

“Fully loaded, safety off. This here is a recipe for unpleasantness”:

**Joss Whedon, John Ford, and the Dark Side of the American
Mythos**

K. Brenna Wardell

[1] There is a moment in Joss Whedon’s *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) that may pass unnoticed, yet it is no throwaway gesture. Captain America/Steve Rogers moves from a sunlit landscape towards the open doorway of a farmhouse, pauses within its frame, and then moves back outside. Echoing John Ford’s iconic 1956 Western *The Searchers*, this moment connects *Ultron* with a seminal moment in American cinema; it also evokes the ambivalence of *The Searchers* and its protagonist Ethan Edwards: a wanderer without a home, a man both heroic and demonic.

[2] As Cap turns and walks away from the farmhouse and its suggestion of family, community, and peace, Whedon foregrounds the restlessness, alienation, and sense of loss of Cap and of the Avengers as a whole. In this moment, Cap is aligned with Ford’s complex, often conflicted, protagonists and with a previous Whedon character with strong Ford connections—Malcolm Reynolds of the television series *Firefly* (2002) and its film sequel *Serenity* (2005). My title nods to Mal and his ’verse; specifically, it draws from a line he speaks in *Firefly*’s “Objects in Space” (1.14) during a moment of tension brought to a head by the traumatized psychic River who, along with the loaded, safety-off firearm she carries, poses an internal danger to Mal and his crew—a precursor to the external threat of the bounty hunter Jubal Early. This sense of threats internal and external also applies to *Ultron*’s doorway moment—but what is the threat Cap perceives as he turns away from the

K. Brenna Wardell is an Assistant Professor of film and literature at the University of North Alabama in Florence, Alabama. Her research focuses on gender and sexuality, aesthetics, and issues of place and space in media and literary texts, with a special emphasis on the Whedonverses and on the films of Alfred Hitchcock and Luis Buñuel.

farmhouse, home of fellow Avenger Hawkeye/Clint Barton, and disappears from view? Does it come from the crazed robot Ultron and the revenge-seeking Maximoff twins, the reason the Avengers have sought refuge in the farmhouse, this “safe house” (01:00:02)?¹ Or is the threat the team itself, whose members at various points not only note their creation of dangerous things, including Ultron, but call themselves “monsters” (01:08:24; 01:28:52; 01:38:17)?²

[3] I begin with this doorway moment because it demonstrates Whedon’s engagement with the themes and formal choices of Ford, a central figure in the development of the Western and Hollywood cinema; with the Western itself; and with the stakes of such borrowing. By citing the director’s and genre’s complex, at times ambivalent, discourse of American identity and history in *Ultron* and other texts, Whedon engages with themes including the tensions between individuals and communities and so-called civilization and the wild while foregrounding the drive to both mythologize the past and its traumas and interrogate it. In doing so, Whedon gestures to the vexed mythos of America itself.³

[4] I am not, of course, the first person to discuss the Ford-Whedon connection; scholars such as Mary Alice Money and David Budgen have pursued this link, as in Money’s “Firefly’s Out of Gas: Genre Echoes and the Hero’s Journey” and Budgen’s “‘A Man of Honor in a Den of Thieves’: War Veterans in *Firefly* and *Serenity*.” Both essays are examples of the rich vein of scholarship centered on *Firefly* and *Serenity* as texts overtly indebted to Ford and the Western. This essay also considers these texts, but it extends the focus to other Whedon work such as *Ultron* to reveal not only the pervasive nature of Whedon’s citation of Ford’s films, particularly examining his *Stagecoach* (1939), *Fort Apache* (1948), and *The Searchers*, but the manner in which Whedon uses the narrative ambivalence and formal experimentation found in a number of Ford texts to create texts that similarly interrogate genre conventions and the ideas of individual and national identity conveyed through these genres. The essay’s approach is shaped by the self-reflexive, interrogative mode Ford adopts in films such as *The Searchers*, a crucial film in Ford’s mid-career reflection that forces viewers to reexamine their preconceptions of the Western, the Western hero, and

their reading of the genre's connection to American identity. This essay argues that in nodding to Ford and films such as *The Searchers*, Whedon similarly evokes active, interrogative viewing of his characters and their worlds. Because both directors raise questions to which they provide no easy, clear-cut answers, violating the conventions of much mainstream cinema, the essay also plays with convention: opening space through its argument for consideration of these issues but not necessarily providing definitive answers.

[5] This essay opens with some background on Ford and the Western to lay out the nature and importance of Whedon's links to the director and genre before moving to close readings of select moments from Whedon texts that illustrate several key thematic and formal connections between the two men. Thematically, the focus is on Ford's and Whedon's creation of complex, often traumatized, protagonists in morally ambiguous worlds who deny simple demarcations such as hero and villain. As part of this, the essay examines the combination of connection and tension between these protagonists and the communities to which they are tied and these communities' association with space, physical and emotional. Formally, the essay explores the manner in which each creator precisely uses mise-en-scène elements to amplify or complicate their protagonists' traumas or to draw out tensions between individualism and cooperation. For instance, the essay argues that each creator plays precisely with spatial design, specifically framing protagonists in relation to often-evocative sets and settings to portray the isolation, literal and figurative, of these protagonists. That is why the essay begins and ends with *Ultron*'s doorway moment, which not only nods to Ford and the famous doorway shots that open and close *The Searchers* but also says something evocative, even troubling, about Cap, the Avengers, and their world.⁴

[6] Ford's career spans much of the twentieth century and crucial changes in the film industry and film form, including the development of classical Hollywood narrative and style, the conventions of mainstream commercial cinema that Ford helped to shape. These conventions include linear, cause and effect stories; narrative closure; a tendency towards happy endings; and an invisible style that foregrounds the importance of narrative over film form. The director's profound

influence on American culture may also be due to his frequent use of American literary and historical figures as the foundations of his films, as in his 1940 adaptation of John Steinbeck's 1939 Great Depression novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, his exploration of the early career of future president Abraham Lincoln in 1939's *Young Mr. Lincoln*, and his 1948 film *Fort Apache*, whose Lieutenant Colonel Owen Thursday was inspired by Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer. Describing the unique nature of Ford's films in *John Ford: The Man and His Films*, particularly as they evolved into the interrogative mode of mid-career films such as *The Searchers*, Tag Gallagher argues, "What is distinctive in Ford is his juxtaposition of disparate moods, styles, and characters—suggesting a variety of possibilities, which, in turn, imply an off-setting modicum of freedom Ford's richness thus is due to dialectical tensions at almost every level: between audience and film, between themes, emotions, compositional ideas" (48). Ford's diverse oeuvre includes genres from comedy to documentary, but it is his work in the Western, that particularly American genre, for which he is best remembered.

