

“Let’s Be Bad Guys”: (Re)Visualizing (In)Justice on the Western Frontier in Joss Whedon’s *Firefly/Serenity*

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Abstract:

In this paper, I analyze Joss Whedon’s world of *Firefly/Serenity* as a continuative narrative existing over television, film, and graphic novel. I argue that in creating an alternative universe that is parallel in its textual undertones, Whedon satires concepts of justice and universal truth as portrayed in historical Western films and that in doing so makes issues visible to the viewer. Doing so reveals the constructed nature of the “Wild West.” In deconstructing these tropes Whedon not only critiques these disseminated interpretations of life in the iconic American West, but also makes them visible through popular culture. Satirizing classical Western elements such as legal authorities or barbarous savages on the frontier (and their creation by the government) elucidates inadequacies of the portrayed frontier reinforced in American Western films. Ultimately, I demonstrate how *Firefly/Serenity* is an example of popular culture both visualizing—and more importantly critiquing—concepts of justice through satirizing the “Wild West.”

Introduction

Imagine a setting where people living on spaceships is the norm, humans are capable of telepathic thought, and everyone was united under the rule of an amalgamated American-Chinese government. Now imagine one with cattle smuggling, train robberies, and barren landscapes. A fusion of these backgrounds constitute Joss Whedon’s cult classic, *Firefly/Serenity*. Coming in on IMDB’s top 20 television shows of all time a decade after it was cancelled halfway

through its first and only season, Whedon's *Firefly/Serenity* is set within the science fiction genre and augments itself with themes from American Westerns to create what can be called a "space Western." *Firefly/Serenity* follows the tale of the crew of the transport (space)ship *Serenity* as they make a living on the frontier of "civilized" space. Whedon's universe—or 'Verse—is the backdrop for the stories that take place within it, yet has many nuances and allusions to narratives of the American frontier on its own, especially as it relates to common tropes of law, truth, and, more broadly, justice.

Whedon's *Firefly/Serenity* presents an alternative science fiction world that is parallel in its textual undertones to narratives of the Western frontier as depicted in American Westerns yet critiques pivotal aspects of the genre such as the treatment of Indigenous peoples and the portrayal of legal figures (Erisman 2006). Responding to Nicole Rafter's (2007) call to increase the use of film, television, and literary tools as they create understanding of broader social phenomena, I demonstrate how *Firefly/Serenity* allows for social critique through satire and juxtaposition. Critique through satire can also be seen to make certain issues (more) visible (Brighenti 2007; Thompson 2005) as it exaggerates absurdities presented in the tropes of American Westerns. In this way, critique through satire as demonstrated in Whedon's *Firefly/Serenity* contributes to the expanding field of popular criminology by critiquing narratives of the American frontier through presenting a similar, yet juxtaposing interpretation of the frontier.

The first component of the paper foregrounds the methodological approach of my sites of analysis and the latent relation between visibility, satire, and juxtaposition as methods of critiquing narratives present in popular culture. Specifically, I justify the objects of my juxtaposition-based analysis and illustrate how satire is a valid method of increasing awareness of certain issues by making them more visible, especially through popular culture (Brighenti 2007; Colletta 2009). Following this is an investigation

over the commonalities between *Firefly/Serenity*¹⁶ and Westerns such as *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939), *High Noon* (Kramer and Zinnemann 1952), and *My Darling Clementine* (Engel and Ford 1946) to demonstrate how Whedon’s ‘Verse exists as a Western despite its latent critiques of aspects of the genre (Erisman 2006; Hill 2009; Money 2008; Whedon 2012). Including common allusions such as clothing, scenery, structures, “jobs,” and a sense of comradery among individuals, I argue that *Firefly/Serenity* can be reasonably compared to Westerns while maintaining incongruent and juxtaposing features that critique aspects of the Western frontier.

Drawing out these incongruences, I analyze how *Firefly/Serenity* (Mendel and Whedon 2005; Whedon 2002a) simultaneously portrays the frontier both as a place of law and lawlessness in contrast to Western films by analyzing the Alliance and the crew of *Serenity* (Tranter 2012). I argue that displaying these visible and personified critiques of an ambiguous legal presence advances my claims that Whedon’s ‘Verse critiques common tropes in Westerns by problematizing conceptions of the existence of law on the frontier. Similarly, by portraying Reavers in a caricatured fashion, I argue Whedon is critiquing the portrayal of Indigenous peoples in Westerns by suggesting the settlers themselves can be blamed for (at least part of) their hostile transgressions (Curry 2008; Douglas and Richardson 2008). Displaying the Reavers in such a fashion not only exacerbates critiques regarding the treatment of indigenous people in Westerns (Herzberg 2008), but also problematizes narratives of them presented in tales from the American frontier. This problematization further advances the idea that *Firefly/Serenity* can be seen as a tool of critique through satire and visibility (Brighenti 2007; Colletta 2009) and may contribute to cultural understandings of Indigenous people and their actions on the frontier outside of their classical Western-film framed representations.

Finally, resorting to arguably the most common trope of Westerns—the cowboy—I demonstrate how the captain of *Serenity*, Malcolm

¹⁶ When I refer to *Firefly/Serenity* I am referring to the entire narrative provided by all of the works in the narrative. This includes *Firefly* the television show, *Serenity* the full length feature film, as well as *Serenity: Firefly Class 03-K64*, the graphic novel series, all of which are by (or executively produced by) Joss Whedon.

