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**Tight Pants and Pretty Floral Bonnets:
Outfitting the Outlaws of the 'Verse**



“Man is a Spirit, and bound by invisible bonds to All Men; . . . he wears Clothes, which are the visible emblems of that fact. Has not your Red, hanging individual, a horsehair wig, squirrel skins, and a plush gown; whereby all mortals know that he is a Judge?--Society, which the more I think of it astonishes me the more, is founded upon Cloth” –Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1833)

“I swear by my pretty floral bonnet, I will end you.” – Malcolm Reynolds, *Firefly* “Our Mrs. Reynolds” (2002)

[1] Individual identity is inextricably tied up with what one wears. One proof of this is the fact that small children who are too young to have developed a sense of self have no interest in clothes. Clothing analysts such as J. C. Flugel and Lois M. Gurel identify three primary purposes of clothing—decoration, modesty, and protection. The clothing we wear for decoration helps us to communicate, specifically to announce our identity, by establishing connections such as political affiliations, familial bonds, religious affiliations, and other organizational memberships. Clothing we wear for modesty is the result of a negative impulse, that is, the necessity to refrain from something, to repress our primitive impulses and to conform to rules of a decent society. Lastly, we wear clothes for protection from the elements and attackers. Basically, as Desmond Morris asserts in *Manwatching: A Field Guide to Human Behavior*, “It is impossible to wear clothes without transmitting social signals” (7). Furthermore, the clothing we wear rarely sends only one message. Nathan Joseph’s *Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication Through Clothing* presents his theory of “Layers of Signs,” in which he explains how the various articles of clothing we wear send potentially conflicting signals to others: “Multiple layers of clothing enable varying levels of communication, each transmitting to a potentially different audience....The wearer often carries different and, at times, contradictory messages” (80). In addition to the messages we send to others, “multiple layers allow the differentiation of attitudes toward the self” (81).

[2] For the characters in a television series or feature film, costume design always contributes to the development of those characters' identities. However, this fact may be more recognizable in Joss Whedon's *Firefly* (2002-2003) than in any other series in recent memory. The clothing worn by the crew members and passengers of the spaceship *Serenity* communicates significant information about their pasts, relationships, loyalties, and personalities. Indeed, much of what the audience initially infers about each character is announced by what that character is wearing when we first meet him or her, whether it be Simon's expensive suit, Kaylee's coveralls, or Wash's Hawaiian shirt. *Firefly* costume designer and frequent Whedon collaborator Shawna Trpcic worked with Whedon to develop a unique plan for costuming his futuristic Western in space. Their theme of "East meets West" was accomplished through the manipulation of color and the use of iconic looks from the past. When the cancelled series received new life in the form of the feature film *Serenity* (2005), the old gang got back together, but this time with replacement costume designer Ruth E. Carter. Leaning heavily on the clothing and dress theories of Roland Barthes as a foundation, I will examine Trpcic's designs for *Firefly* and contrast them with Carter's for *Serenity*. As an artist, Carter naturally strove to place her own mark on the project, but the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) alterations she made to Trpcic's established designs for each character introduced contradictions into the characters' personality profiles, many of which changed the messages their clothing sends to the audience on a fundamental level.

[3] In *The Second Skin: An Interdisciplinary Study of Clothing*, Marilyn J. Horn explains that clothing acts as a "second skin" in establishing the physical boundaries of self" (90). Essentially, we are conditioned from birth to perceive clothing as an extension of our bodies and, therefore, as an extension of ourselves. It is impossible for us to get dressed without broadcasting messages, intentional or otherwise, to those around us. To complicate matters, those messages often conflict with each other because we are complex individuals, and since aspects of our personality are not fixed but develop and change with our experiences, our patterns of dress usually fluctuate as well. Horn elaborates: "Gradually a person abstracts the commonalities from his experiences in different role categories, and integrates these into a unified feeling toward the self. Clothing will function most purposefully if it is consistent with the individual's core feelings about himself" (92). Furthermore, "The imitation of clothing behavior is a direct and tangible means of identifying oneself with a model person or referent group; this not only facilitates the learning of new social roles, but becomes an important process in the formation of the concept of self" (95). Because clothing is so crucial to how individuals identify themselves, it

must also be a priority when fabricating personalities for the stage or screen, a priority Whedon and Trpcic seem to have.

