

Paint It Red (and Black and Blue)

How Joss Whedon and Jack N. Green
Created the Bruised, Beautiful
Look of *Serenity*

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In one of the many tense moments in *Serenity* (2005), Joss Whedon's cinematic continuation of his TV series *Firefly* (2002–03), Captain Mal Reynolds (Nathan Fillion) barks orders at his crew, including a specific aesthetic choice that may help them survive a seemingly suicidal mission: "And we're gonna need paint. We're gonna need red paint." Smearred with this paint, paralleling the blood that stains its captain's face, the starship *Serenity* ventures into the film's heart of darkness—the mysterious planet Miranda—to discover a secret that will change the lives of the captain and crew, and the 'verse (universe) itself.

The success of Reynolds and his crew in this mission is based, in part, on a manipulation of aesthetics, from the look of their vessel to Reynolds's own appearance. Similarly, Whedon's ability to create in *Serenity* a work that is at once linked closely to its televised precursor and also decidedly stand-alone is based on his own understanding of aesthetics. This process of adaptation/continuation was facilitated, as Whedon acknowledges, by his collaboration with director of photography Jack N. Green (credited in *Serenity* as Jack Green), a film industry veteran famous for films ranging from *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992) to *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005).¹

Analyzing select tools that Whedon and Green employ—from high-contrast lighting and saturated color to the long take—reveals the manner in which the men draw from and reimagine the iconography of diverse genres

including film noir, science fiction, and the Western. It also showcases the bruised yet beautiful look of the film, its distinct place in Whedon's oeuvre, and its role in the development of science fiction on the silver screen. I'll begin with a short review of some notable aspects of the aesthetics of *Firefly* and then examine the distinctive elements of *Serenity*, focusing on the tools Whedon and Green employ to create a gritty and poetic, claustrophobic yet vast, decidedly cinematic world.

Inspired by Whedon's interest in the American Civil War, immigration, and frontiers (Earthly and otherwise), *Firefly* is a deliberately hybrid text combining genres (the Western and science fiction), tones (slapstick and chilling violence), and references (existential philosophy and the smallness of beagles).² In keeping with this mix, *Firefly's* aesthetic is both homey and grand. Despite a tight budget, particularly for a series utilizing special effects, *Firefly's* visual world is effective and often evocative, presenting a universe simultaneously authentically grubby and imposing.³ The result is a speculative text whose sense of reality, despite its fantastic nature, creates high stakes, physically and emotionally, for its characters and for its viewers.

While the aesthetic of *Firefly* draws from genre traditions in Western and science fiction film and television, Whedon and his crew do not simply pay homage to this past; instead, they rework genre elements while combining them in often humorous, sometimes unsettling, ways. Part of the freshness in Whedon's approach to the TV Western relates to what the series does not do. For example, unlike Westerns such as *Guns Smoke* (1955–75) and *Bonanza* (1959–73), *Firefly* uses location shooting, not sets, for many exterior scenes, especially those set on the hardscrabble, low-tech outer planets. The expansive, often impressive, nature of these vistas—from lush greenery to vast, desolate deserts—provides physical reality coupled with visual spectacle while offering a stark contrast with the cramped spaceship *Serenity*.⁴ Whedon's use of natural lighting and wide shots of these landscapes not only differentiates *Firefly* from many other TV series but echoes the aesthetics of classic film Westerns such as John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Searchers* (1956). Such citations foreground Whedon's knowledge of film history and his ambitions for *Firefly*, which include bringing film grammar to television. Similarly, Whedon's employment of science fiction iconography in *Firefly* is governed, at least in part, by what he avoids: eschewing the polished, high-tech environments and utopian ideals of some previous texts for gritty reality.⁵ Discussing his desire to create a much less controlled and perfect world in an interview with Mike Russell for *CulturePulp*, Whedon contrasts *Serenity* with other spaceships, noting "...the textured reality is there. I want to *be* on that ship, and I never felt like I was *on* those other ships. They were big, giant Sheratons" (qtd. in Lavery and Burkhead 2011: 114).