Reynolds, exists as both hero and anti-hero (Hill 2009; Magill 2008; Money 2008). Existing at this intersection, I claim Captain Reynolds is a visible critique of the heroic cowboy presented in the frontier by not acting in the name of justice as commonly found in Westerns. Breaking down the cowboy in this fashion, I argue, demonstrates how Whedon is critiquing Westerns by undermining the prolific cowboy archetype as a justice-seeking, selfless, and moral character and replacing it with seemingly contradictory conceptions of comradery, selfishness, and relative truth that problematize justice as conceived of on the frontier.

In their totality, I argue these sites of analysis produce an image that problematizes the popular conception of the frontier popularized by Western films by offering a critical and gritty alternative of the frontier influenced—and to an extent dominated—by abusive legal figures, revisionist history, and subjective truth. Approaching conceptions of the frontier in this fashion not only answers Rafter's (2007) call to increase the use of popular media as a form of (popular) criminology, but also demonstrates how popular media itself can be a vehicle for understanding and critiquing narratives of life on the frontier regarding law, Indigenous peoples, and justice (Foucault 1980; 2002; Rafter and Brown 2011; Young 2010).

Visibility, Satire, Juxtaposition and Methodology

Visibility—the process of rendering legible phenomena that would otherwise go unseen—has become a growing tool in the social sciences (Thompson 2005). As Andrea Brighenti (2007) points out, visibility exists at the intersection of aesthetics and politics. She argues that making phenomena visible allows them a symbolic presence that contextualizes them in relation to their surroundings and can advance separate agendas such as increasing police legitimacy and accountability (Goldsmith 2010), questioning how meaning is constructed by a text and the space its audience is situated (Johnson 2009), analyzing how media intensifies experiences of sexual violence (Dodge 2015), or even dismantling approaches of colonial analysis (Said 1978). In the context of media, film, and literature, Thompson (2005) notes how this visibility is

mostly a one-way form of communication, produced for a large audience but relatively unreceptive to direct response.

Understanding visibility as such, I use it here to demonstrate how my sites of analysis—as they exist over television, film and graphic novel—have the capacity to present critiques of the frontier to an audience that may not have been aware of them previously.

In addition to this foundation of visibility, I draw upon the notion of satire as a specific form to further increase the visibility of social critiques, specifically through popular media. As Lisa Colletta (2009) discusses, satire “holds up human vices and follies to ridicule and scorn” (859) and rests upon a mutual understanding that both the satirist and audience have in common regarding a cruelty or injustice that has been committed. Useful as a path of critique linked to political progress, satire requires elements of visibility (Colletta 2009). Specifically, in order for satire’s political critiques to come across to the audience, they must be aware of an issue and the context of which the satire takes place. In making subversive issues visual, such as the ambiguity of legal authorities on the frontier, or the problematic origin of conceptions of “barbaric” Indigenous peoples, I argue Whedon is also satirizing them to make a political critique of how these concepts have been presented in narratives of the frontier through classical Western films (Rafter and Brown 2011).

Furthermore, I utilize juxtaposition—the act of placing two radically different concepts beside one another to illustrate their differences—as a method of critique. As Bent Sorensen (2013) mentions, juxtaposition “intends to challenge the obviousness of the visual by rendering visible, ideally, forces that exist in secrecy, veiled in the all too obvious” (48). Juxtaposition in this way allows the audience to make connections between *Firefly/Serenity* as it exists as a (space) Western while simultaneously critiquing common characteristics of the genre such as the constructions of law, Indigenous peoples, and justice (Caputi 1991). Juxtaposition therefore is an extremely useful tool for analysis within genres as it allows allusions to be drawn between media—such as clothing or scenery—while also facilitating critiques of that genre through nuanced differences. Subsequently, juxtaposition, coupled with

aspects of visibility, offer a nuanced method ripe for popular criminology as it advances critiques by placing two objects beside one another and letting the audience pick up on the critique of the subversive points hidden in plain view.

In this paper I generalize Westerns to create a narrative of the “typical Western,” specifically as supported by the genre as a whole. I do not do this to construct a narrow or broad definition of Westerns, but to operationalize my approach for the sake of comparison. To constitute this narrative I utilize the work of Rafter (2006) as well as her collaboration with Michelle Brown (2011) to set the criteria for my films of comparison. Specifically, I looked for films that shed light on aspects of life on the Western frontier such as *My Darling Clementine* (Engel and Ford 1946), *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Morsella and Leone 1968), or *The Wild Bunch* (Feldman and Peckinpah 1969). Using the frontier as a metaphor for space not only makes sense in terms of how Westerns as well as Whedon’s ‘Verse are commonly described (vast, empty, barren, etc.), but also because it is the iconic location of the Western genre as a whole. As such, while some Westerns such as Michael Cimino’s *Heaven’s Gate* (Carelli and Cimino 1980) have applicable elements, I have prioritized Westerns that situate themselves on the American frontier (Young 2010). In addition, I have aimed to utilize films that have a significant historic impact, “either in technical, critical, or filmic terms, or in terms of subject, script, content, and sensibility” (Rafter 2006: 7) such as *Stagecoach* (John Ford’s first sound film, and also the first collaboration between him and iconic Western actor John Wayne; Ford 1939), *High Noon* (notoriously known for popularizing the term “High Noon” in the public vernacular; Kramer and Zinnemann 1952), or *The Great Train Robbery* (an example of one of the first Westerns, known for utilizing unconventional film techniques at the time such as cross cutting—displaying two scenes taking place at the same time in alternate locations—as well as being one of the first examples of train-robberies on film; Porter 1903).