[4] Additionally, clothing is often used as a tool to defend the self and to determine how the self is interpreted. Many times, the perception of an individual's self is the result of a series of first impressions, what Horn calls "sub-identities" (106), the majority of which are formed from visual codes, usually from clothing. Gordon Allport, in his 1937 book *Personality—A Psychological Interpretation*, further explains the psychology of the first impression: "With the briefest visual perception, a complex mental process is aroused, resulting within a very short time, 30 seconds perhaps, in judgment of the sex, age, size, nationality, profession and social caste of the stranger, together with some estimate of his temperament, his ascendance, friendliness, neatness, and even his trustworthiness and integrity" (500). Because so much depends on the initial messages individuals are able to send to others upon encountering one another for the first time, it is crucial to pay attention to and learn to analyze the role clothing plays in the development of an individual's identity and sense of self. Viewers experience this first impression phenomenon with new characters when watching the opening scenes of a film or the pilot episode of a television series. Trpcic's costumes for *Firefly* contributed significantly not only to the initial establishment of identities and backstories of the crew but also to the ongoing character development throughout the series.

[5] Costuming theory is by no means a new field, and a handful of major critics have dabbled in it. Roland Barthes, in particular, had quite a bit to say about theories of clothing and dress which will be useful in discussing *Firefly* and *Serenity*. No discussion about high fashion is complete without mentioning his well-known *The Fashion System*, but he also wrote elsewhere more extensively about the history of the field and specifically about costumes. In his 1957 essay "History and Sociology of Clothing: Some Methodological Observations," he recounts the history of the analysis of clothing and dress: "Truly scientific research on dress started in about 1860 (Quincherat, Demay, Enhart, medievalists, in general). Their principal method was to treat dress as the sum of individual pieces and the garment itself as a kind of historical event" (3). He further discusses the imperfect nature of histories of dress up to that point. Geographically speaking, "Any vestimentary system is either regional or international, but it is never national" (5). Socially, histories of dress "rarely consider anything but royal or aristocratic outfits...[and are] never linked to the work experienced by the wearer" (5), such as a doctor, Shepherd, pilot, companion, or mercenary, perhaps. Barthes continues his critique of the state of clothing criticism in his article "Language and Clothing" (1959). He explains that some texts indexing and studying

dress were produced in the Renaissance, most of which were lexicons linking clothing to social or anthropological status, but dress history did not begin in earnest until the Romantic era, and even then it was only undertaken by specialists of the theatre. For their purposes, history was merely reconstituted as a set of roles. Since the end of the nineteenth century, a number of illustrated “historical popularizations” have been produced which “have tended to place clothing in relation to a reality external to its form, in short to postulate a transcendence of dress” (24). A key turning point in costuming theory came when the tendency to think of dress as a signifier of an age eventually switched to a psychological interpretation of an individual’s dressing choices, and it is an understanding of this sea change which elevates Trpcic’s designs for *Firefly* above Carter’s for *Serenity*.

[6] So what constitutes a successful, coherent costume versus a mere collection of garments? In his 1955 essay “The Diseases of Costume,” Barthes discusses a “pathology” or “ethic” (41) of costume and ponders with what ideals we should judge the costumes of a play (or, in this case, a television show and film). He insists it is not “historical truth or good taste, faithfulness of detail or pleasure of the eye” (41) but the play itself; judgment of costumes should be based on what is needed to express the specific message of that play. He simplifies it even further by explaining that anything in the costume that contributes to the clarity of the play’s message or goal is good, and anything that distracts from it is bad. He then outlines some negative rules for what a costume is not—it is not an alibi, i.e. a justification; it must not be an excuse, an attempt to redeem a play lacking elsewhere; “it must neither smother nor swell the play” (42), or in other words, the servant must not become the master. Naturally, he follows up these mandates with the positive rules for what a costume *is*, or should be at least. First, it must be an argument: “In all the great periods of theater, costume had a powerful semantic value; it was not there only to be seen, it was also there to be *read*, it communicated ideas, information, or sentiments” (46). Second, it must “create a humanity” (48), which it does by draping the actor flatteringly and giving him human proportions, by agreeing with the background scenery, and by being able to “absorb the face” (49). Finally, the costume is a kind of writing: “If the writing is either too poor or too rich, too beautiful or too ugly, it can no longer be read and fails its function. The costume, too, must find that kind of rare equilibrium which permits it to help us *read* the theatrical act without encumbering it by any parasitic value...It must be both material and transparent: we must see it but not look at it” (49-50). These sentiments are evidence of the extent to which Barthes’s costuming theory, in addition to his theory of individual clothing and dress, is also permeated with the vocabulary and concepts of linguistics. Each costume is a sign to be read, and the signified is the message of the play. When viewers

meet the *Serenity* crew for the first time, they “read” about their pasts, their personalities, their relationships, and their skills by interpreting the messages of their clothing, much as they would do when meeting someone new in real life.

