the horrible realization. Just as the young River told her teacher what is wrong with the Alliance is that 'We meddle . . . We're meddlesome,' so, though she probably could never articulate it, River has now come to realize that 'We made them.' Her reaction is due in part to cultural guilt, a concept, again, Whedon explores in depth in 'Pangs.'

If Whedon's Reavers are the Savage Redskins, then the origin of the Reavers is Whedon's metaphor for the creation of the savage in the imaginations of European explorers. As noted above, however, many first contact accounts accurately record 'the gentleness and generosity of the natives,' just as many were influenced by Eurocentric negative expectations. The explorers were coming from a Europe of the Spanish Inquisition with its fear of witches who were thought to consort with devils in forests and heaths:

Under torture, suspected witches admitted to all sorts of encounters with Satan and his cohorts . . . taking place in the woods far from public view. The image of the devil that emerged from such confessions is often that of a being with a dark or red visage, and if not naked, clothed in the skins of animals or decorated with feathers. (Hoxie 568; cf. Wilson 10)

The Americas were, understandably, seen as nothing but forest, far from civilization. Our word 'savage' comes from the Latin *silvaticas* (in the forest) through the Spanish *salvage* and French *sauvage*. 'Heathens' are, of course, people of the heath. Shakespeare's Macbeth, for instance, meets his witches on the 'blasted heath' (*Macbeth* 1.3.77). It's little wonder that the inhabitants of the New World were seen as 'savage heathens.' They seemed to have knowledge of healing herbs

and magical cures, just as did the old 'wise women' frequently charged and convicted of witchcraft by the Inquisition under the guidance of *Malleus Maleficarum*, or 'Hammer of Witches' (Kramer and Sprenger). Robert Berkhofer's *The White Man's Indian* is an excellent source for such Eurocentric images of Native Americans. To give one example, he cites Hakluyt and Goldsmid's *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1598–1600), which describes sailors removing the moccasins of an old 'Eskimo' woman to determine whether she was either a witch or a devil: 'The old wretch, whom divers of our saylers supposed to be eyther a devill, or a witch, had her buskins plucked off, to see if she were cloven footed, and for her ugly hue and deformity we let her goe' (17). There can be no doubt that Eurocentric expectations included monsters and cloven-hoofed devils and that these images had a real influence on what the explorers and colonists thought they encountered. Whedon's concern for such issues can be traced as far back as an early draft of the first episode of *Buffy*, in which Buffy, walking into her first high-school class, asks 'Is this Eurocentric History?' (Whedon, '*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: Unseen Pilot'). This line was, quite rightly, dropped, in final production as it is too sophisticated a question for any teenager to ask, with the possible exception of Willow. Still, it reveals something quite important about Whedon and supports our reading of his treatment of the Reavers.

The origin of the Reavers and the use of G-32 Paxilon Hydrochlorate (Pax) to pacify an entire population can be read on many levels (see Chapter 11). It is certainly a comment on the misuse of technology, on the meddlesome mindset run amuck. It is also probably a comment on the wide use of the antidepressant Paxil today. But these interpretations do not take into account the importance ascribed to the word 'Miranda,' the name of the planet where the Pax was deployed with such devastating consequences. However, as noted above, the name was first introduced as part of the mystery surrounding River's mental condition. This highlights the mysterious term, giving it added significance.

In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Miranda is Prospero's daughter. Together they have oppressed Caliban, the indigenous inhabitant of the island on which they have been cast and which they essentially colonize. They treat Caliban as a slave and regard him as a monster. He is even the offspring of a witch, Sycorax. Laura Donaldson provides a reading of *The Tempest* that casts light on Whedon's use of Shakespeare's Miranda. Donaldson notes, 'Prospero enacts the role of omnipotent

Western patriarch, and Caliban, that of the “native” Other’ (16). This she calls the ‘Prospero Complex’ and contrasts it with a radical feminist ‘Miranda Complex,’ which provides a more nuanced understanding of the colonized Other. This colonized Other is no longer just the figure of Caliban, but is expanded to encompass Prospero’s daughter, Miranda herself, who is entirely unaware that she is also oppressed by the patriarchy represented by her father. Miranda is thus in the position of being, on one level, a colonizer, and on another, the colonized. She is conflicted, but quite unaware of that fact. She is also unaware that she, like her father, is oppressing Caliban. The Reavers are in a sense the colonized Caliban. Though not oppressed in the same way, they were quite literally turned into savages by the Alliance, which, it could be argued, is oppressing all of its citizens, since it seems happy to experiment on its unsuspecting populace. We argue, then, that the Alliance is playing the role of Prospero. This reading is bolstered by the fact that one of the most civilized and technologically advanced of the inner planets is called Ariel. It is a place of deception since the majority of Alliance citizens are content not to question the covert activities of their government. It is also on Ariel that Jayne decides to betray River and Simon Tam. In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Ariel is the airy spirit who executes the meddlesome will of Prospero, using magic to create the storm of the title and to deceive and manipulate Prospero’s enemies, just as the Alliance uses its powers to oppress and deceive the citizens under its control. As Mercedes Lackey argues, ‘The dystopian society in which the crew of *Serenity* operates feels real . . . It resonates because the rules by which this dystopia operates are familiar . . . The Alliance uses a lot of the same psychological weapons on its own people that all the major governments of the world . . . are . . . using today’ (63–4).

Series co-executive producer Tim Minear, writer and director of the episode ‘Bushwhacked,’ explains how he

set up the universe by exploring the two extremes—the Reavers and the Alliance. The first half of the episode is . . . about the savagery of being too far from civilization. The second half was about civilization being so civilized that it becomes this collectivist bureaucratic behemoth that can’t get anything done, and it’s trying to control you too much. Really the story is about how our people inhabit a space in between those two extremes. (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:84)



We are suggesting that River, Mal, and his crew represent Shakespeare's Miranda, caught between the Reavers and the Alliance, pursued by both. Ariel, whom Whedon associates with the Alliance and its citizens, is set free at the end of Shakespeare's play. At the end of *Serenity*, Mal and company give a measure of freedom to the citizens of the Alliance by exposing some of its deceptions and manipulation, nicely transcending the Miranda Complex. Whedon's point is that the Reavers were literally, if unwittingly, created by the Alliance itself, just as Caliban becomes an enemy when Prospero enslaves and degrades him.<sup>2</sup> Whedon's metaphor is clear: upon first contact in North America, the Europeans construed and constructed the Natives as savages. Viewers of *Firefly* and *Serenity* who see the Reavers as Redskins—at least those of us of British or European heritage—are brought to the uncomfortable realization, like River, that 'we made them,' and as this investigation has demonstrated, we continue to do so if we follow the Callicotts rather than the Cordovas of this world.

# 11 . A Geopolitical Interpretation of *Serenity*

JEFFREY BUSSOLINI

While *Serenity* is engaging as a story in itself, as great science fiction it also comments critically on human relations. It is easy to be engrossed in the 'verse of *Serenity* as another of the highly imaginative, captivating worlds issuing from creator Joss Whedon's mind. The characters are drawn with care, each possessing an intricate backstory we glimpse at certain turns, with a combination of deep moral conviction and ambiguity that gives their choices great resonance. The tale of the Great War, the dominance of the Alliance, and the corresponding liminality of the outer planets makes for a fascinating realm. Moreover, I propose that the story of *Serenity* can be seen as a very potent criticism of U.S. imperial politics and current world affairs. Upon hearing about the show, Jane Espenson thought, '. . . Joss is never about the stuff, but the stuff behind the stuff. I saw the connections between his fictional world and our current world. That was easy' (1). In this chapter, I explore that connection in three sections: David Lavery and competing understandings of the Space Age in his *Late for the Sky: The Mentality of the Space Age*; the creation of the Reavers as 'blowback' to overambitious policies of pharmaceutical and military control; and parliamentary rule as state of exception (a state of emergency used to justify the subversion of democratic rule) drawing on the recent work of Veronese political philosopher Giorgio Agamben in *Stato di Eccezione (State of Exception)* and *Homo Sacer: il potere sovrano e la nuda vita (Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life)*.<sup>1</sup> I analyze scenes and aspects from both *Serenity* and *Firefly*, but draw heavily on the film, since its timing (pre-production then filming during the build-up, invasion, and occupation of Iraq) makes

it a more direct and biting social commentary. As Espenson observes, ‘The political parallels between their world and ours are particularly strong in the movie. And so are the emotions, the characters, the entire rich world of a very real future’ (3).

At issue is the style of science fiction that uses advanced technology to set a stage, but steadfastly refuses the allure of a naive utopianism, whether technological or spiritual (which does not, however, mean that the story or the protagonists are hopeless or nihilistic—see Chapter 7 and Lackey). *Firefly* is effective because it uses science fiction without losing sight of the human and embodied concerns that are unlikely to be swept away by technology, even if we become more scientifically advanced and cyborg as a species. Beyond that, Whedon takes advantage of powerful artistic leverage in portraying situations that are charged and difficult to present directly. By doing so, he makes a very powerful criticism of the Iraq war, its foreign policy and military precursors, and deep-seated aspects of thought about space and science. Although in the years following 9/11 and the patriotic fervor that it gave rise to, it would have been very difficult and controversial to present these points outright, Whedon manages to make them via the crafting of his fictional ‘verse.

### *The mentality of the space age*

In *Late for the Sky: The Mentality of the Space Age*, Lavery describes how much space and technology discourse, in science fiction as well as government and popular discussions (e.g. ignoring global warming), is animated by a ‘neo-gnostic’ dream to flee the earth and escape our bodies. *Firefly* offers a version of the Space Age which is embodied and eschews the technological utopianism we might find, for instance, in *Star Trek* (1966–9). As Lavery points out—via his phenomenologically grounded account, drawing on Hannah Arendt, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, and others—space visions are often predicated upon the notion of the destruction of earth and the necessity for human escape (which closely parallels the notion of the destruction of our bodies and the liberation of our souls). These versions of the future often feature scientific cures to significant human problems like overpopulation, war, and the like.

Lavery begins his book with a very apropos epigraph from French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Signs*:

The Earth . . . is not in motion like other objective bodies, but not at rest either, since we cannot see what it could be ‘tacked on to.’ It is the ‘soil’ or ‘stem’ of our thought as it is of our life. We shall certainly be able to move it or to carry it back when we inhabit other planets, but the reason we shall is that then we shall have enlarged our native soil. We cannot do away with [the Earth]. As the Earth is by definition one, all soil we tread upon becoming simultaneously a province of it, the living beings with whom the sons of the Earth will be able to communicate will simultaneously become men—or, if you prefer, terrestrial men will become variants of a more general human community which will remain one. The Earth is the matrix of our time as it is of our space. Every constructed notion of time presupposes our proto-history as carnal beings compresent to a single world. Every evocation of possible worlds refers to a way of seeing our own world [*Weltanschauung*]. Every possibility is a variant of our reality, an effective possibility of reality. (Merleau-Ponty 180)

For Merleau-Ponty, as for Lavery, we humans are embodied beings who are inextricably tied to that embodiment and the earthly context where it developed. The ‘verse of *Serenity* is presented along exactly the lines that Merleau-Ponty imagines. As the film’s introduction explains, humanity has radiated out from an overcrowded Earth, but new planets are ‘terraformed,’ literally formed into the image of Earth/Terra. Although perhaps none of the characters has ever been to Earth, they are all well aware of the lore about ‘Earth-That-Was’ that serves as a continual point of reference for space-bound humanity. As River notes in the episode ‘Out of Gas’ (1.8), ‘Day is a vestigial mode of time measurement based on solar cycles, it’s not applicable,’ with little direct meaning for humans who have never been to Earth. Nonetheless, the crew still uses it and celebrates Simon’s birthday (although River hasn’t gotten him anything as a gift). The humans of the *Firefly* ‘verse are still bound as Earth people—the envelope of Earth, its soil, and time have been expanded to include additional solar systems. Having left Earth behind, humans carried it with them into space, precisely as the quotation from *Signs* predicts.

This persistent ‘Earthiness’ is the decisive point for Lavery and *Firefly*. Technology may enable transportation across great distances, but it will not enable us to take leave of our embodied condition. As Lavery points out, such a dream has long been a powerful one:

The original Gnostics expected to be saved from the Hell of Earth and body by knowledge, by spiritual insight, not by technology, not

by a cybernetically engineered, exosomatic evolution or the *deus ex machina* of a rocket in which they could journey in search of the real, the true homeland. Only the adepts of *gnosis*, not the essential message, have changed in its Space Age rebirth. (48)

There is a strong tie between Space Age dreams and the ancient, spiritual hopes of escaping one's body. Apropos of Gnosticism, Lavery writes that 'its central tenets can be summarized with some accuracy. A "transmundane" religion with a dualistic and transcendental conception of salvation' (46). Drawing on the book *The Gnostics* by Jacques Lacarriere, Lavery makes it quite clear this tradition has implications for space travel and the fate of the Earth:

'The fundamental difference' separating the Gnostics from their contemporaries, writes Jacques Lacarriere, in a passage that could, almost without altering a word, be adopted as an accurate characterization of the most radical of contemporary space advocacy, was 'that, for them, their native "soil" [was] not the Earth, but the lost heaven which they [kept] vividly alive with their memories.' As 'autochthons of another world' who had 'fallen onto our Earth like inhabitants from a distant planet' and 'strayed into the wrong galaxy,' they experienced a perpetual 'longing to regain their true cosmic homeland.' 'The sense of uprootedness,' the alienation, experienced by the Gnostics, Lacarriere shows, was 'not merely geographical but planetary.' (47)

The fiction of *Serenity* runs in the opposite direction. Rather than seeking to flee Earth in order to flee the human condition (or their onerous embodiment), the humans of the 'verse retain their tie to Earthly embodiment as a crucial aspect of their being and identity. It is the memories of Earth-That-Was they keep alive through stories and traditions that seem to give them a common social referent.

Two scenes from *Firefly* illustrate the persistent, Earthy embodiment in the 'verse. Whereas some other science fiction, for instance *Star Trek*, demonstrates a technological utopianism seeming to offer a measure of deliverance from aspects of bodily life, *Firefly*, and other science fiction texts like *Alien* (1979) and *Babylon 5* (1994–8), do not. In the first episode of the series, 'Serenity' (1.1), there is an excellent shot of Captain Mal Reynolds using a dingy head in his quarters. It looks more like an outhouse than a technologically advanced space toilet and shows very directly that these are humans in space, who must still urinate and defecate. Technology of transport and exploration has not

delivered them from the ‘messy’ reality of human existence. In *Star Trek*, I cannot remember any portrayal of a head on a ship, as if those space-farers were delivered from that aspect of bodily life. While *Mal* uses a similarly dingy sink that pulls out from the wall to wash, on *Star Trek* they use sonic showers that seem almost magical—high technology which has significantly modified the bodily exigency of washing.

In the episode ‘Ariel’ (1.9), we see that the medical technology of the ‘verse is not so different from our own. Although the hospital is clean and modern, it looks more like a major hospital of today than a futuristic facility five hundred years away. When River predicts the death of a heart attack patient and Simon helps him, the setting looks like a recovery or emergency room that we would see on *ER* (1994–present) or *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005–present), and the medical equipment, procedures, and technology are almost exactly like those used now (needles, IVs, defibrillators, ECGs, etc.). In *Star Trek*, the medical facilities and technologies (hyposprays, medical tricorders) little resemble current medical technology, and the characters frequently berate the brutality of twentieth-century medicine (see the scene from the episode ‘City on the Edge of Forever,’ 1.28, when Dr. Leonard McCoy, in a drug-induced psychosis, breaks down lamenting the pain of the ‘needles and sutures . . . and cut[ting]’ used in medicine).

The premise that the medicine in *Firefly* bears a strong resemblance to our own is particularly demonstrated by the fact that Ariel is a central planet and the hospital involved is one of the finest and most sophisticated. If we recall medical technology and practices five hundred years ago, differences from now would be stark indeed. As such, the portrayal of medicine in *Firefly* heavily underscores the persistence of the human, bodily condition.

A few more observations are relevant concerning the status and longevity of the Gnosticism that Lavery identifies at the heart of space thinking. The recent discovery, and translation from Coptic, of the Judas Gospel seems to indicate that Jesus himself was part of the gnostic sect and shared its beliefs. According to interpretations now emerging (corroborating older conjecture), Jesus was thankful for Judas’s role in helping him to shed the constraints of his body and achieve liberation. This ancient tradition clearly still persists in contemporary theology and society (Kasser and Wurst; Pagels and King).

A neo-gnostic set of beliefs seems to motivate (or to explain) certain aspects of current U.S. policy. The odd pairing in the Bush administration of extreme hostility toward environmental measures

and increased weaponization and exploration of space seems to fit well with Lavery's framework. The trashing of the Earth seems to be of little import, perhaps should even be hastened, if humans are preparing to make the great leap beyond.

### *The creation of the Reavers and 'blowback'*

The creation of the Reavers is already one of the most-studied aspects of the film *Serenity*. At the 2006 *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses, many of the presentations were devoted to the Reavers' story in the film. Among these were presentations by Mary Alice Money on 'The Reavers' Origin in *Serenity*: Whedon's Mistake or Masterstroke,' Deborah Monroy on 'Seven Ways to View *Serenity*: Or, When Does the Dancer Become the War?,' Agnes Curry's 'We Don't Say Indian: On the Paradoxical Construction of the Reavers,' Jennifer C. Garlan's 'Bushwhacked by the Nightmare Native: The Western Roots of *Firefly*'s Reavers,' and Rhonda V. Wilcox's "'I Don't Hold to That": Joss Whedon and Original Sin,' which all contained analyses of the Reavers. In terms of geopolitics, there are two major aspects to the creation of the Reavers: psychopharmaceuticals and the 'blowback' to the application of force and influence.

### *Psychopharmaceuticals*

The Alliance's attempt to use G-23 Paxilon Hydrochlorate to produce docile bodies and workers on planet Miranda clearly backfired. In the eerie, unforgettable scene from Miranda we get a clear exposition of who the Reavers are and where they came from, delivered as a kind of 'message from the beyond' by one of the Reavers' first victims, a member of the Alliance 'Research and Rescue' expedition sent to investigate after a mass holocaust had taken place (30 million dead):

It isn't what we thought. There's been no war here, and no terraforming event, the environment is stable. It's the Pax, the G-23 Paxilon Hydrochlorate that we added to the air processors. It was supposed to calm the population, weed out aggression. Well it works. The people here stopped fighting, and then they stopped everything else. They stopped going to work, they stopped breeding, talking, eating. There's 30 million people here and they all just let themselves die. I have to be quick [as the Reavers are heard banging on the door]. About a tenth of a percent of the population had the

opposite reaction to the Pax. Their aggressor response increased, beyond madness. They have become, well, they've killed most of us, and not just killed, they've done things. I won't live to report this, but people have to know, we meant it for the best, to make people safer.

'The Pax' is a clear analogue to Paxil, one of the major 'mood enhancing' drugs of recent pharmaceutical interventions (along with others like Zoloft and Prozac). As with Pax, these three drugs, designed to reduce anxiety and promote stability, have been reported to cause self-mutilation, suicide, and violent, homicidal tendencies. In his 2004 article on 'Suicidality, Violence, and Mania Caused by Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs),' Breggin notes that SSRIs can cause 'a stimulant profile,' 'manic psychoses,' and 'obsessive preoccupations that are alien or uncharacteristic of the individual,' which can result in 'suicidality, violence, and other forms of extreme abnormal behavior' (31; see also 'Antidepressant'). Jayne describes the same kind of behaviors in *Serenity* after their initial brush with the Reavers: 'I do not get it. How's a guy go so wrong? Cutting on his own face, rapin' and murderin' . . . Eating people alive, where does that get fun?' We also see such violence in the episode 'Bushwhacked' (1.3).

*Serenity* contains a strong philosophical statement about overzealous desires of social stability and productivity. As Mal says in his speech to the crew after they have discovered the recording on Miranda,

Somebody has to speak for these people . . . as sure as I know anything I know this: they will try again. Maybe on another world, maybe on this very ground swept clean. A year from now, ten, they'll swing back to the belief that they can make people . . . better. And I do not hold to that.

The Pax, like many of our technological 'quick fixes,' is motivated by the gnostic desire to escape or regulate the difficulties of our bodily existence but it is not without severe and unforeseen consequences, what might be called the return of the repressed or the return of the real (Freud; Lacan).

Beyond the philosophical problems with attempting to transcend human embodiment through technology, there is an economic and power dimension to this critique, since the companies that make these drugs are major vehicles for neo-liberal, U.S.-led domination in the world market. As with the Alliance in *Serenity*, concerns are



frequently raised that the pharmaceutical industry is little interested in reducing human suffering or protecting human life (despite slogans of progress and civilization like the ‘comfort and enlightenment of true civilization’ mentioned by River’s teacher). Considerations about profit, market share, and protection of trade secrets often seem to be more important. Two recent trends bear this out. First, spiraling health care costs in the United States are primarily attributable to rising medicine prices and the fight against lower-cost alternatives such as generic or cut-rate drugs from the patent-holding companies (Harris). George Bush’s recent Medicare overhaul was criticized for refusing to deal with high drug costs, allowing a system in which the government will pay full price for exorbitant medicines, even if this means less money for other treatments and medicines. Americans are becoming frustrated with the high profits of pharmaceutical companies, gained by the high costs they must pay for medicines, especially as it becomes increasingly evident that drug costs have little relation to research costs (mostly funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) or National Institutes of Health (NIH) anyway) or to ‘fair pricing’ (Love, ‘Call’; Love, ‘Comments’).

Second, there is the continuing saga of HIV and AIDS in the global South. Although cocktails of anti-retroviral drugs have transformed the character of the epidemic in richer countries, there remains a significant problem in getting these medicines (which can increase survival and slow transmission) to poorer areas. The sticking point is high drug prices and the reluctance, or outright refusal, by pharmaceutical companies to make their medicines available at a lower price. This refusal has been coupled with active campaigns through the World Trade Organization to try to block the independent production of generic drugs in Brazil, India, and Thailand, which have been justified on the grounds of medical and social emergency. The problem with this approach is that it blocks provision of the most effective medicines to areas where they are most needed. Although pharmaceutical companies have budged slightly on their prices—under public pressure and initiatives from the Gates Foundation—by and large they are still protecting their enormous profits and market shares while millions go without medicines that could help them. The Bush initiatives on AIDS in Africa are substantially swallowed up by paying full price for medicines that turn a giant profit for big pharmaceutical companies, when the purchase of generic drugs could vastly increase the number of people helped. The resentment against this kind of

callous economic dominance around the world may be as strong a factor as military action in generating anti-American sentiment.

It bears noting that the current insurance situation in the United States, not to mention in France, Britain, and other countries, makes it easy to get a prescription for a drug like Paxil (designed to increase social stability and worker productivity), but very difficult to get support for preventive or therapeutic treatment that may have more to do with addressing the root issues of strife in embodied human lives. And this is not to mention initiatives designed to change the organization of labor practices in society to minimize stress in the first place. One psychiatrist whom I interviewed lamented the fact that support for therapeutic counseling sessions had dwindled over the years to the extent that the once-mandatory hour-long sessions with patients had been reduced to ten-minute checklist reviews. During the same time, she said, it has become much easier to prescribe a variety of psychological medications, promoted and paid for by insurance companies and state agencies that begrudge any money for therapeutic counseling.

### *Blowback*

In 2000, international relations scholar Chalmers Johnson published *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, drawing on the CIA term ‘blowback’ for the unintended consequences of intelligence, military, and diplomatic operations. The story of the Reavers’ creation also seems to contain a meditation on precisely this same phenomenon, inasmuch as it was the ill-advised actions of the Alliance itself which generated the Reavers. The horrifying, violent Reavers initially appear to be mysterious freaks who emerged out of nowhere (like boogey-men from children’s stories, as Jayne describes it). However, as detailed above, we learn in the course of the film that the Reavers were created by the Alliance in a failed attempt to pacify psychopharmacologically the residents of the planet Miranda. In the current political climate, one can hardly help noticing these messages. While the United States, like the Alliance, has attempted to pacify much of the world (sometimes under the major economic engine of biotechnology and psychopharmaceuticals for those who can afford to pay for these products), this exercise of power has given rise to disturbing side-effects that pose a serious threat. Thus, much has been made of the fact that it was misguided U.S. foreign policy that set up

both Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, both of whom would return as significant threats to U.S. power (e.g. see Falk).

Although Saddam Hussein was executed as an enemy of the United States and the Iraqi people, it was U.S. intervention and support which made him such a threat in the first place. A notorious film clip and set of photographs show Donald Rumsfeld visiting Hussein in 1983, warmly greeting him, shaking his hand, and hugging him enthusiastically. Rumsfeld's visit paved the way for the provision of weapons and military technology, including biological weapons (later used against the Iraqi people). At the time, the United States was seeking an ally to help contain Iran (which had recently deposed the Shah and taken hundreds of American hostages in an infamous ordeal). Iraq fought an eight-year war with Iran in which some one million people were killed. The U.S. supplied a great deal of military support and strengthened a regime that would later turn against U.S. interests. Consequently, American forces invading Iraq (in 1991 and 2003) faced weapons and technology originally provided by the United States. The great fear of weapons of mass destruction, whether they were biological, chemical, or nuclear, came from precursor technologies and supplies that the United States had contributed. Even before the two wars between the United States and Iraq, a U.S. ship was destroyed in the Gulf by a French Exocet anti-ship missile which had been provided to Iraq as part of support for the war against Iran (causing one Navy friend of mine to opine that 'we should nuke 'em [Iraq] 'til they glow').

Another case of this blowback is the world-changing saga of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Like Saddam Hussein, these were once 'allies' of the United States who were heavily armed and trained by American intelligence and military agencies. When the United States was seeking a counterweight to Soviet aggression in Afghanistan (in roughly the same timeframe as the Iraq-Iran war), Washington recruited, instructed, transported, and supplied Islamic fighters (Mujahideen) to wage insurgent warfare against the Soviet forces. The U.S. encouraged Islamic radicalization on the part of fighters to fuel anti-Soviet sentiment. This resistance was successful; the Soviets were unable to maintain control over Afghanistan and eventually were forced to withdraw their troops. The U.S. and the region were left with a sizeable number of radicalized, trained, and battle-hardened fighters. The United States had supplied a number of sophisticated weapons for use against Soviet aircraft, such as the Stinger shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missile, which was quite effective in shooting

down Russian jets and helicopters. With the Soviet withdrawal, a great number of these and other weapons were left in the hands of the fighters. In the years following 9/11, several plots have been foiled (in Newark, New Jersey, and Geneva, Switzerland, for instance) that intended to use Stinger missiles to destroy passenger aircraft.

In River's dream sequence at the beginning of *Serenity*, she responds to the teacher's question, 'With so many social and medical advances that we can bring to the Independents, why would they fight so hard against us?' by saying, 'We meddle. People don't like to be meddled with. We tell them what to do, what to think . . . We're in their homes and in their heads and we haven't the right. We're meddling.' This line of thinking resonates with the examples of blowback and big pharmaceuticals. U.S. economic and military 'meddling' has produced a number of situations which incubate powerful animosity toward America.

Another key line from *Serenity* shows how the film deeply draws upon the motif of blowback. When Wash is steering *Serenity* through the mêlée of Alliance and Reaver ships above Mr. Universe's planet, there is a quick shot of Mal standing on the bridge saying 'Chickens come home to roost.' Although a brief line during one of the most action-laden parts of the film, it has a very specific lineage. This is the same phrase that Malcolm X used to comment upon the Kennedy assassination, as a consequence of U.S. foreign policy and 'meddling' abroad (Malcolm X). For Malcolm X, I believe, the assassination and domestic strife that accompanied it were the return to these shores of violent U.S. policies abroad (especially, for instance, in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America). The pithy phrase 'chickens coming home to roost' expressed the fact that U.S. imperial influence has a chain of consequences, including ones that we would often prefer to ignore, since they don't fit easily with a comfortable worldview.

This phrase had a continuing life after 9/11, when the Native American Indian scholar Ward Churchill published *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens: Consequences of American Conquest and Carnage*, which made a similar case about the events of 9/11 as that Malcolm X had made about the Kennedy assassination. Churchill was treated to a deluge of racist invective and embarrassing, nationalistic fury, but this may be because he had struck a chord. In no way excusing the attacks of that horrendous day, he was unwilling to ignore the very real, misguided policies that had given rise to the hatred that motivated the attacks and that had ultimately provided the training and know-how to the people who carried them out. *Serenity* contains the same message:

we had better pay heed to the effects and consequences of U.S. foreign and imperial policy. Like the Alliance, we cannot hope to intimidate or pacify the world (the 'verse) without significant feedback effects, animosity, and blowback.

*The state of exception and parliamentary rule*

Italian sociopolitical philosopher Giorgio Agamben describes how readily parliamentary systems converted into totalitarian systems and back again in the twentieth century (in his *Homo Sacer* and *Stato di Eccezione*). Central to his writing is the intuition that these forms of government are not far from one another, or that they have grown into one another. The figure of the Alliance Operative in *Serenity* expresses this perfectly and makes us think about our parallel 'operatives' in, for instance, the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency. The Operative routinely breaks laws and norms that are supposed to characterize the most important aspects of Alliance life. In other words, he regularly commits undemocratic acts in order to defend democracy. The perceived threat to democratic, civilized life in the Alliance (run by its Parliament) justifies virtually any measure to protect it.

This odd and deadly reversal is the heart of a paradox about security and governance where open societies nonetheless contain undemocratic elements that they claim are justified in the name of survival. Agamben begins his reflections on the matter, drawing on Carl Schmitt, by noting that "The paradox of sovereignty makes itself evident: "the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside of the juridical order"" (*Homo Sacer* 19).

Agamben also makes clear that he is drawing heavily on the work of Michel Foucault from the last decade of his life, especially his concern with 'la biopolitica' (*la biopolitique*, biopolitics) in the lecture courses at the Collège de France in 1976–9, focusing on 'the process through which, at the thresholds of the modern age, natural life begins, instead, to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of state power and politics is transformed into *biopolitics*' (*Homo Sacer* 5). Life, as in the protection of basic life by whatever means, has a way of trumping liberty in these realms, even to the point of excusing and justifying murder (or extraordinary rendition, torture, extensive

domestic eavesdropping, Guantánamo Bay, and the like). According to Agamben,

It is only because biological life with its needs had already become the politically decisive fact, that it is possible to understand the otherwise inexplicable rapidity with which in our century parliamentary democracies were able to devolve into totalitarian states, and totalitarian states convert themselves, almost without complications of continuity, into parliamentary democracies. In both the cases, these devolutions are produced in a context in which politics had already for some time been transformed into biopolitics, and in which the game at hand consisted only in the determination of which forms of organization would most effectively assure the care, control, and the use of life itself (bare life). (*Homo Sacer* 134)

In the case of River's treatment as laboratory animal, and the fate of those on Miranda, the Alliance is concerned with the control and use of 'biological life,' 'life itself,' and 'bare life.' River's fundamental human rights count for naught next to the state imperative of developing a human weapon (probably to try to counter the blowback from an earlier failed experiment in bioengineering). The rights and the memories of the Miranda settlers were similarly quashed in the search for better regulation of biological life.

Around the issue of life itself we see the Janus faces of the Alliance: the promise of life and quality of life in 'comfort and enlightenment of true civilization' versus the no-holds-barred ruthlessness of the Parliamentary Operative (in name seemingly a guardian of democracy) who views Alliance citizens, even high-level scientists and men of god, as expendable in the name of the greater need of the Alliance. Like the sovereign, and many national security agents, he is in the paradoxical position of using illegal and undemocratic means in the name of democratic rule of law. Recall what the Operative says in a wave conversation with Mal (who is on Haven after discovering the dead and dying there, including Shepherd Book). The conversation is shocking in the way that it clearly illustrates this paradox of sovereignty and preoccupation with bare life:

*Mal:* I don't murder children.

*Operative:* I do, if I have to.

*Mal:* Why? Do you even know why they send you?

- Operative:* It's not my place to ask. I believe in something greater than myself. A better world, a world without sin.
- Mal:* So me and mine gotta lay down and die so you can live in your better world?
- Operative:* I'm not going to live there. There's no place for me there, any more than there is for you. Malcolm, I'm a monster. What I do is evil, I have no illusions about it but it must be done . . . Every minute that you keep River Tam from me more people will die.
- Mal:* You think I care?
- Operative:* Of course you care. You're not a Reaver, Mal, you're a human man and you will never understand how (Mal turns off transmission).

Perhaps the Operative is especially self-aware, a noble foe to confront Mal, but it is interesting how he presents such a direct belief that his actions are thoroughly evil (making an identity between himself and the Reavers) but at the same time absolutely necessary to the survival and flourishing of a just society 'without sin' (he, too, is looking for the gnostic escape from the human condition, it would seem). The Operative is the monstrous face of the Alliance, but his existence and rhetoric are justified by the civilized and humane face that is its other visage. In the Operative's speech, as in Agamben's quote, democracy and totalitarianism readily flow back and forth into one another.

# RELIGION AND MORALITY





# 12. 'I Do Not Hold to That'

Joss Whedon and Original Sin

RHONDA V. WILCOX

Stories are made of other stories. (Joss Whedon, *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion*, 30)

What some people consider 'sin,' I consider human characteristics. (Joss Whedon, *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion*, 20)

The first words of the movie *Serenity* are 'Earth that was . . .,' words that seem to refer to a post-utopian, post-lapsarian past time, a paradise lost. These words seem at first to be—and at first are—those of a voiceover narration helping to establish the mythos of a science fiction world. But the film soon shows us that they are the words of a character establishing a myth, a teacher voicing the story of the State, the government—in this case, the Alliance. As she speaks about the new worlds they have conquered after having lost Earth-That-Was and the benefits of civilization brought to the rebellious outer planets, she is interrupted by the voices of her young students, telling stories of monsters of the deeps of space, stories like urban legends. We thus have two competing myths: civilization versus the monsters, called the Reavers. The teacher stops their excited chatter. When she asks why anyone would resist the Alliance and civilization, one of her students, River Tam, moves from myth to analysis: 'People don't like to be meddled with. . . . We're in their homes, and in their heads, and we haven't the right.' In fact, someone is in *her* head: this is all just River's dream, and her mind holds both myths, of civilization and of savagery, both of which we will later learn to be partly false and partly true. The teacher tells her, 'River, we're not telling people what to

think. We're just trying to show them how,' a standard pedagogical line which many viewers presumably recognize. Whether or not this line partakes of myth is certainly brought into question by the teacher's next action: she takes the pencil River has been tapping—River's own writing instrument—and plunges it directly into River's forehead. The pencil in the brain is a ghastly image of the teacher taking control of the story-telling tool.<sup>1</sup>

We immediately cut from the child River to the adolescent River in a grim laboratory, a needle plunging into her head—one more instrument of mental manipulation. And there is a further fictional step when we realize that River's time in the lab—during which we see her rescued by her physician brother—in fact is a holographic projection, a security recording that is being viewed by an Alliance operative. By this point audience members realize that, like River, we cannot be sure of what we see. How many myths are there in this story?

Joss Whedon, the creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *Angel* (1999–2004), *Firefly*, and *Serenity*, is someone who makes myths and unmakes them, or remakes them. Scholars such as Greg Stevenson, in *Televised Morality*, and Jana Riess, in *What Would Buffy Do?*, have already made clear that Whedon, though he is himself an atheist, feels no hesitation about working with Christian symbolism to explore a moral point. Redemption is the religious theme scholars most often have identified in Whedon's work. But he also repeatedly grapples with the idea of Original Sin. As I have argued in *Why Buffy Matters*, in the two-part 'Surprise'/Innocence,' (2.13–14), he contests the idea of woman as Eve or Pandora, the sexual creature who brings the failure of the flesh. In 'Amends' (3.10) and later, throughout Season Seven, he has Buffy struggle against that same idea of the 'Dirty Girls' (7.18). If Original Sin can represent not only religious but also psychological and political meaning, then Whedon suggests that we must accept both the Id<sup>2</sup> and the Other<sup>3</sup> in order to have a full existence. Thus in one sense he repudiates the story of Original Sin—the traditional patriarchal blaming of the flesh-woman for the ills of all;<sup>4</sup> but in another sense he embraces it: humans do have a dark side, and in balance with the light it is part of the engine of life.

The Genesis story of the Fall, later called Original Sin, is, of course, multifaceted in significance and interpretation. The story of Adam and Eve's response to the tempting snake and their covering their nakedness with fig leaves is indeed a myth to acknowledge sexuality. But it is just as much a myth about knowledge—coming to full

consciousness—and thus to full personhood. Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good *and* evil. And once they attain moral consciousness, they also know death: in being expelled from the garden, they are being separated from the tree of life.<sup>5</sup>

If *Buffy* deals primarily with the element of sex in the myth of Original Sin, *Firefly/Serenity* deal with the elements of knowledge and consciousness, knowledge and personhood. *Serenity* focuses particularly on River, the brilliant, graceful young woman whose mind has been experimented on by Alliance scientists so that she emerges as a psychic and a preternaturally effective fighter; as Whedon says, 'Apparently I can't ever write anything without an adolescent girl with superpowers' (*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 16). When we meet River, however, she has been badly damaged emotionally and mentally by the torturous experiments she has suffered. At first she seems simply the victim: when we first see her, she has suffered neural stripping and is as naked as Adam or Eve; and she is unconscious. She is completely vulnerable. She is protected by her brother Simon, who has given up a fortune and a surgical career to rescue her. But soon we glimpse her unearthly skill with a gun and her ability to read minds—in each case, in a context of protecting others: her shipmates in a fight, a traumatized child. She is benevolent but unnerving, especially because she is not in control of her own 'fractured' mind (Whedon's term, *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 27). As Whedon says, 'She is the monster. She is the damsel. She is the action hero' (33).