[7] While the Western is a relatively young genre, it arguably has deep roots, including a connection with the myths of classical antiquity. In his inquiry into the genre in "What Is a Western? Politics and Self-Knowledge in John Ford's *The Searchers*," Robert B. Pippin opens with observations from the critic Andre Bazin that link conflicts such as the American Civil War to the Trojan War, subject of the ancient Greek poet Homer's epic *The Iliad*, while associating Homer's depiction of the hero Odysseus's journey home in *The Odyssey* with westward expansion and frontier travel (223-224). In "Darkening Ethan: John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) from Novel to Screenplay to Screen," Arthur M. Eckstein notes that Ford described the film, set in 1868 Texas, as an "epic" (5), placing the story of Ethan's multi-year search for his niece Debbie, kidnapped by Comanche warriors, in this classical tradition. Specifically, Eckstein details that Ford called *The Searchers* a "psychological epic" (5), an appellation that evokes a sense of individual and national psychology writ in widescreen. Connected to issues of nation and national identity formation is the journey, literal and figurative, of the epic hero, the epic's central figure. Examples from antiquity of such heroes include *The Iliad*'s mighty, rage-filled Achilles

and the wily Odysseus, figures echoed by Ford protagonists such as Davy Brandon, the resourceful Pony Express rider of his 1924 silent epic *The Iron Horse*, and the Ringo Kid, the heroic outlaw of *Stagecoach*.

[8] Both films are essential in Ford's oeuvre and in the genre's evolution. *The Iron Horse* is considered by writers such as John P. Frayne, who discusses Ford's career in an article titled "Stagecoach," as a landmark in the Western's development, and it serves as a useful narrative and formal touchstone for later Ford films and directors who cite Ford (19). Centered on the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, the film reflects Ford's interest in American history while its formal elements of stunning location shooting, the capturing of this scenery in long shot to demonstrate its scale and scope, and the eloquent use of these spaces to elucidate physically and emotionally the nature of the human communities who populate them lay the groundwork for future Ford Westerns and the genre as a whole.

[9] *Stagecoach* too is pivotal, particularly for the development of the Western hero and Whedon's engagement with both genre and hero. Focusing on nine diverse strangers traveling through hostile territory and braving each others' prejudices and peccadillos, the film is, as Fred Erisman discusses in "*Stagecoach* in Space: The Legacy of *Firefly*," an obvious precursor to *Firefly* and *Serenity*, as well as to *The Avengers* and *Ultron*. *Stagecoach*'s characters are a microcosm of a diverse, often combative, American society, and they provide a roll call of classic Western types from the drunken doctor to the prostitute with the heart of gold. The film also features a star-making performance by John Wayne, in his first of many roles for Ford, as the Ringo Kid. Wayne's Kid is a model of virile, near mythic, masculinity: a vision of heroism echoed darkly in Wayne's later role as Ethan. Both the Kid and Ethan influence Whedon's Mal and, to some extent, his version of Cap in *Avengers* and *Ultron*.

[10] Ford returns to the cinematic representation of myths of heroism and national identity found in *The Iron Horse* and *Stagecoach* in *The Searchers*, but he does so in a more complex, interrogative mode that creates a decidedly ambivalent attitude towards these myths. It is no wonder, then, that Whedon cites the film as an influence on his often-somber *Firefly* and *Serenity* and describes *The Searchers* in a 2004 interview

with Thomas Leupp as “uncompromising” (82), an adjective that sums up the film’s bleakness and its hard-eyed revision of the Western. Certainly the characters in *The Searchers*, particularly its putative hero Ethan, a psychically scarred and morally compromised veteran of the American Civil War and the Franco-Mexican War, directly foreshadow the hardscrabble, often lawless, characters of *Firefly* and *Serenity* and their war-torn ‘verse while gesturing to the imperfect, haunted characters of Whedon texts from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) to *Ultron*.⁵ Wayne’s Ethan is the figure through whom much of the film’s ambivalence, from its representation of a violent masculinity to its depiction of a national identity built on racial conflict, manifests, its tensions bubbling up in Ethan’s often-fractured relationships with other characters and in the increasing unease with which viewers read him. In “Darkening Ethan,” Eckstein notes that commentators have argued that the film posits the idea that racism comes from one’s own dark desires, such as Ethan’s unspoken desire for his sister-in-law Martha, that are then projected onto the Other—here the Comanche chief Scar, whom Debbie eventually marries (3). Ethan’s racism is especially prominent in his shifting attitude over time towards Debbie and in that attitude’s potentially violent results. As Russell Meeuf notes in *John Wayne’s World: Transnational Masculinity in the Fifties*, “For an increasingly demented Ethan, the goal is not to save her but to kill her over the shame of her miscegenation” (90). Although Ethan fails to do so, instead bringing her back to the community of white settlers, his racist nature and acts create a disturbing conundrum: the supposed hero triumphs, but at what physical and psychological cost?⁶ By placing at his film’s center a figure with whom audience identification is a fraught affair, Ford calls the character and the Western genre’s traditional portrayal of heroic white masculinity into question.⁷

[11] At the same time, Ford further complicates *The Searchers* by choosing not to locate the film’s ambivalence solely in its representation of Ethan but in that of other characters as well. While Ethan’s overt racism appalls, characters from Ethan’s fellow searcher Martin, Debbie’s adopted brother, to Laurie Jorgensen, the daughter of the family who eventually takes in Debbie, behave in insensitive to hateful ways.⁸ In his choice to show the entire settler community as, to various degrees,

flawed, even disturbed, Ford gestures not only to the complicated nature of the film's nineteenth-century setting during the Texas-Indian Wars but also to the anxieties and prejudices of the 1950s America of its release. For all of these reasons, *The Searchers* makes viewers question the film's characters and the myths promulgated by American cultural products such as the Western. It is this interrogative narrative mode that Whedon borrows in work from *Buffy* onwards, along with specific formal techniques to enhance this mode.