[7] Furthermore, in addition to establishing what qualifies as a good costume, Barthes outlines three categories of costume errors, the first being “hypertrophy of the historical function” (43). There are essentially two kinds of history—intelligent consideration of the nuanced tensions of the past and a superficial reconstitution of anecdotal details. Barthes accuses the costume of often being guilty of the latter: “A good costume, even when it is historical, is...a total visual fact” (43), not a cobbled together collection of separate pieces. Although the characters in *Firefly* come from eclectic backgrounds, the sense is that together they inhabit a cohesive world. The second costume error is the “hypertrophy of a formal beauty without relation to the play” (44), which basically describes conventionally beautiful costumes which do not serve the play. Favoring beauty over accuracy removes the humanity from the play, and, by extension, the theater. The *Serenity* crew generally wear clothing which favors function over form and accurately represents and enhances their personalities. Even Inara’s beautiful ensembles are strategically matched to her profession and upbringing. The last category of costume diseases is the “hypertrophy of sumptuousness” (45), or expensive materials. Ticket prices are often paid back to the viewer visually through lavish costumes. Barthes quips, “Costume *pays* better than emotion or intellection” (45), and what is worse, it is all fake, an imitation. While the costumes in *Firefly* and *Serenity* most certainly contribute significantly to character development, Whedon never uses them as a crutch to cover for weak emotional resonance or plot. Barthes’s rules for an effective costume and his categories of errors, while originally applied to theater only, most certainly have value when discussing costumes for television and film. Trpcic’s designs for *Firefly* meet Barthes’s criteria perfectly, while Carter’s for *Serenity* introduce confusion and contradiction into a previously-created universe.

[8] Trpcic, the California native whose only major lead design credit prior to *Firefly* was the pilot and first 40 episodes of *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, was the assistant designer to Jill Ohanneson for the *Firefly* pilot but became the lead designer for the remainder of the series. Indeed, the vast majority of the costumes on the show were Trpcic’s designs. She and Whedon developed a particular vision, specifically “East meets West,” and the show also looks to the past to define the future. The most influential categories were “World War Two and the Old West, 1876 and the American Civil War, 1861, mixed in with 1861 samurai Japan” (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1.150). More importantly, the future in *Firefly* looks lived-in, as if it has a history. *Serenity* looks like a

home where actual people actually live, and its warm humanity is contrasted with the cold sleekness of the Alliance ships. Much of Trpcic's historical vision is executed through the use of color:

If you look at Asian culture, with the red lamps and the colors they use to highlight emotions and feelings, I tried to do that with a brush stroke, with a deep red or a deep orange to constantly bring us back to the heart and the humanity of these people and the reality of their struggle, trying to separate them from the coldness of the Alliance. When we went to the hospital [in "Ariel"], I wanted everyone to be wearing white and blue, and grey and purple, cold colors. Whereas, when you think of the Old West, you think of golden lights burning and coming home. I wanted people to feel at home with the characters, and to convey that with color. (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1.150)

The future "history" created by Trpcic follows Barthes's rules for the successful costume. Her designs are not attempts to compensate for lack elsewhere, and they neither smother nor swell the narrative. More importantly, her costumes are not only seen but "read" as signs which communicate details about each character's background and personality. Much of what we initially learn about the members of the Serenity crew is gleaned not from their dialog but from the messages sent by their expertly-designed clothing ensembles. A closer examination of each character in turn will reveal how Trpcic has achieved Barthes's "total visual fact."