The often-ambitious approach taken by Whedon and his crew to the

aesthetics of *Firefly* foregrounds formal choices that not only advance the narrative and capture viewer attention but also demonstrate TV's expressive potential. For example, discussing the choice of a handheld effect for the photography with Russell, Whedon argues that this provides a sense of authenticity: "The template I was working from was *NYPD Blue*—it was 'you are there'" (qtd. in Lavery and Burkhead 2011: 109). By placing the viewer in close visual connection with the characters, Whedon also has the chance to emotionally link viewers to the characters and their goals, increasing investment in the unfolding drama. So too elements of *Firefly*'s mise-en-scène, such as the rich and varied colors and textures of the characters' costumes and environments, subtly advance viewer understanding of characters and the 'verse yet draw focus only when intended to achieve a certain effect.⁶ For instance, as commentators have noted, the use of earth colors, particularly shades of brown, ties the series into the mise-en-scène of the Western with its dusty towns and sere deserts while keeping Mal and Zoe's (Gina Torres) backstory as Browncoats, soldiers for the Independent Planets during the Unification War, in mind.⁷ Similarly, the drab khaki jumpsuits offset by colorful tops worn by Kaylee (Jewel Staite) reveal her mixture of practicality and imagination while the homemade charm of Jayne's (Adam Baldwin) knitted yellow and orange hat, a gift from his mother, has a warmth and eccentric wooliness, a homemade charm that contrasts with the character's seemingly amoral nature and hard-bodied masculinity. Together, these formal elements create dramatic effects, yet they rarely read as constructed with such effects in mind—their unobtrusive nature belying the care that went into them.

These formal elements are showcased in the presentation of the spaceship *Serenity* with its well-used, sometimes cluttered, spaces.⁸ Described by Whedon in a *Firefly* DVD featurette as the tenth character, the ship is a lived in, homely, and, in places, homey space (in Anon. 2003). This hominess is particularly pronounced in *Serenity*'s dining area, featuring yellow walls decorated with a climbing vine and fruit design, a long wooden table, and mismatched chairs: the space's eclectic charm is enhanced by lighting choices such as the glowing candlelight on Simon's (Sean Maher) cake in *Firefly*'s eighth episode "Out of Gas" (25 October 2002). Barbara Maio even argues that the ship itself is watching, arguing: "But it is not in object 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" (2008: 209).

Like the genre mixing of the series, the ship itself is built on the tension and possibility of contrasts; the stripped down, functional space of the cargo bay, for instance, feels a world away from Inara's (Morena Baccarin) shuttle—an exotic fantasy space of draped red and deep bronze fabric and atmospheric lights that highlights her profession as a Companion—and Kaylee's

room, with its colorful black, yellow, and green batik wall hanging and party lights.⁹ Color plays a notable role in the presentation of the diverse locations and multiple tones found within the spaceship and in the series as a whole, with color quickly differentiating both characters and spaces, from the sunshine of the dining room and the rich, opulent reds of Inara's shuttle to the infirmary's blue, its cool, sterile mise-en-scène underscoring the shock of bright red when an injured crewmember is treated there.

The richness of *Firefly*'s visual world functioned, as Whedon acknowledges, as both a blessing and burden during the planning of *Serenity*: he had the advantage of a fully-conceived 'verse but had to balance it with the weight of building on and reinventing it in the challenging, high-stakes medium of film. To examine Whedon's choices in crafting a unique, distinctly cinematic text, I focus on select elements: the creation of a sense of narrative and visual scale/scope through precise, evocative use of cinematography and mise-en-scène; the addition of the genre of the noir Western with its shadowy visual world and emotionally, sometimes physically, wounded protagonists; and the collaboration between Whedon and DP Green, whose *Unforgiven*, with its meditation in form and content on violence anticipates *Serenity*'s bloodied beauty.