One of the most significant of the *Firefly* episodes for River is 'Objects in Space' (1.14), written and directed by Whedon. In this episode a bounty hunter, Jubal Early, pursues River, who at this point seems to be a weapon highly valued by the Alliance, that bastion of civilization which has in the past supported wealthy families like the Tams while literally destroying the worlds of rebels who refuse their control, such as *Serenity's* Captain Malcolm Reynolds and his first mate Zoe Washburne. The bounty hunter who pursues River is himself curiously philosophical, skilled, and intuitive (as Whedon comments) almost to the point of being psychic—and psychotic; in other words, he is very like River. The overarching difference is that she, even in her fractured state, is benevolent (thus, for example, when she lifts a gun from the floor, she visualizes it as the branch of a tree), while he is sadistic, as she points out to him in recalling what he did to a neighbor's dog. And there are few more horrifying scenes than the one in which he threatens to rape *Serenity's* young engineer Kaylee if she resists him. Yet he is

able to see himself as logical: he shoots Simon, having explained that surgeons should experience wounds just as psychiatrists go through psychoanalysis: 'insane troll logic,' as *Buffy's* Xander might say.

As Whedon explains in the commentary, Early allows us to learn something about each of those on board the ship, by their reaction to him—and his to them. At the beginning of the episode, they are discussing their new knowledge of River's weapons ability and her unstable mental condition, discussing whether or not she should stay on board. By the end of the episode, she is literally floating through space down into the welcoming arms of the captain, as she returns from Early's Boba Fett-like vessel, having engineered his departure into the emptiness that so suits him. 'Objects in Space' seems to be a precapitulation of *Serenity* in many ways. Certainly the character of Early anticipates the film character of the nameless Alliance Operative who relentlessly seeks River: both are extraordinarily skilled men who speak in an extremely polished fashion with great confidence and purpose, and yet are willing to kill without hesitation in their pursuit. (Of their differences, more later.) This pattern continues as River is pivotal, in both 'Objects' and *Serenity*, in saving the lives of the *Serenity* crew (or most of them), and she seems to progress in terms of mental/emotional stability in both stories; near the end of 'Objects,' she beams as she asks the captain for 'permission to come aboard,' and by the end of *Serenity* she is helping him pilot the ship.

Furthermore, 'Objects,' like the film, is a story Whedon unquestionably used for spiritual, intellectual, and philosophical exploration—non-Christian existentialism. Whedon uses much of the commentary to recall his own experience of existentialism (in particular, Sartre's *Nausea*) at River's age. He focuses on the emptiness of the physical, of 'objects in space'—from the multicolored world we see in the flash of the episode's opening to the multicolored ball with which Kaylee and River play jacks at the end, a mirroring that Whedon notes. He ponders the overwhelming fact of their existence and the overwhelming fact of our ability to imbue them with meaning. This imbuing an object with meaning is vividly represented during the part of the episode when River claims to have become the ship *Serenity*—and in this science fiction world, she may have. Even when this turns out not to be literally true, still her benevolent nature, as she claims to be the ship, represents the meaning with which that ship is imbued by its crew and regular passengers. As Whedon says in his commentary, objects 'do have meaning and it's the meaning we bring

to them and that’s what makes us so extraordinary.’ Agnes Curry, in ‘Is Joss Becoming a Thomist?’, and Lyle Zynda talk about this episode in terms of existential choice.<sup>6</sup> Whedon puts the idea of consciousness entailing choice into a spiritual context with his commentary: ‘It’s mind-boggling . . . I believe that whether you have faith or not, to think about consciousness . . . our ability to . . . imbue [objects] with meaning . . . [River] imbues [things] with a kindness.’

‘Objects in Space,’ then, pre capitulates *Serenity*, not just because it includes a dark hunter who pursues and reflects River, but also because it focuses on consciousness and choice in a spiritual and philosophical context. We choose the stories through which we make our world’s meaning. One of the most enjoyable aspects of exploring a creator’s oeuvre is discovering the variations on a theme that almost invariably appear in the work of a thoughtful artist. The variation on this theme of consciousness and choice moves from existentialism in ‘Objects’ to the vehicle of Original Sin in *Serenity*. And Whedon changes the traditional terms of the myth: in *Serenity*, a world *without* sin is shown to be a world of death.

*Serenity* treats consciousness and personhood through several accentuated visual images: the merging of the faces of River and the Operative, the close-up of River whispering the word ‘Miranda,’ and the image of River floating in space above a planet. Each of these visuals helps carry the theme.

The first image comes at the end of the scenes described in my introduction, with their repeated re-sets of the point of view. We realize that River and Simon’s escape is being presented to us as a holographic recording when we hear a voice say ‘Stop—backtrack,’ and the images do so. I remember being struck by the fact that, as he walks through the holograph, the Operative’s face first appears coming *through* River’s: his face is briefly hers. He, too, has been manipulated in his beliefs and his understanding of self, though not so obviously as River. He has no name; he is selfless; as he says of the lab which has operated on her, ‘Like this facility, I don’t exist.’ And in the commentary, Whedon says,

One of the first images that occurred to me was him coming through the holograph . . . so that his eyes come right through hers; his connection to her is something very important to me thematically . . . I was always interested in that connection because he is so intuitive—almost psychic himself—he has a lot in common with River.

Whedon's commentaries on the Operative and Jubal Early are clearly similar. The Operative is 'a perfect product of the Alliance—or, rather, what's wrong with the Alliance . . . He is reasonable, understanding, and in his own way very honorable.' But Whedon also says that, like River, 'He is in fact not entirely well.' The Operative is also the one who introduces the idea of sin into the story. For each character he kills, he asks, 'Do you know what your sin is?'—as if to justify to himself his killing of the person.<sup>7</sup> Death is the wages of sin; mortality is the consequence of Original Sin. The Operative does not even see himself as worthy of the perfect world he is trying to create, but his selflessness means that he ultimately has no respect for any other self, any other individual consciousness. And this religiously-toned, Aeneas-like devotion to the State is something he identifies with civilization, specifically Roman civilization: he arranges for those who get in the way of his pursuit of River—or indeed, anyone along the way whom he finds wanting—to die by falling on their own swords. But while such Roman deaths could be seen as chosen, the Operative's version is a mockery of choice: he physically damages his victims and then positions them above his sword placed on the ground so that they fall, unwilling, to their deaths. The Operative's interpretation of sin and selflessness is similarly a movement towards death, rather than towards freedom and consciousness. Just as River's teacher's claim to enable students to *think* really cloaks a plan to shape their thinking, so too the Operative's belief that he is morally superior reflects the training, the shaping of his Alliance masters who have denuded him of name and self, as they wished to denude River. In the end of the story, acknowledging that Captain Mal Reynolds is right, the Operative also acknowledges that he is nothing but 'a shadow' himself. He is one of many foils for the physically very present, bare-feet-to-earth River.

He has been a weapon, and the Alliance wish River to be nothing more than that, certainly not a creature conscious of the mind/body of self. In the movie we first see her powers as a weapon in the scene that introduces the next image I examine. The crew have landed on a planet intending to fence their stolen goods, and they visit a bar to do so. The psychologically modified River is triggered to violence by a signal sent out over many screens by the Alliance—one being in this bar. The moment of her triggering is shot in distinct, pale light as the room (in her mind and in the theater) goes silent. The camera focuses on her lips as she whispers one word: 'Miranda.' The shot recalls a very famous cinematic image from the film many think of as the

greatest piece of American cinema, *Citizen Kane* (1941). Early in that film, the camera focuses on the lips of the aged Charles Foster Kane as he whispers the word 'Rosebud,' and much of the film focuses on the search to discover the meaning of that word. Similarly, here we do not know the meaning of the word 'Miranda,' and the crew sets out on a quest to discover its meaning. In *Citizen Kane*, 'Rosebud' is connected with death as it is the protagonist's dying word; in *Serenity*, 'Miranda' is here possibly connected with death, since some of those River mindlessly attacked in the tavern may have died; at least it is connected with destruction. In *Citizen Kane*, we finally learn that 'Rosebud' is the name of the sled the boy Charles Foster Kane was playing with before he was taken from his mother and father; it is a signifier of his loss of a normal childhood, and thus of his psychological shaping—a theme clearly relevant to the current subject of discussion. (And note the biblical pun of Cain/Kane.) If Charles Foster Kane was an extraordinary person strangely shaped by his upbringing, certainly River is even more so. Since (unlike Kane) she still lives, discovering the truth about the shaping of her consciousness will allow her to reclaim her consciousness. When she learns the secret behind the term 'Miranda,' she *does* come to herself. Susan Swinford has said that the moment when River vomits on learning the truth represents 'externalizing the truth'; it is an ugly truth, and she expels it from within her, thus reclaiming her own health and self. In a way, both *Citizen Kane* and *Serenity* thus seem to endorse the view underlying much psychoanalysis: that knowing the truth about the past can help you reclaim yourself, your own consciousness, your story.

I will later return to the secret of Miranda but first want to continue exploring this initial 'Miranda moment.' The name Miranda suggests Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (see Chapter 10). In his commentary, Whedon says, 'I'm talking about *The Tempest* and her famous line "O brave new world that has such people in it."' Her father Prospero's response is 'Tis new to thee,' emphasizing her lack of worldly knowledge (5.1.184–5). Miranda is the exemplar of young innocence: she has been brought up on an island, away from the world, with no other human but her father. She says her famous line during the announcement of her betrothal to a handsome shipwrecked prince, and the story is in part about her coming to adult consciousness, both in terms of knowledge of the world and sexuality. The bar in which River first whispers 'Miranda' has a name of Shakespearean antiquity, the Maidenhead: the Virginitv tavern. There could hardly be a more



meaning-laden name, in the bar where engineer Kaylee says, 'A year now, I ain't had nothing twixt my nethers weren't run on batteries.' Miranda is a famous exemplar of virginity—physical and mental innocence—a condition applicable to River in spite of the violence she does when triggered by the controlling Alliance (the result, as Tanya Cochran says, of neurological penetration). Shakespeare's Miranda healthily grows and changes, and River will also flow forward. The secret meaning of 'Miranda' for the Alliance, however, is of an unchanging world, and that means death—of which, more later. But for now, let me note that the close-up image of River's lips whispering 'Miranda' evokes both Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* and Shakespeare's *Tempest* to thematic purpose regarding innocence and the claiming of consciousness.

The third image I wish to discuss comes later in the film, after Mal has told Simon, in response to the damage River has wreaked in the Maidenhead, 'you've got some storytellin' to do.' Their story is a variation on the myth of the 'Fall from innocence'—two wealthy, intelligent, talented, happy people who come to knowledge of a darker side of the world in their own sort of 'Fall.' While Mal, Simon, and the others try to decide what to do, River dreams again—of her teacher, of being barefoot under the white tent surrounded by rich vegetation, a garden-like place of seeming purity. She focuses on a computer screen of moving notations, characters, and we see planets in alignment, recalling an image from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Then we see, encased in the ovoid shape of the computer screen, River's head floating planet-size in the sky above a planet. The image recalls the scene at the end of *2001* when the star-child hangs in the sky. Even the choral music used at this point in *Serenity* echoes the Ligeti music from *2001*. Once again we have a thematically significant image: the star-child and River, both presented as innocents before the time of full consciousness. It is also worth noting that, looming as large as they do, both seem frighteningly powerful as they unconsciously drift towards knowledge. It is at this point in *Serenity* that we cut to an image of dead bodies, followed by the attack of a Reaver—and River awakens. (And yes, the girl's name sounds like the name of the monsters: 'She is the monster; she is the damsel,' *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 33.)

Shortly after, she and Mal confront each other. In response to her dream of the aligning planets, she must locate Miranda—not a person but a 'brave new world'—and definitely more Huxley than Shakespeare. Mal at first does not know what she's doing; she holds a

gun on him, but he points out to her, ‘I staked my crew’s life [he does not mention his own] on the theory that you’re a person.’ She needs to claim her own mind to be that person, and to claim her mind she has to know the true story.

They discover the story of the savage Reavers’ origins on the planet with the innocent name Miranda. It is in the center of Reaver territory. The Operative pursues them, killing their friends as he goes; he even kills their former shipmate the preacher man with the mysterious past, Shepherd Book—a man whose name is all about telling the right story. When Mal tries to bluff the Operative, the Operative says he knows that Mal cares about the deaths he’s caused because ‘You’re not a Reaver, Mal.’ This comment gives Mal the idea to use the dead to disguise their ship as a Reaver vessel. In effect, he makes their deaths meaningful, makes their deaths fight for the truth.

But the Operative’s comment is thematically significant as well. Mal is not a Reaver, but he might have been. The Reavers were normal people. On the planet Miranda another Alliance experiment has taken place. A holographic recording tells the tale. One may momentarily think the speaker refers to the Pax Romana or the similar peace enforced by the Alliance, and she does refer to its results, but Pax here is an abbreviation: ‘It’s the Pax, the G-32 Paxilon Hydrochlorate that we added to the air processors. It was supposed to calm the population, weed out aggression . . . It worked. The people here stopped fighting. And then they stopped everything else. They stopped going to work, stopped breeding . . . talking . . . eating.’ The engine of life stopped. And while the majority of the population simply let themselves die—following the directions of the teacher in River’s dream who keeps telling her to ‘lie down’—on the other hand a fraction of a percent of the population reacted in the opposite way, becoming insanelly aggressive, becoming Reavers. The monsters are simply people reacting to the treatment of a government which thinks it knows enough about humanity to ‘meddle,’ as River has said. When Mal later confronts the Operative once more, he strikes him in the throat at the climax of their battle, preventing the Operative from saying the world as he sees it, from telling his government myth. Instead Mal forces him to experience another version of the world as he plays the recording from Miranda, the story of the world named after innocence, an artificial innocence—the story of a world of death. As he starts the recording, he tells the Operative, ‘I’m gonna grant your greatest wish. I’m gonna show you a world without sin,’ the line Whedon, in his commentary,

calls the most important in the movie. As many have noted, the name Mal means wickedness, badness, sin; and Mal comes from the planet Shadow ('Our Mrs. Reynolds,' 1.6). But as Whedon says, 'What some people consider "sin," I consider human characteristics.' Mal is the fully human person—flawed and whole, the person never fully at peace because he is truly conscious. Augustine blamed concupiscence as Original Sin; but in Sharon MacIsaac's *Freud and Original Sin*, we can see what Whedon calls human characteristics: 'Concupiscence . . . is . . . the indeliberate act of desire, springing from the very dynamics of man's [sic] nature . . . Every human being must have concupiscence in this sense; absence of it would spell paralysis of the will' (105), the horror of Miranda's dead.

*Serenity* is not, of course, the only science fiction that reworks the story of Original Sin. *Star Trek* (1966–9), for instance (which Whedon often contrasts to his fictional universes) has a clear parallel in 'This Side of Paradise' (1.24), in which colonists and the crew find themselves peacefully unproductive until Captain Kirk awakens them to action once more through 'violent emotions' (specifically, wrath), asserting that humanity is now leaving Paradise by choice. A variant is lightly touched on in the Espenson *Buffy* episode 'Storyteller' (7.16) in which Andrew, Cain-like, murders Jonathan because 'we shall live as gods' (cf. Genesis 3:5), as Adam and Eve were promised. More significant for this discussion is the multi-episode story of Jasmine in Whedon's *Angel*. Jasmine (Gina Torres) is an incarnate goddess who brings unutterable peace and loving understanding among all those she touches, but their will is hers (cf. Richardson and Rabb 147–9). Winifred Burkle is the woman who manages to return humanity to anger, misery—and free will. We must always leave Eden. Jasmine, the too-sweet flower in the garden, is finally destroyed when Angel says her true name. The name, the words, the story, the myth—these let us make our own meaning.

Whedon's Captain Mal, with his fondness for the sin of wrath, does not simply hear the new story, but takes up the responsibility of spreading it. In my opening I describe the beginning of the movie, in which two stories, two ways of seeing the world, compete: the government teacher's story of civilization and control and the students' story of savagery and monsters. They are, in fact, two facets of the same story—a more complex story—the whole of which Mal and the rest of *Serenity*'s crew are determined to tell. 'Somebody has to speak for these people,' he says. And it is not just for the sake of

those who became Reavers, or for those who let themselves die, but also for others in the future: as Mal says of the Alliance, 'As sure as I know anything, I know this: They will try again. Maybe on another world, maybe on this very ground . . . A year from now, ten, they'll swing back to the belief that they can make people . . . better. And I do not hold to that. So no more running. I aim to misbehave.' The Alliance believes they can change human nature, that they can ignore, rather than rewrite, the story of Original Sin. The word 'misbehave' is a term that might be applied to children. Mal's use of it undercuts the attitude of government types, represented by the soothing voice of River's teacher, types who condescend to those they perceive as foolish in their rebelliousness. But this 'misbehavior' is a recognition of adult human nature—'human characteristics,' as Whedon calls it. Swinford argues that 'The greater truth of the movie is that there is no good and evil,' but I disagree. Whedon himself notes that there are many good things about the Alliance (in 'Future History'), but what they have done to the Reavers is clearly not good. As Jayne says, 'Eating people alive? Where does that get fun?' And telling the truth about what has happened on Miranda is just as clearly presented as a good in the story, in spite of the loss of life involved.

Repeatedly in the film reference is made to 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.' Both Brandy Ball and Deborah Monroy have noted the comparison of River to the albatross of Coleridge's narrative poem. The Operative tries to warn Mal away from River by calling her the albatross around his neck. But as Mal says, 'Way I remember it, albatross was a ship's good luck . . . till some idiot killed it,' and to Inara he says, 'Yes, I've read a poem. Try not to faint,' emphasizing the story that has become part of his. In the closing scene of the film, ensconced on his own ship, he refers to the story of that other mariner again: 'Little Albatross,' he calls the well-read River to her face. For those unfamiliar with the poem, it is not just a story of luck: it is a story of sin. The mariner of the title, divorced from feeling, casually kills another living creature. While the Operative or other members of the Alliance may feel some civilized regret, they are still willing to kill for their own agenda. The terms of the poem suggest that the mariner's sin, like Original Sin, represents the wrongdoing of all humanity (for which Jesus will later pay): 'By him who died on cross / With his cruel bow he laid full low / the harmless albatross' (399–401). It is only when he respects and feels for his fellow living creatures that he is able to begin to recover from his sin: 'He prayeth well who loveth well /

Both man and bird and beast' (612–13). Coleridge makes a curious choice in bringing the mariner to this recognition: the living creatures of nature which he sees, loves, and blesses, are snakes—water-snakes. Given that the snake is certainly connected in the Adam and Eve story with the idea of sin, Coleridge's choice may suggest the mariner's acceptance of his own connection to the sinful. It is a recommendation for spiritual humility that Mal and his crew share, and which the Operative does not understand until the end. Coleridge's poem has a clear recommendation for the mariner's method of dealing with his experience: he must tell his story over and over. Similarly, as Ball notes, Mal and the *Serenity* crew take as their highest calling the need to tell the story of Miranda, the story of the Reavers—the story of frozen, dead innocence and living, mad aggression. One difference between Coleridge's story and Whedon's is that Coleridge's mariner is compelled to tell the story, whereas Whedon's shipmates fight—in some cases give their lives—to tell this truth. 'Can't stop the signal,' as Mr. Universe says. In traditional Jewish teaching of Genesis 3, 'Eden represents the loss of childhood and the movement toward adulthood . . . questioning authority . . . learning about responsibility' (Goodman 85). Mal and his crew certainly have questioned authority and taken responsibility in telling River's truth.<sup>8</sup>

Mal and River: 'sin' and ever-flowing change. When she knows the story of Miranda, River knows herself; in fighting to tell it, Mal learns who he is—as, in some sense, do all those who join him (on or in front of the screen). Of the 'world without sin,' Whedon tells us 'the film is really about something. It's about the right to be wrong'—in other words, free will, another element of the Fall. He adds, 'Sin is just what people *are*—it's been codified, it's been given a name—but all those things we take as faults are also the source of pleasure and decency.' How many ways can the story of the Fall be read? In the lovingly flawed world of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, Whedon has given us another way to name our natures, another story to tell ourselves—in all the senses the phrasing bears. Perhaps most importantly, this story tells us we must struggle to choose our own myths. And if *Serenity* tells of a loss of paradise, it is paradise well lost; it is a fortunate Fall.

# 13. Humanity in a ‘Place of Nothin’

Morality, Religion, Atheism, and Possibility  
in *Firefly*

GREGORY ERICKSON

*The fall into space*

The opening and closing scenes of the television series *Firefly* present images of a human search for meaning in a cruel world seemingly devoid of direction or divine guidance. The first minutes of the pilot episode depict Sergeant Malcolm Reynolds and a group of his rebel soldiers suffering a crushing defeat at the hands of the powerful Alliance. The final shot of the series shows a defeated bounty hunter floating to his inevitable death in the vast emptiness of space, ironically commenting to himself, ‘Well, here I am.’ The series is framed by these two defining moments—the first a realization of true hopelessness, and the last a recognition of what Martin Heidegger<sup>1</sup> calls the ‘throwness,’ the random brute facticity, of the human condition—and explores, through humor, drama, tragedy, irony, and imagery, multiple reactions to the meaninglessness of the human condition. But while the attempt to create meaning out of blackness or empty space may be an existential quest, it is not necessarily an atheistic or impossible one. Like the bounty hunter floating in space or Mal staring numbly at the descending Alliance ships, life on *Firefly* appears—sometimes—as nothing but blackness. However, as we will see throughout the series, life does contain flickers of hope and meaning, moments that often paradoxically come flush up against (and often resist) ideas of the religious or the ethical, often through reinterpretations of the very idea of space as nothing or blackness.

*Firefly*, as creator Joss Whedon describes it, is about ‘nine people looking into the blackness of space and seeing nine different things,’ or as writer Jane Espenson explains, ‘about what it means to be human in a world where no obvious rewards await the virtuous’ (2). Whedon originally pitched the show to the Fox network as ‘depression in space’ (‘Serenity’ DVD commentary) and the word *space* is most revealing here if we expand the meaning beyond ‘outer space.’ Space suggests an empty container, a vacuum, or an emptiness that can be seen either as destructive blackness or as possibility—as a black hole or an empty canvas. I will primarily focus on four episodes—‘Serenity’ (1.1), ‘The Train Job’ (1.2), ‘Bushwhacked’ (1.3), and ‘Jaynestown’ (1.7)—where faith, morality, and religion are interwoven in contradictory and revealing ways that question the idea of what it is to be human and explore the possibilities of creating meaning within a space of nothingness.

The world of *Firefly* is in many ways completely recognizable. The show’s depictions of the abuse of power and the subjection and alienation of marginalized populations are only slightly more extreme examples of current human and social conditions. Religion also appears to have changed very little in the years since the twenty-first century. While there is some evidence of East–West fusion (e.g. references to the Buddha), we still see a largely Judeo-Christian sensibility that has a concept of sin and damnation, a masculine image of a monotheistic God, priests, monks and abbeys, a definitive Bible, crosses, and marginalized fundamentalist sects. While these religious signifiers are generally presented without comment, much of the show’s dramatic tension comes from characters balancing personal survival with their sense of ethical behavior and loyalty to traditional religious practices and beliefs.

By establishing extreme versions of familiar situations, and by constantly foregrounding conflicting views of ethical and belief systems, *Firefly* continually forces us to address contemporary questions: What is the relationship between religion and ethics? What is the point of ritual in an apparently meaningless world? Is there a future for the idea of a ‘sacred text’? As digital, biological, medical, and cybernetic technology expands our definitions of ‘human,’ how will we define ourselves? In the first half of the twenty-first century perhaps the two most crucial philosophical and intellectual challenges will be theorizing the surprising persistence of religious faith and defining what it means to be ‘human.’ These two issues are in many

ways closely related, cannot be understood apart from each other, and are central tensions within the world of *Firefly*.

Perhaps more than texts of science, theology, or philosophy, it is literary narrative, and works of fantasy and science fiction in particular, that are the ideal texts to negotiate possible ways of understanding the complexities of defining the human. For theologian Elaine Graham, the cultural purpose of science fiction is to explore 'the blurring and interpretation of boundaries' as well as the 'uncharted extremities of humanity, nature, and artifice' (60). *Firefly* problematizes all of these, demonstrating the impossibility of satisfactory answers, and also offers some tentative suggestions for their negotiation. Unlike earlier science fiction dramas like *Star Trek* (1966–9), which tend to respond to ethical questions with solid and 'logical' solutions based in an absolute sense of human goodness and a belief in right and wrong,<sup>2</sup> *Firefly* explores through misdirection, confusion, and paradox: there is never a clear path, an absolute answer. Only by peeking into our own darkness and continuing to try to think or do the 'impossible' are these questions and issues able to be usefully addressed.

### *'Serenity' and 'The Train Job': Two pilots, two paths, many truths*

As fans know, *Firefly* has essentially two pilot episodes. The first, the two-hour 'Serenity,' was rejected by the network as too slow, too dark, too depressing. A second episode, 'The Train Job,' was then quickly written and had to function as a pilot, giving background information and introducing characters, all the while compromising the original concept by creating a more cheerful show and a 'jollier' Malcolm (or as Whedon remarks on the DVD commentary, Mal's 'uncompromising character . . . which we compromised on'). But rather than just denouncing the evil network, or pointing to the quality difference or conceptual gaps between the two versions,<sup>3</sup> by modeling our readings on recent biblical criticism,<sup>4</sup> we can see these two versions not as contradictory, but as portraying a more nuanced and plural story. In other words, whatever the extenuating circumstances were that resulted in two somewhat incompatible beginnings, acknowledging the complexity of separate sources and incompatible versions can result in a richer, more complex, text.

Like the two versions of the David story in the Hebrew Bible where David is introduced as both a shy sensitive shepherd who plays music



and as an arrogant charismatic leader who announces to Goliath, 'I will strike you down and cut off your head' before he slays him, we can see the pilot episodes as presenting two different sides of Mal's personality and the show's aesthetic. Like the Gospels that present a Christ crucified on both Passover (Mark) and the day before Passover (John), giving us a Jesus that can attend a last Passover supper and also symbolize the lambs killed in preparation for that very meal, the two pilots give us a Malcolm that is both embittered and misanthropic and curmudgeonly charitable. *Firefly* is pessimistic and hopeful, depressing and uplifting, religious and atheistic. This logic of both/and rather than of either/or points to the theme of plurality and a type of mental organization whereby seemingly contradictory information works not to negate, but to present non-linear, anti-narrative, non-metaphysical, and multiple positions.

The original pilot, an episode that begins with the loss of faith and life on a battlefield and ends with a prostitute blessing a monk, and 'The Train Job' set up the ideological tensions of the series through presenting contesting and dialectical philosophical positions, most obviously represented by the contrast between Malcolm Reynolds and Shepherd Book. The ideological clash between Mal and Book points to, on one hand, the dichotomy of pragmatism versus faith, and, on the other, demonstrates how each view is limited.

'Serenity' presents the framework of the arc for both Book and Mal, arcs that entail personal confrontations with their belief systems and with their relationship to religion and ethics, neither of which, in the context of the show, can be shown to offer a satisfactory path. In the opening battle scene, Mal represents the ideal of a charismatic, supportive, and spiritual leader: he exhorts his troops, 'we've done the impossible and that makes us mighty'; he kisses a cross for luck; he tells a frightened soldier that they are 'too pretty for God to let us die'; and he refers to their coming air support as 'angels.' When the support never comes and the troops are advised to surrender, enemy Alliance ships descend into the valley, and a stunned Mal stares uncomprehendingly, not even noticing as the man standing next to him is killed. In this moment, Mal's vision of optimism and faith seems to have dissolved; his trust in man and God disappears. In a version of the scene that was not used, Zoe says, 'Are we really getting out? Thank God,' to which Mal responds, 'God? Whose color is he flying?' Although expressing differently placed skepticism, both versions of the scene present an embracing and then rejection of God, a giving and taking away of any

guarantee of meaningfulness. The speed with which Mal moves from belief to doubt demonstrates that the line between these paths is thin: they are opposite sides of the same coin, different points along the same continuum.

The next scene jumps forward six years where the first image is of a space-walking, upside-down Malcolm setting charges to an abandoned ship to perform an illegal salvage operation. The abrupt cut to Mal upside down, of course, symbolizes the state of his world since the war's end. More suggestive, however, is to realize that there is no upside down in space—no reference point, no ground, no horizon. It is only a matter of perspective. The rest of the episode emphasizes Mal's 'fallenness' from any concept of God or divine nature, especially through a contrast to Book, who has left an abbey to board the ship. Book, although not without his mysterious dark side, in many ways is presented as a traditional religious figure. He is often seen carrying his Bible and represents what seems to be a solid moral presence and voice of compassion amongst what will be chaotic and cruel situations.

Although Mal makes a point of respecting the Shepherd's presence on the ship, he dismisses any religious role that Book might play, telling him, 'If I'm your mission, Shepherd, best give it up. You're welcome on my boat. God ain't' ('The Train Job'). Yet even this characteristic dismissal raises interesting questions. Mal, as becomes clear throughout the series, believes in a strong code of right and wrong. But what standard of ethics does Mal believe in and where does it come from? What God is it who is not welcome on 'his boat'? At the end of 'The Train Job,' as he and Zoe return much-needed stolen medical supplies, Mal insists there are certain moral situations when man doesn't have a choice; he must do what's 'right.' When a sheriff in 'The Train Job' tells Mal that sometimes a man has a choice, Mal implies a sense of absolute right and wrong: 'I don't believe he does.' The word 'believe' is central here. Mal's ethical system seems to be both fluid and uncompromising, yet it comes from a belief, or at least a desire to believe, in *something*. Literally and metaphorically floating in space, Mal wants an anchor, wants to believe in a world that is either upside down or right side up, wrong or right.

What does it mean to say, 'I believe'? I believe in God? I believe in the goodness of Man? I believe in Reavers? How does belief relate to knowledge? The phrase 'I know that God exists' can be read as an affirmation of just the opposite. If one knows, then God becomes part of the empirical world, an entity that can be perceived sensually, and

therefore is not, by most definitions, God. The statement 'I believe in God,' or 'I believe in right and wrong,' is an ambiguous and subversive statement that admits simultaneous possibilities and impossibilities, presence and absence. Although Mal claims no allegiance to God, he does perhaps base his codes of behavior on traditional belief systems, seemingly even beliefs he once held. As anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss would put it, and as we will see demonstrated in later episodes like 'Jaynestown,' the structure of belief remains after the faith is gone; it is a present absence.

Mal's paradoxical ways of seeing and creating meaning are revealed in two comments from 'Serenity.' Early in the episode, he remarks that he likes complexities because 'the woods are the only place I can see a clear path.' Yet later when they have escaped their brush with Reavers, he announces to the crew 'we're out of the woods.' These directly contradicting statements suggest the ambiguity between the appearance of a clear, right path and the opposing idea of clarity only within multiplicity or chaos. The second idea sees chaos not as error but as a way to see 'meaning' through misdirection and confusion. The metaphor of a 'path' to meaning is perhaps a misleading one, as it suggests images of straight lines and clear vision, a clarity that is subverted by the visual style of the show. There are few straight lines, absolute boundaries, framed images, or black and white areas, visually or morally. Mal's clear path through the woods is an apt description of the show's indirect approach to questions of understanding concepts like 'right' and 'God.'

Although in some ways presented as oppositional, both Mal and Book are contained by linear and modernist assumptions that still dominate our late Enlightenment thinking, and that survive, partly, because of the persistence of traditional monotheistic thinking. Mal may reject God, but it is a very specific God he denies, and in his denial he still maintains the hierarchical structures of monotheism. Mal replaces God with man, but merely transfers the attributes of the divine to the human. He denies God, but fails to rewrite the book. Book, as well, perhaps fails to rewrite his book—a book that still has an end, that still progresses from Genesis to Apocalypse, from Fall to Paradise. If we can say with Jacques Derrida that the 'idea of the book is the idea of a totality' (18), then the idea of a totally autonomous book represents a single unified God, and, as his name suggests, Book's faith also translates to the belief in a single definable and unified self, all assumptions of unity that the show calls into question.

*'Bushwhacked' and the idea of nothing*

In our virtual world where fact and fiction are no longer seen as clear opposites, thinkers like Elaine Graham find monsters crucial in how we define ourselves and our relationship to the ideas of human, posthuman, and the divine. It is monster myths, the 'stories we live by,' as Graham writes, that will be critical tools in determining what it means to be human in the new digital and biotechnological age (17). For Graham, 'Monsters have a double function . . . simultaneously marking the boundaries between the normal and the pathological but also exposing the fragility of the very taken-for-grantedness of such categories' (39). This role has been taken on in recent years by figures such as the replicants in *Blade Runner* (1982), the Borg in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–94), the Cylons in *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–present), and the Reavers in *Firefly*.

'Bushwhacked' is the episode that most vividly presents the idea of the monstrous Reavers and is one of the most concentrated philosophical explorations in the series, contemplating the concept of nothingness and how that pertains to ideas of what makes us human. Graham writes that 'definitive accounts of human nature may be better arrived at not through a description of essences, but via the delineation of boundaries' (11). In other words, humans define themselves by creating borders between the human and the non-human. To be human is to insist on ontological existence—we are the opposite of nothing—and it is our own awareness of nothing that allows us to create and imagine ourselves as a unified body. In such a system, nothing then becomes a threat, a non-existence that by its very existence threatens being. 'Bushwhacked' shows each character reacting to the threat of Reavers, shows them trying to define their difference, and shows them grappling with the concept and fear of nothing.

'Bushwhacked' opens with the crew playing a basketball-like game but without, as Inara says, 'civilized' rules. The game is interrupted when the crew comes across a seemingly deserted ship. As they debate whether they should risk going aboard to help possible survivors, Book says to Mal, 'Shall I remind you of the story of the Good Samaritan?' Mal's response, 'I'd rather you didn't,' is a characteristically flippant dismissal of religion, but it also can be seen as his not wanting to be distracted from determining what the 'right' decision is. By giving a direct answer to an ethical dilemma, religious thought gets in the way of Mal seeing a 'clearer' path that admits all the complex variables. For

Mal to base his decision-making process on a paradigmatic narrative taken from the Bible would be too easy. Mal still believes in right and wrong and the possibility and necessity of making ethical choices, but he no longer believes in the religious connection to these decisions. After the crew finds the dead bodies that Reavers have viciously slaughtered, raped, and partially eaten, he uses the religious sentiment of others to distract them when he proposes that Book perform funeral rites: 'I ain't sayin' there's any peace to be had, but on the off chance that there is, those folks deserve a little of it.' But for Mal, 'those folks' are already dead, so he owes them nothing. Although he appears to be giving permission to funeral rites, he is actually just distracting the civilian members of the crew from the knowledge that they are trapped, sitting ducks for a returning Reaver ship. His moving speech for funeral rites *is* humane, just not in the way that they think. While the others perform a ritual for the mangled crew, Mal, Kaylee, and Wash conduct the dangerous, delicate operation that frees the ship.

The episode is the first time we see what the Reavers can do, and the idea of Reavers (the series' presentation, not the film's explanation) demonstrates how ideas of the monstrous comment on twenty-first-century definitions of the human. Jeffrey Cohen sees the figure of any monster as a 'form suspended between forms that threaten to smash distinctions' (6), and Mal articulates the loss of these distinctions through the concept of nothing: 'Reavers ain't men, or they forgot how to be, come to just nothin'. They got out to the edge of the galaxy, to that place of nothin' . . . and that's what they became.' Mal's explanation of the Reavers is one of several suggested in this episode as the line between Reaver and human is negotiated by each character. As usual, Mal and Book voice opposing views. Book insists on ritual as a defining border between us and them, human and non-human: 'How we treat our dead is what makes us different.' Mal, on the other hand, has no need for ritual and pushes the idea of Reavers to the dark recesses of his mind. For both Mal and Book, despite their inner reservoirs of strength, the idea of the Reavers is deeply disturbing. When it comes to monsters, as Cohen says, 'Destructiveness is really deconstruction' (14), and the Reavers threaten to reveal the lack of a normative and essential humanity.

By presenting the Reavers almost totally through their absence, *Firefly* casts the negotiating of human essence—usually presented in technological terms—into an almost purely psychological context. Reavers, within the framework of the series, almost do not exist ('The

greatest characters I never created,' says Whedon in the 'Bushwhacked' DVD commentary). But although we barely see them, we see what they can do, what seeing them can do to a person, and mostly, we see the fear the idea of them can create. Their actual existence is a point of debate on the show, where they are considered as legendary by some. 'They're real,' Zoe and others insist to the more sheltered characters who consider them fictional, but the 'reality' is in the effect and not in any kind of physical essence. While Reavers, like all monsters, represent unthinkable figures beyond the borders of the charted world, and on the fringes of the imagination, the concept of the 'real' is central to understanding monsters, as without possibility monsters are not monsters at all, but merely fairy tales. 'Do monsters really exist?' asks Cohen. 'Surely they must, for if they did not, how could we?' (20). What if we do believe there are monsters? What if the monster is not a metaphor for either the wholly other or something within the self? What if it is not a metaphor at all, but is *actual*?

In analyses of monsters as 'other,' the focus is on the monster as an unknowable entity; the monster is something outside us, so absolutely other as to be inconceivable. For Freud, however, monsters represent something internal and psychological: a repressed otherness within the self. In Western thought, then, monsters are interpreted as both the other and the self, as imaginary and real, as human and other. From this viewpoint, Jayne's comment on Reavers, that 'Them people aren't human,' is more profound than he could ever know. They are the strangers we can never hope to understand, or they are the dark recesses of our souls that we do not want to acknowledge. Mirroring Freud's definition of the 'uncanny' as a 'species of the frightening that . . . had long been familiar' (124), Reavers are both improbably other and dangerously familiar. And, as 'Bushwhacked' makes clear, we all contain the core of a Reaver.