Drawing upon all the canonical material on Whedon’s universe—consisting of a television series cancelled after airing for only half a

season, a relatively unsuccessful Hollywood film, and a series of adventurous graphic novels—I situate my arguments in relation to American Westerns and how Whedon’s works make visible critiques of subversive issues such as law, colonization, and justice (Mendel and Whedon 2005; Whedon 2002a; 2012; Whedon, Jeanty and Moon 2014; Whedon, Matthews and Conrad 2012; Whedon *et al.* 2011; Whedon, Whedon and Samnee 2010). While Rafter draws on crime films as a *category* that transcends genres, this paper focuses on Westerns and their common “themes, settings, and characters” (Rafter 2006: 5) to demonstrate how an analysis of a specific genre can still contribute to popular criminological understandings of popular media.

A Western in Space: Drawing Comparisons of “The Frontiers”

In order to make my larger claim that Whedon’s ‘Verse can be seen as a critique of narratives generated in American Westerns, I argue that *Firefly/Serenity* serves as an alternative to typical Western films yet takes on many of its aspects; essentially it can be seen to build on Westerns while critiquing their illusions of truth and justice (Hill 2009; Tranter 2012). I do so by analyzing the concept of the frontier itself as it mediates science fiction tropes such as spaceships, laser guns, and floating cars with the gritty, stagecoach driving, revolver-slitting worlds of John Ford, Henry Fonda, and John Wayne (Erisman 2006).

While the frontier is portrayed as a vast wasteland open for growth in Westerns, *Firefly/Serenity* offers an equally similar parallel. Instead of the American frontier, Whedon’s ‘Verse encapsulates the frontier of civilized society itself as it spans across multiple star systems. Whereas the centre of Whedon’s universe consists of the “civilized” planets of hover-cars and skyscrapers, the frontier—or “outer rim”—consists of planets on the edge of the galaxy reminiscent of America at the turn of the 20th century. Understanding the frontier as a link between Westerns and *Firefly/Serenity* in this way acknowledges that the objects of my analysis may have technological differences—such as spaceships over stagecoaches—yet for the purposes of my argument they are

aesthetic and do not problematize the claims I make hereafter (Jowett 2008; Whedon 2012).

There are countless allusions to the Western frontier in Whedon's 'Verse, but for the purposes of this discussion I limit myself to examples of costumes, settings and landscapes, as well as the internal logic of the universe including "jobs" and social relationships.¹⁷ In describing these elements as they appear in both Westerns and Whedon's 'Verse I claim that similarly to Western films, *Firefly/Serenity* takes place on the "final frontier," space.

Visual Props and Costumes of the Frontier

Visual allusions to the Western genre are evident throughout *Firefly/Serenity* (Mendel and Whedon 2005; Whedon 2002a; 2012), one of the most obvious being the character's clothing. This is seen most specifically in comparison to *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939) as it has a similar story structure and underlying character archetypes (Erisman 2006). A good first example is Malcolm "Mal" Reynolds (Nathan Fillion). Throughout the series, Mal wears worn-in clothes that feature warm and unflattering shades of brown and maroon, embodying depictions of frontier heroes in Western films. *Stagecoach's* (Ford 1939) counterpart, Ringo (John Wayne), wears similarly styled clothing including a rudimentary looking pair of jeans, a square belt buckle, and the all-too-iconic suspenders. This parallel is made through the laissez-faire stylistic cowboy gear they both adorn, opting for efficiency over style (Erisman 2006).

Drawing more comparisons between the two literary universes, the doctors in both *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939) and *Firefly/Serenity* are also similarly dressed. While Whedon's Simon Tam (Sean Maher) is not the bumbling alcoholic that Doc Boone (Thomas Mitchell) portrays in *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939), both wear clothes indicative of a higher

¹⁷ These are in no regards the only parallels possible. For examples regarding the musical scores Whedon uses see S. Andrew Granade's "*So Here's Us, On the Raggedy Edge*": *Exoticism and Identification in Joss Whedon's Firefly* (2011) or Jennifer Goltz' *Listening to Firefly* (2004). For examples on the portrayal of women and sex worker see Beadling (2008), Rowley (2007), Davidson (2004), and Taylor (2004).

social (and “civilized”) class. Simon wears pristine and high-end clothing including silk garments, fine vests, and jackets with clean button down shirts. This imagery carries directly over from Doc Boone as he is portrayed in *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939) with a black coat and a visibly stark white button down shirt bearing crisp white cuffs (Erisman 2006). Additionally, Inara Serra (Morena Baccarin) and Dallas (Claire Trevor) can be paralleled as the sex workers of their respective casts electing to wear strategically conservative yet titillating clothing.¹⁸ While these are some of the key characters, more tertiary characters, such as Niska (Michael Fairman) and Badger (Mark Sheppard) are dressed similar to the townspeople in *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939) and countless other Westerns. These stylistic allusions are constant reminders of *Firefly/Serenity*’s take on the Western genre, but more importantly they are indicative that Whedon’s ‘Verse takes place on the frontier of civilization (Mendel and Whedon 2005; Whedon 2002a; 2012). While the visual props and costumes are a strong site of connecting *Firefly/Serenity* to the Western frontier, arguably the most iconic representation of Western films is the physical representation of the frontier through settings and landscapes.