As Whedon notes in interviews, the move to the big screen required going big on multiple levels—from a narrative featuring high stakes that the characters might not survive to formal choices including expressive, experimental use of cinematography, lighting, and color.¹⁰ Many of Whedon's choices in *Serenity* appear to derive from issues of genre, particularly from his wrestling with a problem connected to Mal and the traumatized psychic River (Summer Glau), the two characters who motivate many of the film's narrative and emotional threads. Whedon observes that "Mal is kinda a Western fellow and River is living in a kind of a noir" (2005). The solution lay, Whedon notes, in the suggestion by his mentor Jeanine Basinger that he consult the noir Western with its dramas of morally compromised, tormented protagonists played out in dark and unwelcoming physical and psychological frontiers. In addition to the noir Western, Whedon notes, in an interview with Thomas Leupp, the influence of revisionist Westerns, singling out *The Searchers* and *Ulzana's Raid* (Robert Aldrich, 1972) because, as he argues, "they're so uncompromising" (qtd. in Lavery and Burkhead: 2011 82).

"Uncompromising" is an apt word to describe *Serenity*: a film that dares the viewer to, like its heroes, dislike its antagonist, and move intellectually and emotionally through the narrative's twists and turns into and, possibly, out of its literal and figurative heart of darkness. To examine how Whedon and Green bring that "uncompromising" approach to character, narrative, and form, creating a 'verse full of vivid colors, dark shadows, and even more shadowy motives and desires, I will examine the film's prologue and

introduction of the spaceship *Serenity* and its crew, then move to select scenes, including a discussion of the “paint it red” scene discussed in my opening.

The film's prologue—providing the backstory of the migration from “Earth-that-was” and the War of Unification between Independents and the Alliance, along with (re)introducing the cannibalistic Reavers—immediately announces Whedon's ambitions to take full advantage of cinema's toolkit. Consisting of multiple scenes that mix familiar and new characters while rapidly cycling through diverse genres, time periods, locations, and points of view, the prologue forcibly communicates to viewers both the film's connection to and departure from the TV series.¹¹ Through short scenes nestled together like nesting dolls—distinct, yet connected—the prologue presents multiple narratives false starts that are introduced only to be revealed to be just part of a series of expository breadcrumbs leading to the film's true beginning: a long take that reacquaints us with *Serenity* and its crew.

The prologue opens with the Universal logo, quickly transformed into an image of an Earth unable, as the modulated tones of a narrator note, to support an expanding population. As the narration continues, new terraformed worlds are shown: the contrast between the gleaming technology and lush environments of some of these worlds—the wealthy inner planets—and the crude buildings and barren environment of the outer planets alluding to the central conflict that would lead to war between the Alliance and the Independents. This epic history of migration is then revealed to be a lesson for children in a pastoral outdoor schoolroom. The children interrogate the reasons for the War of Unification and mention the Reavers, their lesson disrupted as, in a startling graphic match, the teacher plunges a stylus into the forehead of one of the children: River. The lesson scene is revealed to be River's nightmare, and the stylus transforms into a needle, jolting her awake in the Alliance facility where staff experiment on her. As this new scene continues, her brother Simon helps her to escape from the facility, but then the scene freezes as a man's voice yells “stop!” The scene is revealed to be a holographic recording, viewed by a new character, the Operative (Chiwetel Ejiofor), as he tracks River. Demanding information, he gazes into the holographic face of River as the prologue ends. The screen is then filled with darkness as the name “Serenity” appears, floating in the black, the letters moving away from the camera as a swirl of red and gold behind the letters resolves into a circular shape with Chinese characters that also read “Serenity.” As the camera pulls back further, the shape is revealed to be a logo painted onto the hull of the spaceship *Serenity*.

With its series of richly colored widescreen images, disorienting moves through diverse genres, and introduction of old and new characters, the prologue sums up the *Firefly* 'verse while expanding the narrative and visual possibilities of the series. As Whedon notes on his DVD commentary, the

fragmented narrative and genre mix of the prologue perfectly rhymes with, and takes the viewer into, River's disordered mental state and the roots of her trauma, wedding form and function (2005). Its disorientation and danger also provide, as Whedon notes, the perfect contrast with the introduction of *Serenity* and its crew, allowing him to create on the spaceship “a sense of safety in space” through tools such as a long take as Mal passes through its diverse areas, interacting with the crew. However, while the spaceship may indeed offer a sense of ease and comfort, particularly for viewers familiar with *Firefly*, Whedon and Green don't let the viewer relax. Instead, they subtly unsettle that safety through specific cinematography, lighting, and color choices that may foreground a sense of connection in the crew's relationships with each other within the unified space of their vessel but also highlight a sense of disorder: the fraying of the crew's psyches just as the spaceship itself threatens to come apart as it descends towards the planet below.