Mal, who has seen what Reavers do, refuses to relate his experience in any concrete terms; he describes them as a 'darkness' that 'you can't even imagine . . . blacker than the space it moves through.' It is this idea of 'darkness' and of 'nothing' that pulls the parts of the episode together, two concepts that simultaneously represent the Reavers, the crew's fear of them, and the only escape from the dangers they embody. As Simon prepares to suit up, he comments on his fear of 'the thought of a little Mylar and glass being the only things separating a person from nothing.' Jayne cruelly responds, in order to taunt Simon, that 'it's impressive what "nothing" can do to a man,' words that resonate

hauntingly after they find a psychotic and damaged survivor of the Reaver's attack. Mal, as we have seen, directly associates the concept of nothing with evil: 'They got out to . . . that place of nothin' . . . and that's just what they became.'

In 'Bushwhacked,' Simon, Jayne, and Mal present various sides of a complex understanding of the concept of nothing and the role it plays in understanding the human condition. What is 'nothing'? Is nothing truly evil? A void of all meaning? The Greek philosopher Parmenides in the fifth century BCE grappled with the questions 'Is it possible to think what is not?' and 'Can non-existence or Nothing *be*?' Parmenides proposed that it was impossible to speak of Nothing. In doing so, of course, he violated his own rule, and therefore Nothing must *be*, or, as he then deduced it, *all* is Nothing. Plato took an opposing view, essentially eliminating the idea of nothing and nothingness. For Plato, anything capable of being thought *is* (Heath 524–5). By the time of Hegel, nothing or negation are completely intertwined with the positive. Being and non-being must both exist as complementary notions, dialectically producing and relying on each other. For Hegel, pure Being and pure Nothing are the same, and for Heidegger too, Nothing is the same as Being. What these later philosophers do is make Nothing not opposite but *other* than Being. Heidegger reads the philosophical axiom 'Nothing is without ground,' not to say that everything has a ground, but to say that nothing *is* without ground. In other words, nothing exists, it *is*, but within groundlessness, outside of being. This complex (de)construction of nothing is presented in *Firefly* through each of the characters. For Mal, nothing is an existential hell of blackness; for Simon, a terrifying scientific and mathematical reality; for Jayne, something he doesn't understand and is therefore to be mocked or destroyed. Only for River, as we will see later, can a negative also be something positive, an emptiness not to be feared.

*Jaynestown' and faith: 'Noah's ark is a problem'*

The questions of the posthuman, the persistence of faith, the possibility of a sacred text, and the relationship of religion to ethics that I posed at the beginning are addressed most directly in the episode 'Jaynestown.' The episode combines multiple plots: on the ship, River and Book engage in a conversation on faith and the Bible, while, on a small outer planet, the rest of the crew finds that Jayne has been made a legendary hero due to a misunderstanding of his actions on a previous visit. This episode

accentuates the two approaches to absolute morality and faith that we have been tracing through Mal and Book, but through the interaction of the two plots, both positions are problematized and complicated.

The episode opens with River 'fixing' Book's Bible of its 'contradictions' and 'repetitions' by systematically tearing out pages. River (who previously described herself as 'broken' in 'Safe,' 1.5) tells Book that his Bible is 'broken' and attempts a solution: 'So we'll integrate non-progressional evolution theory with God's creation of Eden. Eleven inherent metaphoric parallels already there. Important number prime number. One goes into the house of 11, 11 times but always comes out one. . . . Noah's ark is a problem . . .' Book tells her, 'You don't fix the Bible,' to which River responds, 'It's broken. It doesn't make sense.' Book then gives his fullest statement about faith: 'It's not about making sense. It's about believing in something. And letting that belief be real enough to change your life. It's about faith. You don't fix faith. It fixes you.'

Although it appears that we as viewers are intended to sympathize with Book's comment that 'You don't fix faith. It fixes you,' this conclusion is immediately subverted as the scene then cuts to the planet where the workers, or Mudders, are singing (literally) their praises of Jayne, who has become a legendary folk hero celebrated in song, story, and statue. This direct juxtaposition of Book's justification of irrational belief with the primitive praises of a slave-like caste for an undeserving selfish criminal forces us to question Book's comments. Has the Mudders' faith in Jayne 'fixed' them? Is there a difference between Book's faith in the Bible and the Mudders' faith in Jayne, which are both based on stories or events that 'don't make sense' and indeed are not, for the most part, factually 'true'? If the episode demonstrates (as it seems to) that faith in Jayne is the wrong kind of faith, does it by implication question the faith of (the) Book?

Book's comment, 'You don't fix faith. It fixes you,' is darkly parodied by Mal when he says 'every man ever got a statue made of him was one kind of sommbitch or another. Ain't about you, Jayne. It's about what they need.' Mal would almost certainly affirm that Book's Judeo-Christian God is indeed a son-of-a-bitch, yet are Mal and Book on opposite sides here or do they come to some sort of agreement? While Mal's humanist pragmatism, again, appears contrasted with Book's faith, both Mal's and Book's statements assert the power of faith above and beyond any core essential presence of truth. Are they both saying that faith is taken on by individuals as a necessary form of self-therapy, that



the subject that is 'believed' is unimportant, superfluous, and preferably even non-existent? Is faith just practical? Jayne's tale, like the story of Noah's ark, is a 'problem,' one based on a misreading of flawed evidence that has been inaccurately reproduced and transmitted. The question is whether that matters or not. When Jayne pushes his own statue down, it is a version of the 'death of God' that Western culture experienced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet God continues to be an influential presence in the twenty-first century, and even after hearing the 'truth' about Jayne, a Mudder sacrifices his life to save him. Is his sacrifice noble or foolish? Will a god always rise from the ashes of that god's own death?

Again, as we have realized in our own time, faith can remain even when the story is broken. There are at least two ways of reading these scenes. Faith in the Bible, like faith in Jayne, while it may be pragmatic and may fix things, is also shown to be on some level foolish. But a second reading is more complex and is a path represented by River, who can perhaps be seen as not 'broken' after all. Like my reading of the two pilots, and like plural interpretations of the Bible, she needs to be allowed (and to allow herself) to be multiple and non-linear (see Chapter 3). The ending of the episode, when River remarks wryly to Book 'Just keep walking, preacher man,' is a humorous deflection from further debate, but also a suggestion from her non-linear perspective that Book and his 'book' have not found or provided an answer yet; while faith may 'fix,' it is not always for the best, and faith certainly can never be 'fixed,' i.e. positioned in a secure place. River's view of scripture resembles Mark Taylor's characterization of scripture as an act of 'wandering.' For Taylor, 'instead of a finished product, the text [of scripture] is the social activity of countless coproducers. Productive readers infinitely . . . extend the text' (182). As River seems to realize, neither Book nor Mal can fix, attach, or create any kind of stable meaning to a book, a myth, or an absolute sense of right and wrong. In the same way that Mal can see most clearly in the woods and yet feels morally compelled to lead his crew out of them, so also faith or truth can only exist nomadically; they are always on the move, and in the necessary search for them one can only 'keep on walking.'

### *Down the river of a non-metaphysical non-linear philosophy*

Taylor defines wandering, not as being lost, but as an act that 'liberates the drifter from obsessive preoccupations with the past and the future'

(157). In the same way that River takes the pages of Book's 'broken' Bible out of order, she removes her 'broken' self from the accepted human paths of time and causality. To 'keep on walking,' to embrace an ever slippery, Protean, plural reality is to actually only experience a trace of any sort of reality—to see 'truth' as footsteps in the sand that will be erased by the next windstorm. The character of River can be seen as suggesting a third (indirect and wandering) path that is neither based on traditional faith nor traditional humanism, that follows neither Book nor Malcolm, that is neither 'religious' nor 'logical' in any conventional sense, rather one that offers multiple possibilities for future thought. River takes the themes that *Firefly* presents and subjects them to her own personal brand of chaos; she transforms nothing and blackness from the evil represented by the Reavers into spaces open to new possibilities. River, like the doomed bounty hunter floating in space, accepts a form of meaninglessness—'Well, here I am'—as she discovers the contradictory layers that make up who she is. Both *Firefly* and *Serenity* end with River teaching the rest of the crew something; her new way of thinking and being become the only way for them to survive.

The project of the postmodern artist, according to Slavoj Žižek, is no longer to strive to fill the Void, but to create the Void in the first place (27). It is thinking this way that allows 'nothing' to become a positive concept. It is significant that of all the people on the ship only River seems to be unafraid of 'nothing.' In 'Bushwhacked,' as she and a terrified Simon cling to the hull of the ship to avoid detection by the Alliance, River gazes in awe at the beauty of black space. River, whose name of course resembles 'Reaver,' has just like the Reavers reached a place of nothing, but unlike them she survives. By looking into nothing, River looks away from the defined self, away from the teleological straight path of history, and away from absolutes. Meaning is not in things, as both Mal and Book want to insist, but between them, in the interplay, the connections, the empty space. What River sees when she gazes into the blackness of space is not the harsh emptiness of Mal, the psychotic insanity of the Reavers, or the absent God of (the) Book, but instead the divine Nothing of the mystics, a recognition of a void, an emptiness that is not good or bad, right or wrong, sacred or profane, upside down or right side up, but a possibility for creation, a tentative wandering path for the future.



MUSIC



# 14. Music, Race, and Paradoxes of Representation

## Jubal Early's Musical Motif of Barbarism in 'Objects in Space'

NEIL LERNER

Over 140 years after the end of the Civil War, race continues to be a powerful and divisive issue in the United States, a continuing source of conflict in our project of democracy. It follows, then, that questions of race should occupy central places in cultural texts that examine our values and history. What happens when they don't, though? For much of *Firefly's* run, Kent Ono's now (in)famous claim that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) presents 'debilitating images and ideas about people of color' (163), an idea developed further (and in some ways challenged) by Lynne Edwards, reminds us of the complexity and potential pitfalls of racial signification within even the often-progressive writing of television auteur Joss Whedon.

Of course, racial signification happens with people of lighter skin as well as those with darker pigmentation—the stereotyping behind the characters of Badger or Niska comes to mind—and we are left with questions of which of these codes get more attention, nuance, and depth. The idea of constructed whiteness in the Buffyverse so persuasively argued by Ewan Kirkland illuminates a similarly constructed blackness in *Firefly's* 'Objects in Space' (1.14). Written and directed by Whedon, the episode brings questions of the representation of race squarely into view, ironically by way of our ears. A bounty hunter named Jubal Early, seeking River and Simon Tam, surreptitiously invades Serenity and rapidly dispenses with the counter-responses of the crew. As he

searches for the hidden River, he begins to wonder if she has non-corporeally possessed the spaceship, as she claims. She in fact has hidden herself in Early's own ship and devises a plan to draw him out of Serenity, where Mal quickly expels him into space. The episode has several subtexts; Whedon posits one when he explains, on the DVD commentary, that 'Objects in Space' marks the episode where River becomes accepted as part of the crew. Whedon also reveals that 'Objects in Space' concerns his own thoughts on existentialism, reflecting his understanding of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* and Albert Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*. Unremarked upon by Whedon but still central to this episode are some curious and potentially problematic paradoxes concerning race and stereotyping: in particular, Greg Edmonson's highly effective musical score reinscribes some rather old—and traditionally racist—musical codes onto the character of Jubal.

Edmonson's musical contributions constitute one of the great pleasures of the television series. As a narrative that combines conventions of science fiction and the Western, Edmonson's fusion of symphonic, country, and world sounds works together with elements of dialogue and *mise-en-scène* to blend the two genres. The visual incongruity of a spaceship that is riding herd over cattle (as occurs in the opening credit sequence of each episode) finds a parallel in European symphonic sounds accompanied by fiddles and guitar twangs. Both the Hollywood Western and the science fiction film have substantial accumulated traditions of musical coding and stereotyping, and while scholars are only just beginning to categorize and analyze those codes, their continued efficacy with audiences speaks to their widespread understanding, if not full comprehension.<sup>2</sup> Beyond its functions of narrative cueing, however, Edmonson's music also brings greater psychological and emotional depth to the characters and situations. Associate producer Lisa Lassek praises Edmonson's contributions in 'Here's How It Was: The Making of *Firefly*,' explaining, '[Edmonson] expressed things in *Firefly* that couldn't have been expressed any other way.'

What, then, does Edmonson's music express to us about the character of Jubal Early? Performed by African-American actor Richard Brooks, Early gets accompanied by a musical motif that Jennifer Goltz describes as 'ominous and frightening' (213). The music resonates as evil and threatening, and in classic Hollywood fashion, the musical cue telegraphs to us something about Early's character. Indeed, Early's motif contains several musical codes for villains in its obsessive melodic repetitions, its steady and unrelenting rhythms, and

particularly in its low pitch range. While Edmonson tends to avoid a pure leitmotif system for his musical characterizations throughout his scoring of *Firefly*—that is to say, he does not employ recurring and developing melodies that symbolize each of the characters and ideas—he does on occasion attach characters and ideas to specific timbres and even to specific melodic shapes and gestures. The distinctive music that accompanies Early occurs thirteen times throughout the episode, all but once played on a bass clarinet (the other occurrence happens on the guitar),<sup>3</sup> and each time tracing out the interval of a rising perfect fifth (usually between E and B, but at times transposed to other keys); it also, as with many of Edmonson's melodies in this series, gets accompanied by a drone, or pedal point.<sup>4</sup>

#### Early's theme (first appearance)

Greg Edmonson  
(transcription by Neil Lerner)

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system includes staves for Bass Clarinet (concert pitch), High strings, Low strings, and Percussion. The second system includes staves for B. Cl., strings, and Perc. The Bass Clarinet and B. Cl. parts feature a melodic line consisting of a rising perfect fifth interval (E to B) in the key of D major. The strings provide a drone accompaniment, and the percussion plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

While composers for film often have to generate large amounts of music in a span as small as two to eight weeks, television composers contend with even more severe deadlines. Edmonson might see a given episode a couple of weeks before getting the final edited version, at which point he and Whedon (or sometimes Lassek) would spot the episode—that is, they would determine which moments of the episode would have music, and they would discuss what sort of music it would be (Edmonson, personal interview). Edmonson then, he explains, had four days to write the music and two more days to record it. Most of the orchestral sounds (the strings and the brass) were sampled



instruments, but a large number of the other instrumental sounds (the guitars, the fiddles, the woodwinds, most of the percussion) were played by live performers, something of a luxury in television scoring. Edmonson's music for Early was usually heard on a bass clarinet performed by woodwind specialist Chris Bleth (the exception is the one time it appears on the guitar), and Edmonson adds that if he had the episode to score again, he would replace the bass clarinet with the rarer contralto clarinet, noting that 'It's just more evil in that range.' While later bringing up the keyword 'evil' when explaining that Early 'brings pain, he brings evil,' Whedon incorrectly describes the timbre as a bassoon or oboe in his DVD commentary:

Now we're going to see the great bounty hunter with his great musical theme that Greg wrote very specifically. I was like let's go *Once Upon a Time in the West*. She [River] has a theme. We agreed on violin. He gave me either a bassoon or an oboe for Early here to make him, you know . . . [voice trails off]. I was looking for *Once Upon a Time in the West*, I kinda got *Peter and the Wolf*. It gives him a kind of almost a fairy story quality which I like very much.

Whedon's invocation of *Peter and the Wolf* brings to mind the usefulness of not only particular melodies but particular instrumental timbres in story-telling. Roland Barthes asserts that 'every musical instrument, from the lute to the saxophone, implies an ideology' (293)—and his mistake of hearing it as a bassoon makes one wonder if his incorrect impression meant he was thinking of Prokofiev's musical characterization of Peter's Grandfather, voiced by the bassoon and also beginning with a rising perfect fifth, although its jerky rhythm and craggy character resonate more as crotchety or cantankerous, not ominous and threatening as does Early's theme.

Still, Edmonson's choice of a bass clarinet, the largest member of the clarinet family, takes on yet more significance if we recall the way the clarinet was treated in some early Tin Pan Alley lyrics. Often the clarinet would be used as a dark phallic symbol, a remarkably unsubtle iteration of the stereotyping of the genital size of African-American males.<sup>4</sup> For example, in 'Alexander and His Clarinet' (1910) by Irving Berlin (music) and Ted Snyder (lyrics), a character named Alexander (a common code name for an African-American male in Berlin's songs) interacts with a woman named Eliza who is delighted by Alexander's clarinet:

*Verse one:*

Alexander Adams played a clarinet,  
 Brought out music that no one has brought out yet,  
 Played his clarinet beneath her window light,  
 To hear Eliza yell with all her might.

*Chorus:*

Honey, is that you?  
 Yes, yes, didn't even have to guess,  
 My honey, what brought you?  
 Oh pet, I see you brought your clarinet,  
 My honey, I'm angry,  
 No, no, for lawdy sake don't dare to go,  
 My pet, I love you yet,  
 And then besides,  
 I love your clarinet.

An even more famous example occurs in 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' (1911), where 'the clarinet / is a colored pet.'

Early's systematic accompaniment with this ominous bass clarinet melody follows in the tradition of not just the ways that Hollywood musically accompanies villains, but more specifically, it follows some traditions in the ways that black rapists get represented. To go back to what most film historians consider the first Hollywood blockbuster, consider how the two black would-be rapists in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) are accompanied by Joseph Carl Breil's musical score, put together specifically for that film. Breil's score, a pastiche of both borrowed and original elements, opens with an original melody titled (in a 1916 edition of sheet music from the film) 'The Motif of Barbarism' (Gaines and Lerner 252). 'The Motif of Barbarism' accompanies the first sequence in the entire film with a title card that reads, 'The Bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion.' Breil's music specifies that a tom tom should beat with the pentatonic melody; the music has a simplicity and texture that connote something primitive, especially compared to the music that accompanies many of the white characters in the film. 'The Motif of Barbarism' returns several times in Breil's film score, notably during the two attempted rape scenes. As Gus, the renegade ex-slave, threatens the Little Sister character with rape, Breil's motif works to establish Gus as a threatening presence; we see him leering in the background of scenes where we watch Little Sister playing, underscored by the

melody first announced to us in connection to the ‘seeds of disunion.’ Later in the film, Silas Lynch (another African-American character who, like Gus, is played by a white actor in blackface) makes sexual advances towards Elsie Stoneman, in a sequence that also calls for the musical ‘Motif of Barbarism’ in the score. In *The Birth of a Nation*, both of these would-be rapists have their plans foiled by members of the Ku Klux Klan, who are meant to be understood in this film as the heroes; the film has been used as a recruiting tool for this terrorist group ever since.

Jubal Early, like Gus and Silas Lynch, also threatens to rape a white woman (Kaylee), and ultimately he finds his plan foiled by intrepid white heroes. Early forces Kaylee into submission by asking her, with chilling nonchalance, ‘You ever been raped?’ Whedon describes the scene, and his awareness of the potent codes he was invoking, in his commentary on the DVD:

Kaylee is someone that he approaches a different way, through a really horrible form of sexual intimidation. This is one of those scenes, that, you know, you write and then you worry that maybe you’re not as good a person as you hoped you were. You film this scene and everybody kind of wants to avoid you for the rest of the day. It really is just as creepy as possible.

Given the largely progressive ideology one finds in so much of Whedon’s work, it feels counterintuitive to imagine Whedon wanting to recruit members for the Klan, even though Whedon presents us with what seem the same racist stories that one finds in *The Birth of a Nation* (i.e. that African-American men will rape white women unless heroic white men—in ‘Objects,’ men guided by a woman—protect them).

As he often does, Whedon complicates the matter beyond simple binaries like black and white. He has a tremendous gift for words and ideas, and his character’s names reflect that. Whether it be the ironic combining of Buffy with Vampire Slayer, the revealing signifier Cordelia, or a character with the same name as film scholar Robin Wood, Whedon’s names often possess multiple layers of meaning.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes he has his characters muse on the meaning of the names, as when River notices that Mal’s name means ‘bad’ (‘The Train Job,’ 1.2). One of his slyest tricks may be the complicated layering present in the name of his Boba Fett-like bounty hunter, Jubal Early.<sup>6</sup>

In a brilliantly perverse twist of historical name-dropping, Whedon names his potential rapist after a particularly nasty Confederate States of America general.<sup>7</sup> Jubal Early of the C.S.A. led several successful campaigns against Union forces, including a raid on Washington in 1864, that rather concerned the federal government workers. Early also is credited with being one of the architects of the Lost Cause, the belief by some in the South that the Confederacy had not lost the war but rather had simply been overwhelmed by the Union's greater numbers (Nolan 11–34).

Whedon then has given us a soldier whose rebel forces lose to the greater centralized power, and who then resists reconstruction efforts, making a point to show up in bars on Unification Day wearing a brown coat. The character of Malcolm Reynolds certainly has parallels with unreconstructed C.S.A. types, although he notably stands apart from them in his repeated critiques of slavery.<sup>8</sup> Still, Reynolds believes his cause to have been the right side, and even though his side lost the war, he continues to resist. As the Operative says to Mal in *Serenity*, 'You're fighting a war you've already lost.' Consider Jubal Anderson Early's response to his discovery that Confederate forces had surrendered: he left the country (spending time in Havana, Mexico, and Canada) and wrote, 'I cannot live under the same government with our enemies. I go therefore a voluntary exile from the home and graves of my ancestors to seek my fortunes anew in the world' (qtd. in Gallagher 37). Such language describes equally well Mal's attitudes towards the Alliance.

So while Whedon indulges in cinematic codes long associated with white racism against blacks, he complicates these by fusing the character of the bounty hunter Jubal Early with the historical figure of General Jubal Early—at the very least, it 'strains the mind a bit' (to borrow Early's phrase from the episode) to imagine the nineteenth-century's Jubal Early responding to the character bearing his name played by Richard Brooks. Whedon further complicates it all by putting an audience sympathetic to Mal into the position of pulling for the symbolic Confederate rebels. Additionally, Early's linguistic precision may appear to stand in opposition to the stereotyping of Early as a sexually barbaric primitive, but the later intercut images of the raving Early support the notion of (or 'imbue them with meaning,' to follow Whedon's commentary) Early as a force of insanity and uncontrollable violence. Do concepts like 'the South' or 'the Confederacy' still have meaning in this fictional television world? Or

in our contemporary real world? At one point in 'Objects in Space,' Early ponders whether or not River's room remains her room when she isn't in it. Throughout this episode and indeed the entire series, Whedon asks difficult questions about existence and meaning. In his commentary for 'Objects,' he eloquently explains Camus' notion of opening up the walls in connection to how he conceived of the walls of the spaceship, Serenity. It's all about what happens when you open up the walls, he explains. If the characters open up the walls, they'll die because they're in outer space; if Whedon as director goes beyond the walls on his Serenity set, it means 'the intrusion of reality on my fiction.' If the object is perceived as a branch and not a gun, is it still a weapon? If hatred isn't in the heart of the racist codes in 'Objects in Space,' is it still racism? Whedon courageously raises these questions even as they have no quick or easy answers. Informed by polysemous musical, cinematic, and verbal codes, the multiple possible readings of 'Objects in Space' and indeed the entire series are, to quote River from this episode, 'getting very very crowded.'

# 15. Marching Out of Step

## Music and Otherness in the *Firefly*/ *Serenity* Saga

CHRISTOPHER NEAL

In any television show or film, the musical content serves the important function of informing our experience beyond that of the visual and narrative elements. The music calls upon the viewer's pre-ordained musical paradigms—on those traditions and practices one has come to recognize as culturally or emotionally normal for a given musical element. In noticing, even subconsciously, the musical elements of a film or television show, we superimpose these cultural or emotional musical understandings upon the visual and dramatic presentation, yielding an altered experience with new interpretive opportunities. The music of *Firefly* and *Serenity* calls on this process in ways that not only lend support to the specific dramatic moments (e.g. exciting, pulsating music during a fight scene or chase) but also create ironic and suggestive elements that support the subtextual elements of the series' and film's narrative. Music in *Firefly* and *Serenity*, as in all film or television, is either diegetic (part of the characters' experience in the narrative) or non-diegetic (external to the story), and both kinds of music contribute in important ways to our understanding of the *Firefly* and *Serenity* 'verse.

The *Firefly* theme song is, in many respects, a traditional folk tune with guitar, solo voice, and a soulful solo fiddle. Since viewers know this is a science fiction story set in outer space, the traditional theme song immediately establishes the conflict between modern and primitive. As viewers, we have come to expect from previous encounters that theme music for a story set in outer space reflects the

vastness of space, the futuristic nature of the story, and the grandeur of the heroic acts of the protagonists. Consider the themes from the *Star Trek* spin-offs (except *Enterprise*, 2001–5), each with dramatic brass melodies that soar above full orchestral ensembles. The march-tempo theme from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–94) features trumpets playing triplet-based melodies that tie across the beat, set over a rhythmic accompaniment, evoking an adventurous spirit in the same manner as the sweeping melody and driving rhythmic accompaniment or the theme for the original *Star Trek* series (1966–9). Themes from *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001) and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993–9) are slower and more sedate in nature. They have softer dynamics and longer notes, with less rhythmic drive. These two themes, with broadly constructed melodies and lush orchestral accompaniments, highlight the slow, graceful movement of the large spaceships as they pull into port in a lonely station positioned in the depths of outer space. Very quickly in *Firefly*, we learn that the dichotomy between our space theme expectations and the folk song that greets us in the opening credits parallels the fundamental difference in technological prowess of the *Serenity* crew and the antagonistic Alliance. At the same time, the song's lyrics describe Captain Malcolm Reynolds' desire to be free of the grasp of Alliance control: 'Take my land. . . . I'm still free. You can't take the sky from me.' Creatively and historically speaking, the conflict between personal freedom and the controlling efforts of a centralized government offers nothing new in *Firefly* and *Serenity*. However, it is the manner in which Mal's universe is presented to us and its interaction with the social commentary that is of interest.

The very nature of a Western in space is dichotomous. Unlike *Star Trek*, which transplants a *Wagon Train*-like narrative entirely into a science fiction setting, the *Firefly* and *Serenity* saga combines elements of the Old West and outer space. Writing a folksy theme song for *Firefly*, Joss Whedon evokes a time in American history when governmental control of the individual was diffuse, at best. In a similar fashion, the musicians in a folk ensemble, such as we find in the *Firefly* theme song and throughout the series, would perform without the use of a conductor. It is a small group of musicians that operates independently of any directive force—the performers work together in a democratic fashion to achieve a shared vision of the musical product. The bands performing with folk musicians such as Arlo Guthrie or Joan Baez collaborate in matters of musical pulse, shaping the phrase, and even the compositional structure of the songs. In performance,

such musical characteristics are subject to immediate and possibly dramatic decisions made by the musicians. It is not uncommon, at the end of a particularly enthusiastic rendition of a folk song, for a band member to call out 'One more time!' as a cue for the entire band to add another impromptu statement of the song's chorus. In contrast, the music we have come to expect through our experiences with *Star Wars* (1977 et al.), *Star Trek*, and others would be that of a symphony orchestra. The large, organized musical forces under the centralized and relatively inflexible direction of a single conductor evoke a significantly different aesthetic. Imagine the absurd vision of an oboist in a symphony orchestra standing up and bellowing out 'One more time!' as the strings and brass approach the final dramatic cadence of the *Star Wars* theme. A typically large orchestral theme would simply not do to support the dichotomous natures of Whedon's *Firefly* and *Serenity* 'verse. The smaller ensemble performing a folk song is, in its own way, subversive, rejecting the centralized governmental control of the Alliance as vigorously as Mal does.

Despite Whedon's declaration that the Alliance is 'not really an evil empire' (Russell), the dialogue in *Firefly* is not subtle in its indictment of government. In the *Firefly* pilot episode, 'Serenity' (1.1), we learn Mal's opinion, as Simon asks, 'So does it happen a lot? Government commandeering your ship, telling you where to go,' and Mal replies, 'That's what governments are for—to get in a man's way.' Later, in 'War Stories' (1.10), Shepherd Book comments that 'A government is a body of people, usually notably ungoverned.' The folk music genre evokes a period in earlier American history and geographical areas in the southern United States generally associated with this kind of music. These include traditional Appalachian communities in Tennessee and North Carolina, as well as the frontier land of Texas. These areas, which would have been Confederate states during the American Civil War, represent a more rural population and, usually, a fundamental political preference for decentralized government that is consistent with Mal's. There is a desire for decentralized governance that grows out of a fundamental mistrust of larger governmental structures.

Typically, a song such as this theme song would demonstrate regular meter throughout that divides easily into groups of two or four, based on the arrangement of strong beats (|) and weak beats (-). While the interlude of the theme song demonstrates this regular meter, the verses themselves are nineteen beats in length, arranged in the following fashion:



*Verse one:*

Take my	love.	Take my	land.
	-		-
Take me	where I	cannot	stand.
	-		- -

And the pattern continues until the instrumental interlude and tag:

—*Instrumental interlude*—*Tag ending*

Have no	place	I can	be
	-		-
since I	found Se—	renity.	
	-		- -
But you can't	take the	sky from	me.
	-		- - -

The tag ending, in the same fashion as the verses, has an odd arrangement of strong and weak beats as well, with a total of fifteen pulses. The odd-meter feel of the otherwise traditional theme song creates a dichotomy between the presumed steadiness of a folk song and the reality of the shifting meters in the performance. This variance circumvents our sense of stability, compelling us to question the safety of what would otherwise be very comfortable and relaxing music. In this manner, the song informs us of Mal's nomadic lifestyle, which he characterizes to Inara in *Serenity*: 'I got no rudder. The wind blows northerly, I go north. That's who I am.' The stop-and-go feel of the theme song emphasizes the meandering and varied pace of the Serenity crew's lifestyle. It emphasizes the Otherness inherent in Mal and his crew—disenfranchised, living outside societal norms, just as the *Firefly* theme song exists somewhat outside musical practice for a typical folk song.

We learn the history behind Mal's disenfranchisement in the opening moments of 'Serenity.' However, he has clearly carried the societal separation to a new level. This choice becomes evident as we move from the Battle of Serenity Valley to the present in the opening minutes of the episode, finding Mal involved in an illegal salvage operation. Mal resists the societal expectation that he lock step with Alliance control, choosing instead to live outside more traditional societal norms. He seems to merge his investment in the morally

ambiguous career choices of thief and smuggler with his disdain for the oppressive governmental entity. While others on the *Serenity* crew may not share the same desire for this level of separation from society, their continued presences are de facto endorsements of the lifestyle.

Additional examples of non-diegetic music in *Firefly* and *Serenity* also contribute to our understandings of the characters and their experiences. Perhaps one of the most common examples is the recurrence of a solo fiddle player, sometimes accompanied by guitar, playing folk-like or bluesy figures as the scene cuts to *Serenity* in outer space. The fiddle theme typically consists of the performer playing on multiple strings at once (called a ‘double-stop’), playing warm, consonant intervals. These musical moments seem to announce to the viewer, ‘Meanwhile, back on *Serenity* . . .’ The solo fiddle evokes the loneliness inherent in flying such a tiny ship out in the middle of space, emphasizing the point that the crew lives outside society. While they are able to maintain a relative degree of harmony that allows them to co-exist on the ship for the time being, the group is alone with respect to the larger societies that surround them, much as the fiddle soloist is alone in the musical setting. While the fiddle evokes the same traditional musical codes as the *Firefly* theme with the same implications, the instrument itself (called a violin in more artistic musical circles) is viewed as the *vox humana* by many composers—the voice of humanity. In the solo fiddle, we find a humanizing element in reference to the *Serenity* crew, despite their existence outside the societal mainstream. It further establishes them as the protagonists, despite their morally ambiguous behavior.

Other musical examples help establish the multicultural nature of the *Firefly* and *Serenity* ’verse, which is evident in both the use of multiple languages and the music influenced by different cultures. Joss Whedon says of his idea for the use of Mandarin in the dialogue,

The one thing that I did that I thought was a little utopian was the idea that since America and China are the two greatest superpowers on the planet, that once we went out forward and created new planets, that they had merged into the beginnings of the Alliance. And that is why everybody who is American speaks Chinese. (‘Future History’)

In most cases where *Serenity* has landed and the crew interacts with local cultures, the supporting music has a strong world music

flare, utilizing exotic instruments one finds in the indigenous music of Eastern cultures. Just as we find the juxtaposition of languages throughout the saga, we also discover that musical elements have become similarly integrated. This practice is evident in such moments as the opening scene of ‘The Train Job’ (1.2) with Mal, Jayne, and Zoe drinking in a bar on a remote planet. The establishment’s music is vibrant dance music, featuring instruments such as sitar, strummed mandolin-like instruments, varied drums and bells, and folk-sounding flutes. As the camera pans across the room, it reveals people of varied nationalities. Some women are adorned in kimonos or belly-dancing attire with halter tops and veils. Several men are wearing clothing suggestive of Russian or Chinese military garb, with tunic-style shirts, sashes, and wide cloth belts. The same type of musical mixture occurs again at the beginning of ‘The Message’ (1.12) as the entire crew visits a space station. In this larger setting, the visual content is similar, highlighting the variety of cultures.

The manner in which a musical excerpt can evoke a blending of cultures lies in the recognition of music as a cultural artifact. As such, the music of a geographical area is influenced by the technology, history, and language of a given culture. Music is not simply an example of a culture but a participant in it. Whether acting in a functional role such as music of worship or a celebratory event, or serving an entertainment role in a concert, on the radio, or in a bar, music influences and is influenced by the surrounding cultural manifestations. As artifacts, musical compositions reflect their origins with such characteristics as use of culture-specific instruments, melodic and harmonic content, and rhythmic structure. The majority of musical examples in *Firefly* and *Serenity* occupy this role—they fulfill or circumvent our expectations based on what we have come to understand about those specific kinds of musical compositions. However, in ‘Jaynestown’ (1.7), we find a song that fills a more specific role, highlighting other important uses of music throughout history and providing subtle support for the series-long narrative structure.

The ‘Ballad of Jayne’ is the most noteworthy diegetic music in the *Firefly* and *Serenity* saga. While it serves a clear comedic function, the song also represents an important cultural meaning for the Mudders. Given the expectation that this group of indentured servants is predominantly illiterate, the preservation of history must take the form of something other than the written word. Throughout time, news and histories have been preserved through folk song. Whether speaking of

the medieval troubadour songs in Europe or the rural American folk songs of modern times, folk songs have been written and performed to preserve cultural histories via the oral tradition. These songs have come to represent not only the histories of these cultures but also their daily practices and belief systems, passing them on through the generations. Consider the traditional song ‘Tom Dooley,’ a tale of a young man accused of the murder of Laura Foster:

Hang down your head, Tom Dooley  
 Hang down your head and cry  
 Hang down your head, Tom Dooley [or in some versions, ‘Killed  
 poor Laura Foster’]  
 Poor boy, you’re bound to die

I met her on the mountain, there I took her life  
 Met her on the mountain, stabbed her with my knife

Hang down your head, Tom Dooley . . .

As with many folk songs, versions of the song abound, some speaking directly to Laura Foster and some not. While the song describes a local tragedy, it also reminds the listener that harsh penalties come as a result of breaking the law. In addition to providing an oral history for a community, it enforces a moral code by speaking of Tom’s punishment for the murder.

Similarly, ‘The Ballad of Jayne’ does more than explain how the Mudders acquired a financial windfall: it is a rallying point of hope for a brighter future in the face of tyranny. The Mudders idolize Jayne because he represents their generations-old desire to stand up to the local magistrate and his oppressive social practices. Jayne’s theft, and what they perceived to be his noble act of distributing the stolen money, makes the prospect of a better life just a bit more plausible. They view his act as gloriously subversive and are so motivated by his ‘bravery’ that they feel empowered to riot when the magistrate attempts to remove the statue of Jayne. When the bar musician begins the song, everyone cheers, crowds around, and joins in the singing with a level of enthusiasm not demonstrated to this point in the story.

The song highlights the struggle between an oppressive centralized power and its control over a population. In this manner, it is a snapshot of the large-scale tension between the Central Planets and those of the outer rim. By invoking the oral tradition to characterize this conflict,

Whedon takes the example to extremes, pitting a relatively educated but tyrannical individual against an uneducated local community relegated to indentured servitude. By inserting Jayne into the Mudders' oral history, Whedon makes him an agent for change and a central figure of hope for the peasant class. Jayne's motivations are unimportant to the scenario, as Mal points out while Jayne laments the Mudder who saved him by jumping in front of a shotgun blast: 'Hell, there wasn't a one of them that understood what happened out there—probably sticking that statue right back up.' When Mal agrees and Jayne complains that it 'eats at' him, Mal comforts him by saying, 'It's my estimation that every man ever got a statue made of him was one kind of sommbitch or another. Ain't about you, Jayne. It's about what they need.' Jayne remains unconvinced, commenting, 'Don't make no sense.' Implicit in their exchange is that the Mudders will continue to sing 'The Ballad of Jayne' despite being informed of his less-than-noble intentions. While the Mudders' reaction affirms the inherent unreliability of facts conveyed through the oral tradition, it also emphasizes the role of such structures in the lives of oppressed people. While songs and stories convey histories, they go beyond this simple role in such societies by offering hope to those who are oppressed.

Both diegetic and non-diegetic musical examples throughout *Firefly* and *Serenity* do much to highlight the alienation felt by the characters. Whether emphasizing the lonely and less technologically advanced existence of the *Serenity* crew or demonstrating the discrepancy between peasant classes and aristocratic figures, the music draws our attention to what is different, what is Other. The musical program in *Firefly* and *Serenity* confounds us by circumventing traditional expectations of genre and performance practice. In doing so, it highlights how the protagonists in the saga live outside societal norms, with the apparent desire to continue doing so until those societal norms change. This sentiment comes to fruition in the resolution of *Serenity*, as Mal and his crew succeed in challenging the oppressive social constructs of the Alliance. While anyone may find it difficult to march to Whedon's odd-metered *Firefly* theme song, it is clear that Mal would march out-of-step no matter what the tune.

