Firefly: Updating the Western (for the Twenty-Sixth Century)

I. Introduction

Joss Whedon, creator of Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel, might seem the least likely person working on television to have created a western. His leap from Buffy, a horror-infused contemporary young-adult drama, to Firefly, a gritty science fiction western, seems a bit unusual, but Whedon makes it work, bringing his trademark dark wit to bear in an altogether more serious setting than his previous series'. Many of the distinctive elements of Buffy and Angel return under this new guise, including a reluctant protagonist, a strong ensemble cast, and Whedon's razor-sharp dialogue. Firefly's setting gives Whedon new material to draw on, however, particularly more than a century's worth of western generic conventions, and he does so with obvious love. Whedon is not bound by these conventions, however – in Firefly, he plays off the deep resonance the western still has in American popular culture to update the genre for modern audiences, reworking old plots and themes to give them new relevance and casting contemporary conflicts in mythic terms.

II. “Here's How It Is”

In Firefly's future-history, the Earth was “used up,”1 so her people – led by the two remaining superpowers, the United States and China – left on a generation-long journey to a new solar system, whose planets and moons they terraformed to suit their needs. The

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Central Planets, the first to be colonized extensively, formed the Alliance, initially to resolve questions over the use of resources and to increase trade. They eventually expanded their mission, however, to include bringing what they called “enlightenment” to the Outer Planets. That mission was opposed by some, who called themselves Independents. The War for Unification, the bloodiest war in human history, ensued. The Independents eventually lost, and the Outer Planets were placed under Alliance control. 

*Firefly* is set six years after the end of the war, at a time roughly analogous to the Reconstruction era of the post-Civil War United States. The show centers around the Firefly-class spaceship *Serenity*, captained by one Malcolm Reynolds, and her crew, who are working odd jobs between the Outer Planets to make ends meet.

“Mal” Reynolds was a sergeant for the Independents in the War for Unification. As Joss Whedon describes it, “Mal had fought for the South – not for slavery, I can't stress that enough... but for [the losing side].” Mal's home world, Shadow, was ravaged by the war. He and Zoë, his second-in-command, were the only members of their company to survive the Battle of Serenity Valley, widely regarded as the tipping-point of the war. Following the armistice, Mal found himself adrift, and he ended up buying himself *Serenity* – named after the battle in which he and Zoë lost so much – and taking on goods and passengers. Most see her dents and scratches – he sees freedom. “No matter how long the arm of the Alliance might get,” he tells Zoë, trying to interest her in flying with him, “we'll just get ourselves a little further.”

Mal and Zoë put together a crew of misfits like themselves – Jayne, a thug-for-hire; Kaylee, a crack mechanic; and

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Wash, the ship's pilot and eventually Zoë's husband. Mal rents one of Serenity's two shuttles to a Companion, Inara – a federated courtesan. He also takes on several passengers who eventually become part of the crew – Shepherd Book, a preacher; and Simon Tam, a doctor, and his sister River, both fugitives on the run from the Alliance. The series chronicles Mal and his crew's adventures in getting – or not getting – a little further than the Alliance and their various other enemies can reach.

III. Malcolm Reynolds, Western Hero

Firefly is most like a western when it focuses on the character of Malcolm Reynolds – of the nine members of Serenity's crew, he comes closest to typifying a standard western archetype. Mal is the strong, ruthless leader, able and willing to do whatever is necessary to keep his crew together and his ship flying, even if that means taking jobs on the wrong side of the law or killing in cold blood. He is Ethan Edwards of John Ford's The Searchers, broken by his defeat in a war he's still fighting, moving forward because his only other option is to lie down and die. He is the “man who knows Indians” – or rather, Reavers. In his defeat he has looked into the blackness of the human soul, and this makes him understand the Reavers in a way others do not. “A man comes up against that kind of will,” he says “the only way to deal with it, I suspect, is to become it.”

Mal's redemption is his dedication to his crew and their reliance on him, the relationship of a sergeant in the army to the soldiers under his command. That dedication tempers his hardness and bitterness with love. “You turn on any of my crew,” Mal tells Jayne, when the latter betrays Simon and River to the Alliance, “you turn on me.” Mal knows that it is ultimately his responsibility to get his crew, alive, out of every situation.