[12] The worlds that Ford's and Whedon's characters inhabit and the manner in which viewers may read these characters are, as both men's careers advance, progressively complex and ambivalent, just as the narratives and formal qualities of their texts display increasing self-reflection and critique. In the case of Ford, significant shifts occur from a more simplistic diegetic division of heroism and villainy or civilization and nature in his early films to an increasingly complex tonality in middle to late period films. For example, Ford's representation of Native American characters as decidedly Other in early and early-middle films such as *The Iron Horse* and *Stagecoach* transforms into a somewhat more multifaceted, yet still limited, representation in *The Searchers*, and finally to a sympathetic treatment in his mournful *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), which examines the hardships faced by the displaced Cheyenne people. In Whedon's case, such evolution occurs over the course of *Buffy*, his first major creatively controlled project, and further deepens in later work such as *Ultron*.

[13] The Whedon-directed and -written "Lie to Me," episode seven in *Buffy*'s second season, provides an early example of Whedon's creation of three-dimensional characters in morally ambiguous worlds. The episode centers on the complex nature and price of deceit, its theme primarily articulated in the storyline of Buffy's betrayal by her dying friend Billy "Ford" Fordham, although the episode's emotional weightiness also derives from the manner in which it builds on the increasingly heavy psychic burden carried by all the major characters from the pilot onwards. This weight of moral complexity and trauma is summed up in the episode's conclusion, as Buffy seeks guidance from her Watcher Giles:

Buffy: Does it ever get easy?
[*Ford rises from the grave as a vampire and she slays him.*]
Giles: You mean life?
Buffy: Yeah, does it get easy?
Giles: What do you want me to say?
Buffy: Lie to me.
Giles: Yes. It's terribly simple. The good guys are always stalwart and true. The bad guys are easily distinguished by their pointy horns or black hats, and, uh, we always defeat them and save the day. No one ever dies and ... everybody lives happily ever after.
Buffy: Liar. (00:43:16-00:44:08)

The scene's contrast of Giles's deliberate Manichaeism and Buffy's tart response works to deepen the characters' individual characterization and moral universe and highlight *Buffy's* narrative complexity on a number of levels. First, it indicates a crucial moment in Buffy's transition from a child who desires adult guidance and comfort to an independent, resourceful woman who understands her world's harsh realities all too well. The scene also serves, like the episode as a whole, as a reflection on *Buffy's* first season which, despite its many strengths, occasionally displays a relatively simplistic morality and limited character development.⁹ In that vein, the episode also reflects critically on teen movies and horror—the genres with which the series is most directly aligned—for the tendency in some representative texts in each genre towards one-dimensional, even exploitive, character representation.

[14] Furthermore, "Lie to Me" also presents an intervention in and interrogation of classical Hollywood narrative's neat, conclusive endings and well-defined demarcations of right from wrong. In his pat response to Buffy's request to "Lie to me" with a story of a clearly obvious good triumphant, Giles echoes the narrative form and style of classical Hollywood cinema: films that quickly distinguish the villainous

from the heroic with the additional panacea of a happy ending. Specifically, Giles's reference to "black hats" digs into the trope established by early Hollywood Westerns of white-hatted heroes and black-hatted villains, thereby calling out the iconography of the early films Ford helped to determine. As this moment between Buffy and Giles, like the episode as a whole, highlights, this iconic dichotomy of good and evil, along with mainstream media's tendency to favor neatly tied happy endings, is not natural but a fabrication: a cultural lie. With its complex morality and lack of easy answers, "Lie" critiques such dichotomies and the texts that tell them, even as its characters long for uncomplicated lives.

[15] A similar ambiguity exists in *Firefly* and *Serenity*, texts whose 'verse derives in part from the American Civil War and its bloody crisis of individual and national identity. As Emily Nussbaum chronicles in "Must-See Metaphysics," *Firefly* was famously inspired by Whedon's interest in *The Killer Angels* (1974), Michael Shaara's book about the Battle of Gettysburg (67). In discussing his borrowing from this real-life conflict, Whedon observes that he chose not to focus on extraordinary, powerful figures or spectacular military clashes but on "the minutiae of the soldiers' lives" (67). Wedding this history to the Western and its generic conflicts, he further notes, "And I wanted to play with that classical 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" (67). Whedon's remarks articulate an interest in expanding, even defying, the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema, such as its focus on a single or small group of protagonists, while interrogating the myth of the "civilizing" of the frontier through the heroic work of a few remarkable white men. Borrowing from Ford, particularly his *Stagecoach*, Whedon instead focuses not on one or a few mighty and prominent individuals but a diverse group of peripheral, nearly powerless, people.

[16] Such diversity is a key element of *Stagecoach*, which brings together stagecoach passengers associated with socioeconomic power, such as a marshal and a banker, with the marginalized and ostracized, as in the prostitute Dallas and the alcoholic Doc Boone, to form an impromptu community.¹⁰ Communities, from well-established

settlements to temporary groupings of people and dwellings, are a central element in Ford's texts, anticipating Whedon's focus on the chosen family. As Frayne notes, "Ford's heroes are usually not lonely. The Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach* recognizes Doc Boone as someone who set his brother's arm years before. In John Ford's films there is an extended web of loyalties, of family and friendly relationships which gives his pictures their characteristic warmth" (22). Just as Ford's choice to include a variety of characters who must learn to work together to survive conveys an argument regarding American identity as complex, messy, only reluctantly cooperative, and, at times, intolerant, pushing back against the panacea offered by some national myths, so Whedon's *Firefly*, *Serenity*, and later *Ultron* unite individuals with diverse backstories and traumas to bond together, although not without bickering and bloodshed.