# VISUALS



# 16. Between Past and Future

## Hybrid Design Style in *Firefly* and *Serenity*

BARBARA MAIO

Set design for cinema and television is one of the most important ways to define an authorial style. Many film auteurs use design style as a character of the film.<sup>1</sup> Stanley Kubrick, for example, gave particular attention to set design. In *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), the Korova Milk Bar becomes a sort of exposition of pop art for costume, colors, props; the tables of the bar (with plastic people as bases) are clearly inspired by the work of Allen Jones, the British pop artist who used women's forms in furniture. In *American Psycho* (2000) the protagonist lives in a museum-house with a Mackintosh chair and Mies van der Rohe armchair that become symbols of his mental illness and his obsession for cleanliness and order. But it is in science fiction that set design has become most prominent. In 1968 Kubrick used design to define *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In the spaceship where the main character is traveling, red Djinn armchairs made famous by Olivier Morgue call attention to themselves in the large white halls. The 1965 design creation is almost contemporary with the film. A similar choice was made by Woody Allen in 1973 with *Sleeper*, where Verner Panton chairs from the late 1960s stand next to classic furniture (such as a wooden clock) as furnishings of 'The Sculptured House' made by architect Charles Deaton in 1963. In these few examples, it is clear that contemporary design is used to create a futuristic effect, because the design of the 1960s and 1970s was perceived as very modern and original—so that to put a chair of notably modern design in a set is enough to affect the whole movie. As David Greene, one of the architects of Archigram,<sup>2</sup> writes in the first



issue of *Archigram Magazine* in 1961, 'A new generation of architecture must arise with forms and spaces which seems to reject the precepts of "Modern" yet in fact retains those precepts' (1). These two decades were charged with changes and technological innovation, and people were open to new ideas.

But it is not just cinema that uses original set design and modern architecture. In the 1960s, television series such as *The Avengers* (1961–9) and *The Prisoner* (1967–8) used set construction with meaningful elements. Britton and Barker underline the idea: 'As viewers, we tend to respond to design imagery at an emotional rather than an intellectual level' (11). *The Prisoner*, for example, is set in the village of Portmeirion, constructed by architect Clough Williams-Ellis in a mix of different styles that give a surrealistic impression. Furniture and objects like the sentinel ball or the memory-erasing machine give a general futuristic, technological aspect to the series. In *The Avengers*, the presence of trendy design is used to evoke British style and the 1960s mode in a way so pre-eminent that the character of Emma Peel became a fashion icon of these years.

Still different, and in a certain way opposite, is the example of *Firefly*. In this series, style is defined in relationship with genres, and as a hybrid product that grows, incorporating different traditions. The series, set in the future, uses objects and architecture from the past, including a wide range of props and set designs that sometimes are hundreds of years old compared to the time when the series is set. Yet design objects from the 1950s to 1970s are also used for a futuristic atmosphere. So it is not unusual to find design furniture next to elements that are familiar to the audience as genre-coded, such as props, locations, and wardrobes usually linked with Western movies (guns, cowboy hats, horses, canyons) or with science fiction movies (spaceships, spacesuits). As Robert Warshow points out,<sup>3</sup> such elements—as well as some ideological choices like a strong, melancholic hero, the nature/civilization conflict, the journey—are compulsory for the Western, but are also strongly present in science fiction. Whedon takes these elements and mixes them in a postmodern way, manipulating codes of genres. For example, in 'Trash' (1.11), when Mal and Saffron are going to steal a valuable antique gun, the room of Durran (the owner and Saffron's former husband) has a very modern look, with much glass and metal giving a general coldness and elegance; but it is also furnished with old pictures on the walls, an ancient pianoforte in a corner, and black leather armchairs that recall 1950s American office

style (Durrant is a collector of items from 'Earth-That-Was'). His home is among floating estates hovering above water—a citation of the cloud city from *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980)—while later in the episode we can see Mal in the middle of the desert, alone, like any regular cowboy (except that he's naked—a Whedonian twist). In this episode Whedon passes from science fiction to Western within the same scene; the author does not become a slave of genres and their visual codes but uses them with expertise. And it is not just in visual code that Whedon applies the genre rule, but also in ideology. Serenity, the spaceship, is a metaphor for a stagecoach; Mal is the heir of the cowboy, solitary and closely tied to an honor code; the Western frontier is transposed into space but always already represents the concept of limits to be exceeded. The idea of civilization versus wilderness is one of the major themes in Westerns. As Erisman argues, the idea of civilization is not a totally positive concept. In *Firefly* the Serenity crew is an outlaw group but the audience's perception is positive, mostly because the Alliance is presented as almost fascistic.

Joss Whedon defines *Firefly* as a 'science fiction Western' (qtd. in 'Whedon Seeks Return'). The tie between this series and genre is dominant. From first glance, *Firefly* presents itself as a work with characteristics of both genres, science fiction and Western. Whedon uses visuals very familiar to the audience. Even in the opening titles both genres are present, with a sequence of images that alternate space and prairie, spaceship and horses. The main characteristic of *Firefly* is the originality of the mix between genres, and Whedon uses not just the main two already cited but also a wide variety from the movie imaginary.

In the opening scene in the series pilot, the battle recalls movies by Kubrick, from *Paths of Glory* (1957) to *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), with soldiers running through trenches looking for shelter between shots and explosions. This scene is a classic war movie scenario that does not at first give the audience any indication that we are going to be watching a science fiction series. But in the second scene we are already in full science fiction genre mode, in open space: the reference is to movies such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The original theme music echoes classic Western sounds: Whedon plays with genre not just using the set direction but also music, lighting,<sup>4</sup> story-telling, and so on. And clearly Whedon is playing with the audience, seeding false hints: for instance, the first appearance of the character Inara is in her room. We see her engaged with a client. The whole scene is constructed to create

romanticism. The space in which Inara moves is rich with oriental suggestions, red velvet and ivory statues—but as soon as she pushes away a curtain, we discover that she lives in a spaceship. From the windows of her spaceship we can see Persephone, a futuristic city full of spacecraft traffic.

As for the science fiction style used by Whedon, it appears closely tied to a particular period, that is, movies of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>5</sup> The world of *Firefly* is not strictly tied to the classic period of the science fiction of the 1950s or to the cyberpunk years of the 1990s and 2000s. Even if Whedon works through hybridization, notably from cyberpunk and postmodernism (see Chapter 8), the result is a product visually more tied to a few movies that are now classics (Lucas's *Star Wars* saga and Ridley Scott's *Alien*, 1979 et al., above all) and less grafted to recent movie tradition such as the *Matrix* saga (1999 and 2003). Moreover, these movies mix genres not just at a visual level but also at an ideological level. The idea of exploration of new territories is common to both science fiction and Western, like the hero characterization. But if Whedon does not directly use cyberpunk, nonetheless a quotation from the father of cyberpunk, William Gibson, is useful in describing the world presented in this series:

I see the present as being vaguely dystopian and vaguely utopian and the future as being much like that but with the volume turned up. I think utopia and dystopia are historical concepts at this point, but we just haven't realized it. Somewhere, we crossed the line, and now we're in this disoriented point of dystopia and utopia. But there are aspects of 20th century life that are phenomenal, and we just take it for granted. (qtd. in Lillington)

Dystopian and utopian worlds are both present, and Whedon switches from one to another, creating disorientation.

At the beginning of *Serenity*, we can see an example of this dichotomy: the Earth's destruction brings people into a new world. While we are listening to the story of this transition, images from the past show us the construction of the new world with metal buildings that recall architecture from Kenzo Tange, symbols of technological progress, a city in the middle of a green valley with lakes, inspired by contemporary architecture from Germany and Holland—as Whedon says in the DVD commentary. Successive scenes show an open classroom in the middle of a beautiful garden where children, dressed in styles that evoke India, are learning a history lesson. This image

seems utopian, but some moments later we are projected into far less beautiful ambience, where doctors are torturing River Tam. Decidedly a dystopian world!

It is interesting to analyze these two kinds of worlds from the perspective of set design. In the utopian set, we can see much use of warm materials—wood, cloth. The classroom is made with a parquet floor under a tent structure made from a material that looks like white cloth, and there are seats of wood. Near the classroom is a pond with water lilies and rich vegetation. The whole scene appears strongly illuminated by dazzling solar light. In contrast, the succeeding scene is set in a cold laboratory furnished with alarming metal equipment. Screens and monitors inhabit icy walls, and in this case the light approaches an antiseptic blue with a strong contrast between lights and shadows—a Kafkaesque world, oppressive and nightmarish. The utopian world seems just an implant suggestion in River's subconscious, while reality appears more tied to a world characterized by violence and lack of freedom. The use of science fiction style is attached to the dystopian, and in this case Whedon follows a classic path in this genre: rare are the representations of a positive future. Scott Bukatman argues that 'The city was most frequently projected as a negative entity, while utopian aspirations were focused instead upon an agrarian existence' (123). In the *Firefly/Serenity* world, both urban and agrarian spaces are associated with dystopia. Cities are full of crime and vandalism but away from urban spaces, violence is the rule.

But the past does not bring a positive representation either. In *Firefly*, scenes strictly tied to the classic Western genre are usually negative. And in this case Whedon follows a tradition in the genre because Western movies usually present a world of violence where the law of the strong prevails. In 'Heart of Gold' (1.13), our heroes have to save Nandi, an old friend of Inara who now is the owner of a brothel. The brothel's women are threatened because of a baby claimed by a client. The visual representation is typical of the genre: a wide desert space with a solitary house besieged by the bad guys and waiting for the cavalry is one of the strongest clichés of the Western, and the only concession to science fiction is the solar sheeting around the house. The final shoot-out is part of the Western code and is carried out mainly without the use of futuristic weapons or a spaceship but with an exchange of bullets (with just a little laser fire). In 'The Train Job' (1.2), another Western cliché, the train robbery, is shown. The train robbery is one of the first topics not just in Westerns but in cinema

history: *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) was one of the first movies to construct the Western imaginary. Here, the inside of the train looks classic, with wooden panels,<sup>6</sup> but outside there is a strong stylistic opposition, with the train suspended on a magnetic railroad—though in the desert, again a classic Western setting. Another futuristic image enters when the spacecraft *Serenity* transports the booty.

The Western code is strongly present in the whole series through yet another visual element: the costuming of the protagonists. Costumes are a mixed version of science fiction, Western, East and West. Influences can be identified with the Wild West in the use of denim and leather in hot colors, while a futuristic effect is given by the use of grey and dark colors—for example, Alliance uniforms that recall Nazi Germany (or *Star Wars* Imperial officers). Asian influence—from the Middle East to Japan—also pervades the series, with extensive use of rich and colorful fabrics.

Captain Malcolm Reynolds is clearly inspired by the character of Han Solo, dressed like a space cowboy. The Solo vest is replaced by a brown coat,<sup>7</sup> but the fascination is the same. The gun becomes a symbol of the character: 'Its design captures both the antique romance of the Old West and the extravagant flair of golden-age science fiction' (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:78). Simon is dressed in the tradition of many doctors in Western movies, a sort of futuristic Doc Holliday or Doc Boone (with less alcohol) from *Stagecoach* (1939), with a three-piece suit that denotes the class typical of this profession but also with some Victorian shadings. Zoe's costume is also tied to Western style, with a leather vest and a classic gun-belt like Mal's. Jayne's style is more connected with the war genre than the Western: his apparel, sport pants and a plain t-shirt with just a discreet oriental symbol (one of many variations), recalls a soldier's style and allude to his character, which is hard and cynical. Wash, Kaylee, and River present a more hybrid style, not strongly defined by genre, but made by mixing different elements such as a Hawaiian shirt, combat pants, heavy coveralls, and flowered patterns. More interesting are Inara's dresses. In the 'Shindig' (1.5) DVD commentary, costume designer Shawna Trpcic says that these dresses were usually made in bright colors to make the character more noticeable in smoky, dark places. In opposition to the other characters' drab and neutral clothes—with browns, dark greens, beiges, and so on—Inara is usually dressed in shiny red or sparkling gold. Her character is the most noteworthy in terms of wardrobe because almost every scene of hers involves a change of clothes. Her costume is the

most elaborate, too, of course, because Inara is a Companion who must present herself in a rich and elegant way, giving the character a romantic aura. So she is not a provocative saloon girl but rather reminiscent of geisha.

'Shindig' can be taken as almost a summation of the series' costume style. The ballroom scene is rich with variety, mixing together Chinese and Indian cloth but also a traditional European/American style from the 1800s: Kaylee with her pink dress presents an echo of Scarlett O'Hara (overdone though it may be). Some men—Mal, for example—are dressed in an elegant Western style, and both a few men and women wear a sort of Indian sari.

This mixed oriental style is one of the most prominent in the series apart from science fiction and Western. Whedon loves Asian cinema, and it is possible to find references throughout his series. In the *Firefly* future, cities are crowded with Asian people or men dressed as ninja warriors; an oriental bazaar becomes the background for the action; belly dancers move around our heroes. In 'The Message' (1.12), the first scenes are set in a sort of oriental souk that is mixed with an impression of a futuristic marketplace where people of different races and ethnicities move through a place of rich chaos and diversity. The scene is in a large spaceship, the outside covered with screens and lights and the inside more like an Arabian square. Inside, men with Indian turbans and women with Chinese fans move around a sort of freak show (which Kaylee and Simon visit) and all sorts of shops; when Inara and Mal are walking in the market, we recognize oriental carpets next to colored kites, Chinese umbrellas next to oriental lanterns. The purpose seems to be to represent a universe made by a mixed choice of influences from planet Earth, most from the Far East but also from the Mediterranean area.

This mix seems to be one of the most used by science fiction creators. It clearly references movies such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Brazil* (1985), and *Total Recall* (1990), where set construction of cities is made by set designers to evoke contemporary cities but with an addition of technology and desolation. In Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, for example, city construction is based on a mix between past and future because Scott was in search of an atmosphere tied to old noir movies. The result is that his Los Angeles is a mix between real Los Angeles, New York, and a variety of oriental cities. Also there are real interiors, such as the 'Ennis Brown House' by Frank Lloyd Wright, used as the home of the main character. In these films the final effect is a representation

of immense cities, blurred and distressing. Compare Whedon's conception: in *Firefly*, the cities have urban planning modeled on American cities. The futuristic sense is given by small technological additions, particulars that denote a scene, that reveal a style. In 'Ariel' (1.9), when Jayne acquires uniforms for the plan to infiltrate a hospital, we see that the city is similar to any other large American city with skyscrapers and parked cars. Some scenes later, we again see the city, this time from the height of the fake ambulance, and the effect is the same as if we were flying over New York or Los Angeles. The moment the scene moves to the inside of the hospital we are again in full science fiction genre with a hall that looks futuristic, with much use of metal and screens that create an atmosphere antiseptic and cold. In 'Trash,' the design of the Bellerophon estate is made by using intersected geometries that recall contemporary architecture: in this case architects such as Kenzo Tange or Tadao Ando<sup>8</sup> are the first that come to mind, and it is not an accident that the building is surrounded by a Japanese garden.

This is not the first time that oriental style has been mixed with science fiction. In *Star Wars*, oriental style is often present. And, as noted, *Firefly* seems to be visually closely tied with *Star Wars*. In Lucas's saga, we can often see places of rich diversity with highly hybridized animals and people. Lucas, as Whedon, creates an imaginary world, using a successful mix of filmic styles, periods, and genres. As in Lucas's masterpiece, settings became part of the story and a spaceship can become a character. As production designer Carey Meyer notes, Whedon 'wanted the spaceship to be another character in the show' (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 2:34). Like the Millennium Falcon, Serenity is a real character, not just a background for action. As Larry Dixon states, 'a ship interior contributes to storytelling through several major factors: lighting, color, depth and composition' (8). Serenity, the characters' home, is presented as a character itself. Interiors are constructed like a real home. Bedrooms are different for every character. Mal lives in a very small and untidy room while Inara lives in an elegant and sophisticated one that is also the workplace where she receives her guests. Meyer suggests in 'Serenity: The Tenth Character' that Serenity is constructed with individual spaces whose colors are tied to the character living there: warm brown for the engine room where Kaylee lives, sensual red and gold for Inara's room, and so on. The kitchen has a familiar aspect: the crew eats around a table just as in a home. The props in the kitchen have an oriental flare (for example, an

iron teapot or straw bowls that recall Thai handcrafts), and characters often eat using chopsticks. The kitchen becomes the fulcrum of life on the spaceship, the place where members of the crew often gather in order to speak or to make important decisions (cf. *Alien*). In *Firefly* we often see the protagonists cook together and speak among the pots and tools of the kitchen. In this way the cold ambience of space acquires a familiar heat.

But it is not in objects and props alone that the spaceship acquires a personality: often the camera frames the protagonists in a false subjective point of view, giving the illusion that it is the spaceship itself that is watching. Whedon uses camera movements and out-of-focus shots to give a sense of action even in static scenes. At the beginning of the pilot 'Serenity' (1.1) for example, when Zoe and Wash are walking and talking, the camera awaits the two actors at the base of the stairs. When they arrive at the stairs they go up, but the camera stays down and frames the couple far away, almost discreetly, from a door. Thus the spaceship is alive, is part of the action just like other characters. In 'Out of Gas' (1.8), *Serenity* even becomes a protagonist: the beginning of the episode shows first a shot of the spaceship alone in the universe as a main character and then a few shots that present the inside, empty space rich with independent life: in fact, in this episode the spaceship is the central point of narration from the moment it suffers damage that could kill the crew.

The ship *Serenity* thus represents not just a simple piece of design construction but rather a conceptual and aesthetic choice. Scenic imagery is used to bring meaning, often symbolic. Here architectural construction and furniture have two simultaneous meanings: technology and familiarity. *Serenity* is a classic spaceship with much modern equipment and a cold aspect, with its long metal corridors. Vertical spaces are constructed to show characters moving up and down ladders. One of the main spaces is a cargo bay, where a large part of the action in the spaceship is set. This room is clearly furnished for practical use: suspended catwalks serve as passages, boxes are packed all around, the central space is used as a garage (for the 'mule' vehicle, for example). The effect is to represent a futuristic ambience—however, sometimes *Serenity* looks more like an old broken-down vehicle that might leave our heroes in trouble (again, cf. *Alien*; Meyer reports that Whedon wanted it to look 'battered,' *Firefly: The Official Companion* 2:34). But *Serenity*, as we have seen, is also a metaphoric home; so the rooms, public or private, are designed to have a sense



of intimacy. As home, Serenity is tied conceptually and visually with another spaceship, the Bebop from *Cowboy Bebop* (1998), one of the most appreciated Japanese anime series. Both ships share a domestic use of the space where characters do not just act but live everyday life. In the Bebop, Spike and his crew entertain themselves, talk, and eat, just like the Serenity crew.

In Serenity much importance is placed on the use of light and shadow. Lighting is the responsibility of the director of photography, but lighting can be a meaningful part of set design as well. As Ward Preston argues, 'Set lighting can make or break a well-designed set' (80). Meyer notes the connection, reporting Whedon's idea to have a contiguous set for the upper and lower decks: they were 'trying to feel the space . . . to light from within the existing space' (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 2:38). In *Firefly*, lighting is also used to create a sense of movement for the inside of the spaceship and in some places for the outside. When the characters move around the spaceship, lights change and give action to the scene; but when the characters are in private rooms or private conversations, the light is often contrasted in order to create intimacy and heat. Directors use out-of-focus camera shots for the same purpose. For example, in scenes with Inara, there is much use of contrast in lights and shadows and much out-of-focus work with close-ups on movements of bodies when Inara is engaged in her job. In the pilot 'Serenity,' Inara is making love with a client: a blurring of the lens becomes visual symbol for the orgasm; the camera seems to caress the bodies. The result is a scene that has an atmosphere of romanticism. The antithesis of this effect can be found in 'Ariel' (1.9). When Mal and the others arrive at the hospital, the lights are very contrasted and strong. The hall is illuminated with a light that comes to the shoulders of the actors so that the entire scene is lit cross-sectionally; the light contrasts are emphasized, creating shadow lines in the middle of the action. Another example of an active use of lights and shadows to create a background is in the episode 'War Stories,' when Mal and Wash are captured by the businessman and torturer Niska. Here the contrast is between the external futuristic image of the spaceship where Niska lives and the torture room, that, similar to a barn of the Old West, has dozens of small holes from which light filters, creating strong contrasts, heightening the circularity of the room and the camera movements.

Circularity seems to be a symbol of Niska, a cold snake of a man who entraps his enemies; 'The Train Job' introduces this devilish

character. The Skyplex, where Niska lives, is a large, ring-shaped space station. Inside, Niska's office is accessible through a circular door, large glasslike windows occupy an entire wall, creating an interesting game of lights and shapes. On the desk we see a Tiffany lamp, and in a corner we recognize a gramophone, small design objects that characterize the man. Niska is presented in a traditional suit, and he has generally an old-fashioned style. And if we consider that *Firefly* is set 'five hundred years in the future,' Niska is designed in a very old style—not only visually, but also morally.

The example of Niska in terms of design objects and props evinces a choice to be seen in the entire narrative arc. In the hybridization between styles, a major example is in choice of weapons. While the action is developed in the future, we can see shotguns and revolvers. Next to a futuristic laser gun it is not unusual to find a revolver. In the pilot, the scene of the ambush on Whitefall is pure Western genre with a regular shoot-out between enemy gangs, and our heroes escape the scene on horseback—but they are going to leave the planet in a space shuttle.

Whedon creates a new Western code that is strongly related to classic representations but at the same time very modern and not clichéd. Using his words, it is 'old fashioned without being Western hokey' (*Serenity* DVD commentary). The originality of *Firefly* and *Serenity* is in the effective use of the hybridization of elements from different architectures and design that come from various sources and periods, a hybridization that works in blending different layers, visual and ideological; in fact, every visual choice is strictly tied with an ideological and moral meaning that originates from the genre codes.<sup>9</sup> Whedon's creations do not mark a definitive break in genres, but use them in a postmodern way, working with additions, playing with citations, creating a jewel-like pastiche from contemporary cinema and television. Whedon pays homage to the whole tradition of genre cinema and at the same time creates a new vision, classic and modern.

# 17. Deathly Serious

## Mortality, Morality, and the *Mise-en-Scène* in *Firefly* and *Serenity*

MATTHEW PATEMAN

How we treat our dead is part of what makes us different than those did the slaughtering. ('Bushwhacked,' 1.3)

The above observation, made by Shepherd Book, points to an aspect of *Firefly* that is central to an understanding of its aesthetic power. While many shows make great use of death in a variety of ways, *Firefly* attempts to treat its dead in the right way. By this, I am not talking about a fact of the internal moral landscape of the show; rather, I am asserting a claim about its form, its representational apparatus. In this chapter, I offer four examples of death in *Firefly* and *Serenity* in an effort to demonstrate the ways in which the *mise-en-scène* of death in the franchise contributes to our affective and moral engagement with the show and its characters. By forcing the viewer to be aware of the structures of representation, the show avoids simple, plot-driven, affectively empty representations of death as well as sentimentally overwrought, morally empty ones. I focus largely on the 'death' of Kaylee in 'Serenity' (1.1), and then present three briefer accounts: the killing of Dobson (Carlos Jascott) by Mal, also in 'Serenity'; the murder by Mal of Niska's henchman (Michael Fairman) in 'The Train Job' (1.2); and finally, the death of Wash in *Serenity*.

*Firefly* is steeped in death. Its imagined universe has as its founding principle the civil war, of which Captain Malcolm 'Mal' Reynolds is on the losing side. This defeat, and its defining moment at the Battle of Serenity Valley, is the motor behind Mal's current occupation as a captain of the *Firefly*-class spaceship *Serenity*. The ship is a constant reminder of the battle, the battle an absolute sign of loss, betrayal, and

death. Indeed, the episode originally intended as the pilot, 'Serenity,' opens with the closing moments of that battle, with Mal's bravery and courage being represented to the viewer as, all around him, comrades die. His fortitude is not doubted as death and the fear of death seem only to spur him to more and more accomplished acts of leadership. However, his allies do not come to rescue him and his troops. He is placed in a position where he must either surrender or risk further slaughter. His choice is to repudiate his faith, to deny God and any higher purpose; pragmatism and blunt survival are the only rules now.

The pre-history of the show, then, is death filled. And so is its narrative conclusion. The film, *Serenity*, has as its main narrative drive the explanation for the Alliance's desire to capture River Tam, the seemingly mentally unhinged, and surprisingly strong, sister of Simon Tam, the seemingly stiff and reserved well-to-do doctor. We discover that River has psychic talents that mean she has effectively read the minds of people responsible for the creation of a drug intended to diminish violence. The trials of the drug on a planet called Miranda have led to two catastrophes. On the one hand, without violence as an aspect of personality, the vast majority of the population lost any sense of determination and literally died from inertia. The remainder, however, had a devastating opposite reaction, and their propensity for violence and their inability to regulate behavior in any but the most savage and brutal of ways led to their becoming the dreaded sociopathic murderers, the Reavers.

With this discovery, Mal becomes filled with purpose: to tell the truth. In fact, the purpose is to tell the Truth. The death of the planet's population and the creation of the monstrous Reavers must be told, and Mal is the man to do it. It would be reductive to argue too strongly that the initial death scene deprives Mal of any but the most attenuated of ethical world views, and the final death scene rekindles this ethical perspective, but the fact of the narrative being utterly bounded and directed by death is, I think, true. This 'moral' narrative of death begins in Serenity Valley in the first episode of *Firefly* and ends with the discovery of the deaths on Miranda in *Serenity* and Mal's assertion that he aims 'to misbehave.' Beyond even this, the fact of death continues to dominate the affective and narrative drive of the story. This is true both of deaths that happen (Book's, Wash's, Mr. Universe's) and of deaths that we might expect but which do not occur, being instead replaced with something like growth or redemption (the Operative's).

In other words, death is not simply something that, on an episode-by-episode basis, provides a narrative direction or plot fulcrum (though it can do that too); rather, death offers a tonal and thematic center to the show, anchoring it into a deep moral seriousness, even at those moments of great comedy, romance, and action. Unlike, for example, the *CSI* or *Law and Order* franchises (2000–present; 1990–present), *Firefly* does not simply regard death in television drama as a functional device from which narrative interest can be exploited. To be sure, as I shall discuss shortly, individual deaths do provide all sorts of story-telling opportunities in the show, but these are always only one of the ways in which the death is operating.

This chapter is not the place to provide a general typology of death in televisual drama, but a couple of observations may be pertinent. First, death, as mentioned, can operate solely as a plot device: a person is killed; the episode is spent discovering the reason. *CSI* is an obvious version of this. There is little need to interrogate the emotional or private realms of the main characters as their central representational and dramatic function is to solve the murder. Death is a spur; indeed, it is the main narrative condition. Second, the death can operate as plot device but can have much more significant emotional resonance, especially if the character who dies or is murdered is one with whom the audience has formed a relationship. In this instance, an episode may work to discover a cause for the death, but can also investigate its impact on other characters. Clearly, ‘The Body’ (5.16) from Whedon’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) is the exemplary episode in terms of a genuine and unflinching examination of the immediate emotional aftermath of a death. Also, though, and in a very different fictional world, the representation of the effects of the death of Tasha Yar in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–94) episode ‘Skin of Evil’ (1.22) is a sincere effort to ponder what death means as an event for those left behind. However, death can operate very much at the other end of the emotional and dramatic spectrum where death is seen in itself as a source of enjoyment or excitement for the viewer. Numerous slain vampires, exploded cars, shot henchmen, slaughtered soldiers, and so on fill our screens with only the sound of pounding bombs, squealing tires, or pummeling fists to commemorate them. Death, then, can be a plot device, a character-oriented emotional investigation, or a purely visceral, libidinal act of spectacle. What differentiates each instance is not just its position in a story, but the specific representational strategies used to offer us the image.<sup>1</sup>

My contention is that, in *Firefly*, while each of the above kinds of death exist (among others), the express focus on the representational tools used to tell the tale of that death means that the viewer is never able to simply enjoy death. From the very first episode, death is seriously considered and seriously represented.

A brief explanation of what I mean by ‘very first episode’ may be useful. While the first show to air on Fox was the episode ‘The Train Job,’ the first episode envisaged by Whedon was the two-hour pilot, ‘Serenity’ (see DeCandido). Not only were episodes shown out of sequence, thereby making the introductions of character and theme difficult to unravel for a viewer, but the replacement pilot, ‘The Train Job’ was simply not very good. Having been spared the Fox foul-up, I watched the show on DVD in which ‘Serenity’ is given its rightful opening position. This placement is important. Even though there is arguably not an overriding season arc to the show, there is, at least, a vital representational decision that sets the tone for the show’s relationship with death, and acts, too, as a wonderful formal mission statement. By not having this as the opening of the show on television, the network denied the audience the chance to engage with a significant method of composition and subsequent important method of reception.

This method has as its most striking example the representations surrounding the supposed death of Kaylee. The initial set-up makes it appear as though this death will fall into the kind of narrative structure mentioned above. Deaths in these kinds of structures simply act as the narrative motor for uncovering secrets and also allow for characters to mourn their colleague. Additionally, they may let the audience witness the mourning and learn more about the characters’ relationships. It is also the case that the audience will be expected to mourn this character. Before analyzing the ways in which the set of discourses relating to the representation of the death of Kaylee are undermined and subverted by Whedon, I want to describe how they have been arrived at in the first place.

The episode, by virtue of being the pilot, works hard to introduce the characters and to contextualize them in such a fashion that the audience is disposed to regard them in a certain way. I have already mentioned Mal’s introduction at the Battle of Serenity Valley and the extent, then, to which he as a character (and Zoe, too) is marked out as a warrior, a killer, a creature of death though, importantly, also a survivor and a leader.

Kaylee is introduced in the midst of her engine room—young, cheery, sexy, skilled, and the desired audience response is one of unmistakable and immediate sympathy. The sympathetic response is continued as the ship docks on Persephone and Kaylee is charged with encouraging fare-paying passengers on board. Her colorful kimono-style dress, parasol, and sheer vitality encourage further positive responses from the audience. Her encounter with Shepherd Book—the easy banter, the pride in her ship, and the teasing way she interacts, as well as her lustful appreciation of whatever is in the box he offers her—simply confirms a general sense of delight in this character.

The brief glimpses of Book also impel one to sympathy. His role as a missionary is laced with a certain mystery, and any potential concern that he may be too worthy to be interesting is subtly obviated. As the episode continues and we see more of him, the mystery heightens and, consequently, so too does the notion of his being interesting as a character.

The character of Lawrence Dobson is given relatively little air time, but what we do see of him early on suggests that he is a minor figure: bumbling, kindly perhaps, possibly a comic foil. He does not elicit significant sympathy but neither does he provoke strong suspicion. That is left for Simon Tam. Dressed in starched collars and red-lensed glasses, reserved to the point of rudeness, he appears to portend danger, if not malign intent. Once Wash notices a transmission made from within the ship, it is apparent that there is a Federal spy on board, and it is equally clear to Mal that it is Simon. Challenging him with a gun, Mal shows his willingness to confront any danger to his ship and crew head on. Unfortunately, as Book points out, he has the wrong man. It is the mild-mannered Dobson who is the agent. Mal, however, seems to be vindicated when it is Simon whom Dobson wants to seize. Mal's relief at it not being his purloined cargo that Dobson is reporting on is short lived, as the agent makes it plain that he holds the captain responsible for transporting a fugitive. Book tries to calm the situation, Mal grabs for Simon, Dobson becomes increasingly agitated, and into this confusion comes Kaylee. She asks what's going on, Dobson turns, fires, and Kaylee is hit.

A number of plot events have occurred, and the audience has had some of its assumptions set askance. Dobson is the agent (though, despite having shot Kaylee he is not a traditional baddie insofar as he is, apparently, working on the side of law); Book's recourse to exceptionally effective violence is a surprise, given his earlier demeanor; Simon's

ruthless refusal to treat Kaylee unless the ship is turned around to flee seems to confirm his malignity, yet Kaylee's own liking of him (and the expectation of that being transferred to the audience) confuses this issue. It is clear, in fact, that Simon is very upset about Kaylee's wounding, and he later works extremely hard to stabilize her.

Up until this moment, the episode—despite its reversals and revelations—has worked relatively straightforwardly with characterization, plot, and representation. The discovery of River, Simon's sister, in a cargo container and her subsequent move to the infirmary begins a representational trajectory that serves to question the interpretive stability of seemingly established modes of televisual discourse.

Kaylee is evidently weak and ill in the infirmary, and Mal goes to visit her. Kaylee commends the captain's goodness, urges kindness toward Simon, observes and comments upon the beauty of River, and continues to elicit from the audience great sympathetic identification. When, after she calls River a 'beauty,' Kaylee's hand falls free of the captain's, and her arm falls softly away from the bed, languid but deathly in middle close-up, the audience is left to wonder whether she is asleep, unconscious, or dead.

A scene later, Mal and Simon come into conflict on the metal gantry. Mal is angry at the involvement of the Feds on the ship and tells Simon he does not have the guts to deal with Dobson. Then, with a mixture of threat, portentousness, and riddle, Mal says to Simon, 'You don't have the time.' This slightly odd phrase visibly bemuses Simon and leaves the audience requiring some explanation. It comes, shattering in its simple brevity: 'Kaylee's dead.'

Anyone watching the show who has been aware of Whedon's previous work in *Buffy* and *Angel* (1999–2004) will know that he is perfectly capable of killing off characters whom it seems inconceivable would be killed off. In *Buffy*, Xander's best friend, Jesse, is killed in the pilot ('The Harvest,' 1.2); and in *Angel*'s first episode 'City Of,' the woman Angel is supposed to save is killed horrifically in the fourth act. However, it still comes as a great shock in *Firefly*. Kaylee has been set up as a central character and, more importantly, as obviously the most sympathetic character. It is clear that she has a soft spot for Simon, and it is doubly cruel for the audience that they are deprived of both a character and an emerging romantic plot line. Yet dead she is. We have seen the gun shot and the wound; we have heard the worried prognosis; we have had the death-bed expression of selflessness and love; and we have seen the languid arm droop in one of television's



most emphatic signs. And now we are told, clearly and unambiguously by a captain, whose expression we have absolutely no reason to doubt, that she is dead.

From this point on, the audience and Simon are following a very closely related narrative path. The character, like the viewer, is shocked and in need of confirmation. Mal turns to leave, there is silence on screen and Simon is static for four seconds before he too turns in the opposite direction and in desperation sprints off to the infirmary to see for himself. His journey, however, is slowed by formal interruption. He is in slow motion: the audience thus being given time to dwell on the enormity of the loss, but also being given time to eke out a glimmer of hope. The emotional shock for Simon is given formal depth through the film speed and the softly played lament on the violin and piano. Any hope the audience may have is seemingly shattered by a simple edit away from Simon's dash, to a medium long shot of Book, stern-faced and serious, leaving his quarters, also in slow motion and extradiegetically located within the mournful music.

The audience here is given information that Simon does not have, and the information is confirmation of Kaylee's death; the reverend acting as a sign, every bit as comprehensible and traditional as the languid hand, that death has occurred and lamentation and prayer are now the required actions. We cut back to Simon, who is running through a door at the top of a staircase, which places him, in terms of shot composition, in very much the same position that the Shepherd has just been in. The formal chime between the two scenes serves subtly to promote further our understanding of Kaylee's death by yoking Book's priestly function of spiritual ministrations to the dead to Simon's function of questing to discover the truth. Simon is compositionally similar to Book for the audience (however briefly and perhaps unconsciously), and as such his relationship with the death is confirmed.

He comes through the door in mid-shot slow motion, negotiates the first few steps, prepares to turn to the next short flight, still in mid-shot, and the camera pans away, down the stairs, across the space into the infirmary where, in long shot, Book stands next to Kaylee's bed. The music has stopped and is replaced by the sounds of Simon breathing heavily, panting from his exertion. As he catches up with the camera, we see Kaylee, sitting up and waving at the doctor.

It is a stunning moment. Everything about the set-up has led us and Simon to believe in the truthfulness of the death. Simon raises his

right hand, a little, offers an attenuated wave, looks genuinely shocked, looks back up the stairs and says, 'The man's psychotic.' His statement obviously refers to Mal, the instrument of Simon's torment, the instigator of the lie, the purveyor of false despair. And the audience, too, will share Simon's assessment. However, the audience is not the character and it has to contend with a further level of betrayal. While a viewer can share Simon's confusion and anger towards Mal, and as such, can be placed in a similar position to Simon, she or he also has to recognize the story-teller behind the story-teller.

Mal's lie works on Simon because, in the imagined world of the ship, the character has seen a wound, treated it, and been told of the consequence. The viewer's relationship with the death is, plainly, different. We understand the death through, and only through, its televisual representation. To that extent, we have been introduced to a character, been encouraged to feel great sympathy for her, have witnessed her romantic inclinations to the doctor, have seen her shot, have seen her 'die,' have seen her 'death' reported, have witnessed the visual and auditory syntax of television death—the frantic race to the scene, the priest seemingly ready to offer services. This is the work of the writer-director.

This is story-telling, and this is the representation of death used to insist on the vitality of discourse, on the refusal to allow lazy devices like languid arms and slow-motion sprints to mean what we assume they will signify. The *mise-en-scène* of the death is also its morality: be ever vigilant against reductive aesthetics and crass simplicity.