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4 “Bushwhacked,” Ibid., written and directed by Tim Minear. Originally aired 9/27/02 on FOX.
5 “Ariel,” Ibid., written by Jose Molina, directed by Allan Kroeker. Originally aired 11/15/02 on FOX.
he gets them into. He will cajole or threaten or bribe, whatever it takes to finish the job, as long as his crew is safe – he is their protector, as Gunsmoke's Marshal Dillon is the protector of Dodge City.

Since Mal's character in a sense embodies the western elements of the show, he is also the character most often involved in plots which invoke the generic conventions of the western. As a smuggler and a thief, Mal automatically evokes the tradition of wrong-side-of-the-law western heroes going back to Frank and Jesse James. Firefly's premiere episode, “The Train Job,” shows Mal as a Jesse James-like outlaw. He returns the medicine he thought he had stolen from the Alliance when he discovers it is badly needed by the people of a small rural town. Mal also sometimes displays the qualities of a traditional western hero. At the beginning of “Our Mrs. Reynolds,” he kills a group of bandits who had been harassing a small town, and in “Safe” he rescues Simon and River from a group of “savage” hillfolk who are ready to burn them at the stake. Mal is not always such a moral character, however. He is no Lone Ranger – he has few compunctions against killing, and there is no silver mine hidden up in the hills which provides him a comfortable income, so he cannot afford to be very uptight about the kind of work he takes on. When Mal and his crew do not make enough money, they do not eat. Whether Mal is engaging in illegal salvage operations, in “Serenity”; or smuggling cattle, in “Shindig” and “Safe”; he does what he needs to do and takes the chances he needs to take in order to keep his crew fed and his ship in the air. Mal is not a diplomat. In “Out of Gas,” when Zoë is wounded, Wash refuses to leave her side until Mal slams him up against a bulkhead and forces him out of the infirmary. In “Ariel,” when Jayne betrays Simon and River to the Alliance, Mal very nearly kills him. And in “The
Message,” Mal does in fact kill an old army buddy for threatening the safety of his crew. Mal is a complex character, far deeper than the heroes of the 'B’ westerns of yore, but he is nevertheless the clear descendant of one such archetypal hero.

IV. Updating the Redemptive Woman

Richard Slotkin calls this western character archetype the “good-badman,” and attributes his genesis to William S. Hart, who directed and starred in more than fifty movies between 1914 and 1925. Although characters who were not on the right side of the law had appeared in westerns before – notably the aforementioned Frank and Jesse James – they had always been portrayed as Robin Hood-like figures, fighting for justice against the corrupt forces of law. Hart's were the first heroes who were at least in part honestly “bad,” unlikable characters. “Badness” was often signified by drinking, violence, and miscegenation, and it was this last which formed the crux around which many western plots were structured. As Slotkin describes it, “Hart almost always played a 'bad man' of one kind or another – an outlaw, gambler, or just a hard customer – who finds redemption through the love of a good [white] woman (or a pure young girl)...”

The hero was motivated by his internal conflict between good and evil, and his fall and redemption were portrayed in racial terms. He was placed in a love triangle, a white man caught between a white woman and a non-white woman. If he chose the false, worldly pleasures of the non-white woman, and did not protect the vulnerable white woman, his wicked and licentious behavior would destroy him. If he instead chose the Godliness of the white woman, he would be empowered to destroy all who meant to harm her. When Firefly invokes this convention, facing Mal with a similar choice, it turns the convention's

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The history of the archetype is instructive. Perhaps one of the starkest examples of it is William Hart's 1916 film *Hell's Hinges*. At the beginning of the film, the weak, womanizing Reverend Robert Henley is sent to the West by the leadership of his church, who judge him unfit to withstand the temptations of a city parish. The elders consider the West a place where people live simply, close to God and the land—a belief which will soon be shown to be false. The Reverend Henley, accompanied by his sister Faith, is sent to minister to the good people of Placer Gulch—nicknamed “Hell's Hinges” and widely recognized by the people of the surrounding area as a place to avoid. Upon the Reverend Henley's arrival in town, the saloon-keeper, Silk Miller, plies him with drink and sets his half-breed whore, Dolly, to seduce him. Eventually the Reverend, having spent the night with Dolly, dies drunk and addled at the head of a mob which is bent on burning down his own church. Yet the Reverend Henley's fall parallels Blaze Tracey's redemption.