Our introduction to the ship and crew begins with a camera pass along the ship's flank and then a move to its front, focusing on the shapes of Mal and the pilot Wash (Alan Tudyk) on the bridge. The camera moves to the ship's interior for a conversation between Mal and Wash, then follows Mal as he moves from the bridge into the front hall, encountering Zoe, his second in command and Wash's spouse, and Jayne, the ship's muscle. Moving from the front hall through the empty dining area and into the back hall he arrives at the engine room to discuss the ship's problems with Kaylee, the ship's engineer, then turns to find his way blocked by Simon, the ship's doctor, who confronts Mal over his plan to involve River in a heist. The two men travel to the infirmary while arguing, have a final confrontation in the cargo bay, and a dissatisfied Simon is left behind as Mal moves out of frame.

Whedon argues that his main goals in the introduction were to reveal *Serenity*'s space, to allow the viewer to meet the characters, and to provide a sense of safety after the quick and violent prologue (2005). And the tools he uses, particularly a long take and a gliding camera, emphasize a sense of homecoming while shedding a new light, literally and figuratively, on this home. First, there is the expansiveness of the long take, which extends for four and a half minutes as Mal interacts with the other characters and their spaces; second, there is the smooth, calming movement of the Steadicam, which glides along with Mal, seeming to pass through the cramped, even claustrophobic, spaces of *Serenity* with comforting ease.

Through these tools and others, Whedon and Green create a sense of a physically and emotionally balanced world. Gone are the quick cuts found in the prologue with its diverse locales; instead, there is a sense of welcome in the familiar spaces, dwelt on briefly but lovingly by the moving camera. As the camera travels with Mal, sometimes lagging behind him, at other times closer to him—peering over his shoulder and almost sharing, literally and

figuratively, his point of view—a sense of emotional connection, verging on suture, is achieved.

At the same time, the length of the take and the camera's presence and movement work to complicate this same sense of safety and connection—both the link that the crew members have with each other and the bond the viewer may feel with them, especially with Mal. As Mal encounters character after character, questioning them with various degrees of forcefulness and encountering varying degrees of pushback, a more ambivalent portrait of the character emerges, and the long take starts to feel somewhat anxious, revealing the unsettled nature of both spaceship and crew: out in the black of space too long. So too the sharing provided by the closeness of the camera creates a certain doubt: the viewer may now feel a closeness with Mal, but given the prickly nature of his interactions with the other characters the viewer may feel unsure about this connection.¹²

A further formal tool that Whedon and Green use here and elsewhere in the film to draw attention to characters or objects while creating a sense of dramatic tension is high-contrast lighting—lighting that provides a strong distinction between light and shadow. In much of the introduction the light is severely limited, keeping a good deal of the characters' faces and the ship's spaces hidden. The lack of visible information provided creates both interest and unease. Perhaps the most notable use of limited light to create tension lies in Mal's interaction with Simon as they face each other in the cargo bay, their faces so faintly limned with blue light that their individual natures and relationship with each other seem mysterious. This sense of something hidden provides a visual counterpart to the mystery of the film's narrative as set out in the prologue: the fractured, potentially violent, nature of River's psyche and the question of how Mal will respond to the danger she may pose.