But, and it is a big *but*, there is a danger here. The story-teller may indeed want to assert his control over the modes of representation and insist that televisual syntax can be re-invigorated and so on, but the character's dismay at being so callously duped by Mal is potentially replicated in the audience's being more angered than impressed by Whedon's morbid manipulation of their emotional involvement. In order to try to circumvent this, a distancing needs to occur between the audience and Simon. As the camera lingers in close-up on Simon's shocked face, a brief burst of laughter occurs, continuing as we cut away to the cockpit. In mid-shot, we have Wash furthest from us sitting in his piloting seat. Nearer to us, on the same side, Jayne is crouched on a console top. Bottom right, as it were, stands Mal, and next to him, nearer to us, stands Zoe. This leaves a gap in the group that is occupied by the camera. The position of the camera, and the depth of shot actually invite the viewer to become the fifth member

of the group, to join the laughing, to share in the joke against Simon which had, only seconds before, been a joke against them.

The ‘death’ of Kaylee is much more than just a formal trick designed to illustrate the power of deft discursive innovation. It certainly does that, but it also works to ensure an emphatic audience attachment to Kaylee; it helps Simon become a figure of sympathy to a certain extent; it shows Mal’s single-mindedness, meanness, wit, and leadership skills (the core crew are certainly united in the enjoyment of the joke); and it does assure the viewer that he or she is watching a television show of signal ambition, scope, and bravery.

Not all death in *Firefly* works in so many different directions, or with such astute discursive representational panache. There are three other deaths, though, that I want to briefly focus on, in order to show how even relatively simple deaths are constructed through particular representational strategies that have an attendant moral resonance. These are the death of Dobson in the same episode, the death of the henchman in ‘The Train Job,’ and the death of Wash in *Serenity*.

Having shot Kaylee, Dobson is not a character with whom the crew or the audience has much sympathy. It can be argued, though, that his working as a lawman makes his act of shooting a forgivable accident in the line of duty rather than an act of malevolence. His efforts to bribe Jayne into betraying the ship further undermines any sense of sympathy (though Mal’s similar efforts to recruit Jayne through bribery should not be forgotten; Mal is far from a morally uncomplicated character). But the moment when any audience sympathy for Dobson is entirely lost is when he viciously and with sadistic delight smashes Book around the head with his makeshift truncheon. It is important that Dobson is not simply an inept lawman, but an actively evil and despicable character in order for his death to have narrative sense as well as moral resonance. As Mal, Zoe, and Jayne return from their transaction on the planet, the ship is beset by Reavers, and Dobson is holding a gun to River’s head.

Onto the ship comes Mal, eager to be off and with no time to waste. The expected standoff (lawman and criminal, reversed, but the trope, like the languid arm, urging a great scene) is not forthcoming. Dobson is in the middle of a verbal threat and, from a distance, Mal shoots his face off. It is a shocking scene, but one that verges on the humorous, because of the extreme, instant violence. The body is dumped off the ship and the crew carry on. Dobson’s death is permissible because he has been demonized—shooter of Kaylee, would-be corrupter of the

already-corrupted Jayne, and violent, sadistic attacker of Book. Despite that, the death sentence is summary in the extreme. Its force comes from what is effectively a generic ellipsis. The time between Mal being confronted by the hostage scene to its resolution should be longer, with verbal parries, cagey movements, efforts to find the best shot. By jumping straight to the kill, Whedon foreshortens the narrative and thereby heightens the effect of the violence. The humor, if such it is, elicits a laugh that is Beckettian in its mode, it is ‘the bitter laugh [that] laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh’ (Beckett 47).

The death of Dobson, like the implied death of Kaylee, derives its power (shock, humor, moral) from disrupting expected, or at least usual, representational strategies. While this tends to be seen as a positive end in its own right by many critics of television, film, and literature, there is a particular example in *Firefly* in which the disruption of generic convention in the representation of death is the cause for some disquiet for John C. Wright, among others. Discussing the show’s attempt to fuse many of the conventions of the tradition of the Western with some of the conventions of science fiction, Wright draws on an example of death from the episode ‘The Train Job.’ The main problem for Wright is a general one that means that *Firefly* is incapable of allowing the necessary level of chivalry to take place. For the aspect of the show to be plausible, his argument runs, a specific kind of chivalric behavior is required, and this chivalric behavior is impossible because it does not cohere with science fiction elements or, more importantly, modern sensibilities. The importance of this in relation to the death scene is as follows. Mal has the henchman of sadistic, possibly mad, crime boss Niska tied up. Mal offers to return the money Niska had paid him, because he has given back the goods he stole. The henchman rejects the offer and makes a death threat that is precise, clear, and emphatic; Mal kicks him into the engine where, inevitably, the body is shredded into a bloody mess. The moment, like Dobson’s death, is horrifying and genuinely, if disturbingly, funny. Unlike Dobson’s death, however, the breaking of generic convention does not serve a greater ethical or aesthetic purpose, for Wright. Indeed, even though Mal’s actions are ‘hardcore’ and the brutality is ‘refreshing’ (165), the effect is one of unrealism.

Realism is, of course, no more than a technique, one that may well have political and philosophical implications, but a technique first and foremost. As a technique it aims to represent its object in a fashion that means a viewer or reader will be as little distracted as

possible by the act of representation so that the world offered will be as unmediated and, therefore, as real-seeming as possible. Realism is not a representation of the real but a technique for the greatest possible level of ‘real-seeming-ness.’ And one part of this technique is the adherence to, or repudiation of, generic conventions. The centrality of chivalric behavior in the Western means that certain kinds of representations of behavior are expected in order for the character and narrative to appear ‘real.’ For Wright, Mal’s failure to understand these codes, his willingness to ignore the inevitable and necessary response by Niska (the avenging of his henchman, the torture and murder of Mal in response to this outrage) means that the action is not realistic. The failure of the show to have a chivalric code because ‘the public is . . . disgusted by chivalry’ (J. Wright 167) leads to a general failure of coded behavior in this instance. Here, the representation of death is a sign of the failure to subvert generic convention successfully. The grim humor is superseded by a sense of writerly failure. Keith DeCandido’s convincing assessment of ‘The Train Job’ as a largely failed episode on a number of grounds goes some way towards explaining what is a cheap piece of story-telling.

Far removed from the depredations of that death are the deaths in *Serenity*. Foremost among these in terms of emotional impact on the audience is that of Wash. It is interesting that in some ways the death of Book (brilliantly acted by Glass in his underplayed, shudderingly violent end) is of more import for plot development insofar as it is the event that triggers Mal’s ferocious and unrelenting desire to succeed against the Operative (Chiwetel Ejiofor). However, it is Wash’s death that assumes the most emotional resonance. And once again the emotional impact of the death is the result of the refusal to accede to representational normalcy.

Having already seen the death of Book, the audience, in some senses, could be forgiven for assuming that it had witnessed the almost necessary death of a major character (and the oldest of the series regulars). When we watch the plan by Mal to escape from both the Alliance and the Reavers, there is a genuine excitement and a sense of peril, but one which does not necessarily assume that the peril is life-threatening for the characters. As Wash valiantly flies the ship with courage and tenacity, and as he introduces the phrase ‘I am a leaf on the wind’ that will be a short-lived refrain to indicate he is capable of gliding the ship onto land without power, we revel in his skills. The action shots are tremendous, the effects thrilling, and the landing

a bumpy, shaky, metal-wrenching, wall-destroying masterpiece of suspense. But the ship comes to its noisy halt, there are tentative smiles, and Wash begins to repeat his refrain when, out of nowhere, and with absolute fatality, a harpoon spears him in mid-sentence. The shock of the characters is palpable, the audience's no less so.

On the DVD commentary, Whedon says that he needed to kill Wash in order to maintain in the audience a genuine sense of peril, a true expectation that more could die. However, it is not simply the fact of his being killed, but the particular representational choices that are important. To have the exhilarating moment of victory so savagely translated into brute misery is not, in itself, completely unusual, but as the last major representation of death in the *Firefly* franchise (thus far), it reminds us of the efforts to which the creative team has gone to ensure that the program never settled for the simply expected, the normal, the usual.

These efforts have not always been successful (the henchman in the engine), have not always been emotionally compelling (the death of Dobson), but they have always been testaments to the vigorous insistence on the centrality of the method of representation. The *mise-en-scène* is a major aspect of television drama, and death is often one of the main events depicted. By focusing on the compositional elements of these scenes and inviting the audience to engage not just in the fact of death but in the televisual structure of the deaths, *Firefly* attempts to raise death from a simple plot device or emotional shorthand. Indeed, and fully cognizant of the irony, we can see that the representation of death becomes one of the sites where the sheer vitality of the show's aesthetic is at its most lively.



FANS, TRANSITION,  
AND THE  
WORLD  
OUTSIDE





# 18. 'Can't Stop the Signal'

## The Resurrection/Regeneration of *Serenity*

STACEY ABBOTT

They tried to kill us. They did kill us. And here we are. We've done the impossible, and that makes us mighty. (Joss Whedon to the fans of *Firefly/Serenity*<sup>1</sup>)

The 2005 release of *Serenity*, the cinematic sequel to Joss Whedon's science fiction television series *Firefly*, is more than simply the most recent example of Hollywood drawing upon pre-existing source material to fill its screens. Instead, it is a further example of how developments within quality television have facilitated a notable fluidity with the film industry. Actors, writers, and directors traditionally associated with the cinema—including Kiefer Sutherland, Glenn Close, Aaron Sorkin, and Quentin Tarantino—have increasingly turned to television as a site of experimentation and quality drama, while actors like George Clooney and Jennifer Aniston, who became stars through particular television series, have transformed their television success into cinema success.

*Serenity* also marks the point where Whedon's television and cinema career came full circle. The journey toward transforming *Firefly* into a big-screen science fiction/action film is a reversal of his reconception of the horror/comedy film *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992) for television. Following the *Buffy* film's lackluster reception and Whedon's own dissatisfaction with how his script was handled on screen, Whedon surprised many by deciding to revisit the same concept, this time in the form of a television series under his own control. The success of

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) has been well documented both in fan and scholarly publications (Golden and Holder; Kaveney; Wilcox and Lavery). The transformation of *Firefly* into *Serenity*, this time from television into film, was a far greater gamble. There have recently been numerous big-screen adaptations or remakes of successful television series, such as *Mission Impossible* (1996), *Charlie's Angels* (2000), and *Miami Vice* (2006). Furthermore, there have been successful examples of series not remade but cinematically serialized. For instance, with the *Star Trek* movies (both original and *The Next Generation*), the cinema is playing host to the further adventures of the crew of the *Enterprise* (with the same actors) while in the case of *The X-Files* (1998), the film offered a spectacular climax to a successful narrative arc around the alien invasion of the Earth. The transformation of *Firefly* into *Serenity* was, however, a very different endeavor due to the series' lack of success. Canceled by the Fox network after fourteen episodes were filmed, the concept was picked up by Universal Studios following the persistent lobbying for the series by its creator Joss Whedon, a protest campaign by devoted fans, and the series' successful DVD sales.

Merely getting the green light to turn *Firefly* into a movie is testament to Whedon's persistence and vision for the project, far greater than even his belief in *Buffy*. While the growing fanbase proved that there was life (or afterlife) in *Firefly* yet, the producers and studio needed the film to appeal to a larger audience. At the same time, they had to satisfy the fans, whose loyalty was an intrinsic part of the film's genesis. Additionally, while television can sometimes allow for a slow build-up of an audience, often judging the success of a niche genre series not by the size of their viewing figures but by their ability 'to increase their viewership' (Colvin 19), contemporary film releases do rely upon immediate and large box-office figures, the opening weekend often determining a film's success. In reality, the film's modest domestic box office of \$10.1 million in its opening weekend was considered a calm start by industry standards, but Universal's head of distribution, Nikki Rocco stated that 'over 40 percent [of moviegoers] were the fans. And there was probably another 30 percent that had not watched the show but had heard of it' (qtd. in Gray).<sup>2</sup> To satisfy these audiences, the film needed to be both faithful to the series while also decidedly cinematic and accessible to the uninitiated, a point acknowledged by Whedon as the reason it was the most difficult script he had written to date: 'You have to service the fans and make it for people who'd never seen it, which means not repeating or contradicting anything you've done

before and yet having all this information that there just has to be’ (qtd. in ‘Burning Bright’ 67). To achieve this, *Serenity* continues from where the series stops—while no dates are given, the absences of both Shepherd Book and Inara from the ship suggest that it is months since the final episode of the show—and resolves certain narrative strands along the way. Most notably, it explains why the Alliance has continued to pursue River Tam since her brother Simon rescued her from their facility.

The film, however, also reworks aspects of the series’ pilot episode, also called ‘Serenity’ (1.1), to reorient the narrative for its new medium and audience. In order to serve those viewers who had never seen the show, certain information about Captain Malcolm Reynolds, the Tams, and the Reavers—previously outlined in the pilot—needed to be provided for the film, yet delivered in such a way as not to feel repetitive to fans. What Whedon, therefore, attempts with *Serenity* is more regeneration than resurrection—re-enacting key moments from the pilot in a cinematic way. For instance, in the pilot Simon has to explain why he is smuggling River in a packing container on board the ship *Serenity*, while being pursued by the Alliance. He stands erect before the entire crew in the dining hall and tells his story. The emphasis in this scene is upon the crew’s response to his and River’s plight. In the film, however, we actually get to see Simon’s rescue at the beginning of the film—subsequently revealed to be a recording of the events. Both sequences provide similar information. River was a prodigy; she was taken by the Alliance as an object of study, experimentation, and conditioning, and was rescued by her brother, who gave up everything he had to save her. While Simon tells the crew in the pilot that River was special, in the beginning of *Serenity* we see her psychic talents when she knows that security are on their way and then her physical conditioning when she hides by climbing up the wall and holding onto the ceiling in Spiderman fashion. In the television version, Whedon tells this backstory while in the film he shows it in a visually engaging way.

Similarly, the Reavers play an important role in both the pilot and the film. In the pilot the audience is first introduced to the Reavers when one of their ships passes *Serenity* and the crew wait to find out if they will attempt to board. The horror that the Reavers represent is conveyed through the suspense of the sequence, as their ship slowly cruises by, accompanied by a rather primal and threatening drumbeat, and the response of the crew as they anticipate an attack. The emphasis

is upon their fear of the Reavers. The image of the formidable Jayne loading his gun, not only to stand and fight but also to kill himself if captured, is a clear indication that the Reavers are to be truly feared, a reaction reaffirmed when Zoe informs Simon that ‘if they take the ship, they’ll rape us to death, eat our flesh, and sew our skins into their clothing. And if we’re very, very lucky, they’ll do it in that order’ (‘Serenity’).

In the film *Serenity*, however, the introduction of the Reavers is achieved through a visual representation of their violent intrusion into a small community on one of the border moons. In this sequence, a small boy tells his mother he thinks he heard gunfire. As she turns away, telling him it’s nothing, the film cuts to a brief close-up of a Reaver, covered in blood, as he slashes her face. This is followed by a match-on-action to a shot of the psychic River as she screams and falls over as if in response to the blow. This is a violent introduction to the Reavers, but more significantly it is the suddenness of their appearance and the fast pace of the editing that conveys their aggression and violence. Whedon explains he felt compelled to show the Reavers here but only in glimpses, to emphasize their presence yet maintain their nightmarish qualities (‘Production Notes’ 9). Throughout their attack on the village, the horror of their atrocities is depicted in spectacular glimpses of violence, shockingly intercut with the action. This approach is maintained at the end of the film when the Reavers attack the crew of *Serenity* in their final standoff, as well as when the crew watch a transmission about what happened on the planet Miranda, a recording at the end of which the reporting officer is attacked by a Reaver who pushes her to the ground and out of frame. The horror of what follows is conveyed by her screams and the revolted and terrified expressions of the crew. The glimpse here serves as a visual, therefore more cinematic, form of suggestion, replacing the anticipation of violence utilized in the series. In both cases, the emphasis remains upon the reaction of the crew.

While these sequences provide the necessary backstory for the series and film, Whedon also reworked aspects of the series’ main story to facilitate the film’s narrative. As he explains, his script for *Serenity* was more of a ‘reboot’ of the original series, particularly around the position that Simon and River have on the ship and their relationship with Mal: ‘Mal and Simon had reached an understanding [on the series] that I have completely ignored, but I’ve done that with a specific reason, there’s a reason why Mal and Simon are in conflict

that is useful to me' (qtd. in 'Burning Bright' 68). While this 'reboot' raises continuity issues and contains within it the potential to disrupt the narrative for fans of the series, its main purpose is to facilitate the transition of the narrative from television to film. By rearticulating the tension between Mal and Simon, which was more or less resolved by the end of the series, Whedon positions their story alongside Mal's (his loss of faith and purpose in the face of the Alliance) into an integrated narrative. While a television series can operate with different character-based narrative strands that may occasionally interact but generally run alongside each other, a film needs to integrate its narrative strands towards a single conclusion—in this case, unlocking and revealing the secrets trapped within River. This serves to resolve the trauma of her character—she tells Simon that she's 'all right now'—and enables Mal to take a noble stance and win a battle against the Alliance.

### *Blurring the television and cinema divide*

In rewriting *Buff the Vampire Slayer* as a television series rather than a stand-alone movie, Whedon was able to take advantage of the strengths of the medium to develop his characters gradually over longer, more complex narrative arcs. As Wilcox and Lavery point out, the series 'has a real, a palpable past' that enables its characters to grow and learn from their mistakes (xxiii). In his reverse adaptation of *Firefly* for the cinema, Whedon not only opts for a more visual form of story-telling but also takes advantage of the specificity of the cinematic form to create a big-screen spectacle. In this manner it is successful where the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* movies, often feeling like extended episodes rather than cinematic features, failed. Despite possessing a modest budget (approximately \$40 million) in comparison to other science fiction films, *Serenity* is big. Opting to shoot the film in widescreen, Whedon explains that in order to be distinct from an episode of the series, the film needed to have 'a grander scale' (qtd. in Dyer 102):<sup>3</sup>

Everything had to be a little bit grander for the film . . . We had to amp up everything we had done to a much greater scale. I wanted desperately for this to be wide screen, because it's drama with a large cast, it's a space epic and a bit of a Western. All of that just cried out for wide screen. But you need to put something in that's epic in scale. (qtd. in 'Production Notes' 8)

This scale exists on both a narrative and aesthetic level. The film's story about the resistance of a small group of outlaws against the all-powerful ruling government, the Alliance, draws narrative parallels with the *Star Wars* saga while aesthetically possessing all of the set pieces of a successful science fiction action film. These include a surface hovercraft chase sequence, a kinetically choreographed martial arts fight scene, numerous hand-to-hand combat sequences, and a dramatic space battle between the film's two primary villains, the Alliance and the Reavers, with the small outlaw ship *Serenity* caught in the middle. Throughout these sequences, the film puts its spectacular physical and special effects—as well as its elaborate set design (such as the interior of *Serenity*, the surface of *Miranda*, and Mr. Universe's communications complex)—up on display. Here we see Whedon and crew's decided attempt to build upon images and effects displayed in the series and extend them into a full-blown science fiction spectacle. To achieve this, the visual effects company, Zoic Studios, that had worked on the television show had to expand their creative team from twelve to seventy-eight people to achieve the 412 effects used in the film (Argy 79).

In doing this, however, the film does not sacrifice the intimacy of the television form, but within the constraints of its running time maintains the emphasis upon complex characterization and story over spectacle that is a quality of the television series. As Loni Peristere, the visual effects supervisor for *Firefly* and *Serenity*, explains,

the film is a character drama that has visual effects. It is not *Star Wars*. It has a gigantic space battle at the end, but that is only set dressing for *Serenity* as she passes through the battle to get to Mr. Universe, who holds the relay they're going to use to send the message that will clarify the big question of the movie. Joss always works that way: his effects are integrated into the story, but they're not the story. (qtd. in E. Gross 66)

Here the film is able both to dazzle its audience with a beautifully conceived and thrilling space battle—beginning with the image of the tiny *Serenity* caught inbetween the colossal Reaver and Alliance ships poised for attack—and to provide them with a more intimate struggle as the crew fights on the surface of the planet to reveal the truth about the Alliance.

The opening of the film offers a similar relationship between spectacle and narrative. The film begins with a seemingly conventional

introduction to Whedon's narrative universe as beautiful images of spaceships launching from the earth are accompanied by a voiceover explaining the story of humanity's movement into space, the history of the Alliance, and the war with the Independents. This is a generically familiar introduction to a science fiction universe. This voiceover is, however, robbed of its omniscience when it is revealed to be a teacher lecturing to her students about the formation of the Alliance—offering a clearly biased position. The fluidity and authority of this sequence is further disrupted when a young River Tam challenges her teacher, who responds by violently stabbing River in the forehead with her own pen. The scene cuts immediately to a shot of River, now a teenage girl strapped to a chair in an Alliance medical facility, being stabbed in the forehead with a needle. The violence of the moment is reinforced by River's screams. This vision of a 'better world' that opens the film is, as a result of this transition, presented as suspect, having emerged from the mind of a traumatized and tortured girl. Furthermore, this jarring transition shifts the focus of the film from an epic story to one of character as we are introduced to River and her brother Simon, who has come to rescue her.

The film's broader story about the pursuit of *Serenity's* outlaw crew by the Alliance because they are protecting Simon and River also emphasizes intimate characterization over big-screen spectacle. The Alliance is represented throughout the film not by the presence of an armada of ships or armies of soldiers, although these are present at the end, but rather through the unnerving performance of Chiwetel Ejiofor as the Operative. In this role, he represents the authority and self-righteousness of the Alliance, for he is calm, cold, and calculating, and he strongly believes in the justification of his actions even if they include the cold-blooded murder of children. As Inara points out, he is dangerous not because he is a killer but because he is a believer. As a result, the final confrontation between Mal, a long-standing opponent of the Alliance, and the Operative is not simply a battle between hero and villain, but a battle between believers, the latter trying to preserve the Alliance, while the former tries to bring it down.<sup>4</sup> The climax of the confrontation, therefore, does not result in the death of the villain (Mal leaves the Operative alive) but the death of his belief system. Here the film delivers both satisfying action and intelligent character development.

Whedon, never afraid to defy narrative and aesthetic conventions, also blurs the distinction between cinematic and televisual forms in



*Serenity* as he has done on his television series. In visualizing the harsh world of *Firefly*, Whedon argued for an unconventional televisual style that involved extensive use of hand-held cinematography and favored shaky zooms, swish pans, and long takes that moved from one character to another as opposed to what Karen Lury describes as the ‘labour- and time-intensive “single-shots”’ quite common in television (24). *Serenity* maintains this aesthetic. From the four-and-a-half-minute sequence-shot that follows Mal around his ship as it undergoes a rocky landing—introducing the audience to each of the characters on board and establishing the layout of the ship—to the shaky hand-held photography of the hovercraft chase sequence, the world of *Serenity* is rough, bumpy, and replete with danger. For instance, in the chase sequence Mal, Zoe, River, and Jayne are as much in danger of falling off the hovercraft as they are of being shot or captured by Reavers.

At the same time as offering this gritty aesthetic, Whedon also borrows a typically televisual form and reimagines it for the cinematic medium—namely the close-up. Lury claims that in television ‘There is a constant return to the human face, often not simply in the form of a head-and-shoulders shot, but in an even more intimate framing in which the face fills the screen’ (30). This emphasis on the close-up is usually linked to the smallness of the television screen and its seeming intimacy, located as it is within the home. As Lury argues, the extreme proximity that is common within television could ‘seem almost hysterical (alarming and/or funny) in another medium, such as cinema,’ particularly widescreen cinema, which magnifies the image exponentially. In *Serenity*, however, despite the presence of big-screen spectacle in the form of special effects as described above, Whedon reimages the close-up as a new form of big-screen spectacle, particularly in his privileging of it in relation to River Tam. Extreme close-ups of River, often completely filling the frame, are used so often in *Serenity* that they are a clear visual motif. Right from the sequence when the Operative studies the footage of River’s escape, there is a repeated use of this type of framing throughout the film. The Operative is first introduced as his voice is heard calling for the recording of River and Simon to stop, backtrack, and stop again. The image is paused on a close-up of River, frozen in time, looking off screen as the Operative’s face passes through her image and into the frame. Later, as he begins his search for her, he walks up to the still-frozen hologram of River and asks, ‘Where are you hiding, little girl?’ as the camera zooms into a close-up of their two faces. This question is answered with another

close-up as the introductory long take around *Serenity* ends on an extreme close-up of River. The compositions of these close-ups also directly call attention to themselves as spectacle, for River is rarely positioned in a conventional head-and-shoulders shot but is often lying down and pictured from the side, photographed at canted angles or even upside down.

Narrative and spectacle are also linked through the use of the close-up in two particular split-screen shots that bring River and Mal together in the same frame. In the first example, Kaylee complains to Jayne that the captain will eventually drive everyone off the ship, just like River and Simon, who have decided to leave. The conversation takes place over a close-up of River, who is listening. The shot slowly dissolves to a shot of Mal in his room. As the two shots merge, their faces are briefly composed on either side of the screen, facing each other and establishing an association between their respective stories and characters. Another similar shot is used after River's martial arts training is revealed and the crew discuss her as a potential threat. Jayne tells the captain that he may have to shoot her if it comes to it, to which Mal responds, 'It has crossed my mind,' and as he says this, the right-hand side of the image dissolves to an image of River lying on the ground, her lips mouthing the words as Mal speaks them. Again the two are visually linked on screen through the spectacle of these split-screen close-ups.

The most notable use of close-up takes place in the Maidenhead Bar when River responds to the Alliance's subliminal signal. As the crew go about their business, River is drawn to the bar's television screens, through which the signal is being broadcast. As she stares at them, the camera slowly moves into a close-up of her face, intercut with an elaborate series of superimpositions and juxtapositions of images and sounds, including flashes of River strapped to a chair screaming, the teacher from her dream, the Operative, and a Reaver. Each time we return to her face, the image is closer and the lighting becomes increasingly blue and washed out, creating a dreamlike quality. This, along with the fading of ambient sound and the montage of images, emphasizes River's subjectivity. The camera continues to push into an extreme close-up of her eyes, which then tilts down to a shot of her mouth, filling the screen, as she utters 'Miranda.' Operating contrary to convention, the extreme proximity of this shot on the cinema screen does not feel 'alarming and/or funny' but rather signals the significance of the moment. Wilcox has compared this shot to one of the most iconic

shots in American film history: the extreme close-up of Charles Foster Kane's lips speaking the word 'Rosebud' in *Citizen Kane* (1941; see Chapter 12). As in *Citizen Kane*, this use of the extreme close-up places a tremendous emphasis on the importance of the word to the narrative and, again like *Kane*, the subsequent narrative is structured around the search for the meaning of the word primarily as a means of unlocking a greater secret. Rather than objectifying River's face, this elaborate sequence serves to privilege her subjectivity—again highlighting how Whedon places spectacle at the service of characterization and story, and, in so doing, interweaves the stylistic conventions of film and television.

*'Can't stop the signal': The vindication of the Browncoats*

The blurring of the line between film and television is reinforced by the introduction of a new character, Mr. Universe, into the *Firefly*-verse, a move that seems designed explicitly to privilege the power of television to communicate. A classic techno-nerd, Mr. Universe controls and monitors the galaxy's communication networks with the catchphrase 'Can't stop the signal.' Here *Serenity* is unusual in its depiction of a future in which television remains a primary form of communication among the masses and appears to exist in part beyond the control of the government; instead it is in the hands of a media 'fan.' The relevance of this message, however, applies to not only the film's narrative but also the meta-narrative of the film's production and in particular the role played by fans in resurrecting *Serenity*. Both prior to and following the *Firefly* fan protests, numerous television series from *Star Trek* (1966–9) to *Farscape* (1999–2003), *Beauty and the Beast* (1987–90) to *Angel* (1999–2004) have witnessed fans galvanizing their efforts to see a much-loved series returned to the screens. The creators, networks, and studios, therefore, often use this kind of support as a means of promoting the series. Yet as Henry Jenkins points out, referring in particular to the *Batman* and *Star Wars* films, many directors or producers see fan 'ownership of the text' as infringing 'upon the producer's creative freedom and restrict their ability to negotiate for a larger audience' (30). In the case of *Serenity*, discourses around the film's production have, however, blurred the distinction between creator and fan by positioning them as working together to bring their shared vision to the screen and to a bigger audience. Cast and crew

equally acknowledge that the series’ substantial DVD sales helped convince Universal Studios to approve the project. Furthermore, Joss Whedon and his cast regularly appeared at a range of comic and genre conventions in the United States throughout the film’s production and post-production, showing excerpts from the incomplete film to receive fan feedback and to build anticipation for the film’s eventual release.

These sneak-peeks climaxed in a series of advance screenings of the film for self-identified fans of the series. Titled the ‘Can’t Stop the Signal’ preview screenings, they featured a recorded video message from Joss Whedon thanking the fans for their contribution to *Serenity*’s genesis and tasking them to spread positive word of mouth about the film to generate the bigger audience necessary to keep *Firefly/Serenity* on the screen. This type of fan–creator relationship is an extreme version of a pre-existing relationship within cult television for, as explained by Matt Hills, ‘The line between creator and audience is blurred by the fact that the former supposedly communicates an intense, private vision to the latter’ (133). In the case of *Firefly/Serenity*, this vision was transformed from Whedon’s vision of the *Firefly* universe to a shared belief in the series after its cancellation and then to a shared ownership of its big-screen incarnation through official recognition of the role played by fans in making the film possible.

This ownership of the *Firefly/Serenity* text by fans was reinforced by their own identification with the series’ Browncoats, the Independents who fought a losing war against the Alliance. The identification with these characters is in large part a result of their positioning as culturally marginalized outsiders, a characteristic that often attracts cult audiences to a particular television series (Spock in *Star Trek*, Mulder in *The X-Files*, and the Scooby Gang in *Buffy* all embody outsiders with whom cult audiences have chosen to identify). It also, however, became a part of the fans’ positioning of themselves as fighting an ‘unwinnable’ fight against the network who canceled the series. What is particularly interesting is, therefore, how the film seems to engage directly with this position of the fans within the text of the film by recasting the war between the Alliance and the Browncoats as an attempt on the part of the *Serenity* crew to share a hidden truth withheld from the public by the Alliance. The text is here echoing the attempts by Whedon and his cast to work with the fans to spread the word about *Firefly*. The tagline ‘Can’t Stop the Signal’ refers both to the truth about the Alliance and the truth about *Firefly*, and also serves to vindicate the

Browncoats—on and off screen—for their persistence in fighting a seemingly ‘unwinnable’ war (see Chapter 19).

*Firefly/Serenity*, therefore, not only highlights the increasing significance of television alongside the cinema by narrowing the divide between the two media both narratively and aesthetically, but also attempts to valorize the cult television audience, traditionally represented as ‘obsessive,’ by making them the heroes of the film. Whether or not the Browncoats are truly vindicated, however, remains to be seen. While Whedon’s film suggests the importance of television in the media landscape, it is necessary to question whether the message will hold sway when compared to the draw of the big screen. Has television and cult fandom really come that far, or has the film industry simply benefited from their increasing power within the commercial market? Having recently withdrawn from the Warner Brothers’ production of *Wonder Woman*, but still developing the fantasy thriller *Goners* for Universal Pictures, Whedon now plans to return to television with *Dollhouse*—an act that would surely suggest a ‘real’ parity between television and the cinema. Whedon’s circle thus continues to turn.

# 19. The Browncoats Are Coming!

*Firefly, Serenity, and Fan Activism*<sup>1</sup>

TANYA R. COCHRAN

A fan can be passive; a Browncoat never is. (po1s, qtd. in Browncoats.com)

I will be the first to admit that I was late to *Firefly*, and when I finally watched it, I did so reluctantly. It wasn't that I distrusted Joss Whedon; I had long before willfully surrendered to the intellectual and fannish pleasures of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Angel* (1999–2004). I just didn't think I could warm up to anything with a Western flavor. Guns and holsters, cowboy boots, and cattle-wrangling seemed too akin to country music, much of which I have no taste for. But like many other people, when *Firefly* was released on DVD, I decided to give it a chance. After a marathon viewing, in the order the episodes were intended to be watched, *Firefly* became televisual sustenance for me; I was an instant fan. Soon I found a particular group of fans that was distinguishing itself among the rest. They were calling themselves 'Browncoats.' My curiosity—both as a scholar and as a fan—led me to explore what that title means. Rather than coming to a tidy conclusion about Browncoat-ness, I am increasingly intrigued and challenged by it, especially in light of broader theories about fans, fan culture, and consumption.

*Fandom and behavior, or what Browncoats do*

Though some people continue to believe fans are a minority of freaks and geeks who are bound to the Latin root of their title (*fanaticus*—

insane, mad, possessed by the gods), being a fan is, as Cornel Sandvoss observes, ‘a common and ordinary aspect of everyday life in the industrialized world’ (3). In fact, those TV series creators who have a pulse on how fans usually operate create their series to inspire such a following, including the kinds of activities inherent to the culture: filk,<sup>2</sup> fanzines, conventions (or ‘cons’), and more. For example, Renaissance Pictures crafted *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) to draw a cult following and welcomed fans’ creative poaching, a decision that led to a ‘symbiotic relationship’ with its avid viewers (Jones 175). Only on the rare occasion that fans tried to profit from their creations did Renaissance threaten or take legal action; it particularly understood the benefits of *Xena*’s online enthusiasts: ‘part virtual temple, part cosmology in and of itself, part community, part arena for creative enterprise, and part unofficial advertising campaign’ (175). In the family of fandom, Xenites—and X-Philes and Trekkers and Leapers and Ringers—and Browncoats are closely related through their online presence and their participatory nature.<sup>3</sup>

Because most fans want to do more than just talk about their favorite show, film, or band, participating quickly develops into an amalgamation of consuming and producing. One of the simplest ways of bearing witness to one’s fandom is to buy an ‘official’ product. For *Firefly* and *Serenity* fans, that means DVDs, soundtracks, visual companion books, novelizations, trading cards, action figures, and t-shirts authorized by and mass-produced for 20th Century Fox and Universal Pictures. These products are easy to find (especially at fan conventions like Dragon\*Con and WonderCon or through online stores), though they can be pricey. In addition to being expensive, products like action figures and sculpted busts are designed with collector-investors in mind; it’s difficult to resist buying just one of a series, collecting variants, and procuring limited editions. In contrast to official merchandise—and perhaps more pleasurable to produce and consume—are wares created by fans for fans.

For instance, The Signal and Firefly Talk continue to podcast every other week. Shows include chat about specific television episodes or the film, tips on gaming, news about fan events like the Browncoats Backup Bash (December 2006) and the Browncoat Cruise (December 2007), reviews of fan fiction and filk albums such as the Bedlam Bards’ *On the Drift: Music Inspired by Firefly and Serenity*, and updates on fan-made films like the parody *Mosquito* (2005) and the documentary *Done the Impossible: The Fans’ Tale of Firefly and Serenity*

(2006). Searching with the term ‘Firefly’ at deviantART uncovers a plethora of high-quality work, including that of artists by profession and fans like Kristèle Pelland, whose cartoon drawing of the *Serenity* cast has to date elicited over 22,000 views and hundreds of comments. Fireflyfans.net catalogs fan fiction sites as well as hosts the writing and art of its message board members. In the Blue Sun Room, for example, Ichiban began posting a series of comic book pages in June 2007, a project called ‘Patience’ that he is writing with a friend. In a hunt for fan poetry, gems like this ‘black humor’ haiku by Solai are unearthed:

Wash stated firmly  
 ‘I am a leaf on the wind’  
 Leaf then, kabob now

Over five hundred hits materialize when browsing the web for ‘*Firefly* vids’ (music videos).<sup>4</sup> Or one might eventually come across the work of writer/playwright/actor/musician/artist Stan Peal, whose original music and lyrics include ‘Jayne’s Hat,’ the tale of Jayne’s cherished, mama-knitted noggin protector. Peal’s other *Firefly* work consists of the Christmas/advertising ditty ‘Have You Seen *Serenity*?’ and the tribute ‘Praise to Joss Whedon’—the former set to the score of ‘The Little Drummer Boy’ and the latter to the hymn ‘Praise to the Lord, the Almighty.’ When dressing like a favorite character strikes the fancy—maybe in preparation for a shindig (Browncoat gathering) or con—fans like Maggie are happy to share how they put their costumes together. Maggie details her step-by-step process—some pieces from scratch, others from retailers—of assembling Kaylee’s jumpsuit, right down to the teddy bear patch and accessories like her parasol. If Frederick Kreuziger’s argument that ‘science fiction today functions as a religion’ (1) seems doubtful, listening to the ‘*Firefly* Prayer’ on Succatash’s website might remove some skepticism. Set amidst eerie background music, the prayer is prefaced by an uncanny voice that asks others to bow their heads then leads a call-and-response appeal:

We believe in one *Firefly* . . .  
 We know that Fox is the devil.  
 We believe in Joss Whedon . . .  
 Give us this day our weekly *Firefly*,



And deliver us from Reavers.  
 Guide us through the Black.  
 Show me how to walk the way of *Firefly*.  
 Amen.