Tracey's love for the pure, wholesome Faith Henley causes him to find God, and, acting as both His agent and Faith Henley's protector, Tracey redeems himself by killing Silk Miller, setting fire to the saloon, and utterly destroying the town, Gomorrah-like. Hart's vision of this redemption was explicitly racist—it was a vision that “...the virile Anglo-Saxon man's sexual love of the pure White woman is the instinctive basis of his 'natural' or innate capacity for civilization and progress.” If a man is motivated by his “true love” for a white woman, he is incapable of being less than sincere, no matter what “physical disposition to vice” he otherwise possesses. A white man is “instinctively bound to

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7 The hinges of an old-style cast-iron wood stove are the hottest part.
8 Slotkin, 248.
9 Ibid.
protect all women of his race, especially the pure and innocent,” and his redemption is always signified by the hero's destruction of the evil forces threatening the White woman.

John Ford invokes this theme forty years later in *The Searchers* (1956), but he does so to critique it. Ethan Edwards is the Blaze Tracey character, the “good badman” who should be redeemed by his efforts to rescue his white niece, Debbie, from Indian captivity. Ethan's so-called “punitive raid” of the Comanche camp parallels Blaze Tracey's fiery destruction of the saloon, casting the redeemed hero protecting the vulnerable white woman as “an Old Testament type of avenger.” Ethan and his men shoot wildly, thundering through the camp on their horses, as though they are avenging angels. Yet Ford calls Ethan's redemption into question. Ethan, having found Debbie – her husband, the Comanche chief Scar, dead – seems much more like the Reverend Henley than Blaze Tracey. Ethan stands ready to take Henley's path, to “set fire to the church” – he intends to kill Debbie in order to save her, to cleanse her of her miscegenation. The racialist theory sees Debbie as become tainted through her presumed union with Scar, and by its logic, Ethan would redeem himself by killing her. If he were to allow her to live as a white woman, the theory holds, he would be allowing the pollution of the race. Yet the film rejects that logic. Ethan is barely persuaded to spare her life, and the film portrays this as the true redemptive path, akin to that of Blaze Tracey. Ethan brings Debbie home, protecting her from further harm as he would any other innocent white woman.

Joss Whedon invokes this theme as well, bringing his own critical perspective to bear. In the *Firefly* episode “Our Mrs. Reynolds,” Mal is presented with his own Faith

10 Ibid., 250.
11 Ibid., 249.
Henley or Debbie Edwards, a vulnerable white Christian woman, in the person of Saffron. She seems to be a naïve girl from a backwater planet, and Mal seems to have inadvertently married her. Mal is obviously sexually attracted to her, as the racialist theory holds he should be, and so he tries to protect her, to impart in her some worldliness and strength, as befits his role. “Look, wife or no,” he tells her, “you are no one's property to be tossed aside.” “Anyone ever tries to kill you,” he says, “you try to kill them right back.” On the other side of the love triangle is Inara, the whore. In “Serenity,” Inara tells Kaylee that she is from Sihnon, which, of the two Major Planets, was the one settled most heavily by the Chinese. Despite the crew's Eastern habits – their use of chopsticks and Mandarin curses, for example – Inara's occupation, her habits of dress, and her treatment by the other members of the crew show that she is in some way alien, even to them. Mal and most of his crew are from the outer planets, however, and they seem to come from those planets settled mostly by Americans. As much as the Firefly universe has ethnic groups, Inara is clearly part of a different one than Mal. In an earlier era of film-making, she would have corrupted Mal, as the half-breed prostitute Dolly corrupts the Reverend Henley. Yet Saffron – the seemingly pure white woman – is playing Mal for a fool, and she eventually sells him out to a group of raiders bent on killing him and his crew and scrapping the ship. Inara, however, finding Mal unconscious but thinking him dead, is clearly grieved, crying and kissing his lips. It is she, the non-white whore, who seems to love Mal most truly and be most truly loved by him, and this is dramatized throughout the series. By portraying Inara as the woman who truly loves Mal, Whedon inverts the racial symbolism of the archetypal good-woman/bad-woman love triangle, rejecting the racialist theory of the redemption of the
“virile Anglo-Saxon male.”