[17] Like *Firefly* and *Serenity*, *Avengers* and its sequel *Ultron* center on a group of variously marginalized characters brought together by necessity and haunted to various degrees by their pasts. *Avengers* narrates the coming together of a diverse, sometimes combative, team, while *Ultron* focuses on their undoing: a process that arguably strengthens them, but not, however, without great emotional and physical loss, from wrecked relationships to deaths. And if *Avengers* argues that uniting temporarily alleviates its characters' traumas, *Ultron* foregrounds the cost of these traumas on an individual and communal basis as the team struggles with the dual poisons of internal team controversy over Ultron's and Vision's creations and Wanda Maximoff's nightmare-inducing hexes. *Ultron* demonstrates that despite their united strength and stratagems, the Avengers' union is fragile; no wonder Ultron embraces the chance to team up with the Maximoffs, noting to Pietro, "You and I can hurt them. [to Wanda] But you will tear them apart, from the inside" (00:39:45-54). Along with further developing the team members' trauma in *Ultron*, Whedon also more fully explores the moral ambiguity of each member and their mission as a whole, an interrogation that extends both to the Avengers and their adversaries. Tellingly, the Maximoff twins' tragic backstory is explored, evoking viewers' sympathy, and the characters move from an adversarial to cooperative relationship with the Avengers, who eventually welcome them to the team. At the

same time, Ultron's critique of the Avengers and humankind is allowed a certain moral weight, even as his violent approach is condemned.¹¹

[18] In this mingling of the heroic and the antiheroic, the virtuous and villainous, Whedon borrows from Ford's increasingly nuanced, reflexive texts and, as his career went on, more interrogative treatment of his protagonists. For example, the morally compromised Ethan is anticipated by an earlier character, the dangerously inflexible, racist cavalry leader Lieutenant Colonel Thursday of *Fort Apache*, a character who Eckstein notes was designed by Ford to critique the glorification of Custer (10). Thursday's limitations as a commander and as a man create disaster for his soldiers, and his faults linger in viewers' minds as a corrective to the character's post-death canonization in the film's finale by a media determined to portray his egoism as heroism and by his colleague Captain Kirby York, played by Wayne, who is unwilling to dispel that myth.¹² Discussing the film's finale, Meeuf notes, "Like *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, in which myths of the West take precedence over historical truth, York's words and deeds obscure the history of Thursday's vanity and ignorance for the sake of national mythologies and a celebration of the cavalry and its oppressive, colonialist mission" (56). In Thursday, Ford explores the darker reaches of male narcissism and the problem of unquestioned command, while in the film's ending, with its tidying up of Thursday's misdeeds, he looks askance at the artificiality of classical Hollywood narratives with their rush to narrative closure and insistence on happy endings, even as he gives a version of both to viewers.

[19] Cap's own journey through *Avengers* and into *Ultron* is illustrative of the manner in which Whedon increasingly complicates the character introduced in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Johnston, 2011) as a World War II do-gooder turned super soldier who loses his beloved and life only to be resurrected decades later. Whedon's take on Cap in *Avengers* emphasizes both the character's alignment with power and prestige as an American-born white male and a military officer and his position as an outsider literally and figuratively out of step with contemporary society and his fellow Avengers or, as the mischievous, malevolent Loki describes him in their first meeting in *Avengers*, "The soldier. The man out of time" (00:41:27-31).¹³ While Cap riffs on this

statement in anticipating Loki's defeat, retorting, "I'm not the one who's out of time" (00:41:33), Loki's implication that Cap and, perhaps, the mission for which he fights are relics of another time and conflict and not helpful, even destructive, to the present lingers in the character's and viewers' minds, to be fully explored in *Ultron*.

[20] Cap's military service and his profound sense of moral mission ironically provide further complications, forming the genesis for his work with the Avengers but also the elements that pull him and the team apart in *Ultron*, as in the non-Whedon *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony and Joe Russo, 2016). Cap's service links him to Ethan and Mal, both veterans, and to these characters' controlling natures and obsessive drives—qualities that allow them to accomplish seemingly impossible acts yet incur significant collateral damage. That Cap's own mission is not necessarily unselfish, even dangerous to himself and others, remains as a question mark over the character in *Avengers* and, more profoundly, *Ultron*, which is why the doorway moment with its echo of *The Searchers* is so intriguing and potentially troubling: putting forth the idea that, like Ethan, Cap may be a kind of revenant, a specter from another time and place fated to walk the earth for good, ill, or some unknown in-between.¹⁴

[21] To further enhance this sense of the moral ambiguity of their protagonists' characterization and narratives, both Ford and Whedon manipulate *mise-en-scène* elements such as composition and framing in subtle, yet evocative, ways, such as uniting characters within the frame while using scenic and prop elements to separate them. These formal choices externalize their characters' internal conflicts and foreground both their separation from and connection to, through bonds of love or duty, a larger community, whether a crew, a team, or a town. To portray the often-ambivalent drives, desires, and anxieties of their protagonists, Ford and Whedon focus on a nuanced visual presentation of their protagonists' bodies and these bodies' relationships to the spaces around them, particularly the space, literal or figurative, of the home, from Ford's lonely fort on the Arizona frontier in *Fort Apache* to Buffy's cozy bungalow or *Firefly* and *Serenity*'s Firefly-class spaceship—so vital to the narrative that Whedon considers it the tenth character.¹⁵ This issue of space and the emotional reaction it evokes from both characters and

viewers is particularly important in the Western genre, as Meeuf details, noting, “at the core of the genre’s appeal are the pleasures and drama of space, of individuals traversing rough terrain on horseback, of communities struggling to form in the midst of open spaces” (42). Meeuf maintains that Ford’s protagonists have a very particular relationship with space that foregrounds their multifold connections to, and disconnections from, actual and metaphoric communities, arguing, “The Fordian western hero is almost always a wanderer through open space, exploring his tense relationship with the settled community through movement and drifting” (43). Certainly this is the case with Ethan’s own movement, which Meeuf characterizes as a “ceaseless drifting” (43), arguing that this “makes literal Ethan’s distance from the community through self-imposed exile” (43).

