

PROVIDENCE COLLEGE

433.37 Topics in Communications & Media: Exploring *Firefly*

3 credit hours

Fall 2010

Dr. Nicholas P. Greco

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Wednesday, 8:30-11:05

Office Hours: Tuesday, 8:30-11:00; Friday, 8:30-11:00; or by appointment.

SYLLABUS

A. COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores issues such as gender, morality, religion, music and genre in Joss Whedon's science fiction western television series *Firefly* and its cinematic sequel *Serenity*. This course assumes that television programming (and, in the case of *Serenity*, cinema) constitutes a text that can be studied, in order to illuminate greater truths concerning life, society and the nature of self.

Over the course of the semester, we will watch the entire run of the *Firefly* television series. Note that, while the series was broadcast on standard network television in 2002, it does contain scenes of violence, language and scenes of sexuality, which some might find offensive. This course is not meant to be an exercise in polemics, but rather an opportunity to develop a sense of critical consumption.

B. COURSE OBJECTIVES

Through participation in lectures, classroom discussion and completion of the course requirements:

1. The student will have a greater understanding of the theoretical study of media texts;
2. The student will have greater insight into the study of popular culture;
3. The student will develop a greater sense of critical consumption, understanding how desire is generated in serialized visual communication.

C. COURSE TEXTS

Required: Espensen, Jane, ed. *Finding Serenity: Anti-Heroes, Lost Shepherds and Space Hookers in Joss Whedon's Firefly*. Dallas: Benbella, 2005.

Required: Espensen, Jane, ed. *Serenity Found: More Unauthorized Essays on Joss Whedon's Firefly Universe*. Dallas: Benbella, 2007.

Required: Wilcox, Rhonda V. and Tanya R. Cochran, eds. *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*. New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008.

D. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Class attendance, participation and reading of the course texts: It is only in the best interest of the student if he or she attends each class and, in fact, consistent attendance is required. Each student is expected to read the assigned course texts and be prepared to contribute to a meaningful discussion based on those readings. It is on this participation that a portion of the final grade is based. Each student is expected to arrive to class promptly for its beginning.

2. Episode Discussion Papers: Each student is required to write 1-page discussion papers on episodes of *Firefly*. Each student must submit 10 of a possible 14 discussion papers, due at the beginning of the following class.

3. Readings Discussion Papers: Each student is required to submit 2 discussion papers (5 pages each) based on the readings from the section of the term that precedes the due date.

4. Major Paper: The major paper consists of an analysis of any aspect of *Firefly* or *Serenity* that a student wishes, using a method, viewpoint or theoretical framework presented in the course. The paper should be 8 - 10 pages in length.

5. Take-Home Exam: The take-home exam will consist of questions that will be supplied to students the week before the last class. Students will be required to prepare their answers formally and submit them at the beginning of the final class.

E. GRADING SUMMARY

Attendance/Participation:	10%
Episode Discussion Papers:	15%
Readings Discussion Papers:	20%
Major Paper:	30%
Take-Home Exam:	25%

Excellent	A+	4.0	91-100	Satisfactory	C+	2.5	67-69
	A		85-90	Adequate	C	2.0	63-66
	A-		80-84		C-		60-62
Very Good	B+	3.5	77-79	Marginal	D+	1.0	57-59
Good	B	3.0	73-76		D		53-56
	B-		70-72		D-		50-52
				Failure	F	0.0	<50

F. COURSE POLICIES

Full text to the academic policies, procedures and regulations of Providence College can be found online in the Student Handbook (http://www.providencecollege.ca/college/student_life/) and the College Academic Calendar (http://www.providencecollege.ca/college/programs/registrars_office/calendar/).

1. Assignment Formatting: All written assignments must be typed, double-spaced, using Times New Roman font (12-point only), with 1-inch margins on all four sides of the page. In addition, the text must be left-justified. Proper page numbering must be indicated on each page. Written assignments may be double-sided. The text should also be free of errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling. The paper should be stapled together at the top left corner, without any type of plastic or paper binding. **Failure to follow these guidelines will result in a loss of marks.**

2. Class Attendance Policy: Attendance is mandatory. Missing more than 5 classes **for any reason** will result in a failing grade in the course.

3. Late Assignment Policy: Assignments are due immediately at the beginning of class on the date on which they are due. Assignments not remitted at that time will be accepted by hand or in my mailbox with a 10% penalty only until 4:30pm on the day that the assignment is due. Any assignments turned in after 4:30pm of the due day will be accepted but will receive a grade of 0. As there will be no extensions granted for any assignments, please note their due dates.