V. Updating the Chivalrous Male Hero

Another characteristic western motif which *Firefly* invokes concerns gender relations – or, as John C. Wright's essay “Just Shove Him in the Engine” characterizes it, “chivalry.” “Chivalry,” Wright claims, “is the notion that those who are terrifying and ferocious in battle should be... courteous, mild and humble toward those they protect: women and children and old men.”12 Wright's argument hinges on the tension between the ways science fiction portrays males as protectors and the “chivalrous” way the archetypal (male) western hero is portrayed.13 He explains, “In high-tech futures [which he calls 'utopias'], the era will surely be too enlightened and egalitarian to have men protect women and children. In low-tech futures [which he calls 'dystopias'], the shocking nature of the barbarism after the fall of civilization is often portrayed by showing a casual attitude toward the lives of women and children.” At one pole he places the utopian heroism of Captain Jean-Luc Picard of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, whom he describes a “too meek.”14 “When Picard is shown resisting Cardassian torture or Borg absorption, his virtue is that of a victim who endures stoically: the heroism of a martyr rather than the victorious soldier.”15 At the other pole, Wright places the dystopian heroism of Mad Max of *The Road Warrior* – “we are meant to admire his tough-

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13 In her introduction to the piece on p. 155, Jane Espenson, a writer for the show and a friend of Joss Whedon's, writes, “Wright implies, in several places, that Joss Whedon may not have approached his shows with a feminist agenda. That some choices might have been an expedient nod to what Wright condescendingly calls 'delicate modern sensibilities'... Damn right Joss approached his shows, all of them, with the absolute deep-seated belief that women have no need of or interest in being protected. Joss is a feminist. Long may he wave.”
14 Ibid., 158.
15 Ibid.
mindedness, his ferocity, not his gentle protectiveness toward the weak.”16 “Chivalrous” men in a western always protect women, children, and old men. Utopian male heroes need not protect such people, because, in those futures, all that they need to protect themselves are “intellectual skills or... phaser marksmanship,” not “brute strength or high-hearted courage.”17 Dystopian male heroes fail to protect their women and children and must place them in harm's way because “there is no home, no safe place to leave them.”18 In science fiction, concerned as it is with change, “we are meant to be charmed with the enlightenment of the gentle Star Trek future,” because it is seen as better than the present, “just as we are meant to be horrified by the cruelty of the barbaric Mad Max future,” because it is seen as worse than the present. Viewers find these tropes interesting, Wright argues, “as long as the current society does not accept [them as norms] to be taken for granted.” Because Wright believes that viewers do take “chivalrous” male heroes for granted, he claims that “chivalry makes ill fodder for feeding science fiction,”19 and so Firefly, which attempted to combine the two genres, neglected to include any elements of “chivalry.” Yet, because “chivalry” is an expected characteristic of a western, Firefly's failure to exhibit it marks the show as “simply unsatisfactory in its treatment of this crucial western element.”20

“Chivalry” as Wright defines it is missing from many works which are reasonably considered westerns, however. In his essay, Wright identifies a subgenre of western he calls “the unchivalrous western, the exception that tests the rule,”21 citing two examples –

16 Ibid., 159.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 161.
20 Ibid., 162.
21 Ibid., 161.
the television show *Maverick* and the film *Unforgiven*. He writes that “these variations on the theme were fascinating precisely because the surrounding environment of the genre forms a backdrop for the contrast.”

The western setting gives the audience the expectation that the hero will behave chivalrously, lending greater significance to his unchivalrous actions. Wright seems to consider the “unchivalrous western” somehow anomalous, a marginal form of his “chivalrous western.” He seems unable to apply his understanding of the “unchivalrous western” to his reading of *Firefly*. In treating the “unchivalrous western” as a vestigial form, Wright ignores not only the precedents he cites, but also their place in the entire body of revisionist, or mature, westerns in film, beginning with John Ford's *Stagecoach* and *The Searchers* and continued in the work of film directors like Robert Altman (*McCabe and Mrs. Miller*) and Clint Eastwood (the aforementioned *Unforgiven*). It is the traditional, “chivalrous” western which is the vestigial form. The modern western, though still cognizant of the older conventions of the genre, no longer hews strictly to them – and *Firefly* is nothing if not a modern western.

*Firefly* draws heavily from the revisionist westerns. As has been stated, Captain Reynolds is no Marshal Dillon – he is a smuggler and a bounty hunter, not an agent of the law. If *Firefly* had been made a “chivalrous western,” it would have followed the well-trod trail blazed by *Star Trek* in the early 1960s. *Star Trek* was pitched as “Wagon Train to the stars,” and it, like *Firefly*, is always somewhere in its heart a western. The difference between the two lies in the type of western – classically “chivalrous” or

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22 Ibid.