[22] In Whedon’s formal choices in works such as *Ultron*, one can see echoes of Ford’s strategic manipulation of composition and framing in both his Western and non-Western films to visually telegraph the isolation of his protagonists while showing their relationships to fellow characters and surroundings. Illustrative is a sequence from Ford’s *Stagecoach* that conveys crucial information about the complex individual figures of the Kid and Dallas, a character who is, as Erisman discusses, a precursor with a twist to *Firefly* and *Serenity*’s Inara, and that foregrounds both their budding relationship and their potential division by social and legal forces (228).¹⁶ As the sequence begins, Dallas has assisted Doc Boone in a birth at one of the stagecoach’s stops, and she shows the infant to the other characters, exchanging smiles with the Kid. Dallas then leaves to return the baby as Doc Boone enters to congratulations. The camera cuts to a long dark passageway nearby, its gloom relieved by a shaft of light at its end. In the foreground, leaning against a wall, the Kid watches Dallas move away from him and towards the light. The frame unites their bodies despite their separation by the passageway’s length, while the passageway’s darkness and Dallas’ back to the camera leave their expressions largely unseen. This visual obscurity produced through chiaroscuro lighting speaks to a sense of hidden desires on the part of the characters while tantalizing viewers with a sense of unresolved tension.¹⁷ As Dallas nears the passageway’s end, the light casts a shadow, creating a double Dallas. At the same time as Dallas’s

literal shadow self emerges, a reminder of the critical light in which her society views her, the light forms a halo effect around her, making her seem unearthly, almost angelic.¹⁸ The Kid moves to follow her, is stopped by another character, and then continues towards the light.

[23] A cut moves to a space outside the building with a stationary Dallas occupying the foreground and the Kid the background, reversing the passageway composition. Their initial distance separates them spatially, although the Kid's movement towards Dallas and the camera brings them closer. However, a further separation remains—a fence that runs vertically, slightly diagonally, through the frame, with the characters on either side of it. While the fence divides, their united presence within the frame joins them, as in the earlier passageway moment, foreshadowing a united future. Through this sequence, Ford emphasizes the solitary nature of the Kid and Dallas as well as their relative isolation from their fellow passengers and society as a whole. However, it also visually shows the emotional connection that will lead them to start new lives together in the film's conclusion.

[24] Whedon's debt to and revision of Ford and films such as *Stagecoach* and *The Searchers* can be clearly seen in *Firefly* and *Serenity*, which in turn influence *Avengers* and *Ultron*. This citation is particularly apparent in the character of Mal, whose physical and emotional nature, as well as his costume and prop elements, directly cite aspects of both the Kid and Ethan. That Whedon combines the two in Mal telegraphs to viewers familiar with Ford's texts both Mal's potential heroism and his darker, more complicated qualities while hinting at his narrative trajectory in the sometimes-melancholy series and even more somber film. The scene in *Serenity* that introduces Mal, his crew, and ship about ten minutes into the film's length is illustrative of the manner in which Whedon foregrounds the character's disjunctive nature, signaling for *Firefly* viewers that he is pushing the character's ambivalent attitude and sometimes thorny relationship with his crew from the series to a greater extent. For new viewers, Whedon indicates Mal's combination of tension and isolation from his first appearance: seemingly posed alone within a window in the ship's cockpit. As the shot continues and Wash is revealed, it becomes clear Mal is not alone; still, the first impression is not only of Mal's visual prominence, foregrounding his importance

within *Serenity's* narrative, but his isolation, a reading not necessarily dispelled as the camera follows him throughout the ship for short, pointed exchanges with the crew.

[25] Whedon's choice to use Mal's passage throughout the ship as a means to introduce the ship and crew and the specific formal elements he uses to portray this physical and emotional journey provide crucial information. For example, Whedon's decision to use a fluid long take as the camera follows the ambivalent-seeming Mal creates its own ambiguity. Given the camera's continuous movement through it, the ship seems a single, united space, gathering the crew together; however, the take also clearly lays out the diversity of the ship's locations and the crewmembers attached to those locations.¹⁹ Through these formal choices the viewer quickly realizes, reinforced by the crew's dialogue, not only Mal's command role but the brittle nature of his seeming confidence and resolve and the isolation, fear, and inflexibility that threaten to tear Mal and his crew apart, a dissolution gestured to by the ship's own loss of a panel in its introduction. Whedon further strengthens the sense of Mal's isolation from and even opposition to the crew in a number of the film's middle scenes by composing his frames so that Mal occupies the other side of the frame from his crewmates, as in their confrontation on Haven following the attack by the Operative's men on the community and Shepherd Book's death. The unbalanced nature of these frames creates a tension that enhances the bitter dialogue between captain and crew. It is only when Mal accepts his role as both leader and colleague to his crewmates in their mission to reveal the truth of the Alliance's botched experiments on the planet Miranda that he is positioned amidst them, a visual marker of their united struggle.

[26] Whedon emphasizes this sense of congruity, of literal and figurative closeness, in his composition of the frame and editing choices in *Serenity's* finale, a scene that bookends Mal's introduction in the film, as Mal and River share physical and emotional space in piloting the ship. The scene begins as Mal enters the cockpit following a conversation with Zoe and sits at a console, seemingly alone. But his dialogue and a camera move quickly reveal he is not, for River is at the other console. Whedon portrays the characters' subsequent interaction in a series of shot/reverse-shots, the camera cutting from one to the other as they talk

and the ship rises from the planet. As Mal discusses the nature of love in a moment of emotional vulnerability and release, Whedon changes the camera's position to shoot from behind his head towards the rain-covered window and the storm outside. The shot reverses the framing of Mal's introduction, in which the camera shoots from outside the ship to Mal within, seemingly bringing the character, now with a greater understanding of himself, full circle. The scene continues in shot/reverse-shot, showing the give and take between the two, sometimes using that same behind-the-head position and taking in the windows, their rain-soaked surface reminiscent of tears. As the scene moves to a close, however, the camera pulls back, uniting Mal and River in a two-shot reminiscent of Ford's treatment of Dallas and the Kid in *Stagecoach*, indicating their connection. Whedon closes with this union, the last shot of the ship's interior, as *Serenity* rises through the storm to a burst of sunlight and moves into the depths of space.