Settings and Landscapes of the Frontier

The distinction between civilized society, and those living the hard life on the frontier is key to *Firefly/Serenity*. This split exists in terms of physical locations and the types of buildings that occupy certain settings. The more “civilized” planets feature tall skyscrapers reminiscent of order and humanity and clearly parallels to the enlightened, developed lands of the East in Western films (Whedon 2002a; 2012). While we do not commonly see visual depictions of the East, many references to the East as big, civilized, ordered, and structured are made plentifully made in Westerns such as through Clementine’s journey in *My Darling Clementine* (Engel and Ford 1946) or the opening scenes depicting the graduation ceremony at Harvard in Carelli and Cimino’s (1980) *Heaven’s Gate* (Maio 2008).

¹⁸ In Whedon’s universe there is a guild for sex workers called companions, which is regarded with extremely high social class. This differs in relation to Dallas in *Stagecoach*; however their archetype are still similar between the two pieces in that they maintain poise while engaging in sexual acts for a living.

These descriptions of the grand and ornate conceptions of civilization are juxtaposed to the barren and simple nature of the frontier.

Through spacious environments, dust-filled streets, or the iconic two story buildings prominent in Westerns, we see how the frontier is less developed both culturally and physically in films such as *High Noon* (Kramer and Zinnemann 1952), *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Morsella and Leone 1968), and *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939). This contrast carries over to *Firefly/Serenity* where the towns on the frontier feature characteristics similar to those of old Western buildings as well as others with a space-age twist, including rusted shipping containers and broad streets lined with spaceships over stagecoaches. The structures themselves generally consist of coarse wooden walls, are relatively short in stature, and are highly weathered (Whedon 2002a; 2012; Whedon *et al.* 2011). The allusions brought forward by the similarities in the buildings further demonstrate a thematic coupling between *Firefly/Serenity* and the Western frontier.

In addition to this architecture, the scenery in *Firefly/Serenity* itself alludes to the American frontier. In many Westerns, including *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939), *My Darling Clementine* (Engel and Ford 1946), *High Noon* (Kramer and Zinnemann 1952), and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Morsella and Leone 1968), the main environment is barren, decorated only by small bushes and an endless horizon of earth (Erisman 2006). The occasional Hill or well-ridden road may garnish the scenery, but the frontier presented in Western films is necessarily an area of emptiness open for expansion to accommodate for the “American imaginary” as it creates a system of identity (Langford 2003). Expansion, for the Western frontier, especially as portrayed in film, is not only a backdrop for a story as Langford notes, but also helps in creating a national identity—even if it is structured upon false imagery. This is no different in *Firefly/Serenity*. In multiple episodes of *Firefly*, including *Serenity* (Whedon 2002b [original pilot episode]), *Train Job* (Whedon 2002c), *War Stories* (Whedon, Cain and Contner 2002), and *Heart of Gold* (Whedon, Matthews and Wright 2003), vast barren

landscapes are often featured (Mendel and Whedon 2005; Whedon 2002a; Whedon *et al.* 2014). A second, expansive nothingness—space—also depicts a significant portion of Whedon’s ‘Verse. While extreme, this parallel should not be overlooked as space itself becomes a part of the frontier colonized by spaceships, cruisers, and even the crew of *Serenity* as they float around transporting goods and completing odd jobs (Erisman 2006; Jowett 2008).

“Jobs” on the Frontier

One of the most iconic jobs prevalent in Westerns films is the train heist as presented in a variety of films including *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Foreman and Hill 1969), *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter 1903), and *The Wild Bunch* (Feldman and Peckinpah 1969). This carries over into *Firefly/Serenity* as can be seen in the second episode of the show, *Train Job*. While robbing a train in Westerns is typically done from horseback, the crew instead use their spaceship to help them pillage their bounty from the train (Whedon 2002a). Additionally, cattle herding, which is also predominate in Westerns such as *My Darling Clementine* (Engel and Ford 1946), make an appearance in the episodes *Shindig* (Whedon, Espenson and Gillum 2002) and *Safe* (Whedon, Greenberg and Grossman 2002). This cattle herding, while iconic of the Western genre, represents how, even in a Whedon’s ‘Verse, moving cattle from one location to another on the frontier is still a lucrative business, even if it is done with a spaceship. One last theme I wish to contextualize *Firefly/Serenity* as a Western is the comradery among a group of people, typically between the protagonist and her associates.

Comradery on the Frontier

Most Westerns feature a group of people who have a common goal. Existing together on the frontier is given more meaning than in civilized society due to the isolated and uncertain nature of the frontier. While Westerns portray civilized society as having a safety net consisting of the law, government, or even your neighbours to protect you, the frontier is not as tame; it is wild and unpredictable. Whether it is Butch and Sundance in their escape to Bolivia, Wyatt

and his brothers herding cattle to California, or a band of unlikely misfits put into a stagecoach together and forced to suffer through the terror of savage Apaches, most Westerns demonstrate relationships of comradery (Hill 1969; Ford 1939; 1946). This is heavily alluded to in *Firefly/Serenity* in how Mal treats his crew.