[9] Captain Malcolm Reynolds's clothing not so subtly announces to the world that, for him, the Unification War is still very real. He still wears the pants, boots, and brown coat that defined the uniform of the Independents. His persistence in wearing the coat, in particular, is not because of mere practical function. When Patience shoots a hole in the arm in the pilot "Serenity," he acts affronted, patches it as best as he can, and continues to wear it. Whedon specifically wanted an American frontier/pioneer look for Captain Reynolds, so Trpcic combined Civil War styles with those of WWI and WWII pilots. Significantly, Mal's clothing has almost no Asian elements incorporated into it other than the folded-back sleeves of his coat, which resemble the sleeve of a kimono. With the exception of perhaps his fellow soldier Zoe, all of the other crew members/passengers wear a more Alliance-friendly hybrid of Eastern and Western designs.

[10] Mal's ubiquitous brown coat, the undeniable anchor of his ensemble, merits further discussion. In "Between Past and Future: Hybrid Design Style in *Firefly* and *Serenity*," Barbara Maio suggests that Mal is "clearly inspired by the character of Han Solo, dressed like a space cowboy. The Solo vest is replaced by the brown coat" (206). The coat worn by the former-Independent-officer-turned-outlaw embodies the heritage of the character. Made out of dyed deerskin and unlined, it is not the coat of a well-to-do core planet dweller. This one garment communicates Mal's politics, military past, and social and economic status all at once. The garment also represents the "East meets West" design of the show. The material, the cut of the collar, and the clasps are features often seen on the clothing of the American West, while the cuffed sleeves and length smack of a man's kimono. Leather artist Jonathan A. Logan, who helped design the coat, says: "It looks rugged and tough and it could give a very masculine presence to the person who wears it. It automatically looks like you're standing in the wind" (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1.82).

[11] In *Uniforms: Why We Are What We Wear*, Paul Fussell reveals a bit of interesting historical trivia which adds depth to the plight of the disenfranchised Browncoats after having lost the Unification War:

The color of the general American Army uniform, worn by all ranks, was something like earth, adopted for the purposes of camouflage, not show or morale. In the States it was called olive drab. It was a shade that might have reminded an imaginative observer of the color of vomit or even excrement. British airmen and sailors started numerous pub fights by calling soldiers "Brown Jobs," a term of insult with fairly clear excremental implications. (56)

The color stigma was so widespread, even among those who wore it, that new uniforms had to be designed to help with recruitment, a change which resulted in the camouflaged combat fatigues so synonymous with the American Army today. Fussell's account calls to mind the opening scene of "The Train Job" (1.2) in which Mal, Zoe, and a reluctant Jayne are drawn into a bar fight on Unification Day with Alliance sympathizers who had insulted the Browncoats.

[12] First Mate Zoe Washburne is a warrior, a career military soldier, and her clothing is always practical and combat-ready. Since she fought in the Unification War with Mal, a hint of that specific uniform is usually present somewhere in her clothing

presentation. She actually wears the exact same style of pants as Mal toward the beginning of the series, but her outfits become more form-fitting as the series progresses. Trpcic clarifies that the goal was to make it clear that they were from the same background but “obviously different” (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 2.57). Zoe’s buttoned shirts, leather vests, hip holsters, and boots are straight out of the American Wild West, notably the *male* Wild West. However, the clean lines “highlight her figure and her strength and her poise” (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 2.57) and, notably, her femininity.

[13] According to Trpcic, Whedon requested that pilot Hoban “Wash” Washburne’s character be a nod to Harry Dean Stanton’s character from *Alien* (1979), particularly the Hawaiian shirts. He wears the whimsical shirts either over or under his more practical flight suits; therefore, they are a superfluous article and meant to be a statement about his personality and a subversion of the utilitarian clothing of the Alliance and perhaps even of the uniforms of Mal and Zoe. Wash’s character is more lighthearted and more overtly comical than Mal’s and Zoe’s, so Trpcic specifically chose colors such as orange and green that would set him apart from their more intense, earthy reds and browns.

[14] Jayne Cobb’s clothing is that of a mercenary, a soldier-for-hire. Unlike Mal and Zoe, he did not fight in the Unification War, so his warrior wardrobe is more eclectic and gritty rather than presenting the echoes of a specific uniform. Barbara Maio notes that Jayne’s style is more akin to a modern soldier than a Western cowboy, a style which alludes to his “hard and cynical” (206) character. Trpcic purposely pieced his outfits together from different eras—WWI fighter cap, WWII jacket, modern-day Army boots. Because of this, his clothing presentation does not show allegiance to any particular cause. He likely picked up the various pieces of his wardrobe because they looked “cool” or were taken from former victims. Jayne’s clothing trademark (besides his orange, yellow, and red knitted hat) is his whimsical t-shirts. Trpcic and her assistant designed the various logos on the shirts by combining a handful of images together, and Whedon would pick the ones he liked. According to Trpcic, one of the shirts bears the Chinese symbol for “soldier,” but many of them say humorous phrases like “fighting elves” (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 2.15). She explains, “That was our way of making our tough guy a little more lyrical and a lot less of an echo of every other bad guy” (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 2.15).