4. Plagiarism: Students are expected to demonstrate academic integrity in all its various forms, and will be held accountable for doing so by the policy on Academic Conduct in the Student Handbook (http://www.providencecollege.ca/college/student_life/). One particularly problematic breach of academic integrity is plagiarism, which is stealing from the ideas and writings of another person and passing them off as one's own. For an elaboration of the nature, types, and prevention of plagiarism, see the Providence College document entitled "Academic Dishonesty: The Problem of Plagiarism in Academic Writing," in the Providence College Academic Formation Guide available in the Bookstore.

5. Final Exam Policy: All requests to have a final exam rescheduled must be approved by the Academic Committee in accordance with the Examination General Regulations (available in the College Academic Calendar at http://www.providencecollege.ca/college/programs/registrars_office/calendar/).

6. Information and Communication Technologies in the Classroom: **Student use of information and communication technologies for purposes other than class note-taking is not allowed in the classroom, as students are expected to give their total attention to class activities.** Use of cell-phones or iPods is never appropriate in the classroom, and use of laptop computers to play games, chat with others, browse the internet, or engage material not related to the class is always distracting to classmates and disrespectful to the instructor. Unlike some other post-secondary institutions, Providence has not yet found it necessary to ban laptops from the classroom, or prevent wireless internet access in classrooms. Only judicious use of them will keep it that way.

This is a Communications and Media class. As such, the exploration of new communication technologies is encouraged. However, unauthorized use of laptops and other information and communication technologies in this class will not be tolerated.

G. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Buffyology: An Academic Buffy Studies and Whedonverse Bibliography

<<http://www.alysa316.com/Buffyology/>>

Slayage 7.1 [25] (Winter 2008): Special Issue on *Firefly* and *Serenity*

<<http://slayageonline.com/Numbers/slayage25.htm>>

H. COURSE OUTLINE

September 8:

Introduction; Episode 1 - "Serenity"

September 15:

Episode 2 - "The Train Job" & Episode 3 - "Bushwhacked"

Keith R.A. DeCandido, "'The Train Job' Didn't do the Job," *Finding Serenity*, 55-61.

John C. Wright, "Just Shove Him in the Engine, or The Role of Chivalry in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*," *Finding Serenity*, 155-167.

J. Douglas Rabb and J. Michael Richardson, "Reavers and Redskins: Creating the Frontier Savage," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 127-138.

Lawrence Watt-Evans, "The Heirs of Sawney Beane," *Finding Serenity*, 17-28.

Barbara Maio, "Between Past and Future: Hybrid Design Style in *Firefly* and *Serenity*," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 201-211.

September 22: **Day of Prayer - NO CLASSES.**

September 29:

Episode 4 - "Shindig"

Andrew Aberdein, "The Companions and Socrates: Is Inara a Hetaera?," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 63-75.

Nicholas Greco, "The Companion as a Doll: The Female Enigma in Whedon's *Firefly* and *Dollhouse*." *Sexual Rhetoric in the Works of Joss Whedon: New Essays*. Edited by Erin B. Waggoner. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010. 239-247.

[ON RESERVE]

Lorna Jowett, "Back to the Future: Retrofuturism, Cyberpunk, and Humanity in *Firefly* and *Serenity*," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 101-113.

Sharon Sutherland and Sarah Swan, "'The Alliance isn't some Evil Empire': Dystopia in Joss Whedon's *Firefly/Serenity*," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 89-100.

Leigh Adams Wright, "Asian Objects in Space," *Finding Serenity*, 29-35.

October 6:

Episode 5 - "Safe"

Alyson R. Buckman, "'Much Madness is Divinest Sense': *Firefly*'s 'Big Damn Heroes' and Little Witches," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 41-49.

Susan Mandala, "Representing the Future: Chinese and Codeswitching in *Firefly*," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 31-40.

Kevin M. Sullivan, "Chinese Words in the 'Verse,'" *Finding Serenity*, 197-207.

Ginjer Buchanan, "Who Killed *Firefly*?" *Finding Serenity*, 47-53.

Alex Bledsoe, "Mal Contents: Captain Reynolds Grows Up," *Serenity Found*, 95-105.

October 13:

Episode 6 - "Our Mrs. Reynolds"

K. Dale Koontz, "I Got No Rudder': Navigating the Sea of Faith with Malcolm Reynolds," *Faith and Choice in the Works of Joss Whedon* (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Co., 2008), 98-118. **[ON RESERVE]**

Cynthia Masson, "But She Was Naked! And All Articulate!': The Rhetoric of Seduction in *Firefly*," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 19-30.