As the captain of the ship, Malcolm Reynolds is tasked with maintaining a crew that simultaneously allows him to conduct jobs without being a burden. As discussed, these are not always the most legitimate of jobs, but he makes a clear effort to protect and provide for his crew (Whedon 2002a; 2012). The attachment to *his* crew is further evident at many points such as *Ariel* (Whedon, Molina and Kroeker 2002) where he discovers Jayne (Alex Baldwin) attempted to sell out Simon and River (Summer Glau) Tam to the Alliance. Deciding to save Jayne's life at the last second before keelhauling for his treachery, Mal insists that he *is also his crew*, and that putting his crew at risk—even though Mal was safe—is still an act against him. Similarly, as Mal is abandoned to grievous torture in *War Stories* (Whedon, Cain *et al.* 2002), Hoban "Wash" Washburne, as he is attempting to rally the crew to free their captain declares "Y'know, there's a certain motto, a creed among folks like us. You may have heard it: leave no man behind" (Whedon, Cain *et al.* 2002: *War Stories*). These examples demonstrate that similar to Westerns, such as *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939) and *The Wild Bunch* (Feldman and Peckinpah 1969), that the frontier presented in *Firefly/Serenity* has similar claims to comradery that bring together its citizens against the (un)certain cruelty of the frontier.

In addressing these parallels between Whedon's 'Verse and the Western genre, I argue that in its science-fiction elements, *Firefly/Serenity* possesses hybrid traits that commonly occur in Western films (Jowett 2008). This link is paramount for critiquing the normative claims made by Western films as I argue Whedon does. Moreover, in showing how Whedon's 'Verse can be considered part of the Western genre I demonstrate how he does so in such a way that disagrees with some of the baseline assumptions made in the genre such as the concept of law on the frontier, the (lacking) origin of Indigenous hostility towards settlers, and broader

claims of justice. Moreover, as the following sections demonstrate, through making these differences visible in *Firefly/Serenity*, I claim Whedon is effectively making visible critiques regarding these claims through tools of satire and juxtaposition.

The Frontier as a Place of Law and Lawlessness

The frontier in *Firefly/Serenity*, I argue, offers a critique of the frontier portrayed in typical Westerns by exemplifying a state of both law and lawlessness and not one over the other (Tranter 2012). The frontier as a place of law and lawlessness may seem contradictory, yet viewing the law in this way critiques the universal claims of good and justice portrayed in Western films by juxtaposing them with a portrayal of the frontier that functions similarly without the characteristic of a firm legal authority. In making this argument I show how *Firefly/Serenity* offers a counter discourse of knowledge regarding the truth of the frontier—namely that one does not necessarily exist—and how positioning it alongside Western films further increases the visibility of Whedon’s critique, especially in regards to advancing a popular criminological conception of law on the frontier (Rafter 2007; Sorensen 2013; Sutherland and Swan 2008).

In classical Western films protagonists are seen to represent the law, such as Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) in *My Darling Clementine* (Engel and Ford 1946) or Will Kane (Gary Cooper) in *High Noon* (Kramer and Zinnemann 1952). Their actions personify conceptions of law and justice in Westerns. Their actions follow a normative concept of a universal construct of “good” and justice. More poignantly, Westerns advance certain ideas of what is good, such as avenging fallen brothers, saving the town from groups of bandits, or defeating gun-toting villains looking for revenge (Tranter 2012). I maintain throughout the rest of the paper that Whedon is critiquing the concept of law as it is seen to exist on the frontier by juxtaposing it with an alternative, yet similar in its textual undertones, universe that accentuates the ambiguity of law on the frontier. In doing so, I argue that Whedon presents a counter-discourse that does not offer to have an answer of assurance, but instead one of uncertainty. To make this position I analyze how law can be seen to exist and not

exist through the Alliance—the dystopian government—and its workforces as well as the crew of *Serenity*.

Arguably the strongest example of the Alliance acting in a state of both law and lawlessness derives from the actions of “the Operative,” as he is ominously referred to (Mendel and Whedon 2005; Whedon, *et al.* 2014). He is an example of someone who exists both within and outside of the law. He can be seen to exist inside the law, as he is assigned top secret missions and the military access to carry them out, yet has no name or title—all he has is an objective which he must complete at all costs. In addition, he abandons a clear claim of good typically associated with the law on the frontier, and, in fact, defines himself as a necessary evil, offering us an interpretation of society where “pure good” is actually impossible in a true Hobbesian fashion (Young 2010).

In massacring Haven—a small colony on a frontier world—during his quest to try and track down the crew of *Serenity*, the Operative clearly represents the law given his utilization of government resources, but not a “just” law as a trope of the Western frontier may suggest. Instead, the Operative offers us an interpretation where the law exists outside of the paradigm perceived on the conventional frontier in its legitimacy to destroy countless innocent people in its pursuit of *Serenity*. Whereas Westerns typically portray law on the frontier as good and just, in *Firefly/Serenity* our eyes are opened to a frontier where this is not the case. Specifically, *Serenity* (the film; Mendel and Whedon 2005) offers a perspective where the law will do anything and everything—including killing grotesque amounts of innocent people—for the slightest chance of achieving its objective. Consequentially, while the Alliance exists on the edge of the ‘Verse, the law can be seen to both exist and not exist—it exists in that the alliance is physically present and is involved in conducting actions, but it also does not exist as it acts outside of the moral claims of “good” law and justice as portrayed through Western films such as Zinnemann’s (1952) *High Noon* (Sutherland and Swan 2008).

This idea of law and lawlessness is further perpetuated in *Train Job* (Whedon 2002c) where the Alliance has an armed escort protecting a drug shipment on the train. While the Alliance provides the town

with the medicine they need to combat the toxic air in their surrounding environment, when it goes missing, they take no initiative to help to locate it. Consequentially, while the law *exists* in the frontier world(s), it also can be seen to *not exist* because it *does not act*. This is contrasted by the local sheriff, who attempts to hold the federal marshals to investigate the theft. Rather satirically, Alliance command deduces that this affair is not worthy of their attention and orders the escort continue on its destination without investigating the theft, delegating the sheriff with the task of tracking down the stolen medicine his town so desperately needs—something which he proves unable to do (Tranter 2012). Instead, after finding out the importance of their bounty to the survival of the town our protagonists break their contract and return the medicine on the grounds that to not do so would be unjust, regardless of the consequences.