[27] While Whedon draws a number of connections thematically and formally between Mal and Ethan, this final scene of Mal's union with River marks a crucial difference. Unlike Ethan in the conclusion of *The Searchers*, Mal is presented as a man who is tied emotionally and physically to his community. One of the Western's most iconic scenes, the conclusion of *The Searchers* begins as Ethan arrives with Debbie and brings her to the Jorgensen family, who wait outside their house. A cut brings the camera inside the house, shooting from its darkness to the open doorway and the view of the bright, serene landscape outside. Ethan watches the older Jorgensens and Debbie move inside the house, steps aside for Laurie and Martin to follow, and then pauses, framed within the doorway; he then turns and walks out into the landscape, his figure moving into the distance until the cabin's door, untouched by any hand, shuts behind him, plunging the screen into darkness. Notably, Ethan, like Mal in his film's conclusion, moves into the unknown, but while Ethan travels alone, Mal flies into the black at home amidst his crew in the familiar space of his ship.

[28] Issues of space and the elusive place, actual and metaphoric, of home are also essential in understanding the nature of the Avengers in *Avengers* and, especially, *Ultron*. In the case of Cap, much of his anxiety is articulated around the theme of "home" as both a figurative and literal

space, a moment crystallized in that moment when he stands in the farmhouse doorway and hears his beloved Peggy's voice say, "We can go home" (01:02:17).²⁰ This moment is anticipated in the film's earlier nightmare sequence, in which Wanda's hexes lead Thor, Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff, and Cap to experience dreams that evoke their past traumas while gesturing to future losses. I begin with Cap's nightmare and then gesture to Widow's to see how Whedon builds in *Ultron* a sense of not only individual but shared trauma.

[29] Cap's nightmare is built on the character's fleeting connection with and disconnection from Peggy and the world he lost when he sacrificed himself, articulated through his sudden presence in a dancehall full of servicemen and women celebrating the end of World War II. The position of the dream is important, coming after the disorienting beginning of first Thor's then Widow's nightmares. Important too is the transition from the visual and aural disturbances of the latter's nightmare to Cap's, as a youthful Widow raises her gun to shoot an inanimate, then animate, target as an ominous pop is heard, its source revealed as a bottle of champagne being opened. In disjunctively transitioning from violence to celebration, Whedon foregrounds the disorientation of Cap and the other dreamers and the dangerous aspects of even the most innocuous of the nightmares' elements. Quick shots follow, showing couples dancing, a lively band, and Cap moving into the center of the riotous celebration, their speed furthering the sense of visual and aural overload. Further formal choices magnify the sense of unease, including a slightly canted angle that unbalances the frame, a blood-tinged sepia haze that almost obscures the view, and low camera angles that transform dancing couples into threatening giants. Suddenly, Peggy appears behind Cap, her familiar presence both comforting and startling as she asks, "Are you ready for our dance?" (00:50:31-33), her line launching Cap and viewers back to the characters' final interchange in *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Thor's nightmare intrudes before a return to the dancehall and Peggy's assurance, "The war's over, Steve, we can go home. [pause] Imagine it" (00:50:58-00:51:04). As if doing so, Cap turns his head and everyone disappears. A long shot from a new angle shows Cap in a now-empty dance hall; the camera then moves back to his profile, and in the next shot Cap and Peggy are suddenly

dancing. Despite the celebratory sense of this last image something feels wrong, especially as there is no sound from their voices, the band, or anything else. Just as suddenly, the camera again shows Cap's profile looking away. Cap's nightmare then ends with a return to the conclusions of Thor's and Widow's nightmares, completing the sequence.

[30] It is this nightmare, with its elements of both wish fulfillment and horror, that is echoed in the doorway moment as Cap moves to the open door of the farmhouse as if embracing what it seems to stand for—safety, his fellow Avengers, a family even if it is not his own. As he seems about to enter, Peggy's ghostly voice sounds, "We can go home" (01:02:17). Cap pauses and then, in answer to or rejection of Peggy's words and their diverse implications of a return to a past of romance, of military struggle, or of something else, moves away. The visual and emotional parallels with Ford's Ethan are compelling but mysterious, and Whedon leaves viewers only questions. These questions are amplified in Whedon's treatment of Widow, another haunted Avenger, whose nightmare showcases further examples of Whedon's Ford borrowing.

[31] Whedon's presentation of Widow's nightmare, which addresses the brutality of her transformation into an assassin in the Russian facility known as the Red Room, cites Ford's *Fort Apache*, a film whose meditation on loss, trauma, and the drives to both face and mythologize the past anticipates *Ultron*. As discussed in paragraph 18, the conclusion of *Fort Apache* shows York, the fort's new commander, discussing with a reporter the loss of Thursday and his men, an outcome viewers understand is largely due to Thursday's combative approach to the Apache people. As York discusses the lost men, he moves away from the reporter and looks out a window. As he does, an image of ghostly cavalry riders appears on the glass and York's face. The image represents what York sees in his mind's eye: men he can recapture only in his memory and words. The superimposition of the image over the frame of the window and York's face recalls the cinema screen and the nature of cinema as an apparatus of ghosts—a medium that captures the fleeting and the lost while creating a sense of a temporary actuality that is always, in truth, a fiction. A similar gap exists in the space between the

reality of the men's deaths—due in large part to the foolish, violent actions of Thursday—and the fantasy the reporter and York in turn spin of Thursday's heroism. The move by the scene and the film as a whole to an artificial closure of the question of the real nature of Thursday and the men's loss serves to both fulfill and interrogate classical Hollywood cinema's preference for neatly tied narratives and happy endings. It also anticipates the famous line from a reporter in Ford's 1962 film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, a work that, as noted earlier, likewise explores the mingling of fact and fantasy in the myths of the West and the Western genre: "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend" (01:58:46-49).