As coeditor of and an author for this collection, I think it is also safe to say that some *Firefly* and *Serenity* fans engage in scholarly activities such as writing conference papers, journal articles, book chapters, and books.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to these artistic, imaginative, and academic displays of fandom, Browncoats—not unlike *Angel* devotees, Trekkers, or Elvis fans—often actively support non-profit organizations. The last few years have seen Browncoats raise money for victims of Asia's tsunami, those displaced by Hurricane Katrina, and Freedom from Hunger. They also earnestly support Whedon's charity of choice, Equality Now, which works to 'end violence and discrimination against women and girls around the world.' At San Diego's Comic-Con 2005, Browncoats collected over \$12,000 for the organization. Jessica Neuwirth, an Equality Now representative, believes that Whedon's work, especially his strong female characters, has made a significant impact on viewers and, in turn, has helped advance the efforts of the organization. Whedon is able to rally fans, she believes, because 'He has a way of communicating with people that is like magic, and it just manages . . . to turn people on to this idea that they have a responsibility, that they *can* make a difference' (qtd. in *Done the Impossible*). Because Ron Glass (Shepherd Book) serves on its board, the Browncoats chose to fundraise at a subsequent Comic-Con for the Al Wooten Jr. Heritage Center, a South Central Los Angeles non-profit organization that hosts after-school social and academic programs for local youth. The philanthropy of *Firefly* and *Serenity* fans suggests that being a Browncoat has much to do with fostering a 'spirit of community and activism' (Neuwirth, qtd. in *Done the Impossible*). That spirit has paid off: The Signal reported in its 7 June 2007 podcast that Browncoats raised over \$60,000 just for Equality Now in 2006. They far surpassed that sum in 2007 with the second annual international fundraiser Can't Stop the Serenity, screenings of the film in cities from Adelaide to Dublin, from Boston to Portland in honor of Whedon's birthday and to benefit Equality Now.<sup>6</sup> The event website reports that in 2007 the screenings raised \$114,528.48.

*Fandom and identity, or who Browncoats are*

Being participatory and productive may be typical fan markers, but fannish behavior does not necessarily make one a Browncoat. Among *Firefly* and *Serenity* fans themselves, intensity of devotion and level of activity distinguishes admirers from true Browncoats:

A fan is someone who watches the show and likes it—simple enough. But a Browncoat . . . is much more of a fan activist, . . . has taken the next step: Instead of just saying, ‘What a great show—oh well, too bad it was cancelled,’ the Browncoat says, ‘F#ck that! What can I do to keep *Firefly* going!?!’ (po1s, qtd. in Browncoats.com)

Other online Browncoats describe their fandom repeatedly with words like ‘passionate,’ ‘rebellious,’ and ‘independent.’ An ‘us against them’ motif particularly colors their self-depictions. Borrowing from the series and film, many make direct comparisons (as if *Firefly* and *Serenity* are allegories of their experience) between *Serenity*’s crew and themselves, between the Alliance and 20th Century Fox:

Browncoats. It’s not just a cute name because that’s what they called people on the show. That’s who we are. We’re the people who lost, and we’re the people who were brothers in arms when the cancellation came down. (Luke Piotrowski, qtd. in *Done the Impossible*)

Outside the story are us, the fans. We Browncoats resemble more than a little the disenfranchised crew of the show. And not unlike Mal and Zoe, we have refused to lay down in defeat and accept the choices that the ‘Alliance’ has left us. (Editors on Browncoats.com)

From these representative examples, particular words and phrases reiterate the active defiance of being disenfranchised and the conviction—even dogma—that a Browncoat is engaged in a ‘fight’ against the ‘Alliance.’ The metaphors of war, resistance, and insurgency clearly govern the symbolic paradigm of Browncoat-ness,<sup>7</sup> which is not surprising, considering that Whedon himself introduced the early film screenings with a rallying cry: ‘They tried to kill us. They *did* kill us. And here we are. We’ve done the impossible, and that makes us mighty.’

While ‘fightin’ words’ shape much of *Firefly* and *Serenity* fandom, another aspect of Browncoat identity is dominated by heart. The community’s camaraderie and ethic of care is well illustrated by the story of Kerry Pearson. According to Adam Baldwin (Jayne), Pearson was a ‘perfect example of the *Firefly* family and the *Firefly* universe’ (qtd. in *Done the Impossible*). Pearson, who went by the screen name Lux Lucre, died of complications related to diabetes about two years after the cancellation of the series. In the special feature ‘Tribute to Lux’ on *Done the Impossible*, Jeremy Neish explains, ‘I think Lux was one of the first über-fans. He created the *South Park* characters based on the *Firefly* characters.’<sup>8</sup> He did comics. He was just really active in the fan community. Everybody just kind of knew who he was.’<sup>9</sup> In March 2003, Pearson joined some friends from the original *Firefly* message board to celebrate his fortieth birthday in Las Vegas, and the twenty fans who gathered claim that party as the first Browncoat shindig. In January 2004, Pearson died. Fans who knew him recount the reasons why he was both a Browncoat and friend: ‘I remember Lux sending me a private email when I joined the official board. It struck me as a very friendly gesture and made me feel welcome and started that feeling of extended family I get from the boards’ (Browncoat1). Because Pearson died before *Serenity* went to theaters, some message boarders vowed to honor him by buying extra movie tickets and giving them to strangers (*Done the Impossible*). Pearson’s popularity and the reason for memorials to him seem largely attributed to his activism, his giving to and participating in the community through his art, filk, and stories.

One story in particular epitomizes Pearson’s fan experience and contributes to the construction of Browncoat identity for the entire community. While in Vancouver filming an episode of *Stargate SG-1* (1997–2007) after *Firefly* was canceled, Adam Baldwin signed onto the message board where he had previously met Pearson and invited him to a local hotel for a beer. Later, they were joined by Alan Tudyk (Wash) who was in the area filming *I, Robot* (2004). To fellow fans’ appreciative awe, Pearson posted to the board soon after, sharing the event through personal testimony and photos. He had, of course, experienced a rare and coveted fan moment: one-on-one time with celebrities associated with the object of his fandom—at *their* invitation, no less. Pearson created a vicarious experience for others, one that continues to be told and retold as it strengthens the Browncoat mythos, even for those who never knew or will know him: ‘I never got to know Lux, but I know

he was one of our finest. Few fandoms get to have such prolific and creative contributors. He was truly one of a kind' (Channain).

*Fandom, production, and consumption, or Browncoats' power*

From experience, I know how much time can slip away while watching Browncoat vids and short films, perusing self-defining manifestos, and reading about fans' encounters with Whedon, his cast and crew. Yet exploring, enjoying, and validating fan activities and identities provide only pieces of a whole picture, pieces scholars have focused on for too long, according to Derek Johnson. Johnson argues that researchers should be looking at the schisms among fans, the rifts between fans and 'external institutions' (287). While the early work of media scholars like Henry Jenkins (*Textual Poachers*, 1992) stressed and praised the creativity, unity, and normality of fans, that work continues to be challenged and complicated, even by Jenkins himself. In the meantime, the orthodox understanding of the culture industry and fandom as being isolated entities has led both fans and scholars to see the industry as 'unequivocally exploitative' and the fans as deliciously resistant (Jones 163). But devout television aficionados inhabit neither a separate nor distant world from the production companies they sometimes vilify. These 'fan "politics" . . . are enormously problematic and complex' (163), and the invention and ubiquity of the internet have only magnified the matter (Tushnet 62–3).

As media scholars Sara Gwenllian Jones and Rebecca Tushnet relate, it was not too long ago that fan-produced artifacts were localized and of varying quality (165–6; 63). The most well-known examples, of course, come from *Star Trek*, a series that engendered an audience response like no other television show before it. Probably the first fan activists, Trekkers took to the streets and also flooded the network with letters when the show was slated for cancellation. The fans were so involved in the series that they had begun, after only a few episodes, to respond in creative ways, generating some of the earliest fanzines and filk, for instance. But most, if not all, of their inventive projects were shared among local friends and fellow fans and were not for profit. These creations had limited distribution and were, according to Jones, of low production quality;<sup>10</sup> Trekker-made art, fiction, and music were not perceived by *Star Trek*'s owners as a threat (166). The internet as well as image, sound, and film editing software now allow

for wide distribution and high-quality products, some of which fans sell, making them a greater threat than in years past. The account of artist and Browncoat 11th Hour serves as a good example.

11th Hour is well known among Browncoats for her artwork, especially her guerrilla marketing posters for *Serenity* and her recent cover art for the official *Serenity* role-playing game. She is also famous because of what happened to her in the fall of 2006: lawyers representing Universal Pictures sent her an email threatening legal action if she did not clear her Café Press store of merchandise sporting *any* reference to the film in conjunction with the film's title. She immediately began to comply, but within a week received another email in which the law firm warned that damages could include retroactive fines of \$8,750, attorney's fees, and up to '\$150,000 per infringed work' (11th Hour). Just as quickly as a lawyer can send an email, a fan can post to a message board. 11th Hour went to her friends and fellow fans with a warning that elicited nearly 800 responses. She explained and cautioned, 'The thing is that the law firm takes issue with even including a written reference to the *Serenity* movie. So even if fans offer images which are not copyright infringements, if they just mention the *Serenity* movie that's enough to warrant legal action. . . . It's very serious. . . . this will affect us all.' The word spread. Dizzy's response on Whedonesque sums up most other ones:

Poor 11th . . . I can actually understand why a company would want to protect their properties, but this goes so far beyond. We fans were used as tools by 'iversal to promote *Serenity*, and 11th was in the front lines. And now—since Universal seems to have decided fan promotion is a no-no—even while she is making every move to follow their [Cease and Desist], they send this to her?

I can understand stopping people from selling licensed property. But this? Ticking off the very fanbase that's been working so hard for years to promote the property? I don't get it.

Dark days are ahead for fans if [Universal] can't tell the difference between what 11th is doing and the fan just out to make a buck.

What Dizzy refers to is the company's effort to channel fan energy.

In the months leading up to *Serenity*'s release, Universal Pictures capitalized on fan enthusiasm by constructing a members-only online community that awarded points and eventually products (t-shirts, hats, movie tickets, etc.) to those able to recruit more members. This kind of community-building is called 'word of mouth marketing,' a strategy

employed by Affinitive, the firm that spearheaded the promotion. On its website, the group claims the ability to ‘democratize’ clients’ brands and uses *Serenity* as one case study of its success. First, Affinitive had to organize fans: ‘With a relatively large cult following existing relatively untapped across several fan sites, Universal’s agency, Special Ops, sought to utilize Affinitive’s technology platform to consolidate and mobilize the group and help build excitement leading up to the theatrical release of the film and subsequent DVD.’ The results exceeded expectations; Affinitive reports that over 75,000 fans became members of the campaign, 85 percent of whom joined because they were invited or heard about the movement from other people. In the end, boasts the firm, the campaign ‘harnessed the power of a large member base.’

Fans certainly felt ‘harnessed’ when news of 11th Hour’s predicament hit the internet. So in addition to much online discussion about 11th Hour’s plight as well as a few others like hers, The One True b!X decided to tally fans’ volunteer hours to promote *Serenity*. The result was The Browncoat Invoice, which declared that Universal owed fans an estimated \$2.1 million for about 28,000 ‘billable fan-hours.’ The site acknowledges that the invoice is not real, though it raises a real issue: ‘the relationship between producers of entertainment and their increasing (and knowing) reliance in the 21st century on fanbases to help promote that entertainment.’ Johnson calls this issue a battle over hegemony:

Fans attack and criticize media producers whom they feel threaten their meta-textual interests, but producers also respond to these challenges, protecting their privilege by defusing and marginalizing fan activism. As fans negotiate positions of production and consumption, antagonistic corporate discourse toils to manage that discursive power, disciplining productive fandom so it can continue to be cultivated as a consumer base. (298)

The complexity of fan–studio ‘politics’ reveals itself: both walk a fine line; both have and do not have power. Jenkins says as much as he continues to flesh out his earlier notions of fans and fandom. Su Holmes explains that Jenkins now draws attention to the relationship of media and cultural convergence. Media convergence denotes ‘technological fusion or producers marketing a text across a range of media platforms’ (e.g. a film, video game, and graphic novel—each

telling a part of the story), while cultural convergence refers to ‘the ways in which audiences may relate to this media culture and the meaning-making strategies arising from this’ (e.g. fan-made websites, costumes, filk, and fiction) (220). Because of these entwined convergences, a Browncoat is often simultaneously an ‘Alliance’ pawn. In fact, scholars like Jenkins and Will Brooker<sup>11</sup> argue that the two identities are actually indivisible (Holmes 220).

As seen from the examples I have shared, fans have taken ownership of their entertainment, not only by their activism to resurrect *Firefly* through *Serenity* (an undertaking that involved buying a lot of series’ DVDs) but also through creating their own content: podcasts, fanzines, games, parodies, tributes, and cookbooks.<sup>12</sup> They are stakeholders in and, therefore, owners of the Whedonverse (just as Whedon wants; he himself has said that *Buffy*—and, I expect, everything Whedon creates—is meant to be iconic, able to inspire fan play and production). Media producers need those stakeholders; however, fans’ perception of ownership and property does not always align with legal definitions of those concepts, especially in the United States (Jones; Tushnet).<sup>13</sup> So fans work within both a community and a capitalistic system with a bottom line, one Whedon himself has a vested interest in—misbehaved fanboy though he is—if he wants to expand his imaginative ‘verse(s). Yet even this community/capitalistic system distinction is a kind of reduction to ‘sides,’ considering that media producers intentionally construct (particularly) online spaces within which they invite and expect fans to interact.<sup>14</sup> Tom McCourt and Patrick Burkart posit that these spaces are meant to ‘automate fandom,’ which results in fans’ alienation from the texts they love, from fellow fans, and eventually from themselves: ‘On both the individual and collective levels, [Customer Relations Management] furthers the reification of culture’ (270). Whedon seems well aware of this complicated relationship yet also a participant in it, for he has on occasion tried to calm fans’ ire for big entertainment by reminding them that *Serenity* would not exist without Universal’s support even as he sounds his ‘they-tried-to-kill-us’ battle cry. He has also repeatedly attempted to coax fans into identifying more with the Alliance, insisting that ‘the reason I made the Alliance a generally benign, enlightened society was so that I could engage these people in a debate about it,’ one with ‘as many points of view as possible’ (qtd. in Russell).

I, along with many others, have high and intimate regard for *Firefly* and *Serenity*. In fact, I consider myself a Browncoat (yes, I own the

DVDs and *Serenity* and Browncoat t-shirts, have stood in long lines for cast autographs, and continue to evangelize for the series and film). But I do not believe any of us is part of a war effort against a clearly identified enemy—no ‘us against them.’ I am neither disenfranchised nor the hero; the ‘Alliance’ is neither totalitarian nor the villain. Ultimately, my power as a Browncoat lies in this honest admission: I continue to participate in the (un)real ‘verse I have come to love, aware that practicing my fandom assumes a consumptive relationship with ‘them,’ an act that does *not* negate my free will, my ability to make informed decisions about when, where, how, how much, and how often I get involved. *I* choose my level of engagement.

If nothing else, I have aspired to suggest that being self-reflexive in the labyrinthine network of the culture industry and everyday life, consumerism and fandom—none of which are mutually exclusive—makes any fan at least a little bit mighty. As long as fandom is a conscious, educated choice, fans are not slaves of the studios, even when they buy or promote some of the ‘stuff’ the studios peddle. And as long as they hold their fandom in tension with what else matters about life, as most Browncoats seem to do, they have not given in to the ‘fatal strategy’ Jean Baudrillard describes: the deliberate and gluttonous consumption of goods in the face of capitalism (Jones 163).





# Notes

## *Introduction*

- 1 Epigraphic subheadings are spoken by and come from the following: The theme song; Mal, *Serenity*; Mal, 'Out of Gas' (1.8); Whedon, 'Serenity: The Tenth Character'; Mal, 'Ariel' (1.9); Book, 'Serenity' (1.1); Wash, 'Serenity'; and Whedon, 'Joss Whedon Introduction,' *Serenity* DVD, respectively.

## *Chapter 1*

- 1 See Capellanus, book 1:dialogue 7, on appropriate speech between lovers. For a discussion of *The Craft of Lovers*, see Green. For a consideration of courtly love in *Buffy*, see Spah.
- 2 *Sententia*: 'A short pithy statement of a general truth' (Lanham 92).
- 3 *Heterogenium*: 'Avoiding an issue by changing the subject to something different' (*Silva Rhetoricae*).
- 4 *Paroemia*: 'Quoting proverbs' (Lanham 73).
- 5 Amy-Chinn argues that this arrangement 'draws attention to the discourse of the whore as offering a form of social service' (180).
- 6 *Antanagoge*: 'Putting a positive spin on something that is nevertheless acknowledged to be negative or difficult' (*Silva Rhetoricae*).
- 7 *Pathopoeia*: 'Speech that moves hearers emotionally, especially as the speaker attempts to elicit an emotional response by way of demonstrating his/her own feelings' (*Silva Rhetoricae*).
- 8 On 'positive face needs' see Chapter 2, note 7.
- 9 *Philophroneis*: 'The pacification of an adversary by use of mild speech or promises' (*Silva Rhetoricae*).
- 10 *Oraculum*: 'The quoting of God's words or commandments' (Lanham 69).
- 11 *Epiplaxis*: 'Asking questions in order to chide, to express grief, or to inveigh' (*Silva Rhetoricae*).
- 12 *Antanaclasis*: 'The repetition of a word or phrase whose meaning changes in the second instance' (*Silva Rhetoricae*).

- 13 On her decision to leave Companion life, Nandi says, ‘So, I trucked out to the border, learned to say *ain’t*, and came to find work,’ implying she had formal language training.
- 14 Given length restrictions, discussion of communication outside the Companion–client dynamic is limited to this paragraph. Inara’s angry, sarcastic, affectionate conversations with Mal make a fascinating contrast with the artifice and composure she maintains with clients.
- 15 I thank Marni Stanley and Kathryn Barnwell for editorial suggestions.

## Chapter 2

- 1 Show creators and writers (e.g. Espenson) note that the Chinese dialect used is Mandarin (Whedon, qtd. in ‘Here’s How’). According to Sullivan, however, there are a few places where Cantonese appears (‘Chinese Words in the ‘Verse’ 200).
- 2 For episodes 1–6, the Chinese and English translations appear as given in the shooting scripts of *Firefly: The Official Companion*. For episodes 7–14, Sullivan’s glossary has been consulted. While Sullivan provides the official alphabetic spelling for the Chinese (hanyu pinyin) as well as the script versions, the shooting scripts do not, so the official romanizations are not adopted here.
- 3 I have adopted here a definition that is widely used in the literature on codeswitching. See, for example, Gardner-Chloros et al. (1306); Myers-Scotton, ‘Explaining’; and Wei, ‘Starting’ (275).
- 4 As a number of writers on codeswitching note, the decision to codeswitch may be a strategic and intentional one, but not necessarily a conscious one (Gumperz 63; Myers-Scotton, ‘Explaining’ 1259; Wardhaugh 106).
- 5 Generally speaking, codeswitching as a device in conversation is studied from two different perspectives. For Brown and Levinson (see also note 6) and Myers-Scotton, codeswitching is understood as part of a theoretical model of linguistic communication. Such models seek to account for why speakers behave the way they do, and to make testable predictions about their behavior in a range of possible future circumstances. Other scholars (e.g. Wei; Williams) prefer a conversation-analytic approach, seeking to uncover what the speakers themselves appear to mean and understand. In conversation analysis, the sequential placement of codeswitched utterances, and what these placements reveal about participants’ understanding of them, takes precedence (see Myers-Scotton, *Social Motivation*, for a comprehensive review). While the methodologies contrast, the findings tend to converge.
- 6 While Short speaks explicitly in terms of ‘playwright’ and reader/audience communication, I find the concept of ‘text’ and reader/audience communication more helpful.

- 7 The term ‘positively polite’ is from Brown and Levinson’s influential account of linguistic politeness. Brown and Levinson noticed that speakers in conversation often do not say what they mean with maximally efficient overt clarity. Rather, they tend to construct their utterances to address the positive and negative ‘face’ needs we all have. ‘Positive face’ refers to everyone’s desire to be liked, accepted, admired, and valued (cf. Chapter 1). ‘Negative face’ needs are our desires to go about our lives unimpeded by the demands of others. For example, if the communicative goal is to get help moving a table, a speaker can make that request with positive politeness, attention to the recipient’s positive face wants: ‘Could you be a hero, and help me move this table?’ Or, a speaker can make the utterance with negative politeness, attention to the recipient’s negative face wants: ‘I’m terribly sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you could help me move this table a bit. It’s just that it’s so heavy.’ The strategy chosen will depend on how close the speaker and hearer are (or want to be), their relative status, and the gravity of the imposition. For a complete account, see Brown and Levinson.
- 8 I am drawing here on Sullivan, Whedon (qtd. in ‘Here’s How’), and comments made on Fireflyfans.net.
- 9 *Buffy* has similarly been accused of tokenism (see e.g. Alessio).
- 10 I say ‘invited to believe’ since the utterances in Chinese are reportedly not always accurate. One of the show’s writers, some of the actors, and even the translator admit that the Mandarin as used on the show would not always pass the native speaker acid test (Whedon, qtd. in ‘Here’s How’), and commentators such as Sullivan have been quick to point out mistakes in both the written and spoken Chinese (‘Chinese Words in the ‘Verse’ 201–4). While the tones and pronunciations may have been inaccurate at times, it is clear that the characters are meant to be speaking fluently. The actors do not stumble or hesitate when they switch into Chinese or mark out their Chinese lines as extraordinary.
- 11 As Sullivan also points out, there may be a further distinction to be made here (‘Chinese Words in the ‘Verse’ 199). Inara and Nandi, who represent culture and learning, refer to Buddha in some of their Chinese interjections. Mal, Jayne, and Wash, on the other hand, tend to refer to God or Jesus or make other Christian references in theirs.
- 12 A version of this chapter was given to the University of Sunderland’s English Staff–Postgraduate Seminar Series ‘Literary Lunchtimes’ (13 December 2006); I thank the participants for their input.

### Chapter 3

- 1 Emily Dickinson, number 435: ‘Much madness is divinest sense / To a discerning eye / Much sense the starkest madness . . .’ (209). Thank you to Judith Poxon for her comments on this essay.

- 2 Earlier in the episode, River tells Simon, 'We won't be here long. Daddy will come and take us home.' Wilcox sees 'Daddy' as a double reference, enabling a negative comparison of Mr. Tam with Mal; Whedon indicates the episode overall conveys this comparison (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:126). In these readings, River makes perfect sense even as she's potentially read as nonsensical.
- 3 Whedon has used the construction of the witch repeatedly to show the limits of our understanding of female power. A discussion of such representation goes beyond the limits of this chapter other than to remark that, in *Firefly*'s 'Safe' (1.5), Whedon hints at a historical contextualization for the killing of witches: female power and knowledge cannot co-exist with a patriarchal society. When the Patron learns River could expose his assassination of the former patron, he supports her execution as a witch.
- 4 On the polysemic nature of Whedon's texts, see, for instance, Cover; Kellner; McRae; Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters*; Wilcox and Lavery.
- 5 On the Western hero and genre, see, e.g. Cawelti; Rollins and Connor; H.N. Smith; Tompkins; W. Wright.
- 6 On the heroic monomyth, see Campbell.
- 7 Wash calls Zoe this in 'Bushwhacked' (1.3).
- 8 Inara's role is a variation on the role of prostitute, although Joy Davidson convincingly argues that her role is far more respectable and less centered on mere sex and denigration of women. See also Chapters 1 and 5 in this volume.
- 9 Expanded upon the representation of these characters at the Southwest/Texas Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference in February 2006. For more on the representation of women as insane, see e.g. Astbury; Buckman; Chesler; Gilbert and Gubar; Showalter; Ussher, to list only a few.
- 10 Holder reads the scene similarly (151).
- 11 The break is noticeable even in the form of the commercial-free DVD, which goes to black after this image and then repeats it.
- 12 John C. Wright states, 'A character [River] more well-suited to bring out a protective desire in a man cannot be imagined' (163).
- 13 Mulvey argues that the objectification of female characters is enabled through the hero's journey, in which woman acts merely as an obstacle to or reward for the completion of the journey; she is not important in and of herself. One role for the woman to play is that of mystery to be investigated, objectifying her and punishing her for her difference as female (65). See Mulvey's 'Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure' and de Lauretis for other views of this construction. Mulvey's thoughts on the construction of the male gaze have been debated repeatedly within feminist film theory, especially regarding the ways in which it posits an essentialist reading of the spectator's gender and sexuality. However,

- her points were the basis for much feminist film theory, and still are useful in interrogating the cinematic apparatus even as they require interrogation. Her points about the ways in which women visually are inscribed in film remain valid, although the position of the spectator remains in question. On the ways in which Whedon has revised the heroic monomyth, see Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters*.
- 14 Blue Sun is a ubiquitous symbol in *Firefly*. Not just a product, Blue Sun may also have governmental ties. River clearly hates Blue Sun: in the scene referenced, she is destroying labels and crushing boxes with Blue Sun on them. 'Blue' is also associated with the blue-handed men.
  - 15 By the beginning of *Serenity*, the crew understands and utilizes some of River's abilities.
  - 16 Phallogocentric discourse, the term French feminists use to refer to this system, is a fixed and stable system of representation; it is the discourse of a rational, linear, privileged patriarchal culture.
  - 17 Cixous' argument about female subjectivity ('Laugh of the Medusa') is similar to Mulvey's theorization of the role of female spectators in cinema. According to Mulvey, women must occupy both heterosexual and masculine positions as viewers; they must therefore either identify with male heroes against the female or sadomasochistically identify with the objectified female. See Mulvey (both essays) and de Lauretis for a discussion of the position of the spectator within cinema and Doane on female spectatorship. See also note 13.
  - 18 The French feminist concept of *l'écriture féminine* has, like Mulvey's arguments about the gaze, been criticized for its essentialization of the female body; while this criticism is valid, the concept is useful in the ways it destabilizes phallogocentrism and enables female speech.
  - 19 River's fluidity exists in her very naming: like a river, she is changeable, powerful, and potentially dangerous.
  - 20 See e.g. Inara's bathing scene and Kaylee's delight in a strawberry in 'Serenity' (1.1).
  - 21 This episode, like 'War Stories' (1.10), presents another character who resists normative behavior. However, while River is established as a sympathetic character, these other characters are depicted as psychotic. Thus Whedon avoids the trap of glorifying the hysteric without mediation: River is a particular type of hysteric. She eschews the pointless violence of Niska and Early and does not revel in causing pain. Due to space constraints, comparisons of River with Early, Niska, and the Reavers have been cut.

## Chapter 4

- 1 See Huff's reading of Zoe's choice (109–10).

- 2 Our current moment is one of both consolidation and controversy as feminists attempt to deal with defining these very terms—‘feminism,’ ‘postfeminism,’ and ‘third-wave feminism’—and the relationship between them. Writers including Yaszek, Baumgardner and Richards, Walker, Sommers, and Roiphe are engaged with definitional issues that have important implications for the future of feminism; their sometimes heated disagreements are testament to the continuing importance of women’s issues.
- 3 This is certainly true for shows like *Ally McBeal*, a comedy full of high-powered female lawyers, which revolves around various legal cases involving women’s issues, only to typically side with the forces of anti-feminism. For instance, Ally’s law firm represents not the sexual harassment victim, but the perpetrator, as was the case in the episode ‘Only the Lonely.’ Likewise, even when the characters in *Sex and the City* espouse feminist ideas, the show diligently avoids the ‘f word’—feminism. As Lotz notes, the characters in both shows ‘came of age experiencing the gains achieved by second wave feminism’ (94). But this does not de facto make the shows feminist.
- 4 Major statements of second-wave feminism can be found in Brownmiller, Friedan, Millett, and Morgan, to name only a few.
- 5 Baumgardner and Richards spend much time defining what they term ‘girlie’ culture: ‘Girlies are girls in their twenties or thirties who are reacting to an anti-feminine, anti-joy emphasis that they perceive as the legacy of Second Wave seriousness. Girlies have reclaimed girl culture, which is made up of such formerly disparaged girl things as knitting, the color pink, nail polish, and fun’ (80). Kaylee, with her pink frilly dress and butterfly-and-flowers sign for her room, clearly resonates with this notion.
- 6 Roiphe details her belief that feminists have created a culture of victimization by exaggerating male power and female powerlessness, particularly in terms of date rape.
- 7 Coontz chronicles the development of the companionate idea of marriage in the eighteenth century, in which the measure of a marriage was no longer ‘How big a financial settlement was involved, how many useful in-laws were acquired, or how many children were produced, but how well a family met the emotional needs of its individual members’ (146). By the early nineteenth century, ‘Many men and women came to believe that wives should remain at home, not because men had the right to dominate them, but because home was a sanctuary in which women could be sheltered from the turmoil of economic and political life’ (156). These changes paved the way to the conceptions of marriage and the respective roles and duties of husbands and wives that undergirded twentieth-century debates surrounding wifehood.

- 8 Such non-academic narratives usually minimize the role of structural issues—lack of subsidized and reliable child care, sufficient family leave, etc.—in favor of individualizing the issue.
- 9 Friedan's notion of the 'feminine mystique' famously described the emptiness of housewifery, and Shulman proposed a plan for dividing housework and childcare equally.
- 10 As Holder notes, 'this dysfunctional little wagon train began to learn how to function together, because in whatever form he works, Joss is interested in family' (145).
- 11 Unlike postfeminism, which has been associated at least in part with a rejection of the need for a continuing feminist movement, third-wave feminists have tended to see their work as building on the gains of second-wave feminism. As Yaszek notes, for authors like Walker, and Baumgardner and Richards, 'the phrase third wave feminism is preferable to postfeminism precisely because it invokes the long history of collective feminist action in America, including its continued importance.'
- 12 In fact, the costume designer who made Kaylee's ball gown describes it as a 'layer cake' because of its 'layers and layers of ruffles' (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:111).
- 13 Although the moment lasts for only a second or two, it seems clear that Kaylee is not leaping to her own defense immediately, while Mal does.

## Chapter 5

- 1 I am indebted to a helpful audience at the *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses (May 2006).

## Chapter 6

- 1 While Whedon does cast Reynolds' masculinity as marginalized, a move Jeffords sees as dangerous, he does not make the associated rhetorical move of posing 'survival—finally the survival of masculinity itself—as depending on the exclusion of women and the feminine' (168).
- 2 See Jowett, *Sex and the Slayer* (119–43).
- 3 I adopt the term 'genteel patriarch' from Kimmel, who uses it to describe one dominant pre-Civil War masculine identity formation; see *Manhood* (1–42).
- 4 See Jowett, *Sex and the Slayer* (119–43).
- 5 In addition, both series and film hint at Book's mysterious past, indicating his former connection to such violence but also revealing his rejection of that lifestyle.



- 6 For more on Zoe's marriage and status, see Chapter 4 and Huff and West.
- 7 Amy-Chinn notes, 'All three of these female characters draw on a second wave feminist discourse in that they enjoy a seemingly equal relationship with the male crew members and do not trade on their femininity as a source of their power' (177).
- 8 See Halberstam (1–43).
- 9 As such, Whedon aligns himself with those who argue that masculinity can be transformed behaviorally, leaving in place the patriarchal structures that naturalize masculinity. For more on this vision, see Mansfield (190–228) and Kimmel, 'Integrating.'
- 10 For more on masculinity's social construction, see Connell (35–8, 67–86) and Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities* (45–63).
- 11 Richardson and Rabb discuss Mal's ethics as promoting freedom through existential choice. I connect this reading to American ideals of individualism and masculinity, as identified in Jewett and Lawrence; Kimmel, 'Integrating'; and Slotkin.
- 12 See Carrigan et al., and Traister for discussions of the current state of masculinity.
- 13 Whedon notes, '*Firefly* is about discovering strength through weakness . . . It's a triumph because they have no power, which is of course different than strength' (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1:6).
- 14 Speaking of Early's rape threat in 'Objects in Space' (1.14), Amy-Chinn notes, 'The effect of this is to instantly demonise black sexuality and to invoke the spectre of the dangerous black man who threatens the innocent white woman. This is particularly poignant—and disturbing—given the post Civil War ambience that defines the world of *Firefly*, because of the way this spectre has haunted the American imaginary and served as the justification for lynching' (188). See Chapter 14.
- 15 It is this repudiation that enables Whedon to say, 'Mal was supposed to be the hero, but in the loosest sense of the word, everything that a hero is not. . . . Mal is a person who believes very little and thinks he believes nothing, and is often conflicted, often does terrible things, runs away for most of the movie, shoots not one but three unarmed men in the course of the film, and is kind of a despicable guy half the time, but he's the only person who can save us from ourselves' (*Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* 11, 21).
- 16 See Kimmel's 'Masculinity as Homophobia.'
- 17 See Mendlesohn (49).

## Chapter 7

- 1 Whedon notes he developed *Buffy* specifically to invert the Hollywood formula of little 'blondes walking into dark alleyways and being

- killed . . . I wanted . . . for her . . . to kick [the monster's] ass' (qtd. in Havens 21).
- 2 Abbott has explored film noir in *Angel* in 'Kicking Ass and Singing "Mandy"' and 'Walking the Fine Line.' See Sutherland and Swan on corporate evil in *Angel*, 'The Rule of Prophecy' and Jowett, 'Helping.'
  - 3 These aspects are emphasized by at least three of the contributors to Espenson's *Finding Serenity*: Gerrold, Holder, and John C. Wright.
  - 4 Theme song, *Firefly*.
  - 5 Based on a book and movie of the same name, the television series *Logan's Run* ran (like *Firefly*) for only fourteen episodes.
  - 6 A focus on language is a common characteristic of dystopias. For instance, all of Atwood, *A Handmaid's Tale*; Orwell, *1984*; Slonczewski, *A Door into Ocean*; and Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* focus on the language of oppressors and/or oppressed as an important element of their critique. The language of *Firefly* most closely follows the pattern of language in *A Clockwork Orange*, which combined Slavic-rooted words with rhyming slang and English to create Nadsat. Since the novel was written in the midst of the Cold War, the choice of Russian as a root language evoked images of totalitarian social ordering. Whedon combines English with Mandarin to recognize the two remaining superpowers, China and the United States. The blend similarly underscores the power structures at play, and the difference of these structures from contemporary American ones. See Chapter 2.
  - 7 *Serenity*.
  - 8 *Serenity*.
  - 9 Some scholarship suggests that Whedon's feminism is problematic. See e.g. Magoulick.
  - 10 The argument that post-9/11 programming is increasingly morally ambiguous is made by a number of scholars including Sumser (155); and Sutherland and Swan, 'The Good, the Bad, and the Justified' (119).
  - 11 As noted, it is interesting to think of River's story as the central dystopic narrative throughout the series and film: in an inversion of the typical dystopic narrative, we do not follow the 'protagonist' in this story—arguably River—through her conflicts with authority. Instead, we follow the group of outsiders that she joins. This group of outsiders is itself a trope of dystopias, but the classic presentation of the narrative has the individual protagonist fleeing to find a rumored group that is not under the control of the government. The group is usually a haven for the protagonist, though in many instances the protagonist brings destruction on the group by joining them. Of course, River does not actually bring destruction on the whole of the group, but she clearly

brings a significant risk of destruction to all, and arguably triggers events that lead to Wash's death.

## Chapter 8

- 1 Steampunk Western television shows are mentioned by Holder in her discussion of *Firefly* (89).
- 2 *Serenity* implies that they want her knowledge but the disregard remains the same.
- 3 The Reavers are the ultimate Western savages (see Chapter 10) but cannibalism returns to the physical body. Taken with the excessive violence of the Alliance operatives, it suggests a return of the repressed.
- 4 See Joy Davidson for a slightly different view of Inara's shuttle (124).
- 5 See e.g. Leigh Adams Wright. Holder points out that previous television shows used a blend of Western and Chinese/Asian (144). See Chapter 2.
- 6 Arguing a different point, Lackey suggests that River 'knows that the freedom she is experiencing now is temporary and illusory, and for that reason, while she has it, she lives absolutely and completely in the now' (70).
- 7 Of course, Book may have been a man of action himself.
- 8 One explanation of the Reavers, pre-*Serenity*, comes at this from the other end; they have been driven mad by the emptiness of the Black. See Chapter 13.
- 9 This may be influenced by the demands of popular television, though *Stargate SG-1* manages to balance action and diplomacy.
- 10 Arguably he is forced to. His mention of 'thirty pieces' might imply a payment or just his realization of his role as Judas.
- 11 Compare, for example, Logan in *Dark Angel*, Professor X in *X-Men*, or Oracle in the Batman comics.

## Chapter 9

- 1 I presented an earlier version of this paper at the 2004 conference of the Popular Culture Association in the South.
- 2 Whedon interview, *Firefly: The Official Companion* (1:9); DeCandido (56).
- 3 In Kaveney's interviews of writers Espenson and DeKnight (100–31), both writers discuss Whedon's guidance of different stages of various scripts from the first idea through outline, notes, breaking the story, rewrites, shooting draft, and final version—even to such details as 'punctuation and word choice' (106).

- 4 For example, see Golden and Holder (241–2) and Nussbaum (56, 58).
- 5 Campbell summarizes the monomyth in ‘The Keys’ (245–51). In *Why Buffy Matters*, Wilcox analyzes Whedon’s use of the monomythic hero and journey in *Buffy* (66–78) and establishes that he ‘had studied Joseph Campbell with [Richard Slotkin] at Wesleyan University’ (99).
- 6 In the world of television Westerns, *Firefly*’s parallel in spirit would be *Have Gun, Will Travel*, the adult Western often written and directed by Harry Julian Fink and Sam Peckinpah. As a mercenary gunslinger—albeit a highly educated, sophisticated gunslinger complete with business cards—Paladin parallels Mal in many ways. This elegant Western also incorporated many characters of various races and cultures, including Chinese, as *Firefly* does. Conrad compares Mal with Paladin (182) and Holder alludes to the universe of *Have Gun, Will Travel* (142).
- 7 In the DVD commentary on ‘Out of Gas,’ Tim Minear recounts that when Fox canceled *Firefly*, Joss Whedon hoped to continue it somehow on another network or as a film. Alan Tudyk (Wash) appropriated the red button from the set and gave it to Whedon, telling him, ‘Just push this button to call us back.’ The entire original cast did come back to make *Serenity*.
- 8 Whedon, Minear, and Torres all choose ‘Out of Gas’ as their favorite episode (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 2:47, 40, 50, respectively).