23 *Star Trek*, like *Firefly*, was also good science fiction – in fact, *Star Trek* episodes like “City on the Edge of Forever” remain among the best science fiction ever broadcast.
modern – each draws from. The chivalrous western is epitomized by *Star Trek*, once its stagecoaches and six-shooters are traded for starships and phasers. Captain Kirk is the lone representative of the law on the untamed frontier, and he is essentially autonomous. Regardless of what the text of the law actually says, Kirk embodies authority, so the show portrays him as right, even when he breaks the law. It is always Kirk's job to protect the weak – especially the women of his crew, despite their presence as presumed equals on the ship – by destroying anything that threatens them. The writers of *Star Trek* would never have allowed Uhura or Nurse Chapel to rescue Kirk from an assailant. If Mr. Wright had his way, and *Firefly* had been made a “chivalrous” western, Zoë would not have been allowed to rescued Mal – as she does in “War Stories” – either.²⁴

Wright consistently misses the true examples of chivalry in *Firefly* – and there are a number – because he is looking the wrong way. He cites “War Stories” as an instance where the series could have shown the characters behaving chivalrously and rewarded them for it, but did not. Wright says, “In the episode ’War Stories’, where the pilot Wash argues with his wife [Zoë] and insists on going on a dangerous mission in her place, nothing is made of the fact that this act saves her from kidnap and torture: the portrayal makes Wash's behavior seem merely petulant rather than heroic, as if there is something wrong with a husband trying to safeguard his own wife.” Tellingly, Wright says nothing about the chivalry in Zoë's conduct – *because he seems not to believe that women can be “chivalrous.”*  

Whedon *does* invoke “chivalry” in *Firefly*, but as with other western tropes used in the show, it is invoked to be reconsidered. Wright's mistake lies in thinking that

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²⁴ ...and think what a heap of trouble Mal would have been in *then*.
Wash's “chivalrous” decision in some way actually protects Zoë – that by taking Zoë’s place, a person better able to withstand the torture (Wash) suffers it in the place of a person less able to do so (Zoë). On the contrary, Zoë is stronger than Wash, as he is fully aware. In that episode, it is Zoë who demonstrates chivalry, defined more broadly as “protection of those less able to protect themselves,” by choosing to rescue Wash over Mal. Zoë knew that without Mal talking to him, making him angry, Wash might crack under the torture. (Wright acknowledges that Wash acts as a “male war bride,”\textsuperscript{25} but he does not seem able to fully invert the sexual typing of that western trope to notice that doing so places Zoë in the role of the chivalrous male hero.) Had Zoë been trying to protect Wash when he suggested he be the one to accompany Mal, she would have forced him to stay behind. Wash is obviously aware that Zoë is stronger and more experienced than he is. When he and Mal are first put into the torture chamber, he tells Mal, “Whatever Zoë would do in this instance is what I wanna do. No matter how ugly it gets, you two always come back… with the stories.”\textsuperscript{26} It is not Whedon's suggestion that in the future, there is no way to protect those who need protection. On the contrary, in “Heart of Gold” when Zoë tells Wash she wants to have a baby, it's clear that she feels perfectly capable of protecting her child from anything which might befall it, despite the hard nature of life among the Outer Planets. Her child does not need to be left in some “home or safe place”\textsuperscript{27} off-ship, because Serenity is home, and she is there to protect it. In the Firefly universe – and perhaps (Whedon seems to be suggesting) even in our own – a person's strength or weakness is not determined intrinsically by their sex. Because

\textsuperscript{25} Wright, 162.
\textsuperscript{26} “War Stories,” Firefly: The Complete Series, written by Cheryl Cain, directed by James Contner. Originally aired 12/6/02 on FOX.
\textsuperscript{27} Wright, 159.
Wright is looking for a “chivalry” based on gender stereotypes in Firefly, he sees only the show's lack of such, rendering him blind to the examples of true chivalry it displays.