[32] This image from *Fort Apache* is repeated, with a difference, in Widow's nightmare in *Ultron*, as images from her training in the Red Room are superimposed over her face. The nightmare begins as Widow finds herself walking down a long staircase and approaching a group of young women dancing ballet in perfect formation. As Widow approaches them, an image is superimposed over her face of the reflection of two light-filled windows containing an image of the trees outside and the dancers inside. This superimposition continues as Widow talks to her trainer Madame B., as if these windows are literal windows to the past, the dancers both Widow's former self and her fellow trainees. Further formal choices build a sense of the traumatic emotional and physical past events that haunt Widow's present self, from quick cuts that create a disorienting effect, as in Cap's nightmare, to *mise-en-scène* shifts that alarmingly blend one potential past with another, even more violent, one, as in the shots in which the paper targets at which a youthful Widow shoots are replaced with images of a moaning man with a bag over his head. Finally, there are the images of surgical tools that form a visible reminder of Widow's forced sterilization and the injuries, moral and physical, she both suffered and inflicted on others.

[33] Yet although Whedon's formal choices in Widow's nightmare appear similar to Ford's in York's discussion with the reporter, there are crucial differences between the two that underline even more fully the profound nature of Widow's trauma. Both scenes reveal protagonists haunted by the past, yet York's remembrance of the lost men is

celebratory while Widow's recall is purely traumatic, revealing the severe emotional and physical price she, as well as other women and men like her, has paid as an instrument of violence. And while York both hides his pain and attempts to spin it away into a heroic myth, Widow reveals a portion of her trauma over her own violence and loss of self to her fellow Avenger Hulk/Bruce Banner at the farmhouse. In doing so, she refuses to sugarcoat her losses even as she tries to comfort Banner's dismay at the recent rampage of his Hulk self, noting as she completes her revelation of that past, "You still think you're the only monster on the team?" (01:08:22-24).²¹

[34] That issue of violence and monstrosity, of threats internal and external, returns me to my original image of Cap poised in the doorway and the questions that moment poses regarding the character, the film as a whole, and the Avengers themselves. Seemingly, by the film's finale all is settled, if not necessarily well—several Avengers have disappeared to pursue individual goals, several have retired, and Wanda, Vision, and Cap's friend Falcon/Sam Wilson have become the core of a new team led by Cap and Widow. While internal and interpersonal fractures have subsumed the characters and narrative for much of the film's length, the finale ends on a grace note of hard-won peace combined with a degree of narrative closure despite the obvious threads left open for future non-Whedon adventures. Cap's search for a home, physical and emotional, seems to be complete: not the domestic space embodied by the farmhouse or the emotional connection personified in the lost Peggy, but a physical home in the team's new base and an emotional one in its mission of world protection. Cap assures Tony he is "home" (02:10:13) as the two walk together in a moment of male closeness reminiscent of the finale of the World War II film *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942).²² But is he?²³

[35] For what does it really mean that Whedon cites *The Searchers*' famous finale and the violent, racist Ethan, one of the great Western antiheroes, in his presentation of Cap? Is Whedon gesturing to darker shades in Cap himself? Or is the problem not the character so much but what he represents—the government, the military, even the history of the U.S. itself? Or is Whedon seeking to go beyond the character and his world to examine the traditional image of the extraordinary, usually

white, male hero, whether in the Western or in other genres such as the military film, troubling that image and showing the negative side of the hero's determination, strength, and will, the qualities that make Ethan, as noted in the essay's introduction, both heroic and demonic? While I incline towards a degree of "Yes" to all these questions, what is noteworthy is that ultimately Whedon provides no distinct answers to the questions he raises; instead, he opens the door to those questions and more and lets viewers, like Cap, stand in that doorway and wonder, hearing ghostly voices.

[36] The opaqueness of *Ultron's* doorway moment with its parallel to the finale of *The Searchers* and its hint towards the darkness of Cap, a character who may inherit Ethan's troubling violence, and of the American hero himself, forces a critical consideration not only of Cap and Ethan, but of the films in which they appear, films that are intentionally interrogative and open-ended. In his discussion of the conclusion of *The Searchers* in his essay "What Is a Western?", Pippin compares the film to Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*, noting, "True to all great works of art, nothing is resolved in all this, and the ending scene here is as complex as the fiction the narrator invents and reports to the beloved in Conrad's novella" (230). So too *Ultron's* elusive doorway moment, which remains unexplained—a gesture only. At the same time, the moment shows Whedon using a director, a film, and a genre tied in essential, sometimes troubling, ways to the very essence of American culture. In doing so he vexes viewers' dreams, those dreams so long shaped by the Western and Hollywood cinema as a whole, and makes us more fully and actively question Cap and his fellow heroes, our heroes, and their missions for ourselves.

Notes

¹ Hawkeye refers to the farmhouse in this manner before the team seeks shelter there following their violent encounter with Ultron and the twins. Its true nature as Hawkeye's home is revealed when his wife and children greet the Avengers.

² Following the revelation of Ultron's creation, Bruce Banner admits he created a "murder-bot" (00:35:06). When the Avengers later argue over whether to activate Vision, Tony Stark argues to Banner, "We're mad scientists. We're monsters, buddy."

You gotta own it. Make a stand” (01:28:52-56). And when the Avengers travel to Sokovia to take on Ultron, Cap notes, “Ultron thinks we’re monsters, that we’re what’s wrong with the world. This isn’t just about beating him. It’s about whether he’s right” (01:38:17-27). On *Ultron*’s heroes and monstrosity, see Wilcox, especially par. 6-11.

³ In her 2002 *New York Times* piece “Must-See Metaphysics,” included in *Joss Whedon: Conversations*, Emily Nussbaum locates Whedon’s interest in the genre in his college years, noting, “At Wesleyan, Whedon was deeply influenced by his professor Richard Slotkin, the creator of the theory of ‘regeneration through violence’: the notion that frontier myths allowed conquerors—including the pioneers of the American West—to rewrite bloody history as heroic fairy tale” (68).

⁴ *The Searchers* begins with a door being opened and a woman moving through that doorway to stand outside and survey the landscape’s expanse, focusing on her brother-in-law Ethan coming towards her home. The film ends with Ethan bringing his niece Debbie to the open doorway of another family’s home, pausing in that doorway, turning, and then disappearing into the landscape.