Combined, these two instances juxtapose the common tropes of law on the frontier by demonstrating how law can be seen to both exist and not exist in certain situations. Positioning law in such a way draws attention to the narratives generally supported by the Western genre, specifically governance/law as justice, and demonstrates how law on the frontier may not have been as portrayed in Westerns. Moreover, in exaggerating the bureaucratic justifications for the uselessness of the Alliance troops in *Train Job* (Whedon 2002c), Whedon is visibly critiquing how bureaucratic institutions can get carried away leaving the frontier unprotected despite their mandate to the opposite.

In addition to the actions of the Alliance constructing an image of law and lawlessness on the frontier, one other example worthy of mention in Whedon’s ‘Verse is Ransie Burgess in the episode *Heart of Gold* (Whedon *et al.* 2003). Burgess can be seen to fit within a classical negative/corrupt rendition of the law. He is a sheriff who is abusing his authority to terrorize a house of consorts. This contrasts with the binary of law as good/justice and instead offers us a direct reading where the legal authority is seen as a negative social force (Whedon *et al.* 2003). Burgess is offered no tangible way of legitimizing his actions, and instead can be seen to make gruesomely misogynist remarks and gestures throughout the episode. In

presenting Burgess as such, Whedon is satirizing the concept of a corrupt representative of the law by layering him as a person who could substantively change the moon making it a better place to live with misogynistic overtones, temper tantrums, stealing a baby, and a rather nasty superiority complex. While Burgess is cited as being the legitimate legal authority on the moon, the crew of *Serenity* is called in to dish out “justice” not through the law, but by acting directly against it (Tranter 2012).

This conception of justice being offered by *Serenity*’s crew of “petty criminals” becomes a critique of Westerns because justice was not caused by the legal authorities, but by the very band of misfits the Alliance has been in constant pursuit after. The crew of *Serenity* is called in as a force of justice in other episodes including: *Our Mrs. Reynolds* (Whedon and Curtis-Hall 2002) where the crew deals with outlaws raiding a village; *The Message* (Whedon and Minear 2003), where they fight off corrupt police officers, and in *War Stories* (Whedon, Cain *et al.* 2002) where the crew distributes medical supplies to the outer planets who are in need—albeit for a profit (Whedon 2002a). In contrast to them doing “good,” episodes such as *Trash* (Whedon, Edlund and Gillum 2003), *Jaynestown* (Whedon, Edlund and Grabiak 2002), *Ariel* (Whedon, Molina *et al.* 2002), or the beginning of *Serenity* (the film; Mendel and Whedon 2005) display instances where the crew themselves are robbing, smuggling and “committing petty theft” (Whedon 2002a). This is exacerbated in the graphic novel *Those Left Behind* (Whedon *et al.* 2012) where the crew robs a bank, or in *Leaves on the Wind* (Whedon *et al.* 2014) where the crew conduct a prison break, and—for the Marxists—start a widespread revolution! The crew of *Serenity* therefore also ignore the binary of law and lawlessness. They do *good* and they do *bad*. They exist as *hero*, and as *villain*, as is evident when Jayne exclaims “let’s be bad guys” at the beginning of one of their heists (Mendel and Whedon 2005).

The enforcement behind the law is problematic as the Alliance typically acts in the name of “justice,” yet their actions are met with scepticism on the frontier. Moreover, as the crew’s actions are juxtaposed with more contemporary protagonists such as Wyatt Earp

from *My Darling Clementine* (Engel and Ford 1946) or Will Kane from *High Noon* (Kramer and Zinnemann 1952), Whedon’s ‘Verse can be seen to directly critique the underlying narratives of the Western genre as producing a constructed—and not necessarily true—rendition of the frontier. Consequentially, through juxtaposing these instances where the law is seen to exist yet not exist on the frontier I argue Whedon is critiquing the normative discourse that law is always seen to be a force of justice, and more broadly that the law even exists on the frontier. This ever-organic and mutating sense of law and justice juxtaposes the rendition typical in Westerns. In doing so, Whedon demonstrates that law’s existence is flexible due to the complicated (de)coupling of law and justice and makes visible some of the problematic assumptions as portrayed in Westerns regarding law and justice (Sutherland and Swan 2008). With this in mind I draw attention to my second example, namely how Reavers can be seen as a satirized form of American Indian Apaches and that in clearly linking the creation of the Reavers to the meddling of the Alliance on the frontier, Whedon is critiquing the assumption that Indigenous people were unduly aggressive towards American settlers of the frontier.

Reavers as Space Apaches

In *Firefly/Serenity* the Reavers are the allegorical comparison to the violent Apaches as commonly depicted in Westerns. They feature a satirized sense of barbarity in comparison, featuring forked tongues, self-inflicted piercings, as well as an uncanny taste for human (Mendel and Whedon 2005; Whedon 2002a). Rumoured to be humans who descended into madness upon hitting the edge of space, the origins of the Reavers are seen to be the subject of myth and hyperbole. This is present in many of the depictions offered in *Firefly/Serenity*, but perhaps the most notable representation of the Reaver’s barbarism is a quote from Zoe Washbourne (Gina Torres) describing to Simon the likely outcome if they were to be boarded by Reavers: “[i]f 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” (Curry 2008; Douglas and Richardson 2008; Whedon 2002a).