VI. Our Future, Their Present

One area in which Firefly breaks truly new ground for a western – and for television in general – is in its visual feel. Whedon says, “I wanted to create a show that took the past and the future and put them together by making them feel like the present.” Firefly takes the “make it look messy” principle of Hill Street Blues and applies it for the first time to a series not set in contemporary times. Most scenes, especially interiors, are shot with hand-held cameras, giving the show a bit of a “documentary” feel. The frame feels sloppy, raw – even when the camera is focused on a single stationary subject, there is often motion around the edges of the frame. Takes are often long – five, ten seconds, longer – with the camera racking between characters as they converse or when new characters enter. It may take a second after the new characters are in the frame before they come into focus. Firefly was filmed in the 16:9 widescreen format, and the larger visual field gives Whedon more freedom to frame the action in horizontal space rather than in depth. Unlike in many television shows, Firefly's characters never talk to each other's backs, unless there is some reason in the story for them to do so. The “messy,” “documentary” style of the camera-work lends the action a realism and an immediacy which provides a powerful “you-are-here” feeling. It gives you the deep-seated sensation that what you're watching is actually happening, here and now in the present, and not in some far-future time.

The especial innovation of Firefly was that the rough, “messy” feel of the live-

action shots was extended to the computer-generated shots as well, to give viewers the feeling of watching “live-action spaceships.” As one of Firefly's visual effects supervisors, Loni Peristere, says, “We wanted to have hand-held cameras, with pans, lens flares, rack focuses, and zooms, all of which have been complete taboos in visual effects... We've never seen a camera operator who's sort of late to get to the action on a computer-generated ship [before].” In Firefly, the quality of the effects is high, and there is no change in the feeling of the camera between the computer-generated shots and the live shots, removing the last barrier separating what is real on the screen from what is virtual. The audience has no way of telling just by looking whether the action on screen existed in reality or only existed inside a computer. Even the exterior shots with no live-action elements feel like they are being shot with a hand-held camera – they are jerky, they are off-frame, they take a while to focus properly. When the sun enters the frame, we see a lens flare. When the camera sees something interesting, it zooms in on it. By using this camera style consistently throughout the entire series, Whedon creates, sheerly through his use of the camera, the feeling that we as the audience are there, in the ship, outside the ship, with the characters. The people and stories are not made “grand and unapproachable” by the way the camera treats them. Nothing looks at all pre-planned – it is as if the camera operator just happened along the action as it was occurring and started filming. This visual style practically forces the audience to suspend disbelief. We cannot tell the difference between reality and virtual reality, and everything we see is so convincing as to evoke in us the belief that it must all be real. Although some elements of

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
Firefly's visual style are prefigured by earlier works, its consistent use throughout all shots of a show with a noncontemporary setting is unprecedented.

The cinematography is not the only way Firefly draws the audience into its universe. In Firefly, Joss Whedon is obsessed with evoking the feeling that his characters are inhabiting a living, breathing world – that, to paraphrase a quote about J.R.R. Tolkien, he did not create the 'Verse and these people in it, he found them. Serenity was actually built, all 190 feet of it, on two sound stages, so when the camera shoots through a doorway into another area of the ship, there is no need for computer compositing. This frees the camera to follow characters as they walk through – and around, outside, and on top of – the ship, instead of presenting a discontinuous ship and requiring some mechanism – eg. “turbolifts” – to mask its implausibility. Whedon admits to liking wide lenses – he says, “My darling on TV was a 17mm”32 – and he uses wide shots extensively to place the characters in the context of the ship. Even when the camera is in close-up, the audience can always see Serenity in the background, enveloping the characters. There is an incredible amount of texture in the environment – the chopsticks and mismatched plates and cups the crew uses, the exposed wiring in the corridors, the rickety wooden chairs around the dining room table, the bench and weights in the cargo hold, Wash's plastic dinosaurs around the control panels on the bridge. The weight of all those little details gives the audience a true sense of place, a sense of the ship as a whole, as a machine, as an organism – not as a set in a Fox production facility. Whedon says, “I like to be in close, with the people, IN them. And they in their surroundings – ceilings, foreground pieces, enough depth to see everything.”33 The ship is a claustrophobic space

32 Whedon, 19.
33 Ibid.
narrow corridors, small cabins, a tiny kitchen. Even the captain's cabin is so small, it only has room for a fold-out toilet. In “Objects in Space,” the crew in their quarters can hear Jubal Early shout from the bridge; the bulkheads barely block the sound. It is clear that the crew are living practically on top of each other. *Serenity* is a working ship, a cargo ship, not a cruise ship or a flying office building.