Drawing from the lighting tradition of German Expressionist cinema and film noir, the choice of high-contrast lighting creates a sense of hiddenness, even paranoia: of something literally and figuratively in the shadows. And the darkness is palpable, both externally in the frame and in the sense of Mal's barely-contained spiritual/emotional darkness. Green had used such lighting before, perhaps most memorably in his work on *Unforgiven*. And just as there are distinct emotional and visual parallels between *Unforgiven*'s protagonist William Munny (Clint Eastwood), the retired gunslinger haunted by his violent past, and Mal, the former soldier carrying internal and external scars, there are connections in the manner Green photographs the men and their environments.¹³ Edward Buscombe's appraisal of Green's use of light for both literal and figurative purposes and its relation to characterization in *Unforgiven* may also illuminate Green's treatment of *Serenity*'s crew, particularly Mal: "*Unforgiven*, though, is dark even by the standards of previous Eastwood works.... One can read this as 'realism'; on the nineteenth-century

frontier, bright lights were the exception. More symbolically, one may note that night is the time when we see into the darkness of Munny's soul" (78).¹⁴ Whedon embraced Green's use of high-contrast lighting, noting on his commentary, "Jack's not afraid of his blacks, he's not afraid of negative space and dark colors and shadows, and I love that because neither am I. It brings your eye to what's important and it gives the skin such incredible texture" (2005). In going so far into the "blacks" in this way the film differentiates itself from the television series, in which lighting contrasts are often more muted and deep shadows, while used, are not necessarily utilized for such sustained periods.

Finally, in tandem with the film's lighting and cinematography Whedon and Green use color with precision for both practical purposes—defining and differentiating spaces and characters—and dramatic effect. As in the series, color signals the different areas of the ship—from the cool blues of the infirmary to the warm yellow of the dining area. However, Whedon and Green's use of color in the film is even more exaggerated. This occurs literally in the greater level of color saturation and the manner in which colors pop against contrasting backgrounds such as the harsh daylight of Haven, the new home of Book (Ron Glass), or the velvety blacks inside *Serenity*. There is also a metaphorical aspect to the use of color—the sense that the colors speak volumes about the characters' hidden psychological states. This is particularly so in the use of red, from the rusty red of Mal's shirt to the blood that flows from Mal and his crew in their confrontations with the Operative and the Reavers.

The introduction scene provides ample illustration of the manner in which Whedon and Green use color, particularly in tandem with lighting, to quickly differentiate the ship's distinct sections and their purposes while conveying crucial information about the characters associated with those spaces. Mal first appears in the cool gray-blue of the bridge, a place of relative serenity, although the lick of flames outside from the ship's descent and the sight of a piece of the ship flying off complicate this. Mal then moves from the bridge through the dark front hall, where he encounters Zoe and Jayne: the horizontal lines of blue light in the space providing illumination yet lending a coldness to the space and an anxiety about the interchanges held within it. Mal then passes through the dining room, the soft light on its yellow walls offering a break from the gloom and a reminder for *Firefly* viewers of the emotional warmth of past gatherings in that space. He then proceeds through the back hall with its few gray/blue lights, even more shadowed than the front hall, and stops at the door of the engine room. Flashes of red-gold sparks illuminate the space, along with lines of thin red lights overhead; these highlight Kaylee as she tends to her equipment, the red color emphasizing a sense of danger and chaos even as the relative brightness provides a further break

from the gloom. Finally, there is a return to dim blue lights and shadows as Mal turns to encounter an angry Simon in the back hall. Simon follows Mal as he moves down to Serenity's lower level and into the sterile blue of the infirmary, and then the men face each other in the cargo bay, a faint blue light outlining their faces. The colors in the introduction scene are diverse, providing a sense of multiple separate spaces; however, the colors are also united by the use of a consistent background of velvety blacks, along with the amalgamation created by the uninterrupted long take and the camera's smooth glide through that space: the result is an eclectic wholeness.

An example of this precise use of color for dramatic effect, in tandem with lighting and cinematography, occurs in a seemingly insignificant moment in which Jayne moves through Serenity trying to locate River after the crew has determined she might be a danger to them. As Jayne passes through a doorway and into a dark corridor, he assures the unseen River "No trouble, little crazy person—we're going on a nice little shuttle ride." As he does, the viewer's eye is drawn to the yellow shirt he wears—the brightest element in the darkened frame. The camera then moves away and tilts up to reveal what is above him: River in a dark dress spread-eagled against the ceiling, her dress and hair blending into the darkness while her exposed limbs and face glow palely in the small amount of light. With its high contrast of dark and light, coupled with River's appearance and the mood of psychological peril, this moment could be a still from a German Expressionist film. In particular, River's expressionless face and eerie stillness make her look like a dreamer or puppet, echoing characters from films such as the surrealist masterpiece *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), a text that has had a significant influence on screen horror.¹⁵ Heightening the suspense of the moment, Whedon does not show the moment when River drops down onto Jayne. Instead we hear gunfire and witness the crew as they react before moving through the corridors to find Jayne unconscious.