⁵ Ethan says little about his past, but the film reveals that he fought on the Confederate side of the American Civil War and took part in, and profited from, the Franco-Mexican War.

⁶ In Alan LeMay’s 1954 novel on which the film is based, the character of Amos Edwards (the film’s Ethan) is so notably threatening to Debbie that Martin feels he may have to kill him to prevent him from harming her.

⁷ Eckstein argues that the adaptation of LeMay’s novel for the screen by Frank S. Nugent situates a great deal more complexity and violence in the figure of Ethan than in the novel and that Ford made additional changes to further highlight these aspects of the character. He also notes that while most Westerns connect their heroes to civilization or civilizing influences, that is not so in the case of Ethan, arguing, “The frontier, with its violence and revenge and wandering, is his only home” (6).

⁸ This is foregrounded in an exchange between Martin, who is, in a change from LeMay’s novel, part Cherokee, and Laurie when the former prepares to leave to search once more for the now-adult Debbie. Laurie argues, “Fetch what home? The leavings of a Comanche buck sold time and again to the highest bidder, with savage brats of her own?” When Martin tries to silence her, she continues, “Do you know what Ethan will do if he has a chance? He’ll put a bullet in her brain. [pause] I tell you, Martha would want him to” (1:47:27-40).

⁹ The first season’s merits are discussed by David Kociemba in “From Beneath You, It Foreshadows: Why *Buffy*’s First Season Matters” in *Reading Joss Whedon*, although it

does have its limitations, as discussed by David Lavery in *Joss Whedon: A Creative Portrait*. Lavery notes, "It would not be unfair to say that, like many a television series, *Buffy* was still finding its feet through its first, partial season" (95).

¹⁰ Discussing their shared social ostracism, Boone argues to Dallas, "We're the victims of a foul disease called social prejudice, my child. These dear ladies of the Law and Order League are scouring out the dregs of the town. Come on. Be a proud, glorified dreg like me" (00:06:31-44).

¹¹ In a final confrontation with Vision, Ultron once again focuses on the failings of the Avengers and humankind. Vision agrees with elements of his argument even as he defends humankind, noting, "There is grace in their failings. I think you missed that" (02:05:46-49). When Ultron argues, "They're doomed" (02:05:50), Vision's response both acknowledges Ultron's truth and complicates it: "Yes. But a thing isn't beautiful because it lasts" (02:05:54-59).

¹² In the film's final minutes the reporter who has discussed Thursday's heroism with York notes that while Thursday may be remembered, the rest of the men will not. York disagrees, arguing, "You're wrong there. They aren't forgotten because they haven't died. They're living—right out there. [*points out the window*] Collingwood and the rest. And they'll keep on living as long as the regiment lives. The pay is thirteen dollars a month; their diet: beans and hay. Maybe horsemeat before this campaign is over. Fight over cards or rotgut whiskey, but share the last drop in their canteens. The faces may change, the names, but they're there: they're the regiment, the regular army, now and fifty years from now. They're better men than they used to be. Thursday did that. He made it a command to be proud of" (02:04:47-02:05:35).

¹³ Whedon had previously worked to shape the character and his world as a script doctor on *Captain America: The First Avenger*.

¹⁴ This point is overtly made in a deleted scene found in the film's Blu ray extras in which Maria Hill responds skeptically to Cap's statement that if Ultron could create peace he would hang up his shield, asking, "Would you?" (02:53).

¹⁵ Whedon puts forward this idea in the short 2003 documentary *Serenity: The Tenth Character*, released as part of the *Firefly* DVD box set.

¹⁶ The twist in the connection between Dallas and Inara is that while the former is considered outside the pale by polite society, the latter is accorded great status within the 'verse.

¹⁷ Ford's use of such lighting recalls the lighting used in German Expressionist films in the 1920s and 1930s to produce a moody, ambiguous, tone and highlight characters' anxieties and desires.

¹⁸ Ford's literal and figurative play with shadows and shadow selves here is reminiscent of his treatment of the figure of Abraham Lincoln in *Young Mr. Lincoln*, released the same year as *Stagecoach*, and his later treatment of young Huw Morgan in his 1941 film *How Green Was My Valley*. In the former film, Ford again uses a shadowy corridor to both connect and disconnect Lincoln from his friends, while in the latter the ambivalence of the young hero, who has sacrificed his education to support his family by working in a coal mine, is hinted at by the shadow that his body, covered with coal dust, casts as he pauses in the house's doorway on his return from the mine.

¹⁹ Whedon's use of a long take, or one-er, here is, as David Lavery notes in *Joss Whedon: A Creative Portrait*, "One of Whedon's directorial signatures" (200).

²⁰ Editor's note: On the farmhouse and variations of home in *Ultron*, see Lisa K. Perdigao's "A Home at the End of the World: The Future of Domesticity in the Whedonverse."

²¹ Their conversation evolves from a discussion of their potential future together in which Banner argues, "there's no future with me. I can't ever, I can't have this, kids, do the math, I physically can't" (01:07:23-33), to which Widow replies, "Neither can I. In the Red Room, where I was trained, where I was raised, um, they have a graduation ceremony. They sterilize you. It's efficient. One less thing to worry about. The one thing that might matter more than a mission. It makes everything easier. Even killing. [pause] You still think you're the only monster on the team?" (01:07:35-01:08:24).

²² In the conclusion, Rick and Louis, the film's two morally ambiguous male protagonists, reveal their allegiance to the Allied forces and forge what may be, as Rick notes, "the beginning of a beautiful friendship" (01:42:04-06).

²³ As Kirk Hendershott-Kraetzer notes of the film's conclusion in "It's Joss Whedon's World and We're Just Livin' in It: The 'Closed Frame' of the Whedonverse," "Whedon did not want an entirely optimistic ending for his film" (40). Hendershott-Kraetzer includes in his essay a quote from Whedon's commentary on the film in which Whedon argues that he wanted to insert a sound cue that would highlight a sense of doubt here; however, he was overruled in favor of a version of the Captain America theme (40).

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