In this section I illustrate how the Reavers in Whedon's universe satire portrayals of American Indian Apaches in Western films. This over dramatization of their aggressive and inhospitable qualities calls attention to the ridiculous representations of American Indians in Westerns through juxtaposing them with the Reavers as purely unrealistic and brutal savages. This evocative construction of Reavers calls attention to the dehumanized perception of American Indians as displayed and displaced in Westerns. Combined with the fact that the Alliance created the Reavers, I argue that making the Reavers visible as an antagonist and caricaturing them to the point of satire acts as a critique of Westerns and their typical portrayal of Indigenous peoples as seen in *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939) and *The Wild Bunch* (Feldman and Peckinpah 1969). More direct, Whedon is critiquing the normative portrayals of Apaches in Western films not only by over exaggerating their aggression, but also by hinting that civilized society is to blame for the creation of the hostile "savages" in the first place (Curry 2008; Douglas and Richardson 2008; Herzberg 2008).

In *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939), as Ringo is about to escape, he notices off in the distance the Apaches are sending war signals through smoke (Ford 1939). This becomes iconic as a source of not only impeding danger, but specifically a danger represented by "savages" who kill for no reason. This is mirrored in *Serenity* by the Reavers and their use of technology. All of their spaceships are barely functional, and consequentially spew large amounts of smoke from their exhaust (Mendel and Whedon 2005; Whedon 2002a). The smoke is indicative of a barbaric nature—while they use technology, they do not use it in a "civilized" way—similar to the perception of the Apache smoke signals in *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939). More specifically, while the crew in *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939) can send signals through wire, the barbarians on the frontier are resorted to communicating through acts of destruction (Douglas and Richardson 2008).

While the Reavers machinery bears physical similarities to that of the Apaches, their actions can also be seen as a satire of classic portrayals of Apaches on the frontier. The physical portrayal of

Reavers is a satire of Apaches in that it radically over exaggerates the hostility the Apaches bear in Western films. In *Firefly/Serenity* the Reavers are a representation of pure (seemingly) unjustified hostility, whereas we are never made aware of the logic behind the actions of the Apaches attack of the cast in *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939). Instead, as portrayed in Westerns, Apaches are inferred as resistant to the process of settling—and therefore civilizing the frontier, depicting them as uncivilized savages (Curry 2008; Douglas and Richardson 2008; Miller and Ripper 2011; Whedon 2002a). As such, the Reavers exacerbate the portrayals of Apaches as savages to the point of critiquing how Apaches have been represented in Westerns. In what is the tide before the climactic storm in *Serenity* (the film; Mendel and Whedon 2005), this satirical allusion takes an interesting turn as the crew end up discovering that the Alliance are responsible for the creation of the Reavers.

Through modifying the air processors on Miranda—a planet on the furthest edge of the civilized frontier—the Alliance caused a catastrophe resulting in a vast majority of the population becoming completely apathetic leading to the population ceasing going to work, eating, or even moving, eventually resulting in their deaths (Mendel and Whedon 2005). The side effect of this additive to the air processors for approximately ten percent of the population was far more severe—they became exponentially aggressive, hostile, and combative—ultimately transforming into the barbaric Reavers (Mendel and Whedon 2005). The Reavers’ existence on the rim reflects where they were created, a planet beyond the frontier of civilized space—a clear allusion to the common resistance to civilization commonly demonstrated by Apaches on the frontier such as in *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939). Moreover, this geographical relation to the Apaches further demonstrates how Whedon is critiquing the normative discourse of Apaches by proposing that civilized society may be to blame for their actions. In doing so, *Firefly/Serenity* visualizes the problematic portrayal of Apaches on the frontier by satirizing their savage qualities through the Reavers and their origins on the frontier.

Presenting the Reavers in this satirized fashion is useful because it renders visible a critique of the Apaches as they are portrayed in the

frontier. Displaying this caricaturization, especially in light of the Alliance's role in creating the Reavers, leaves the audience asking multiple *critical* questions: were the settlers, or more specifically civilized society, responsible for creating the Apaches in the sense we portray the Reavers in *Firefly/Serenity*? Is the chemical agent used to convert the people into Reavers in *Serenity* a metaphor for the rapid expansion and meddling into the Western frontier? In doing so the audience is allowed to come to a conclusion of the frontier on its own, outside of the predominate perspective presented in Western films that law and civilized society are always good. In presenting this canon to the reality of the frontier Whedon denies a grand claim to truth regarding the hostility of the Apaches as they are portrayed in Westerns. Moreover, the lack of any grand claim of truth or justice regarding Reavers is another example of how *Firefly/Serenity* offers a counter-discourse of knowledge about the "Wild West" by proposing an alternative fiction to the creation of the frontier's "savages." Moving on from this I now look at Malcolm Reynolds and how he can be seen as both a hero and a villain, and represents a deconstruction of the classic cowboy archetype seen in Western films.

Hero or Anti-Hero? An Amalgamation of Cowboy and Rogue

In most Westerns there is typically a character that acts in the name of justice. Typically this is delegated to the cowboy archetype. Whether it be the lawful sheriff in *High Noon* (Kramer and Zinnemann 1952), Ringo in *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939), or Wyatt in *My Darling Clementine* (Engel and Ford 1946), the protagonists are typically portrayed as a hero by achieving some level of justice. I argue Mal personifies *both* hero and anti-hero and in doing so moves against this normative framework of the heroic cowboy and problematizes the grand conceptions of justice as they are portrayed on the frontier in Westerns. To assert these claims I ground my analysis on Mal's actions as they deconstruct grand narratives of justice and reflect a more personalized and subjective conception of justice and how this operates in comparison to the typical appeals to broad justice as seen in Western films.