That claustrophobia, that reduced scale, is perfect for television. *Firefly* focuses on the spaceship, *Serenity*, just as TV westerns overwhelmingly focus on interiors – bars, homes, brothels, general stores – eschewing the Monument Valley vistas which characterized westerns in the movies. Intimate stories lend themselves much better to the reduced visual scope and the reduced budget of a television show than do sweeping epics. Science fiction or western movies can fall back on their stunning visuals to evoke a sense of wonder and excitement when the characters and plot are two-dimensional. Television shows do not share that luxury. To keep an audience watching, week after week, a series relies on its characters and their interactions, and these are often best catalyzed by limiting the physical space available to the characters. Where sitcoms like *Seinfeld* and *Friends* take place largely in the main characters' apartments, and dramas like *West Wing* and *ER* focus on offices and professional spaces, *Firefly* confines its characters to *Serenity*. About half of the fourteen episodes take place almost entirely on board the ship – *Firefly* is never driven by the need to find new and interesting planets to explore, the need to create new alien races with unique facial features each week. When *Serenity* lands on a planet, it is likely one that the crew has visited before – they are not exploring an uncharted quadrant of the galaxy with innumerable unknown worlds, “boldly going” where no one has gone before. They remember what happened in previous episodes –
unlike in many other television shows, the characters are not magically reset every episode. Some examples:

- in “War Stories,” Book chides Simon about “moonlighting as a criminal mastermind,”34 referring to “Ariel”;
- Saffron from “Our Mrs. Reynolds” reappears in “Trash,” and Niska from “The Train Job” gets his revenge in “War Stories”;
- in “Shindig,” Mal takes a job to smuggle a herd of cattle to one of the border moons, and “Safe” opens with the delivery of the herd;
- and in “The Train Job,” Kaylee tells Mal that the compression coil needs replacing, and its failure causes a devastating fire in “Out of Gas.”

The characters in “Shindig” talk about taking out the trash and doing the dishes on their spaceship – hardly the noble, lofty things other heroes on television care about, especially in science fiction. In “Ariel,” the characters visit a futuristic junkyard, which looks much like our own. The show’s pilot, “Serenity,” makes it clear that on the Outer Planets and their moons, food is more valuable than practically anything else, and fresh fruit is a true luxury. All of these details give credence to the idea that the crew is working a string of jobs between the border planets. In Firefly, Whedon is constantly, subtly reminding the audience that this crew is truly living on the edges of society, where some things just cannot be taken for granted. He gives a depth to the series which is unusual even for television, a medium which has always excelled at building the audience's conception of the world and the characters' place in it through the inevitable accretion of detail.

34 “War Stories.”
VII. Conclusion

By reworking the themes and conventions of classic westerns, Joss Whedon's *Firefly* gives modern relevance to more than a century's worth of generic forms, continuing the process of recapitulation and revision. The series adds new characters from science fiction to the familiar mix of cowboys and soldiers and prostitutes – wise-cracking pilots; sprightly mechanics; and tormented psychics. It takes traditional western plots – the white woman/non-white woman love triangle, the rescue of the war bride – and inverts their racial or sexual subtext, exploring the implications of such role reversals. It brings to noncontemporary television drama, and especially *science fiction* television drama, the gritty, “documentary” aesthetic born on *Hill Street Blues* which is powerfully associated with the here-and-now – an aesthetic so compelling that it is now being adopted by new science fiction shows like *Battlestar Galactica*. *Firefly* was something quite unique. Despite its brief run, its impact on television will continue to be felt far into the future, because it has now became the founding text for an entirely new body of works.
Bibliography


The 1920s were an age of dramatic social and political change. For the first time, more Americans lived in cities than on farms. The nation’s total wealth more than doubled between 1920 and 1929, and this economic growth swept many Americans into an affluent but unfamiliar “consumer society.” People from coast to coast bought the same goods (thanks to nationwide advertising and The demands of the twenty-first century require the colleges and universities of our country to strive toward the development of globally minded, fluid, analytical citizens able to effectively function in the context of an increasingly complex, pluralistic world order.

Since the onset of industrial methods of production in Western Europe over two hundred years ago, technology has worked to weave human societies closer and closer together, for better or for worse. These technologies have enabled astounding leaps in human progress as well as numerous unspeakable horrors from which we do not stand. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the United States enjoyed a unique position. Our world leadership was widely accepted and respected, as we strengthened old alliances and built new ones, worked for peace across the globe, advanced nonproliferation, and modernized our military. After 9/11, the world rallied behind the United States as never before, supporting our efforts to remove the Taliban in Afghanistan and go after the al Qaeda leadership.