## Chapter 10

- 1 Thanks to Megan Stoner for this example.
- 2 Though many scholars see Prospero as representing Shakespeare himself, post-colonial critics tend to echo our reading in this chapter (cf. Donaldson, and Wood’s collection).

## Chapter 11

- 1 Agamben translated by Jeffrey Bussolini.

## Chapter 12

- 1 The writing instrument is not actually a pencil, but a futuristic equivalent.
- 2 See MacIsaac’s *Freud and Original Sin*.
- 3 Cixous suggests an original interpretation of the story of Genesis 3 focusing on accepting the Other in ‘Coming to Writing’ (42–7); see Berkowitz.
- 4 The idea of Original Sin, a term nowhere used in the Bible (though hinted in Paul’s Romans 5 and 7), is very literally patriarchal, having

been promulgated by Christian patriarch Augustine, who believed that each human was born sinful, through sexual procreation. See e.g. *The City of God*, Book 14.

- 5 See Augustine, *The City of God* 14.1 on death; 14.15–16 on sex; on the ‘error of woman’ in particular, see 14.11. Tennant, while, like many others, rejecting the Augustinian tradition of inherited sin because of the need for ‘accountability as a condition of sin’ (viii), nonetheless notes in his broad survey the connections made by many between Genesis 3 and sex (e.g. 40–1, 67–8, 153; and on Pandora and Eve, see 52–3); death (14, 244) and knowledge (in various senses: 12–14, 62). The point at which Adam and Eve acquire moral consciousness is debated. MacIsaac (105–6) focuses on sex and consciousness in the sense of self-alienation (cf. Hegel, as noted in Mojzes 110) and desire. This chapter touches only a few of the vast number of discussions on Original Sin.
- 6 On existential choice in *Firefly/Serenity* overall, see Richardson and Rabb 137–49.
- 7 By the time he kills Mr. Universe, he has become upset enough to omit this ritual.
- 8 Thanks to Rev. Marti Keller for advice on this topic and to Greg Erickson regarding my draft after its presentation at the *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses, 25–8 May 2006.

### Chapter 13

- 1 On existential philosophy in *Firefly* see Zynda.
- 2 As Wilcox and others have noted, this way of thinking applies more to the original *Star Trek*; later incarnations give a much more complex idea of humanity. I would maintain, though, with Graham, that these later versions still present a world that ‘corresponds to a strongly secular humanist vision of what it means to be human,’ and one where ‘an imagined twenty-fourth century is remade in the image of mid-twentieth century values’ (133, 153).
- 3 See, for example, DeCandido (55–61).
- 4 See e.g. Alter’s *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

### Chapter 14

- 1 An earlier version of this essay was read at the *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses (27 May 2006). I gratefully acknowledge the helpful advice of Elizabeth Crist, Daniel Goldmark, and Kathryn Lowerre, and especially Greg Edmonson, who graciously discussed his work on *Firefly* with me in a 2005 interview.
- 2 Television music may rightly claim the ignored status previously noted by those writing about film music. While not wanting to downplay the differences between music in film and television, I believe Whedon’s

interest in creating cinematic experiences for television opens up his texts for discussion using models from Film Studies. For more on music in the Hollywood Western, consult Kalinak, 'The Sound' and 'Typically American'; J. Smith, 'The Sounds of Commerce'; Lerner, 'Look at That.' For more on music in science fiction film, consult the introduction and essays in Hayward's *Off the Planet: Music, Sound, and Science Fiction Cinema*.

- 3 On the 2002 DVD release, the Jubal Early motif begins at the following moments: 1. 6:56; 2. 8:47; 3. 12:14; 4. 16:46; 5. 17:15; 6. 18:15; 7. 20:21; 8. 24:50; 9. 28:12; 10. 34:46; 11. 35:31 (fragments, in guitar instead of bass clarinet; as River says 'I'm very close to him'); 12. 36:04 (just fragments of it); 13. 40:07.
- 4 Gabbard interprets the phallic possibilities of the trumpet in 'Signifyin(g) the Phallus: Representations of the Jazz Trumpet,' in *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema*. And it is worth remembering that the clarinet occupied a more central role in the performance of jazz early in its history, before it was displaced by saxophone and trumpet soloists in the post-1920s decline of the New Orleans style.
- 5 Wilcox offers a compelling close reading of names and naming in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in *Why Buffy Matters* (46–65).
- 6 Coincidentally, John Williams' music for *The Empire Strikes Back* employs ominous low woodwind timbres in connection to several of Boba Fett's onscreen appearances.
- 7 As Kathryn Lowerre pointed out to me, both Jubals draw their name from a biblical origin: in Genesis 4:21, a direct male-line descendant of Cain is named Jubal, and Jubal has important connections with music (depending on the translation, he was 'father of all such as handle the harp and pipe' or 'harp and organ' or 'Zither- und Flötenspiele').
- 8 Several fan websites claim Jubal Early as a distant relative of Nathan Fillion.

## Chapter 16

- 1 For an overview of the relationship between design and cinema see also Maio, 'Fashion, Style e Design: il cinema presenta i Sixties' and 'Cinema e Design. L'estetica significativa degli spazi.' I thank architect Mauro Corsetti for suggestions about cinema and design for this chapter.
- 2 Archigram was an architectural group formed in the 1960s, based in London and inspired by technology to create a new perception of reality tied with the 1960s ideological lifestyle.
- 3 For a critical analysis of the Western genre see Warshow's *The Immediate Experience*. His chapter 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner' gives an outline for the ideal Western code.

- 4 In the *Serenity* commentary Whedon interestingly argues that on Miranda, the ‘terribly bright,’ cold overexposure of the light (in opposition to the warm light of other planets, e.g. Haven) symbolizes ‘the insane optimism of the Alliance.’
- 5 For an overview, see Hanson’s *Building Sci-Fi Moviescapes: The Science Behind the Fiction*.
- 6 These wooden slats full of little holes are recurrent in the series; in ‘War Stories’ (1.11), for example, we can see this set construction in Niska’s prison—an effective choice to create light movement.
- 7 In *Firefly: The Official Companion*, the brown coat is defined as ‘the very spirit of the production design of *Firefly*: East meets West’ (1:82).
- 8 Kenzo Tange and Tadao Ando are two of the most important contemporary architects. Their architecture is linked with modernism; they use a mix between classic Japanese styles and futuristic, geometric shapes, formed mostly of crude materials, e.g. concrete. Especially for Ando, there is almost a spiritual approach to building in nature.
- 9 On the moral aspect of the series, see Richardson and Rabb (137–49).

### Chapter 17

- 1 I am grateful to Rhonda Wilcox for the following observation with regard to the role and function of death: ‘Can televisual death not also be, however (and much more rarely), a prompt to philosophical interrogation? How about *The X-Files*’ “Beyond the Sea,” with the death of Scully’s father—or, again, “The Body”?’

### Chapter 18

- 1 This was part of Whedon’s video introduction to the ‘Can’t Stop the Signal’ preview screenings of *Serenity*.
- 2 According to *Box Office Mojo*, the world-wide box-office revenue for *Serenity* came to \$38,869,464.
- 3 The film was shot with an aspect ratio of 2:35:1 while the series was shot in 1:78:1, an increasingly common aspect ratio for television. So while the television series is widescreen, the film offers the much wider image that is expected in the cinema.
- 4 While Mal is often presented as dismissive of religion in both the series and the film, he is equally presented as a man of ‘belief,’ most notably his belief in the Independents in the face of the Alliance. It is this belief that is put into crisis when the Independents lose the war at the beginning of ‘*Serenity*’ and must be restored in order to defeat the Operative (see Chapter 13). As Shepherd Book, in his dying words to Mal in *Serenity*, insists: ‘I don’t care what you believe . . . Just believe it!’

## Chapter 19

- 1 I presented a version of this chapter as ‘Fan Filkers and Documentarists: Reading *Firefly* and *Serenity*’s Browncoats’ at the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference in Boston (6 April 2007).
- 2 According to McGath, ‘*Filk music* is a musical movement among fans of science fiction and fantasy fandom . . . , emphasizing content which is related to the genre or its fans, and promoting broad participation.’ While McGath’s definition is useful, filk has as complex and rich a history and livelihood as fandom itself.
- 3 Browncoats further benefit from an unusually reciprocal relationship with Whedon, who lurks on but also posts to and interacts with fans on message boards like Whedonesque.
- 4 Tushnet explains, ‘Music in fan music videos is often hard to defend as transformative’ (71). In other words, the use of music puts fan vids outside of ‘fair use’ more than the manipulation of video clips does. So while I desire to share exceptional examples, I am loath to do so. Also, I wish to respect vidders’ usual preference for anonymity.
- 5 See Wilcox’s ‘In “The Demon Section of the Card Catalogue”: *Buffy* Studies and Television Studies’ for a history and bibliographic overview of scholarship on Whedon’s work.
- 6 Ticket sales may have been helped by Whedon’s impassioned post to Whedonesque on 20 May 2007, where he responds to the ‘honor’ killing of seventeen-year-old Dua Khalil as well as the movie trailer for Roland Joffé’s *Captivity* (2007). Whedon encourages readers, ‘Do something. Try something. Speaking out, showing up, writing a letter, a check, a strongly worded e-mail. Pick a cause—there are few unworthy ones. And nudge yourself past the brink of tacit support to action. Once a month, once a year, or just once.’
- 7 See a list of ‘guerrilla marketing’ tactics at Fireflyfans.net, including viral ads for the series, the film, and the ‘*Serenity*’Versary.’
- 8 Lux Lucre’s *South Park* renditions of the *Firefly* crew are archived in memoriam at <<http://www.profj.org/firefly/luxlucre/>>.
- 9 Not ‘everybody’ knew or knows about Kerry Pearson/Lux Lucre. For example, Wendy Campbell, a colleague and fellow fan who offered feedback on chapter drafts, notes in her 19 June 2007 email that she has never heard of him and, as a result, questions her devotion: ‘Is it me? Maybe I’m not enough of a fan.’ She raises an excellent point I cannot address here for want of space, one that suggests at least two questions: (1) Who, what, and how much does one have to know to be considered ‘fan enough’? and (2) Does the answer to the previous question reveal an embedded hierarchy in the *Firefly/Serenity* fan community? For more on ‘fan-tagonisms,’ begin with Derek Johnson.



- 10 In its 24 May 2007 podcast, The Signal notes that '*Done the Impossible* is so well-made that sometimes it's easy to forget that it's a *fan* creation' (original emphasis). The statement seems an unwitting nod to Jones's mention of the 'low-quality' past and 'high-quality' present of many fan productions.
- 11 See Brooker's 'Overflow and Audience.'
- 12 See *Big Damn Chefs*, a collection of 'the best recipes in the 'Verse . . . put together for Browncoats, by Browncoats,' at <<http://www.bigdamnchefs.com/>>.
- 13 It is very significant that the main documentary feature of *Done the Impossible* was released under Creative Commons (CC). For more on CC copyright, visit <[www.creativecommons.org](http://www.creativecommons.org)>.
- 14 Several other examples include perusable résumés, class notes, and love letters of *Dawson's Creek* characters (<<http://www.dawsonscreek.com/>>) and, more recently, *Lost*'s Wiki (<<http://lostwiki.abc.com/>>). For an extreme case of institutional control of fan creativity, see Jones's discussion of LucasFilm and *Star Wars* fans (173).

# Works Cited

- 11th Hour. 'Universal's Legal Action ~ Fans Beware.' Online posting. 24 Oct. 2006. Prospero. 3 June 2007 <<http://forums.prospero.com/foxfirefly/messages?msg=32591.1>>.
- 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. MGM/Polaris, 1968.
- Abbott, Stacey. 'Kicking Ass and Singing "Mandy": A Vampire in L.A.' *Reading Angel* 1–13.
- , ed. *Reading Angel: The TV Spin-Off with a Soul*. London: Tauris, 2005.
- . 'Walking the Fine Line Between Angel and Angelus.' *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* 3.1 (Aug. 2003). 15 July 2007 <<http://slayageonline.com>>.
- Affinitive. 'Case Study: Universal Pictures/*Serenity*.' 2007, Affinitive. 29 May 2007 <[http://www.beaffinitive.com/clients/casestudy\\_serenity.html](http://www.beaffinitive.com/clients/casestudy_serenity.html)>.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*. 1995. Turin: Einaudi, 2005.
- . *Stato di Eccezione*. Turin: Boringhieri, 2003.
- Alessio, Dominic. "'Things are Different Now?': A Post-Colonial Analysis of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." *European Legacy* 6.6 (2001): 731–40.
- Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. New York: Basic, 1983.
- Amy-Chinn, Dee. "'Tis Pity She's a Whore: Postfeminist Prostitution in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*?' *Feminist Media Studies* 6.2 (June 2006): 175–90.
- Angel*. Creators Joss Whedon and David Greenwalt. Perf. David Boreanaz, Charisma Carpenter, Alexis Denisof, J. August Richards, Andy Hallett, and Amy Acker. Warner Brothers. 1999–2004.
- 'Antidepressant Paxil Found to Double the Risk of Violent Behavior.' 12 Sept. 2006. *News Target*. 8 July 2007 <<http://www.newstarget.com/020406.html>>.
- Argy, Stephany. 'Zoic Takes *Firefly* from TV to Film.' *American Cinematographer* 36.10 (Oct. 2005): 79–80.
- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Empire Writes Back*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Astbury, Jill. *Crazy for You: The Making of Women's Madness*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: Seal, 1986.

- Augustine, Saint. *The City of God*. Trans. Marcus Dods. New York: Random, 1950.
- Ball, Brandy. "Instead of the Cross, the Albatross/About My Neck Was Hung": The Symbol of the Albatross in Joss Whedon's *Serenity*.' Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference. Atlanta, GA. 12–15 Apr. 2006.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*. Trans. Richard Howard. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985.
- Battiste, Marie, and James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson. *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: A Global Challenge*. Saskatoon: Purich, 2000.
- Baumgardner, Jennifer, and Amy Richards. *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*. New York: Farrar, 2000.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Watt*. London: Jonathan Calder, 1953.
- Bedlam Bards. *On the Drift: Music Inspired by Firefly and Serenity*. Bedlam Bards and Tree Leom, 2006.
- Bell, Shannon. *Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.
- Berkhofer, Robert F., Jr. *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*. New York: Knopf, 1978.
- Berkowitz, Charlotte A. 'Paradise Reconsidered: Hélène Cixous and the Bible's Other Voice.' *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*. Eds. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith L. Poxon. London: Routledge, 2003. 176–88.
- Bernstein, Abbie. 'The Whedon Universe.' *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion Movie Magazine* (2005): 8–12.
- Blade Runner*. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Harrison Ford. Warner/Blade Runner Partnership/Ladd/Run Run Shaw, 1982.
- Breggin, Peter R. 'Suicidality, Violence, and Mania Caused by Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs).' *International Journal of Risk and Safety in Medicine* 16.1 (2004): 31–49.
- Britton, Piers D., and Simon J. Barker. *Reading between Design*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2003.
- Brooker, Will. 'Overflow and Audience.' *The Audience Studies Reader*. Eds. Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn. New York: Routledge, 2003. 322–34.
- Brown, Penelope, and Stephen Levinson. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.
- Browncoat1. Online posting. 12 Jan. 2004. Fireflyfans.net. 3 Apr. 2007 <<http://fireflyfans.net/thread.asp?b=2&t=3277>>.
- 'The Browncoat Invoice.' 16 Nov. 2006. 29 June 2007 <<http://www.browncoatinvoice.com/>>.
- Browncoats.com. 2005. 2 Apr. 2007 <<http://www.browncoats.com>>.
- Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975.

- Brunsdon, Charlotte. *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Buchanan, Ginjer. 'Who Killed *Firefly*?' *Espenson* 47–53.
- Buckman, Alyson. 'The Monstrous Madwoman: Gender, Sanity, and *Woman on the Edge of Time*.' *FEMSPEC*, forthcoming.
- Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Creator Joss Whedon. Perf. Sarah Michelle Gellar, Anthony Stewart Head, Alyson Hannigan, and Nicholas Brendon. Warner Brothers. 1997–2001. UPN. 2001–3.
- Bukatman, Scott. *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993.
- Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange*. London: Penguin, 1979.
- 'Burning Bright.' *Starburst Special* 71 (2005): 62–70.
- Califa, Pat. *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*. Pittsburgh: Cleis, 1994.
- Callicott, J. Baird. 'Many Indigenous Worlds or the Indigenous World? A Reply to my "Indigenous" Critics.' *Environmental Ethics* 22.3 (2000): 291–310.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1968.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. New York: Knopf, 1955.
- Cannadine, David. *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.
- 'Can't Stop the Serenity.' 18 July 2007 <<http://www.cantstoptheserenity.com/>>.
- Capellanus, Andreas. *The Art of Courtly Love*. Trans. John Jay Parry. New York: Norton, 1969.
- Carrigan, Tim, Bob Connell, and John Lee. 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity.' *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*. Ed. Harry Brod. Boston: Allen, 1987. 63–97.
- Cavallaro, Dani. *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture*. London: Athlone, 2000.
- Cawelti, John G. *The Six-Gun Mystique*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green UP, 1975.
- Channain. Online posting. 10 Jan. 2004. [www.fireflyfans.net](http://www.fireflyfans.net). 10 June 2007 <<http://www.fireflyfans.net/thread.asp?b=2&t=3277>>.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *Troilus and Criseyde*. Ed. Barry Windeatt. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Chesler, Phyllis. *Women and Madness*. 1972. New York: Harcourt, 1989.
- Churchill, Ward. *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens: Consequences of American Conquest and Carnage*. Oakland: AK, 2003.
- Citizen Kane*. Dir. and perf. Orson Welles. Mercury/RKO, 1941.
- Cixous, Hélène. 'Coming to Writing' and Other Essays. Ed. Deborah Jenson. Trans. Sarah Cornell et al. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991.
- . 'Laugh of the Medusa.' 1975. *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. 2nd ed. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1997. 347–62.

- Clark, Kenneth. *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art*. 1956. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960.
- A Clockwork Orange*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Hawk Films Ltd., 1971.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.' 1800. *Selected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Elisabeth Schneider. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971. 48–68.
- Colvin, Phil. 'Angel: Redefinition and Justification through Faith.' Abbott, *Reading Angel* 17–30.
- Connell, R.W. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995.
- Conrad, Roxanne Longstreet. 'Mirror/Mirror: A Parody.' *Espenson* 169–82.
- Coontz, Stephanie. *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*. New York: Viking, 2005.
- Cordova, V.F. 'EcolIndian: A Response to J. Baird Callicott.' *Ayaangwaamizin: The International Journal of Indigenous Philosophy* 1.1 (1997): 31–44.
- Cover, Rob. "'Not to Be Toyed With": Drug Addiction, Bullying and Self-Empowerment in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.' *Continuum* 19.1 (Mar. 2005): 85–101.
- Coyne, Michael. *The Crowded Prairie*. London: Tauris, 1997.
- The Craft of Lovers*. Ed. Kathleen Forni, *TEAMS Middle English Texts Online*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 2005. 19 July 2007 <<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/forcrtf.txt.htm>>.
- Cryle, Peter. *Geometry in the Boudoir: Configurations of French Erotic Narrative*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994.
- Curry, Agnes B. 'Is Joss Becoming a Thomist?' *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* 4.4 (2005). 15 July 2007 <<http://slayageonline.com>>.
- . 'We Don't Say Indian: On the Paradoxical Construction of the Reavers.' *The Slayage Conference on the Whedonverses*. Gordon College, Barnesville, GA. 26–8 May 2006.
- Davidson, James. *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998.
- Davidson, Joy. 'Whores and Goddesses: The Archetypal Domain of Inara Serra.' *Espenson* 113–30.
- DeCandido, Keith R.A. "'The Train Job" Didn't Do the Job: Poor Opening Contributed to *Firefly*'s Doom.' *Espenson* 55–61.
- de Lauretis, Teresa. 'Oedipus Interruptus.' *Thornham* 83–96.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- Dickinson, Emily. 'Much Madness is Divinest Sense.' *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Boston: Back Bay, 1976. 209.
- Dixon, Larry. 'The Reward, the Details, the Devils, the Due.' *Espenson* 5–15.

- Dizzy. 'Universal's Legal Action against 11th Hour.' Online posting. 24 Oct. 2006. Whedonesque. 28 June 2007 <<http://whedonesque.com/comments/11688>>.
- Doane, Mary Ann. 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator.' Thornham 131–45.
- Donaldson, Laura. *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender, & Empire Building*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1992.
- Done the Impossible: The Fans' Tale of Firefly & Serenity*. Dir. and prod. Brian Wisner et al. Rivetal, 2006.
- Dyer, James. 'Serenity Wow!' *Empire* 197 (Nov. 2005): 98–103.
- Edmonson, Greg. Personal interview. 10 Oct. 2005.
- Edwards, Lynne. 'Slaying in Black and White: Kendra as Tragic Mulatta in *Buffy*.' Wilcox and Lavery 85–97.
- Equality Now. 1 June 2007 <<http://www.equalitynow.org/>>.
- Erisman, Fred. 'Stagecoach in Space: The Legacy of *Firefly*.' *Extrapolation* 47.2 (2006): 249–58.
- Espenson, Jane, ed. *Finding Serenity: Anti-Heroes, Lost Shepherds, and Space Hookers in Joss Whedon's Firefly*. Dallas: Benbella, 2004.
- Falk, Richard. *The Declining World Order: America's Imperial Geopolitics*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Farrell, Scott. 'Seeking Chivalry and Finding Serenity.' Jan. 2006. Troynovant. 12 Nov. 2006 <[www.troynovant.com/Farrell/Whedon/Seeking-Chivalry-Serenity.html](http://www.troynovant.com/Farrell/Whedon/Seeking-Chivalry-Serenity.html)>.
- Firefly*. Creator Joss Whedon. Mutant Enemy/20th Century Fox, 2002.
- Firefly: The Complete Series*. Creator Joss Whedon. 2002. DVD. Mutant Enemy/20th Century Fox, 2003.
- Firefly: The Official Companion*. 2 vols. London: Titan, 2006–7.
- Firefly Talk. 2005–7. 1 July 2007 <<http://www.fireflytalk.com/>>.
- Flanagan, Tom. *First Nations? Second Thoughts*. Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2000.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. 1919. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. 1963. New York: Laurel, 1983.
- 'Future History: The Story of Earth That Was.' *Serenity*. Writ. and dir. Joss Whedon. Perf. Nathan Fillion, Summer Glau, and Chiwetel Ejiofor. DVD. Mutant Enemy/Universal, 2005.
- Gabbard, Krin. *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.
- Gaines, Jane, and Neil Lerner. 'The Orchestration of Affect: The Motif of Barbarism in Breil's *The Birth of a Nation* Score.' *The Sounds of Early Cinema*. Eds. Richard Abel and Rick Altman. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001. 252–68.
- Gallagher, Gary W. 'Jubal A. Early, the Lost Cause, and Civil War History: A Persistent Legacy.' *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*. Eds.

- Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000. 35–59.
- Gardner-Chloros, Penelope, et al. 'Parallel Patterns? A Comparison of Monolingual Speech and Bilingual Codeswitching Discourse.' *Journal of Pragmatics* 32 (2000): 1305–41.
- Garlan, Jennifer C. 'Bushwhacked by the Nightmare Native: The Western Roots of *Firefly*'s Reavers.' The *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses. Gordon College, Barnesville, GA. 26–8 May 2006.
- Gerrold, David. 'Star Truck.' Espenson 183–95.
- Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace, 1984.
- , and Bruce Sterling. *The Difference Engine*. New York: Bantam, 1991.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
- Gillis, Stacy, ed. *The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded*. London: Wallflower, 2005.
- Golden, Christopher, and Nancy Holder. *The Watcher's Guide*. Vol. 1. New York: Pocket, 1998.
- Goltz, Jennifer. 'Listening to *Firefly*.' Espenson 209–15.
- Goodman, Roberta Louis. 'Developmental Psychology.' *The Ultimate Jewish Teacher's Handbook*. Ed. Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz. Denver: A.R.E., 2003. 85–108.
- Graham, Elaine. *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens, and Others in Popular Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002.
- Gray, Brandon. 'Serenity Moseys to Tame Start.' *Box Office Mojo*. 3 Oct. 2005. 3 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/news/?id=1910&p=.htm>>.
- Green, Richard Firth. 'The Craft of *Lovers* and the Rhetoric of Seduction.' *The Fifteenth Century, Acta* 12 (1985): 105–25.
- Greene, David. Editorial. *Archigram Magazine* 1.1 (1961): 1.
- Gross, Edward. 'The *Serenity* Effect(s).' *Cinefantastique* 37.6/7 (Sept./Oct. 2005): 66.
- Gross, Steven. 'Intentionality and the Markedness Model in Literary Codeswitching.' *Journal of Pragmatics* 32 (2000): 1283–303.
- Gumperz, John. *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982.
- Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke UP, 1998.
- Hamel, Debra. *Trying Neaira: The True Story of a Courtesan's Scandalous Life in Ancient Greece*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003.
- Hanson, Matt. *Building Sci-Fi Moviescapes: The Science Behind the Fiction*. Oxford: Focal, 2005.
- Harmon, William, and C. Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*. 7th ed. Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 1996.
- Havens, Candace. *Joss Whedon: The Genius Behind Buffy*. Dallas: BenBella, 2003.

- Hayward, Philip. 'Sci-Fidelity: Music, Sound, and Genre History.' *Off the Planet: Music, Sound, and Science Fiction Cinema*. Ed. Philip Hayward. London: Libbey, 2004. 1–29.
- Heath, P.L. 'Nothing.' *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. New York: MacMillan, 1967. 524–5.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. 1807. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Le Principe de Raison*. Paris: Gallimard, 1962.
- 'Here's How It Was: The Making of *Firefly*.' *Firefly: The Complete Series*. Creator Joss Whedon. 2002. DVD. Mutant Enemy/20th Century Fox, 2003.
- Hester, Thurman Lee, and Dennis McPherson. 'The Euro-American Philosophical Tradition and its Ability to Examine Indigenous Philosophy.' *Ayaangwaaminizin: The International Journal of Indigenous Philosophy* 1.1 (1997): 3–9.
- Hester, Thurman Lee, Dennis McPherson, Annie Booth, and Jim Cheney. 'Indigenous Worlds and Callicott's Land Ethic.' *Environmental Ethics* 22.3 (2000): 273–90.
- The High and the Mighty*. Writ. Ernest K. Gann. Dir. William Wellman. Perf. John Wayne. Wayne/Fellows, 1954.
- Hillegas, Mark R. *The Future as Nightmare: H.G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians*. London: Oxford UP, 1967.
- Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Holder, Nancy. 'I Want Your Sex: Gender and Power in Joss Whedon's Dystopian Future World.' *Espenson* 139–53.
- Hollinger, Veronica. 'Cybernetic Deconstructions: Cyberpunk and Postmodernism.' *Storming the Reality Studio*. Ed. Larry McCaffery. Durham: Duke UP, 1991. 203–18.
- Holmes, Su. "'But This Time You Choose!": Approaching the "Interactive" Audience in Reality B.' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7.2 (2004): 213–31.
- Hoxie, F.E., ed. *Encyclopedia of North American Indians*. Boston: Houghton, 1996.
- Hudson, Nicholas. 'Arts of Seduction and the Rhetoric of *Clarissa*.' *Modern Language Quarterly: A Journal of Literary History* 51.1 (1990): 25–43.
- Huff, Tanya. "'Thanks for the Reenactment, Sir." Zoe: Updating the Warrior Woman.' *Espenson* 105–12.
- Ichiban. 'Patience.' June 2007. Blue Sun Room. Fireflyfans.net. 13 June 2007 <<http://www.fireflyfans.net/showprofile.asp?un=ichiban>>.
- Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986.
- Jardine, Alice. *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.
- Jeffords, Susan. *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989.



- Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Jewett, Robert, and Shelton Lawrence. *The American Monomyth*. New York: Anchor, 1977.
- Johnson, Chalmers. *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*. New York: Metropolitan, 2000.
- Johnson, Derek. 'Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom.' *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. Eds. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington. New York: New York UP, 2007. 285–300.
- Jones, Sara Gwenllian. 'Web Wars: Resistance, Online Fandom and Studio Censorship.' *Quality Popular Television*. Eds. Mark Jancovich and James Lyons. London: British Film Institute, 2003. 163–77.
- Jowett, Lorna. 'Helping the Hopeless: *Angel* as Critical Dystopia.' *Critical Studies in Television* 2.1 (Spring 2007): 74–89.
- . *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2005.
- Kalinak, Kathryn. "'The Sound of Many Voices": Music in John Ford's Westerns.' *John Ford Made Westerns: Filming the Legend in the Sound Era*. Eds. Gaylyn Studlar and Matthew Bernstein. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001. 169–92.
- . "'Typically American": Music for *The Searchers*.' *The Searchers: Essays and Reflections on John Ford's Classic Western*. Eds. Arthur M. Eckstein and Peter Lehman. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2004. 109–43.
- Kasser, Rodolphe, and Gregor Wurst. *The Gospel of Judas: Together with the Letter of Peter to Phillip, James, and a Book of Allogenes from Codex to Tchacos*. Critical ed. Washington: National Geographic, 2007.
- Kaveney, Roz, ed. *Reading the Vampire Slayer: The New, Updated Unofficial Guide to Buffy and Angel*. 2nd ed. London: Tauris, 2004.
- . 'She Saved the World. A Lot: An Introduction to the Themes and Structures of *Buffy* and *Angel*.' Kaveney, *Reading the Vampire Slayer* 1–82.
- . 'Writing the Vampire Slayer: Interviews with Jane Espenson and Steven S. DeKnight.' Kaveney, *Reading the Vampire Slayer* 100–31.
- Kelley, William G. 'Rhetoric as Seduction.' *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 6 (1973): 69–80.
- Kellner, Douglas. 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer as Spectacular Allegory: A Diagnostic Critique.' 2003. UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. 31 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/buffy.pdf>>.
- Kerman, Judith B., ed. *Retrofitting Blade Runner*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1997.
- Kimmel, Michael. 'Integrating Men into the Curriculum.' *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 4:181 (1997): 181–95.

- . *Manhood in America*. New York: Free, 1996.
- . 'Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity.' *The Masculinities Reader*. Eds. Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett. Cambridge: Polity, 2001. 266–87.
- King, Geoff, and Tanya Krzywinska. *Science Fiction Cinema*. London: Wallflower, 2001.
- Kirkland, Ewan. 'The Caucasian Persuasion of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.' *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* 5.1 (June 2005). 15 June 2007 <<http://slayageonline.com>>.
- Klages, Mary. 'Poststructuralist Feminist Theory.' 23 Oct. 2001. University of Idaho. 2 Feb. 2006 <<http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~sflores/KlagesCixous.html>>.
- Kramer, Heinrich, and James Sprenger. *The Malleus Maleficarum of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger*. Trans. Montague Summers. New York: Dover, 1971.
- Kreml, Nancy. 'Implications of Styleswitching in the Narrative Voice of Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*.' *Codes and Consequences*. Ed. Carol Myers-Scotton. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. 41–61.
- Kreuziger, Frederick A. *The Religion of Science Fiction*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1986.
- Kuhn, Elisabeth D. "'I Just Want to Make Love to You": Seduction Strategies in Blues Lyrics.' *Journal of Pragmatics* 31 (1999): 525–34.
- Kurke, Leslie. 'Inventing the Hetaira: Sex, Politics, and Discursive Conflict in Archaic Greece.' *Classical Antiquity* 16.1 (Apr. 1997): 106–54.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977.
- Lackey, Mercedes. 'Serenity and Bobby McGee: Freedom and the Illusion of Freedom in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*.' *Espenson* 63–73.
- Land, Thomas C. 'Tom Dooley.' 1868. *Folk Song USA: The 111 Best American Ballads*. Eds. John A. and Alan Lomax. New York: Duell, Sloane, and Pierce, 1947.
- Lanham, Richard A. *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1968.
- Lavery, David. *Late for the Sky: The Mentality of the Space Age*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1992.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 'The Child and the Shadow.' *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Rev. ed. Ed. Ursula K. Le Guin. New York: Harpercollins, 1992. 54–67.
- Lerner, Neil. "'Look at That Big Hand Move Along": Clocks, Containment, and Music in *High Noon*.' *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104.1 (Winter 2005): 151–73.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Raw and the Cooked*. Trans. John and Doreen Weightman. New York: Harper, 1970.

- Lillington, Karlin. 'Inventor of Cyberspace Steps Back to the Present.' *Irish Times* 25 Apr. 2003. 21 June 2007 <<http://radio.weblogs.com/0103966/stories/2003/04/25>>.
- Lipski, John, M. 'Spanish-English Language Switching in Speech and Literature: Theories and Models.' *Bilingual Review* 9.3 (1982): 191-212.
- Lotz, Amanda D. *Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2006.
- Love, James. 'Call for More Reliable Costs Data on Clinical Trials.' *Marketletter* (13 Jan. 1997): 24-5.
- . 'Comments on the Need for Better Federal Government Oversight of Taxpayer Supported Research and Development.' Address. The Subcommittee on Regulation, Business Opportunities, and Technology of the Committee on Small Business. U.S. House of Representatives, Washington D.C. 11 July 1994.
- Lury, Karen. *Interpreting Television*. London: Arnold, 2005.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. *Theory and History of Literature*. Vol. 10. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.
- McClure, Laura. *Courtesans at Table: Gender and Greek Literary Culture in Athenaeus*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- McCourt, Tom, and Patrick Burkart. 'Customer Relationship Management: Automating Fandom in Music Communities.' *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. Eds. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington. New York: New York UP, 2007. 261-70.
- McGath, Gary. 'Filk: A New Definition.' 13 May 2002. 14 June 2007 <<http://www.mcgath.com/filkdef.html>>.
- MacIsaac, Sharon. *Freud and Original Sin*. New York: Paulist, 1974.
- McPherson, Dennis. 'A Definition of Culture: Canada and First Nations.' *Native American Religious Identity: Unforgotten Gods*. Ed. Jace Weaver. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998. 77-98.
- McRae, Leanne. 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Male Defeat.' *Bad Subjects* 61 (Sept. 2002). 31 Mar. 2007 <<http://bad.eserver.org/issues/2002/61/macrae.html>>.
- Maggie. 'Kaylee's Costume from the *Firefly* Pilot.' 2 Apr. 2007 <[http://www.costumersguide.com/maggie\\_costumes/kaylee\\_makingof.html](http://www.costumersguide.com/maggie_costumes/kaylee_makingof.html)>.
- Magoulick, Mary. 'Frustrating Female Heroism: Mixed Messages in *Xena*, *Nikita*, and *Buffy*.' *Journal of Popular Culture* 39.5 (2006): 729-55.
- Maio, Barbara. 'Cinema e Design. L'estetica significativa degli spazi.' *AR* 61.5 (Sept./Oct. 2005): 37-8. 18 July 2007 <<http://www.architetttiroma.it/ordine/ar/pdf/ar61.pdf>>.
- . 'Fashion, Style e Design: il cinema presenta i Sixties.' *PIX* 3.6 (Apr. 2006): 11-13.
- , and Christian Uva. *L'Estetica dell'Ibrido*. Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2004.

- Malcolm X. 'God's Judgment of White America (The Chickens Come Home to Roost).' Address. 4 Dec. 1963. Ed. Benjamin Karim. Malcolm-x.org. 8 July 2007 <[http://www.malcolm-x.org/speeches/spc\\_120463.htm](http://www.malcolm-x.org/speeches/spc_120463.htm)>.
- Mansfield, Harvey. *Manliness*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2006.
- The Matrix*. Dir. Andy and Larry Wachowski. Groucho II Film/Silver/Village Roadshow/Warner, 1999.
- Means, Russell. *Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspectives on Environmental Justice*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996.
- Mendlesohn, Farah. 'Surpassing the Love of Vampires; or, Why (and How) a Queer Reading of the Buffy/Willow Relationship is Denied.' Wilcox and Lavery 45–60.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Signs*. Trans. Richard C. McLeary. *Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1964.
- Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. New York: Avon, 1970.
- Mojzes, Paul. 'The Cracked Mirror: Understandings of the Myth of the Fall.' *Society and Original Sin: Ecumenical Essays on the Impact of the Fall*. Eds. Dumond Foster and Paul Mojzes. New York: Paragon, 1985. 106–18.
- Money, Mary Alice. 'The Reavers' Origin in *Serenity*: Whedon's Mistake or Masterstroke.' The *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses. Gordon College, Barnesville, GA. 26–8 May 2006.
- Monroy, Deborah. 'Seven Ways to View *Serenity*: Or, When Does the Dancer Become the War?' The *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses. Gordon College, Barnesville, GA. 26–8 May 2006.
- Morgan, Robin, ed. *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*. New York: Vintage, 1970.
- Mosquito*. Writ. and dir. Nathan Town. 2005. 3 Apr. 2007 <<http://www.mosquitoverse.com>>.
- Mulvey, Laura. 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946).' Thornham 122–30.
- . 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' Thornham 58–69.
- Myers-Scotton, Carol. 'Explaining the Role of Norms and Rationality in Codeswitching.' *Journal of Pragmatics* 32 (2000): 1259–71.
- . *Social Motivations for Codeswitching*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993.
- Nolan, Alan T. 'The Anatomy of the Myth.' *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*. Eds. Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000. 11–34.
- Nussbaum, Emily. 'Must-See Metaphysics.' *New York Times Magazine* 22 Sept. 2002: 56.
- Ono, Kent A. 'To Be a Vampire on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: Race and ("Other") Socially Marginalizing Positions on Horror TV.' *Fantasy Girls: Gender and the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*. Ed. Elyce Helford. Lanham: Rowman, 2000. 163–86.