Malcolm Reynolds in his adventures of the frontier offers an ambiguous rendition of the classical Western cowboy (Hill 2009). While Mal looks the part—and plays it even better—he varies from his cowboy archetype in that he can be seen to not always act in the name of a broad concept of justice (Tranter 2012). Whereas in Westerns the concept of justice is typically associated with the law and fixing a wrong such as revenge in *My Darling Clementine* (Engel and Ford 1946) or standing up against a criminal *High Noon* (Kramer and Zinnemann 1952), in *Firefly/Serenity* this is not always the case. The capacity for the crew, following the orders of their captain, to operate in a morally gray zone demonstrates how on the frontier justice is not as clear cut as it is presented in Western films. Mal robs trains, then returns the stolen medicine; he brings fallen comrades back home, and nonchalantly shoots officers of the law; he robs banks, and fends off corrupt sheriffs (Mendel and Whedon 2005; Whedon 2002a; 2012). All of these are shadowed by his decision to protect two highly wanted fugitives—Simon and River Tam (Magill 2008). While the Tams were clearly wronged by the Alliance, having conducted cruel and inhumane experiments on River (and Simon’s only crime being freeing her from the facility), the cost of Mal’s decision to harbour these two fugitives is substantial because it places his already legally questionable enterprise at far greater risk. Mal can be seen to represent the typical cowboy at times by standing up for a conception of justice that resonates with his Western film peers, but he can also be seen to deviate from this barometer of justice as well. He is a cowboy *and* a smuggler; a hero *and* a villain; a murderer *and* a saviour (Erisman 2006; Tranter 2012).

The viewer does not *always* agree with Mal’s actions, but because of this, when we do, they have much more meaning to us. This offers a critique of the stereotypical “good cowboy” for something that is more vague—a captain who does good, but sometimes does “bad” as well. This dialectic strife personified in Malcolm Reynolds makes visible a second, relative conception of justice on the frontier. Specifically, in doing what he feels is best at the time Malcolm is deviating from the moral compass present in the hero, but also from the anti-hero by doing good deeds as well. This latent potential to be a rogue as well as a cowboy classifies Mal as someone that is not

interested in acting solely along broad claims of justice as is done in traditional Westerns. This causes the viewer to reflect on whether they are comfortable with Mal's actions. While we may support him when he shows mercy in not killing Patience (a trade partner turned rogue), or Saffron (an undercover saboteur who tried to steal his ship), we may be shocked when he coldly kills an officer of the law, pushes an innocent man to a torturous death in the name of profit, or when he commands his crew to string the dead bodies of their friends to the nose of *Serenity* (Mendel and Whedon 2005; Whedon 2002a; 2012). This lack of a clear claim to justice is reflective of Whedon's critique of the Western frontier by demonstrating that justice is more relative than portrayed in Westerns (Tranter 2012). This ability to switch between the cowboy and the rogue makes Mal fundamentally different to the justice-seeking sheriff of the frontier, demonstrating a visible critique through a possible alternative rendition where justice is far more relative and subjective than for the cowboys of the American West.

Conclusion

In combination the three sites of analysis here I maintain are a fruitful avenue to cut into Whedon's *Firefly/Serenity*. Through creating an alternative universe that still can be associated with the Western genre, Whedon makes visible critiques of Westerns by offering a frontier that is similar, yet distinct in its differences. Embracing satire and juxtaposition, this paper has demonstrated how these methods offer opportunities to media studies by making critiques more visible. Specifically, I have illustrated how the frontier in *Firefly/Serenity* demonstrates a capacity of both law and lawlessness in response to its Western counterparts and in doing asks what is justice on the frontier, and who is it for? Similarly, I have claimed that the satirical representation of Apaches present in the Reavers exacerbates critiques regarding the treatment of Indigenous people in Westerns and questions narratives of them presented in Western films. Finally, resorting to arguably the most common trope of Westerns—the cowboy—I have demonstrated how the captain of *Serenity*, Malcolm Reynolds further critiques conceptions of justice as he portrays characteristics of both hero and

villain. In concert with one another these three examples offer a contribution not only to further understanding *Firefly/Serenity* but also understanding how popular media can be utilized to advance social critiques, specifically in regards to legal figures, Indigenous people, and justice as they exist, or have been portrayed to exist on the frontier.

In response to Rafter’s call to increase studies for a public criminology I have compared *Firefly/Serenity* with other films in the Western genre to demonstrate how Whedon problematizes the popular conception of the frontier popularized by Western films by offering a critical alternative of the frontier through abusive legal figures, revisionist history of Indigenous peoples, and subjective conceptions of justice on the frontier. Specifically, in comparing the textual undertones between *Firefly/Serenity* and classical Western films I have illustrated how the former critiques the universal claims to truth and justice embedded in the latter. Understood through conceptions of visibility, satire, and juxtaposition, the approach demonstrated here presents an alternative discourse of the frontier and in doing so offers a popular cultural stance on an alternative to the frontier. Whedon’s universe, on these grounds of similarity yet pivotal differences, exists as a form of popular criminology through critiquing the grand narratives of truth and justice, specifically as they have been woven through Western films.

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