[15] Ship’s mechanic Kaywinnet Lee “Kaylee” Fry’s wardrobe is a mixture of Eastern and Western styles, most obviously exemplified by her pairing of a silk jacket over coveralls, occasionally accessorized by a paper umbrella and sandals. Perhaps the most intriguing mixture represented by Kaylee’s wardrobe is the dual presentation of masculine and

feminine. Her occupation is typically masculine and often necessitates masculine coveralls, boots, and a smudged face, but she is also undeniably feminine. She often wears pink shirts under her coveralls and wears dresses any time she has the chance. And we must not forget the now-iconic teddy bear patch with which she has lovingly embellished the leg of her pants. She frequently expresses moony admiration for Inara's glamorous lifestyle, primarily because of the fancy clothes the Companion gets to wear. Trpcic very easily could have been tempted to give Kaylee her wish by taking advantage of actress Jewel Staite's femininity and natural beauty with unrealistically fashionable cuts and fabrics, committing Barthes's second costuming error—as she also could have done with all of the attractive actresses on the show—but she wisely recognized the need for each character's clothing ensemble to "serve the play," or to contribute to the "total visual fact" of the 'Verse Whedon had created.

[16] Even though the ship's registered Companion Inara Serra, as a natural result of her position, is always dressed in a much higher quality of clothing than the other Serenity passengers and crew members, even when wearing pajamas, her costumes are always appropriate for the character, realistic for the setting, and thematically relevant rather than superfluous. The colors are usually deep, lush, and regal. As Maio observes, "Her character is the most noteworthy in terms of wardrobe because almost every scene of hers involves a change of clothes" (206). Trpcic drew from a variety of cultures to clothe the Companion, including ancient Greece and the geishas of Japan. She also scoured collections of old pictures of women in lingerie (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 2.140). The dominant Asian elements in her wardrobe subconsciously hint at her support of Unification, which she reveals in a flashback scene in "Out of Gas." In addition to messages about her status and culture, Inara's clothing also exudes (and perhaps reinforces) conventional images of femininity and beauty. Her gowns, dresses, and pajamas always fit her perfectly and drape her figure flatteringly.

[17] Shepherd Derrial Book's clothing needed to be readily identifiable as that of a clergyman without representing any specific denomination. The nondescript gray is supposed to suggest the uniforms of the Alliance. Trpcic originally designed Book's wardrobe to be loose-fitting, but when she saw how physically fit Ron Glass was, she redesigned his clothing to be more form-fitting to show off the Shepherd's physique. The physically-fit Shepherd's being on display for the audience to see every unexpected muscle makes the hints about his mysterious past and the combat skills he displays all the more believable. Also, whereas Mal's and Zoe's uniforms help them hold onto their past, Book's uniform helps him hide from his.

[18] Doctor Simon Tam's wardrobe undergoes a drastic transformation from the beginning of the series to the end. When he first boards *Serenity*, even though he is an Alliance fugitive, he is dripping with affluence and sophistication. Early in the series, he wears expensive silk vests and ties, white dress shirts, and black dress pants and shoes. Maio equates him with many of the doctors in Western movies, "a sort of futuristic Doc Holliday or Doc Boone (with less alcohol) from *Stagecoach* (1939)" (206), but his wardrobe is more than simple mimicry of an archetype. As the series progresses, he loses the ties and eventually the silk vests, loosens up his collars, trades in the dress pants for more comfortable slacks, and even wears non-collared wool sweaters. Trpcic and her team wanted to separate him from the rest of the crew initially and did so with a cooler color palette and richer fabrics than what the crew wears. She credits his relationship with Kaylee as one source of his transformation into a "more romantic and softer" look (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1.127). His clothing at the beginning of the series is also a subtle mixture of Eastern and Western styles, the East being represented by the round, red sunglasses he initially wears, the materials present in his clothing, and the cuts of some of his suits. According to Walter A. Fairservis in his article "Costumes of the East" in *Natural History*, historically, the Chinese "had strong feelings about wool," and those who wore it were considered "barbarians" (45). Transversely, Europeans interpreted silk garments as weak and effeminate. As the series progresses, the Eastern elements fade out of Simon's wardrobe, suggesting a gradual distancing from his old life working for the Alliance. This subtle costuming progression visualizes the thematic arc of the series and allows the viewer to "read" Simon's story in his evolving clothing codes over an elongated period of time.