The result of the care with which Whedon and Green use formal elements here, particularly high-contrast lighting, is that a sense of suspense builds as the viewer, like Jayne, tries to penetrate the space's darkness and locate River. Highlighting the contrast between the saturated yellow of Jayne's shirt and the black around him makes the seemingly powerful Jayne appear, for a moment, like the proverbial canary in a coal mine: his vulnerability to potential injury or death the first sign of true threat. This use of color and lighting puts forward a visual argument that enhances the narrative's sense of an impending danger from which no one will be safe: a danger that could come from the inhumanly still and powerful River who, in this moment, looks more like a vampire or wraith than a flesh and blood woman.

Similarly, the short scene in which Inara first encounters the Operative demonstrates the specific aesthetic choices that allow Whedon and Green to

quickly convey narrative and character information. The scene begins with a shot of Inara in a long deep red dress, her hair flowing down her back, standing in front of the Companion training house. The dress' color makes her stand out against the background and anticipates the crimson cloak Mal will wear when he attempts to slip into the training house to find her. Inara's back is to the viewer, and she is framed by a portico of thin columns, the angular lines of this structure softened by the flowing movement of near-transparent draperies. Beyond her is the expanse of a green-forested valley, while below her, seemingly emerging from the woods, is the Operative. He is clad in light, cool blue, his hands placed behind his back, his face calm and serene. The image is peaceful, almost timeless: an Arcadian space that recalls a moment from an ancient epic, such as an imagining of the welcome home offered by Penelope to her far-traveling husband in Homer's *The Odyssey*. Yet given that the viewer knows the Operative's villainy, the fantasy cannot hold, and Whedon's cut from this image to a medium shot of Inara's face quickly transforming from a smile of welcome to a recognition of danger verging on horror upturns the scene's peace.

Effective in both advancing the narrative and providing a note of beauty in its classical allusions, attention to this Inara/Operative scene is also helpful in understanding Whedon's approach to *Serenity's* aesthetics: reflecting not only Whedon's desire to differentiate his film from his TV series, but also serving as a reminder that this scene and the film itself are a rejoinder to the aesthetics of other science fiction films. Discussing his choices for the scene on his commentary, Whedon notes that he had this particular shot in his mind for some time, and that "I wanted something that was very, very different from what I was seeing, which was a lot of everything is monochromatic *Matrix* movies and obviously *Star Wars*, you know there's lots of deep reds and heavy coloring and I didn't want to go there, but I did want something that would make a bold statement of many, many worlds, and that this isn't just a simple ... you know, everything is slightly green kind of world." While Whedon's statement primarily focuses on this scene, it may also speak to his aesthetic goals for the film as a whole: his desire to build on both genre conventions and specific film texts but to also innovate beyond them, creating a unique aesthetic for his 'verse.

This leads me to the final formal choices that I will discuss: the use of red paint mentioned earlier and further use of red in the penultimate scene of Mal's confrontation with the Operative in his attempt to send the recording detailing the true origin of the Reavers into the 'verse. In examining these scenes I want to not only foreground the formal elements upon which I have focused and their literal meaning and effects, such as red's association with blood and violence, but also to address the figurative levels of this formal choice. The first scene I will discuss is the crew's return to Haven, a scene

that marks a turning point in Mal's arc within the film and propels the spaceship and its crew towards the unknown frontier of Miranda.

When the crew returns to Haven to see Book they discover desolation—the sight of the scattered bodies of Haven's inhabitants and a downed Alliance spaceship spewing dark smoke. The cruel loss of the scene is highlighted by the planet's too-bright daylight, the bodies standing out against the white of the ground and the desert environment and forming a stark contrast to the crew's previous visit, in which Green used Rembrandt lighting to enhance the warmth of the crew's welcome, the visual lushness of the nighttime scene's deep black and gleams of red and gold reflecting the joy of their reunion with Book. Mal locates the dying Book and holds Book's hand and head as he confesses his responsibility for the Alliance's actions against the planet's inhabitants.