- O’Riordan, Kate. ‘Changing Cyberspaces.’ Gillis 138–50.
- Orwell, George. 1984. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.
- Pagels, Elaine, and Karen L. King. *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity*. New York: Viking, 2007.
- ‘Pangs.’ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Writ. Jane Espenson. Dir. Michael Lange. Warner Brothers. 24 Nov. 1999. DVD. Mutant Enemy/20th Century Fox, 2006.
- Papi, Marcella Bertuccelli. ‘Insinuating: The Seduction of Unsayings.’ *Pragmatics: Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association* 6.2 (1996): 191–204.
- Peal, Stan. Homepage. 4 June 2007 <<http://www.stanpeal.com>>.
- Pelland, Kristèle. ‘The Crew of Serenity.’ 2006. deviantART. 1 June 2007 <<http://kristele.deviantart.com/>>.
- Pender, Patricia. “‘I’m Buffy and You’re . . . History’”: The Postmodern Politics of *Buffy*.’ Wilcox and Lavery 18–34.
- Penzer, N.M. *Poison Damsels: Thieves, Sacred Prostitution, and the Romance of Betel Chewing*. London: Kegan Paul, 2002.
- Plato. *Symposium*. Trans. Robin Waterfield. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.
- . *Timaeus Critias Cleitophon Menexenus Epistles*. Trans. R.G. Bury. London: Heinemann, 1929.
- Preston, Ward. *What an Art Director Does*. Los Angeles: Silman-James, 1994.
- Probyn, Elspeth. ‘New Traditionalism and Post-Feminism: TV Does the Home.’ *Screen* 31.2 (1990): 147–59.
- ‘Production Notes.’ *Serenity* Press Pack. Universal Pictures UK, 2005.
- Richardson, J. Michael, and J. Douglas Rabb. *The Existential Joss Whedon: Evil and Human Freedom in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel, Firefly, and Serenity*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007.
- Riess, Jana. *What Would Buffy Do? The Vampire Slayer as Spiritual Guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- Roberts, Nickie. *Whores in History: Prostitution in Western Society*. London: Harper, 1993.
- Roiphe, Katie. *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus*. New York: Little, 1993.
- Rollins, Peter C., and John E. O’Connor. *Hollywood’s West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2005.
- Rotundo, E. Anthony. *American Manhood*. New York: Basic, 1993.
- Russell, Mike. ‘The CulturePulp Q&A: Joss Whedon.’ 24 Sept. 2007, CulturePulp. 20 June 2007 <<http://homepage.mac.com/merussell/iblog/B835531044/C1592678312/E20050916182427/index.html>>.
- Sargent, Lyman Tower. ‘The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited.’ *Utopian Studies* 5.1 (1994): 1–37.
- Sandvoss, Cornel. *Fans*. Malden, MA: Polity, 2005.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Nausea*. 1938. Trans. Lloyd Alexander. New York: New Directions, 1964.

- 'Serenity.' Box Office Mojo. 18 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=serenity.htm>>.
- Serenity*. Writ. and dir. Joss Whedon. Perf. Nathan Fillion, Summer Glau, and Chiwetel Ejiofor. DVD. Mutant Enemy/Universal, 2005.
- Serenity: The Official Visual Companion*. London: Titan, 2005.
- 'Serenity: The Tenth Character.' *Firefly: The Complete Series*. Creator Joss Whedon. 2002. DVD. Mutant Enemy/20th Century Fox, 2003.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. 1606. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Eds. G. Blakemore Evans, et al. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 1355–90.
- . *The Tempest*. 1611. Ed. Northrop Frye. *The Complete Works*. Ed. Alfred Harbage. New York: Viking, 1969. 1373–98.
- Short, Mick. 'Discourse Analysis and the Analysis of Drama.' *Language, Discourse, and Literature*. Eds. Ron Carter and Paul Simpson. London: Unwin, 1989. 139–68.
- Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980*. New York: Penguin, 1985.
- Shulman, Alix Kates. 'A Marriage Agreement.' *Up from Under* 1.2 (1970): 5–8. *The Signal*. 2005–7. 3 Apr. 2007 <<http://signal.serenityfirefly.com/>>.
- Silva Rhetoricae: The Forest of Rhetoric*. 2003. Brigham Young University. 24 June 2007 <<http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/silva.htm>>.
- Slonczewski, Joan. *A Door into Ocean*. New York: Doherty, 2000.
- Slotkin, Richard. *The Fatal Environment*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1986.
- Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: The American West as Myth and Symbol*. Madison, WI: Popular, 1978.
- Smith, Jeff. *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music*. New York: Columbia UP, 1998.
- Sobchack, Vivian. 'Images of Wonder.' *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*. Ed. Sean Redmond. London: Wallflower, 2004. 4–11.
- Solai. 'Firefly Haiku.' Online posting. 19 June 2006. *SciFi.com*. 2 Apr. 2007 <<http://forums.scifi.com/index.php?showtopic=1907818>>.
- Sommers, Christina Hoff. *Who Stole Feminism?: How Women Have Betrayed Women*. New York: Simon, 1994.
- South, James B. "'All Torment, Trouble, Wonder, and Amazement Inhabits Here": The Vicissitudes of Technology in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.' *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 24.1/2 (2001): 93–102.
- Spah, Victoria. 'Ain't Love Grand: Spike and Courtly Love.' *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* 2.1 (2002). 24 June 2007 <<http://slayageonline.com/essays/slayage5/spah.htm>>.
- Spongberg, Mary. *Feminizing Venereal Disease: The Body of the Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century Medical Discourse*. New York: New York UP, 1997.
- Stagecoach*. Dir. John Ford. Perf. John Wayne. United Artists, 1939.
- Staite, Jewel. 'Kaylee Speaks: Jewel Staite on *Firefly*.' *Espenson* 217–27.

- Star Trek*. Creator Gene Roddenberry. Perf. William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, DeForest Kelley, James Doohan, Nichelle Nichols, and George Takei. NBC. 1966–9.
- Star Wars IV: A New Hope*. Dir. George Lucas. Perf. Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, and Carrie Fisher. 20th Century Fox, 1977.
- Star Wars IV: A New Hope*. Special Edition. DVD. Fox, 2006.
- Steiner, Leslie Morgan. *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families*. New York: Random, 2007.
- Stevenson, Gregory. *Televised Morality: The Case of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Dallas: Hamilton, 2003.
- Story, Louise. 'Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood.' *New York Times* 20 Sept. 2005: C1.
- Stoutenburgh, John. *Dictionary of the American Indian*. New York: Wings, 1990.
- Succatash. 'Firefly Prayer.' 2005. Strange Finger. 2 Apr. 2007 <<http://www.strangefinger.com/firefly.html>>.
- Sullivan, Kevin. 'Chinese Words in the 'Verse.' Espenson 197–207.
- . 'Unofficial Glossary of Firefly Chinese.' Espenson 229–38.
- Sumser, John. *Morality and Social Order in Television Crime Drama*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996.
- Sutherland, Sharon, and Sarah Swan, 'The Good, the Bad, and the Justified: Moral Ambiguity in *Alias*.' *Investigating Alias: Secrets and Spies*. Eds. Stacey Abbott and Simon Brown. London: Tauris, 2007. 119–32.
- , ———. 'The Rule of Prophecy: Source of Law in the City of *Angel*.' Abbott, *Reading Angel* 132–45.
- Savin, Darko. 'Utopianism from Orientation to Agency: What Are We Intellectuals under Post-Fordism to Do?' *Utopian Studies* 9.2 (1998): 162–90.
- Swinford, Susan. 'Adapting *Serenity*: Genre, Myth, and Freedom.' Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference. Atlanta, GA. 12–15 Apr. 2006.
- Taylor, Mark C. *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.
- Tennant, F.R. *The Sources of the Doctrine of the Fall and Original Sin*. 1903. New York: Schocken, 1968.
- Tepper, Sheri. *The Gate into Women's Country*. Lincoln: Foundation, 1988.
- 'This Side of Paradise.' *Star Trek*. Writ. D.C. Fontana. Dir. Ralph Senensky. NBC. 2 Mar. 1967.
- Thompson, Robert J. *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1996.
- Thornham, Sue, ed. *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Washington Square: New York UP, 1999.
- Tompkins, Jane. *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992.

- Traister, Bryce. 'Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies.' *American Quarterly* 52.2 (June 2000): 274–304.
- Tsuchiya, Akiko. 'The Paradox of Narrative Seduction in Carmen Riera's *Cuestión de amor propio*.' *Hispania* 75.2 (1992): 281–6.
- Tushnet, Rebecca. 'Copyright Law, Fan Practices, and the Rights of the Author.' *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. Eds. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington. New York: New York UP, 2007. 60–71.
- Ussher, Jane M. *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992.
- Walker, Rebecca. 'Becoming the Third Wave.' *MS* Jan./Feb. 1992: 39–41.
- Wardhaugh, Ronald. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.
- Warshow, Robert. *The Immediate Experience*. New York: Anchor, 1964.
- Weaver, Jace. 'American Indians and Native Americans: Reinhold Niebuhr, Historiography, and Indigenous Peoples.' *From Our Eyes: Learning from Indigenous Peoples*. Eds. Sylvia O'Meara, et al. Toronto: Garamond, 1996. 19–30.
- Wei, Li. "'How Can You Tell?'" Towards a Common Sense Explanation of Conversational Code-Switching.' *Journal of Pragmatics* 37 (2005): 375–89.
- . 'Starting from the Right Place: Introduction to the Special Issue on Conversational Code-Switching.' *Journal of Pragmatics* 37 (2005): 275–9.
- West, Michelle Sagara. 'More Than a Marriage of Convenience.' *Espenson* 97–104.
- Whedon, Joss. 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Unseen Pilot.' 26 Jan. 1996. Unreliablenarrator.net. 18 July 2007 <[http://www.unreliablenarrator.net/buffyverse/buffy\\_shooting\\_scripts/unairedpilot.txt](http://www.unreliablenarrator.net/buffyverse/buffy_shooting_scripts/unairedpilot.txt)>.
- . 'Can't Stop the Signal: Browncoats Unite.' 17 Oct. 2005 <[http://serenitymovie.com/nonflash\\_site/pn\\_5.html](http://serenitymovie.com/nonflash_site/pn_5.html)>.
- . 'Let's Watch a Girl Get Beaten to Death.' Online posting. 20 May 2007. Whedonesque. 6 June 2007 <<http://whedonesque.com/comments/13271>>.
- 'Whedon Seeks Return of "Gritty" Sci-Fi.' 7 Oct. 2005. BBC News. 16 July 2007 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4318938.stm>>.
- Whitehead, Stephen. *Men and Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity, 2002.
- . 'Object Lessons: Men, Masculinity, and the Sign *Women*.' *Signs* 26.2 (Winter 2001): 355–88.
- Whitfield, Stephen E. *The Making of Star Trek*. New York: Ballantine, 1968.
- Wilcox, Rhonda V. 'In "The Demon Section of the Card Catalogue": *Buffy* Studies and Television Studies.' *Critical Studies in Television* 1.1 (Spring 2006): 37–48.
- . *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. New York: Tauris, 2005.



- , and David Lavery, eds. *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Lanham: Rowman, 2002.
- Williams, Ashley. 'Fighting Words and Challenging Expectations: Language Alternation and Social Roles in a Family Dispute.' *Journal of Pragmatics* 37 (2005): 317–28.
- Wilson, Amelia. *The Devil*. London: Barron, 2002.
- Wood, Nigel, ed. *The Tempest. Theory in Practice Series*. Buckingham: Open UP, 1995.
- Wright, John C. 'Just Shove Him in the Engine, or the Role of Chivalry in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*.' Espenson 155–68.
- Wright, Leigh Adams. 'Asian Objects in Space.' Espenson 29–35.
- Wright, Will. *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1977.
- Xenophon. *Recollections of Socrates and Socrates Defense before the Jury*. Trans. Anna S. Benjamin. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965.
- Yaszek, Lisa. "I'll Be a Postfeminist in a Postpatriarchy," or Can We Really Imagine Life after Feminism?' *Electronic Book Review* 29 Jan. 2005. 12 Mar. 2007 <[www.electronicbookreview.com](http://www.electronicbookreview.com)>.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Fragile Absolute or Why the Christian Legacy is Worth Saving?* London: Verso, 2000.
- Zynda, Lyle. 'We're All Just Floating in Space.' Espenson 85–95.

# Index

- 11th Hour (fan) 246–47  
*2001: A Space Odyssey* 110, 121, 162, 201, 203  
abrogation 37–38  
*Adventures of Brisco County, Jr., The* 119  
aesthetics 3, 10, 75, 170, 193, 209, 213, 219, 221, 223, 232–34, 238  
Agamben, Giorgio 139, 150–52, 261  
agency, female 47–49, 53–62  
‘Alexander and His Clarinet’ 186–87  
Alliance 5–6, 12, 14–16, 31, 35, 37–39, 42–44, 46–58, 57, 71, 76–80, 82–83, 89, 91–97, 99, 102–07, 109–13, 119, 133–35, 137–38, 139, 144–45, 147, 149–52, 155–58, 160, 162–63, 165, 167, 170, 179, 189, 192–95, 198, 203, 206, 213, 222, 229, 231–33, 235, 237, 243, 248–49, 260, 264  
*Angel* 2–5, 76, 89, 98, 120, 132, 156, 164, 217, 236, 239, 242, 259  
appropriation 37–38  
archetypes 72, 89, 114, 116–17  
architecture 101, 201–02, 204, 208, 211, 263–64  
art design (see production design)  
artifice 19–23, 26–27, 29, 73, 169, 252  
*Astonishing X-Men* 11  
Atheism 167–79  
Baccarin, Morena 4  
‘Ballad of Jayne, The’ 10, 13, 177, 196–98  
Baldwin, Adam 4, 244  
Barthes, Roland 186  
bass clarinet 185–87, 263  
Battle of Serenity Valley 7, 84, 98, 194, 215  
Berlin, Irving 186  
betrayal 44, 46, 59, 83–84, 213, 219  
Bible 13, 25, 46, 74, 131–32, 156–58, 162, 165–66, 168–71, 174, 176–79, 261; see also Christianity; religion  
bilingualism 31–40  
*Birth of a Nation, The* 187–88  
Black, the 111, 115–17, 120, 242, 260,  
*Blade Runner* 101–02, 104, 106, 173, 207  
Blue Sun 44, 241, 255  
Boba Fett 158, 188, 263  
body (see physicality; technology and the body)  
Boyd, David 3  
Breil, Joseph Carl 187  
Brooks, Richard 184, 189  
Browncoats 5, 10, 42–43, 82, 236–49, 265–66  
Buddha 67, 168, 253; see also religion  
*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 15, 76–77, 89, 95, 130, 136, 156, 214, 217, 227–28, 231, 239

- Cain, Cheryl 3, 14  
 Callicott, J. Baird 130, 138  
 Campbell, Joseph 117, 254, 261  
 Can't Stop the Serenity 242  
 'Can't stop the signal' 166, 227, 237–38  
 cancellation of *Firefly* 2, 9, 40, 237, 243–45  
 canon 5, 98  
 Chinese 9, 31–40, 67, 195–96, 207, 252–53, 260–61  
 chivalry 79, 81, 86, 118, 221–22  
 Christianity, Christian symbolism 156–66, 168, 177, 253, 262; see also Bible; religion  
 Churchill, Ward 149  
 cinematic, the 160, 189–90, 227–31, 233–34, 255, 263  
 cinematography 5–7, 42, 44, 46–48, 104–05, 115, 121–23, 158, 159–63, 167, 171, 172, 184, 203–05, 208–11, 212–23, 229–32, 233–36  
*Citizen Kane* 160–62, 256  
 Civil War (American) 5, 119, 183, 189, 193, 257–58; see also Confederate States of America  
*Clockwork Orange, A* 94, 98, 201, 259  
 codeswitching 31–40, 232  
 color, use of 104, 115, 121–23, 158, 201, 206, 208  
 community 48, 57–61, 84, 103, 110–11, 120, 195, 237, 240–45; see also family  
 Companions 4, 7, 13, 15, 19–20, 22–23, 26–30, 42, 56–57, 61, 63–75, 79, 81–82, 85, 95, 110, 207, 252, 254,  
 Confederate States of America 189, 193; see also Civil War  
 consciousness 131, 134, 157, 159–62, 262,  
 consumption 37, 110, 239, 245, 249  
 Contner, James 3, 14  
 Cordova, V.F. 129–32, 138  
 costume 5, 46, 60, 78, 101, 102, 157, 196, 201–04, 206–07, 216, 241, 248, 257  
 courtly love 33, 251  
 Cult TV 2, 237–38, 240  
 culture industry 245, 249  
 Curry, Agnes 127, 144, 159  
 cyberpunk 94, 101–13  
 cyborg 108–09  
 damsel 41, 48, 72, 157, 162  
 death 159–65, 212–23, 262, 264  
 DeCandido, Keith R. 114, 215, 222, 260, 262  
 deceit 71, 73, 75  
 diglossia 32  
 director of photography 210  
 directors 2–3, 190, 210, 219, 227, 236  
 discourse 33, 35–36, 38, 41, 43–46, 48–49, 55–56, 58, 89, 140, 215, 217, 219, 247, 252, 255, 258  
*Dollhouse* 11, 238  
 Donaldson, Laura 136, 261  
*Done the Impossible: The Fans' Tale of Firefly and Serenity* 240, 242–44, 288  
 double 72, 86, 157–60; see also shadow character  
 DVDs 2–3, 6, 38, 66, 98, 228, 237, 240, 247–48, 254  
 dystopia 9, 89–100, 105, 107, 137, 204–05, 259  
 Earth-That-Was 14, 25, 90, 132, 141–42, 156, 203  
 economics 67–69, 81, 145–47, 240–42, 244–49  
*écriture féminine, l'* 45–49  
 editing 7, 115, 230, 245  
 Edlund, Ben 3, 13  
 Edmonson, Greg 184–86, 262  
 Ejoifur, Chiwetel 16, 222, 233

environmentalism 129–38, 143–44  
 embedded discourse 39  
 Equality Now 9, 242  
 Espenson, Jane 3, 6, 12, 66, 129–30,  
 139–40, 164, 168, 252, 259  
 ethics 8, 24, 59, 71–72, 77–86, 99,  
 102–04, 118, 168, 170–76, 213,  
 221, 258  
 existentialism 158–59, 184

family 4, 7–8, 15, 33, 41–44, 57–61,  
 65, 77, 84, 110, 115, 117, 121–23,  
 186, 240, 244, 256–57  
 fans 2, 8, 10, 36, 95, 169, 207,  
 227–49, 253, 265–66  
 feminism 9, 54–62, 68, 256–57  
 feminism, second-wave 55–57, 78,  
 89, 94–100, 256–57  
 feminism, third-wave 53–62, 256  
 filk (science fiction folk music) 240,  
 244–45, 248, 265  
 Fillion, Nathan 4, 263  
*Firefly* Episodes:  
 ‘Ariel’ (1.9) 14, 39, 44, 67, 71, 79,  
 84, 105, 143, 208, 224, 251  
 ‘Bushwhacked’ (1.3) 92, 175  
 ‘Heart of Gold’ (1.13) 4–5, 8,  
 15, 36, 79, 81, 96, 109, 113,  
 121–22, 205  
 ‘Jaynestown’ (1.7) 13, 21–22, 46,  
 67, 74–77, 85–86, 168, 172,  
 190, 196  
 ‘Objects in Space’ (1.14) 10, 15,  
 46, 48, 83, 103, 111, 158–59,  
 183–90, 272, 282  
 ‘Our Mrs. Reynolds’ (1.6) 1,  
 8, 13, 19, 23, 28, 31, 35, 54,  
 57–59, 72, 79, 81, 96, 164  
 ‘Out of Gas’ (1.8) 8–9, 14, 78, 83,  
 86, 92, 97, 114–24, 141, 209,  
 251, 261  
 ‘Safe’ (1.5) 8, 13, 29, 34–36, 39,  
 41, 44–45, 47, 78, 82, 84, 103,  
 107, 111, 177, 254

‘Serenity’ (1.1) 10, 20, 31, 42, 61,  
 65, 79, 92, 114, 119, 128, 142,  
 168, 195 209, 212, 229, 251,  
 255

‘Shindig’ (1.4) 6, 12, 20, 35–36,  
 60, 66, 70, 78, 80–81, 86, 99,  
 106, 206–07

‘The Message’ (1.12) 15, 29, 34,  
 83, 93, 109, 196, 207

‘The Train Job’ (1.2) 10, 12,  
 43, 80, 98–99, 102–03, 108,  
 118–19, 169–71, 196, 205, 210,  
 220–22

‘Trash’ (1.11) 14, 27, 37, 57, 59,  
 72, 84, 202, 208

‘War Stories’ (1.10) 14, 20, 22, 36,  
 53–54, 56, 61, 71, 77, 83, 85,  
 106, 109, 119, 195, 210, 269,  
 278

*Firefly/Serenity* Characters:

Badger 13, 106, 183

Shepherd Derrial Book 4, 11,  
 13, 28–29, 44, 46–47, 59, 61,  
 66, 74, 84–85, 92, 97, 106,  
 109, 128, 140, 142, 151, 163,  
 169–74, 176–79, 193, 212, 216,  
 218, 220, 222, 229, 260, 264

Rance Burgess 15, 81–82, 108

Jayne Cobb 4–5, 7–8, 10–15,  
 34–35, 38, 44, 46–48, 54,  
 56, 58–59, 61, 67, 74, 77–81,  
 84–86, 94, 103, 106, 109, 118,  
 123, 128–29, 137, 145, 147,  
 165, 175–78, 196–98, 206, 208,  
 219–21, 230, 234–35, 241, 244,  
 253

The Councilor 20, 22–23, 28, 71

Lawrence Dobson 12, 79–80, 212,  
 216–17, 220–21, 223

Jubal Early 46–48, 83, 103, 111,  
 157, 160, 183–90, 265

Kaylee Frye 3–6, 9, 11–12, 15,  
 29–30, 31, 33–35, 46, 54,  
 59–62, 77–78, 80, 83, 86,

- 92, 95, 104, 109–12, 120–21, 157–58, 162, 174, 188, 206–08, 212, 215–18, 220–21, 235, 241, 255–57
- Durran Haymer 57, 202–03
- Fess Higgins 21–23, 28, 67, 74
- Magistrate Higgins 13, 21–22, 197
- Mr. Universe 6, 16, 97, 110, 112, 149, 166, 213, 232, 236, 262
- Nandi 8, 15, 19, 28–29, 38, 63, 67, 71, 79, 81–82, 108, 205, 252–53
- Adelel Niska 12, 14, 48, 53, 56, 61, 80, 83, 85, 99, 118–19, 183, 210–11, 212, 221–22, 255, 264
- The Operative 16, 97, 104, 134, 150–52, 159–60, 163, 165, 189, 213, 222, 233–35, 264
- Captain Malcolm Reynolds 1, 4, 6–9, 11–15, 20, 23–30, 33, 36, 38–39, 41, 46, 48, 53–54, 56–59, 61–62, 67–68, 70–74, 76–86, 90, 92–93, 95–99, 103, 105–07, 111–12, 115–24, 128–30, 133–34, 136, 138, 142–43, 145, 149, 151–52, 157, 160, 162–66, 167, 169–74, 176–79, 184, 186, 188–89, 192–94, 196, 198, 202–03, 206–08, 210, 212–13, 215–22, 229–31, 233–35, 251–58, 261, 263–64
- Saffron 1, 8–9, 13–15, 19, 23–28, 31, 54, 56–62, 63, 79, 81, 96, 99, 202
- Inara Serra 4, 6–7, 9, 11, 13–15, 19–23, 25–28, 30, 34, 38–39, 45–46, 54, 57, 59, 61–62, 63–75, 77, 79–81, 85–86, 90, 95, 97, 99, 104, 110, 123, 165, 173, 194, 203–08, 210, 229, 233, 252–55, 260
- Tracey Smith 8, 15, 83
- River Tam 4–5, 7–9, 11–16, 35, 41–48, 58–59, 61, 74, 78, 80, 82, 84–85, 91–95, 97–99, 103–09, 111–12, 119, 132, 138, 141, 143, 146, 149, 151–52, 155–63, 165–66, 176–79, 183–84, 186, 188, 190, 205–06, 213, 217, 220, 229–31, 233–36, 254–55, 259–60, 263
- Doctor Simon Tam 4–5, 7–8, 11–15, 29–30, 34–35, 39, 42–46, 58–61, 77–78, 80, 84, 106, 111, 120–22, 133, 137, 141, 143, 157–59, 162, 175–76, 179, 183, 193, 206–07, 213, 216–20, 229–31, 233, 235, 254
- Hoban ‘Wash’ Washburne 1, 3–4, 9, 11–12, 14, 25–26, 30, 31, 34–36, 48, 53–54, 56, 59, 62, 77–78, 83, 85, 96–97, 109–10, 112, 120–21, 123, 134–35, 143, 149, 174, 206, 209–10, 212–13, 216, 219–20, 222–23, 235, 241, 244, 251, 253–54, 260–61
- Zoe Washburne 4, 6–9, 11–12, 14–15, 24, 26, 30, 34–36, 41, 48, 53–54, 56–60, 62, 77–78, 85, 95–96, 98, 105, 110, 118–23, 128, 157, 170–71, 175, 196, 206, 209, 215, 219–20, 230, 234, 254–55, 258
- Atherton Wing 13, 20–21, 80, 99
- Firefly* theme song 1, 111, 191–95, 198, 203
- flashbacks 14, 103, 115, 118, 121–23
- food 7, 54, 66, 91–92, 104, 106–07, 110, 117–18, 122
- Fox network 2, 98, 168, 228
- frame story 115
- Fray* 11
- French 135
- friendship 4, 33–34, 48–49, 81, 110; see also family; community

- frontier 4–5, 11, 19, 82, 90, 92, 96,  
 99, 102–03, 105–09, 112, 118,  
 127–38, 193, 203
- Gabbard, Krin 265
- Gaines, Jane 187
- gaze, male 41–42, 45, 48, 254
- geisha 63–64, 207
- gender 8–9, 23, 53–86, 91, 94, 96, 99,  
 245, 254,
- genre 1, 5, 8–10, 67, 71, 76, 89–124,  
 184, 193, 198, 202–06, 208, 211,  
 221–22, 228, 237, 254, 263, 265
- geopolitics 139–52
- Gilgamesh, Epic of 67
- girlie 60, 62, 256
- Glass, Ron 4, 222, 242
- Glau, Summer 4, 109
- Gnosticism 142–43
- Goners* 11, 238
- ‘good wife’ 52–62
- Grabiak, Marita 3, 13
- Great Train Robbery, The* 206
- Greenberg, Drew Z. 3, 13
- Hands of Blue 43
- heroes/heroic 4–5, 7, 13, 41–42, 46,  
 48, 74, 76, 79, 85–86, 92, 98, 100,  
 112, 114–18, 120, 122–23, 128,  
 130, 157, 176–77, 188, 192, 202,  
 204–05, 207, 209, 211, 233, 238,  
 249, 253–55, 258, 261
- hero’s journey (see Campbell)
- Hester, Thurman Lee 129–30
- hetaera 23, 63–75
- High and the Mighty, The* 116
- home 7, 58, 103, 110, 112, 122,  
 208–10, 234
- Hong Kong films 89–91
- horror 5, 89, 93, 115, 121, 123, 128,  
 132, 134, 164, 227, 229–30
- humor 36, 77, 99, 115, 130–31, 167,  
 178, 214, 216, 220–22, 241
- hybrids/hybridity 102, 105, 201–11
- ideology 48, 86, 107, 186, 188, 203
- imperial forces (*Star Wars*) 6, 206
- imperialism 130, 139, 149
- Independents 5, 92, 132, 149, 233,  
 237, 264
- individualism 82–83, 258
- intelligence 147–48, 150
- Internet 2, 108, 245, 247
- Jenkins, Henry 236, 245, 247–48
- Kaveney, Roz 72, 130, 228, 260
- Kirk, Captain James T. 86, 117, 164
- kitchen (of *Serenity*) 7, 54, 104, 110,  
 117, 208–09
- Lackey, Mercedes 105, 107, 137, 140,  
 260
- language 1, 7–9, 19–49, 61, 66, 91,  
 106, 129, 188–89, 195–96, 244,  
 252, 259
- Lassek, Lisa 3, 184–85
- Lavery, David 139–44, 228, 231, 254
- lesbian love scene 20, 22–23
- love 19–20, 22, 26, 30, 54, 58–59,  
 74–75, 79, 115
- loyalty 7, 228
- Maher, Sean 4
- Man Called Horse, A* 128
- Manifest Destiny 104, 107
- marriage 24, 26, 53–59, 72–73, 77,  
 79, 85, 96, 256, 258
- masculinity 23, 76–86, 257–58
- Matthews, Brett 3, 15
- McPherson, Dennis 129–30
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 140
- Meyer, Carey 208–10
- Minear, Tim 1, 3, 6, 9, 12, 14–15,  
 102, 114–19, 121–23, 137, 261
- Miranda 93, 97, 104, 107, 134, 136,  
 138, 144–45, 147, 151, 159–66,  
 213, 230, 232, 235, 264
- mise-en-scène* 6–7, 10, 184, 212–23

- Molina, Jose 3, 14  
 monomyth 42, 48, 117, 254–55, 261  
 morality 22, 72, 77, 94, 168, 170, 172, 174, 176–78, 213, 219  
 Mudders 13, 74, 85, 177, 196–98  
 music 1, 6, 8, 10, 26, 42, 66, 121, 162, 169, 183–98, 203, 218, 229, 239–41, 245, 262–63, 265; see also sound  
 myth/mythology 1–2, 13, 25, 41, 74, 108, 112, 117, 124, 129, 131, 155–57, 159, 162–64, 166, 173, 178, 184, 244
- names, naming 57, 188–89, 255, 265  
 narrative 2, 10, 19, 42–47, 55–56, 74, 83, 98, 101, 103, 115, 117, 121–23, 127, 165, 169–70, 174, 184, 191–92, 196, 211, 213–15, 218, 220–22, 228–33, 235–36, 238, 257, 259, 262  
 Native American 9, 127–38, 133, 136, 149  
 non-linear 5, 9, 44, 46, 170, 178  
 Nothing / nothingness 167–79
- online (see Internet)  
 Original Sin 9, 144, 155–66, 261–62  
 Other 106, 137, 156, 175, 191, 194, 198  
 outer planets 69–70, 92, 139, 155
- paideia 66  
 patriarchy/patriarchal 43–46, 48, 81, 137, 156, 244–55, 257–58, 261–62  
 Pax (G–23 Paxilon Hydrochlorate) 9, 104, 134, 136, 144–45, 147, 163; see also pharmaceuticals  
 Pearson, Kerry (fan) 244  
 Peristere, Loni 127, 132  
 pharmaceuticals/drugs 9, 53–54, 139, 144–47, 149  
 philosophers 63, 66–74, 129, 132–33, 139, 150, 176  
 physicality 6, 25, 46, 75, 102, 105–07, 109, 111–12, 140–44, 156, 160, 175, 184  
 politeness 39, 253  
 post-9/11 9, 89, 96, 98, 100, 140, 149  
 post-colonial theory 37, 39–40, 261  
 postfeminism 9, 53–62, 76, 256–57  
 posthuman 173, 176  
 postmodernism 55, 57–59, 62, 179, 202, 204, 211  
 power 9, 19, 21, 27, 30, 31, 33, 48, 55, 68, 76–83, 91, 94, 96, 104, 106, 129, 137, 145, 147–50, 157, 168, 189, 197, 212, 220–22, 238, 245–49, 254, 256, 258–59  
 production design 6–7, 102, 127, 142–43, 201–11, 232, 264  
 Prokofiev, Sergei 186  
 prostitute/prostitution 5, 22, 42, 57, 63–68, 71–73, 75, 81, 170, 254  
 psychopharmaceuticals (see pharmaceuticals)
- Quality TV 2–3, 227
- race 70, 126, 183–90, 261  
 Reavers 9–10, 48, 60, 78–80, 82–83, 93, 98, 104, 120, 127–38, 139, 144–45, 147, 152, 155, 163, 165–66, 171–75, 179, 213, 220, 222, 229–30, 232, 234, 242, 255, 260  
 red button 120, 123, 261  
 religion 9, 28, 67, 142, 167–79, 241, 264; see also Bible; Buddha; Christianity, Christian symbolism  
 resistance 2, 42, 45–46, 54, 95, 99, 112, 148, 232, 243  
 retrofuturism 101–02, 105  
*Return of A Man Called Horse* 128  
 rhetoric 8, 10, 19–30, 66, 72–73, 152, 257  
 “Rime of the Ancient Mariner, The” 165–66

- sanity/insanity 15, 179, 189  
 savages/savagery 9, 112, 127–38, 156, 164, 213, 223, 260  
 scholars 2, 11, 20, 64, 66, 69, 130, 156, 184, 245, 248, 252, 259, 261, 265,  
 science fiction 5–6, 9, 11, 76, 86, 89, 101–04, 108–11, 113, 115, 117, 119–20, 139–40, 142, 158, 164, 169, 184, 191–92, 201–08, 221, 227, 231–33, 241, 263, 265  
 scripts 2, 252, 260  
 seduction 19–30, 54, 72, 79  
*Serenity* 2–3, 6, 9–11, 16, 48, 60, 63, 69, 76, 82, 90–93, 97, 103–05, 110, 112, 127, 132, 138–52, 155–56, 159–66, 179, 191, 198, 204–05, 211, 212, 222–23, 227–38, 240, 243–49  
 set design (see production design)  
 setting 7, 9–11, 90–91, 101, 115, 123, 143, 171, 192, 195–96, 206, 208  
 sex 15, 20–22, 25, 28–29, 54, 56, 60, 78, 110, 156–57, 210  
 shadow character 1, 72, 86, 118, 175;  
 see also double  
 Shakespeare, William 2, 58, 64, 135–38, 161–62, 261  
 shiny 7  
 slavery 6, 35, 65, 92, 136, 177, 189  
 social construction 76, 78, 198, 258  
 social status/social standing 4, 63, 70, 81, 91  
 Socratic dialogue 71, 73  
 Solo, Han 119, 206  
 Solomon, David 3, 14, 114, 119, 121  
 Sophists 71–74  
 sound 115, 120–21, 162, 183–84, 214, 218–19, 230, 234–35; see also music  
 South, James B. 133  
 spaceship 5–7, 60, 104–05, 115, 184, 190, 192, 201–05, 207–10, 212, 233  
*Stagecoach* 5, 116–17, 206  
 Staite, Jewel 4  
*Star Trek* 5, 33, 40, 86, 110, 140, 142–43, 164, 169, 173, 192–93, 214, 228, 231, 236–37, 245, 262  
*Star Wars* 5–6, 31, 86, 119, 193, 203–04, 206, 208, 232, 236, 266  
 state of exception 139, 150–52  
 steampunk 9, 101, 260  
 Stevenson, Gregory 156  
 subjectivity 41, 43–45, 235–36, 255  
 superhero 4  
 technology and the body 94, 101–13, 133, 136, 140–43, 145, 147–48, 168, 196, 207, 209, 247, 263  
 ‘throwness’ 167  
 Torres, Gina 4, 164  
 trickster 1  
 Trpcic, Shawna 206  
 Unification 5–6, 92, 97, 189  
 Universal Pictures 238, 240, 246  
 utopia/utopian 93, 140, 142, 155, 195, 204–05  
 vampire 4, 76, 214  
 vids (fan-made videos) 245, 265  
 virginity 36, 64, 74, 81, 161–62  
 visual (see cinematic, the;  
 cinematography; production design; *mise-en-scène*; setting)  
 war 4, 7, 14, 43, 92–93, 95, 144, 148, 189, 203, 206, 233, 237–38, 249, 264  
 Wayne, John 5, 86, 116  
 weapons 6, 12, 14, 27, 47, 57, 59, 83, 85, 103, 117–19, 127, 137, 144, 148–49, 157–58, 162, 190, 202, 205, 211, 216, 239  
 Weaver, Jace 130  
 Westerns 1, 5–6, 9–10, 40, 42, 76, 83, 86, 89–90, 95, 99, 101–02, 104,



- 107–08, 112–13, 115–19, 121,  
127–28, 132–33, 137, 144, 184,  
192, 202–07, 211, 221–22, 231,  
239, 254, 260–61, 263
- Whedon, Joss 1–16, 30, 31, 33,  
35–38, 41, 44, 46, 48, 55, 61,  
63–64, 68, 71–72, 76, 78–83,  
86, 89–90, 94–95, 97–98, 100,  
101–05, 107, 109–10, 112,  
114–21, 123, 127, 130–36, 138,  
139–40, 144, 155–61, 163, 166,  
168–69, 175, 183–86, 188–90,  
192–93, 195, 198, 202, 205,  
207–11, 214–15, 217, 219, 221,  
223, 227–34, 236–38, 239,  
241–43, 245–46, 248, 251–55,  
257–62, 264–65
- Wiggins, Mike 119
- Wilcox, Rhonda V. 131, 144, 228,  
231, 235–36, 254, 255, 261, 262,  
263, 264, 265
- witch 13, 41, 47–48, 103, 135–36, 254
- Wonder Woman* 238
- writers (in the Whedonverses) 2–3,  
8, 30, 67, 71, 117, 137, 168, 219,  
222, 252–53, 260