[19] Simon's sister River arrives on *Serenity* in cryogenic stasis without a stitch of clothing, and there is no indication that Simon had packed any for her, especially since she is awoken prematurely. Summer Glau has said that she assumes River pieced together her wardrobe from pieces raided from Inara's and Kaylee's closets, and she and Sean Maher made up backstories in which Simon would pick up pretty dresses that he thought River might like at various stops along the way (*Firefly: Still Flying* 103). Her clothes are always comfortable and feminine, but never sexualized. She is frequently barefoot, which allows her a direct connection to the ship, but when she does wear shoes, they are sturdy combat boots. The juxtaposition of the tough boots with the soft clothing represents her two states—vulnerable and deadly. As Trpcic notes, "She's this soft, beautiful, sensitive girl, but with this hardcore inner character" (*Firefly: The Official Companion* 1.128).

[20] The dominant antagonistic presence in *Firefly* is the Alliance. It defeated Mal, Zoe, and the other Browncoats in the Unification War, and although it makes artistic

expression and medical advancement possible, it nonetheless continues to represent governmental control and loss of personal freedom throughout the series. Trpcic wanted the Alliance clothing to present a severe coldness which would contrast with the warm humanity of the Serenity crew. She mainly distinguished the two conflicting sides using color—cold grays, blues, and purples for the Alliance and warm reds, oranges, and browns for those on Serenity. Many, including Maio, have made comparisons between the various Alliance uniforms on *Firefly* and other recognizable science fiction uniforms, namely the Imperial officers in *Star Wars* (1977) and the soldiers in *Starship Troopers* (1997). There is a good reason for the latter, seeing as the Alliance combat uniforms, which became affectionately known on set as “purple bellies,” were in fact the same ones used in *Starship Troopers*. The inspirational starting point for the Alliance officers’ uniforms was Nazi Germany, particularly noticeable in the hat and jacket shapes (Minear and Whedon).

[21] Whedon was clearly pleased with Trpcic’s nuanced vision because he enlisted her help on several of his later projects including *Doctor Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* (2008), *Dollhouse* (2009-2010), *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), and *Much Ado About Nothing* (2012). Therefore, her lack of involvement with *Serenity* is perplexing. When the *Firefly* characters graduated to the silver screen, Trpcic was replaced by new-to-Whedon costume designer Ruth E. Carter, presumably because Universal Pictures would be more comfortable with someone with more of a film pedigree. Carter was discovered by a then-unknown Spike Lee when she was working as a theatrical costumer in Los Angeles. He took a chance and hired her to work on his film *School Daze* (1988), a chance which paid off, as she would go on to design the costumes for nine more of his films, including *Malcolm X* (1992), for which she was nominated for an Academy Award. In an interview with *Madame Noir*, she recalls, “Spike Lee gave me my first shot on a feature film. I remember it like it was yesterday. I was ready for it. I’d done theater and opera. I know how to break down a character, know how to break down a script. I did it my way, not the standard way that others do it. I did it my way. He gave me my first shot and I’ll be forever grateful [sic] for that” (3). Carter’s collaboration with Lee sparked a successful career for her. She was nominated for another Academy Award for her work on Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad* (1997) and in 2002 was presented with a Career Achievement Award at the American Black Film Festival. Her other notable projects include *What’s Love Got to Do with It* (1993), *B*A*P*S* (1997), *Love & Basketball* (2000), *Shaft* (2000), *Four Brothers* (2005), and most recently the Whitney Houston vehicle *Sparkle* (2012). Seeing as Trpcic’s only film credits at the time *Serenity* was greenlit were independent films, foreign films, television movies, and straight-to-DVD releases, the studio’s decision to replace her made sense on paper.