As Mal tries to comfort Book, Whedon and Green emphasize the scene's horror: the camera dwelling on the red wound in Book's abdomen and the blood in his mouth and on his hand, blood transferred to Mal's ear, cheek, and neck as Book's hand slides down his face as he dies. This trail of red remains moments later, as Mal confronts the crew with his decision to go to Miranda and oppose the Alliance. The crimson of this blood is echoed by the rusty red shirt Mal wears, the red standing out against the shades of blue, purple, yellow, and brown worn by the other characters and the pale, almost colorless, background, isolating Mal from them. That Mal desires to cover the spaceship—their home—with the same red stain provides a further element of contention and separation, yet this protective cloaking is indeed the best solution. Just as Mal earlier manipulated aesthetics to try to enter the training house on Inara's world undetected by the Operative, sneaking in under the improbable cover of a bejeweled crimson cloak, so Mal's aesthetic choice of the red paint, along with other adjustments to *Serenity's* appearance, allows the crew to pass the Reaver fleet outside Miranda and learn the colonists' fate.

Emphasizing the sense of anger, passion, and alienation evoked by the color of Mal's red shirt and blood-streaked face, Whedon and Green compose the frame to further highlight Mal's separation from the crew and their initial opposition to his plan. As he stands facing them, his single body opposed to the group, the presence of all of their bodies within the same frame showcases a potential for unity. However, Mal's position on the opposite side of the frame from his crew creates a sense of dissociation. This is further emphasized when, rather than showing all the characters within the frame, Whedon moves to a shot/reverse shot, focusing first on Mal and then on the crew's reaction to him, an editing pattern that separates the characters, if only briefly. This bloody, fierce version of Mal is repeated, with some important variations, in his final battle with the Operative.

In this confrontation Mal is again clad in red, although the shirt he wears is not red, but brown; instead, it is the red of the blood that flows from his nose, his mouth, his damaged eye, and his wounded side that mark Mal, contrasting him with the cool calm of the Operative in his blue, unstained shirt. After he has defeated the Operative and left him to watch the recording the crew collected on Miranda, detailing the Alliance experiments that led to the Reavers, Mal leaves to find his crew. The moment speaks to celebration, but Mal does not pause to savor his victory; instead, he limps off, obviously damaged, holding his bleeding side. And as he comes out of the elevator to find his crew, Whedon and Green show him at first in darkness: just an unknown, possibly menacing, shadow against the wall—seemingly very much like the Mal of the introduction. River is similarly initially cast in darkness—only a shadowy outline with a weapon in hand, bodies piled around her—as the doors opposite Mal open to reveal her. Two damaged characters, wounded externally and emotionally, stare across the bodies of the similarly wounded crew: their baptism in blood a sign of the horror they have wrought and endured.

The broken, bruised face of Mal and his wounded body, photographed in intimate detail, is both a triumphant moment of endurance beyond pain and of doubt resolved and a critique of traditional representations of the hero, for rather than the morally upright and physically perfect hero glorying in his success, Whedon presents a visibly broken man who has just stepped out of the shadows into an uncertain light. And while the film's final scenes—the funeral ceremony and the final interaction between Mal and River on the bridge as *Serenity* breaks atmosphere and heads towards the stars—offer a certain benediction, the powerful, unsettling sight of the bloody, uncompromising face of Mal remains in the mind, an indelible image of the ambitious, even unsettling, nature of Whedon and Green's narrative and aesthetic experiments.

NOTES

1. For instance, in a 2005 interview with Mike Russell for the website *The CulturePulp*, Whedon notes of Green, "He's the reason we got to make a movie that looks—I think—a good deal more expensive than it was. He moves so fast, and he makes frames that I think are just as gorgeous as anything" (qtd. in Lavery and Burkhead 2011: 114).