[22] Any artist will testify, however, that there is more to the design process than what can be measured by awards and statistics. Trpcic was clearly instrumental in crafting the three-dimensional selves gathered together into a make-shift family in *Firefly*, and Carter, who has said, "You really have to know people and what makes people who they are through their clothes" ("Entrepreneur Spotlight" 1), thankfully, did not completely abandon Trpcic's foundation, but she did make enough small changes to significantly alter the audience's perception of the characters they thought they knew. Each alteration, considered alone, seems a mere trifle, but when the elements of her new vision are viewed together, they clearly disrupt the "total visual fact" achieved by Trpcic in the series.

[23] Mal, the consummate cowboy, who displays very few Asian design elements in his ensemble in the series, wears shirts for the film with Asian-inspired side buttons, and his tan pants are exchanged in several scenes for more militant green and grey. Additionally, his leather suspenders and boots are replaced with futuristic-looking rubber ones, removing even more of his previously established identity. Indeed, the only Western remnants in his wardrobe are his gun holster and his brown coat, but even his coat is missing the repaired bullet hole in the arm which makes it uniquely his. These changes muddy Mal's background and create confusion in his clothing presentation.

[24] Jayne's wardrobe is actually for the most part unchanged, which is rather appropriate for the simple-minded mercenary, but Wash receives a disappointing make-over. The most significant alteration to his look for the film is the removal of much of his whimsy. He wears one of his signature Hawaiian shirts when the crew visits the Maidenhead bar on Beaumonde, but he is mostly seen wearing a rather traditional-looking flight suit. Wash's flight suit in *Firefly* is faded and worn and has no distinguishing marks or labels, but his updated flight suit for *Serenity* looks new and has a collection of patches prominently displayed, presumably from his days in flight school. Not only does this undermine the poverty-stricken outlaw theme of the series, but it also undermines Wash's established role as the comic relief. Most likely, the patches were added to clarify his past and, therefore, his connection to new character Mr. Universe, with whom he attended flight school. Gone, too, is his endearingly disheveled hair, replaced with a shorter, more sensible cut. As with Mal, the presence of unexplained and contradictory garments muddles Trpcic's carefully crafted clothing characterization from the series. The overall confusing result is a Wash who is more serious and put-together than the Wash that fans came to love in the series.

[25] Shepherd Book's serene, simple, yet tough-under-the-surface image in the series is stripped down to simply tough for the film. In *Serenity*, he is no longer traveling

with the crew but has settled down on the moon Haven, where it seems the ubiquitous grey uniform, which so defined his character in the series, is no longer necessary. He, instead, wears a long-sleeved black thermal shirt and dark grey cargo pants. Additionally, his long hair is no longer smoothed back into a conservative ponytail but woven into cornrows, and rounding out the toughened look is a brand new beard. In *Firefly*, Book's clothing is a symbol of his station and sends obvious messages about his personality and experiences, but his wardrobe in *Serenity* does not communicate so clearly. Without hearing his conversation with Mal about faith when the crew visits Haven the first time, one would never understand that he is a Shepherd from his looks alone. Unlike in the series, Book's character development in the film is reliant on dialog alone, leaving the element of costume design under-utilized. Indeed, his clothing does not seem to fit into the established 'Verse at all.

[26] As previously discussed, Simon's clothing presentation progresses throughout *Firefly* from an affluent mixture of East and West to a comfortable, casual look with practically no Eastern design elements. Carter maintains the progression, for the most part, with the exception of one memorable garment. Roughly midway through the film, when the crew returns to Haven to find it has been attacked by Reavers, the doctor is wearing a blue shirt of clearly Asian design, with a high, banded neck and embroidered border which angles down onto a wrap-around panel across the chest. This obvious regression in Simon's clothing evolution might seem insignificant; it is, after all, just one shirt. However, in addition to being featured wearing the Asian garment in Universal Picture's promotional images, Simon is also wearing it during the pivotal scene in which Shepherd Book dies and the crew decides to journey to Miranda disguised as Reavers, the sole purpose of which is to expose the corruption of the Alliance. Simon's formal, Asian shirt is in direct conflict with his gradual rejection of those clothing cues in the series.

[27] All of the women on *Serenity* are given the Hollywood treatment for the film, decidedly violating Barthes's second and third costuming errors involving beauty that isn't functional and unnecessarily sumptuous materials. Zoe is more sexualized, wearing clothing that is generally tighter and sometimes lower cut. Her tan pants, which frequently match Mal's in the series, are also traded in for the militant dark green. The most controversial outfit, however, is the dress she wears to her husband's funeral. While it is most certainly beautiful, feminine, and the traditional Chinese mourning color of white, it is also slinky and sheer and looks more like something Gina Torres the actress would wear rather than the character Zoe Washburne. Granted, in "Shindig" (1.4), Zoe dismisses Kaylee's admiration of the pink layer cake dress, commenting that she herself would prefer something with a little

more "slink." However, while creating a pivotal costume for the film based on one line from one episode of the series would be the ultimate demonstration of a costume that serves the play and enhances character development, such a high level of nuance and respect for what has come before is not consistent with Carter's costuming approach to the rest of the film. Worst of all, conspicuously absent from the funeral attire is Zoe's cord necktie that she is literally never seen without (when she is dressed). In the commentary for the episode "Shindig," Trpcic explains that the cord necklace is supposed to be a symbol of Zoe's marriage to Wash (as opposed to a ring), hence why she never takes it off (Baccarin, Espenson, and Trpcic). Granted, Zoe is also seen wearing the cord in flashback scenes before she is married to Wash, so the presentation of this accessory is admittedly inconsistent. If Trpcic's intention for the necklace is accurate, however, Zoe would most certainly wear it to her husband's funeral, caring not a mite if it clashed with her dress.

[28] Kaylee's fate is similar to Zoe's. In *Firefly*, Kaylee is a mixture of grease monkey and girlish femininity; in *Serenity*, she is a mixture of a little less grease monkey and little more *womanly* femininity. She still wears coveralls, but instead of a baggy pair with a teddy bear appliqué, her new pair is much tighter and a darker color. Her undershirt is still pink, but it is skin tight. It initially seems to be the same outfit she often wore in the series, but the subtle alterations make it an unrealistic costume for a mechanic and change the message it sends. The casual clothes she wears to the Maidenhead bar consist of tight camouflaged cargo pants with a studded belt, black leather boots, and a metallic jacket, all of which are also more womanly and sexualized than the civilian clothing Kaylee wears in the series. Carter seems to have fallen prey to the temptation Trpcic resisted by downplaying Kaylee the mechanic and by accentuating the attractive actress underneath.

[29] River, whose wardrobe is soft and feminine in the series (except, of course, for her boots), is perhaps the most sexualized of all in the film. Replacing the pinks and floral prints are dark browns, blues, and grays, and the cuts are also smaller, tighter, and shorter than the sundresses and sweaters the audience had grown accustomed to seeing her wear in *Firefly*. The darker, sexier clothing signals the loss of her innocence and ushers in her emergence as a full-fledged action hero. Even Inara's clothing, if it is possible for someone of her profession, also presents a heightened sexuality in *Serenity*. She still wears the extravagant, supremely feminine clothing of a Companion, but with the addition of bigger jewelry, more dramatic make-up, and enhanced cleavage. These upgrades could be accounted for thematically in that Inara now resides and seems to be working as an instructor at a Companion house rather than living the life of a fugitive on the run, but considered alongside the treatment of the other female characters in the film, this

explanation does not stand alone. Both Inara's Companion wardrobe and River's clothing in the series, as Barthes recommends, are transparent—seen but not distracting—but their wardrobes in *Serenity*, like those of the other female characters, seem to have succumbed to the “hypertrophy of sumptuousness” criticized by Barthes. Every outfit is pumped up to an unrealistic level.

[30] The signals we send with our clothing are inextricably tied to our very selves. Every time we get dressed we are writing codes which we use to communicate information to those around us about our personalities and our past experiences. Those who craft the wardrobes of fictional characters in films and television series must imagine and consider a lifetime's worth of contributing factors, and as Barthes notes, many costumers get it wrong. Shawna Trpcic worked closely with Joss Whedon to shape a hybrid world of past and future and East and West for *Firefly* and to then fill it with believably clad individuals with textured histories. When Ruth Carter replaced Trpcic as lead costume designer for the film *Serenity*, she made enough small changes to the previously-established clothing codes to significantly alter the messages they sent, which, in turn, altered the personalities, indeed the very selves, of the beloved characters. Perhaps no one can take the sky from them, but it appears Carter can take their identities.

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