2. In a discussion of *Firefly* in "Must-See Metaphysics" from *The New York Times*, Emily Nussbaum notes the film's origin in Whedon's consumption of Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*, about the Battle of Gettysburg. She quotes Whedon on the origins for the series: "I wanted to play with that classic notion of the frontier: not the people who made history, but the people history stepped on—the people for whom every act is the creation of civilization" (qtd. in Lavery and Burkhead 2011: 67).

3. As David Lavery notes in *Joss Whedon: A Creative Portrait*, "The budget for *Firefly* was even smaller than *Buffy's* or *Angel's*" (2014: 112). Despite this, one of the reasons given by Fox executives for cancelling the show was its expense, coupled with its low viewership.

4. Addressing the setting for Western films in a discussion of Clint Eastwood's film

Unforgiven, Edward Buscombe notes, "From the early days of the last century, Westerns have used landscape to ensure authority.... Deserts particularly were favoured. Europe too had mountains ... but it had no deserts and canyons to rival the spectacular sights of Arizona and Utah" (2004: 45).

5. In the gritty, lived-in look of the spaceship *Serenity*, Whedon recalls the messy communal spaces and well-worn industrial look of *Alien* (Scott, 1979), an important influence he has mentioned a number of times, including in his discussion with Mike Russell for *CulturePulp* (see Lavery and Burkhead 2011: 114).

6. For example, Barbara Maio notes the hybrid nature of the costumes in the series: 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 or 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 (2008: 206).

7. Mal's costume, for example, references a number of the film characters played by John Wayne, especially Wayne's dress in films such as *Stagecoach* and *The Searchers*.

8. Describing the spaceship in "Must-See Metaphysics" in the *New York Times*, Emily Nussbaum notes, "At once majestic and junky, the *Serenity* resembles a blown-up kid's toy, and its interior had been filled with oddball details. A tiny plastic bobble-headed dog sits on the dashboard, and the ship's low-tech engine is reminiscent of an overgrown eggbeater" (qtd. in Lavery and Burkhead 2011: 65).

9. This space is made even more colorful by Kaylee's addition of her fluffy pink party dress in the sixth episode "Shindig" (1 November 2002).

10. Discussing the reflexive nature of the film, J.P. Telotte argues that Whedon's awareness of the medium and its demands may be a crucial element in the success of *Firefly's* film adaption:

Yet what is arguably most interesting about the film version is something that hardly surfaces in *Firefly's* relatively brief existence. For *Serenity* seems pointedly mindful of its medium, after a fashion that we do not typically see in most television series, but has always marked some of the best cinematic sf (2008: 68).

11. Whedon notes that he found the question of how to open the film particularly difficult, especially as he had "a lot of explaining to do" and he needed to do so while keeping the film dynamic; the solution was the prologue:

Part of that became the idea of constantly shifting our expectations of where we were, so what seemed like [the] typical beginning of a science fiction movie narration turns out to be a simple classroom scene ... all of this is done to keep feeding information to the viewer while still unsettling and keeping them interested (2005).

12. In an interview with Mike Russell, Whedon focuses on the shift in size on all levels needed to adapt *Firefly* for film, facilitating both emotional and visual impact: "It would really get into their lives and tell the big, epic story—with the big chases and the big trouble and the fights and all the glory that we go to the movies for. But at the same time, it would be about the people in it—as opposed to the things you can accomplish with CGI" (qtd. in Lavery and Burkhead 2011: 109).

13. In his discussion of *Unforgiven*, Edward Buscombe argues that this use of darkness was absorbed by Green through his work with Eastwood and with Eastwood's long-time DP Bruce Surtees (2004: 77).

14. Describing Eastwood's approach, Buscombe argues, "As a director Eastwood has always had a liking for the crepuscular, for scenes shot in semi-darkness with just one or two sources of light" (2004: 77).

15. River's appearance rhymes with that of several characters in that film, such as Jane, the dark-haired, pale-faced heroine who turns out to be an inmate of an insane asylum, as well as the ashen-faced, dark-clad somnambulist Cesare, who appears to be being used as an instrument to enact a series of killings planned by the mysterious Dr. Caligari, a hypnotist.

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