Laura L. Beadling, "The Threat of the Good Wife': Feminism, Postfeminism, and Third-Wave Feminism in *Firefly*," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 53-62.

Nancy Holder, "I Want Your Sex: Gender and Power in Joss Whedon's Dystopian Future World," *Finding Serenity*, 139-153.

DISCUSSION PAPER #1 DUE

October 20:

Episode 7 - "Jaynestown"

Gregory Erickson, "Humanity in a 'Place of Nothin': Morality, Religion, Atheism, and Possibility in *Firefly*," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 167-179.

Nathan Fillion, "I, Malcolm," *Serenity Found*, 49-53.

Lyle Zynda, "We're All Just Floating in Space," *Finding Serenity*, 85-95.

Eric Greene, "The Good Book," *Serenity Found*, 79-93.

October 27:

Episode 8 - "Out of Gas"

Geoff Klock, "*Firefly* and Story Structure, Advanced," *Serenity Found*, 161-174.

Mary Alice Money, "*Firefly*'s 'Out of Gas': Genre Echoes and the Hero's Journey," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 114-124.

Jennifer Goltz, "Listening to *Firefly*," *Finding Serenity*, 209-215.

Larry Dixon, "The Reward, the Details, the Devils, the Due," *Finding Serenity*, 5-15.

November 3:

Episode 9 - "Ariel" & Episode 10 - "War Stories"

Shanna Swendson, "A Tale of Two Heroes," *Serenity Found*, 67-78.

Michael Marano, "River Tam and the Weaponized Women of the Whedonverse," *Serenity Found*, 37-48.

Evelyn Vaughn, "The Bonnie Brown Flag," *Serenity Found*, 187-201.

Michelle Sagara West, "More than a Marriage of Convenience," *Finding Firefly*, 97-104.

Jeffrey Bussolini, "A Geopolitical Interpretation of *Serenity*," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 139-152.

DISCUSSION PAPER #2 DUE

November 10:

Episode 11 - "Trash"

David Magill, "'I Aim to Misbehave': Masculinities in the 'Verse,'" *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 76-86.

Natalie Haynes, "Girls, Guns, Gags: Why the Future Belongs to the Funny," *Serenity Found*, 27-36.

Robert B. Taylor, "The Captain may Wear Tight Pants, but it's the Gals who make *Serenity* Soar," *Finding Serenity*, 131-137.

Loni Peristere, "Mutant Enemy U," *Serenity Found*, 117-129.

Bruce Bethke, "Cut 'Em Off at the Horsehead Nebula!," *Serenity Found*, 175-185.

November 17:

Episode 12 - "The Message"

Matthew Pateman, "Deathly Serious: Mortality, Morality, and the *Mise-en-Scène* in *Firefly* and *Serenity*," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 212-223.

Tanya Huff, "'Thanks for the Reenactment, Sir.' Zoe: Updating the Woman Warrior," *Finding Serenity*, 105-112.

Maggie Burns, "Mars Needs Women: How a Dress, a Cake, and a Goofy Hat will Save Science Fiction," *Serenity Found*, 15-25.

Ken Wharton, "The Alliance's War on Science," *Serenity Found*, 141-150.

Mercedes Lackey, "*Serenity* and Bobby McGee: Freedom and the Illusion of Freedom in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*," *Finding Serenity*, 63-73.

November 24:

Episode 13 - "Heart of Gold,"

Rhonda V. Wilcox, "'I Do Not Hold to That': Joss Whedon and Original Sin," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 155-166.

Joy Davidson, "Whores and Goddesses: The Archetypal Domain of Inara Serra," *Finding Serenity*, 113-129.

P. Gardner Goldsmith, "Freedom in an Unfree World," *Serenity Found*, 55-65.

MAJOR PAPER DUE

December 1:

Episode 14 - "Objects in Space"

Neil Lerner, "Music, Race, and Paradoxes of Representation: Jubal Early's Musical Motif of Barbarism in 'Objects in Space,'" *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 183-190.

Christopher Neal, "Marching Out of Step: Music and Otherness in the *Firefly/Serenity* Saga," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 191-198.

Stacey Abbott, "'Can't Stop the Signal': The Resurrection/Regeneration of *Serenity*," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 227-238.

Tanya R. Cochran, "The Browncoats Are Coming! *Firefly*, *Serenity*, and Fan Activism," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 239-249.

Jewel Staite, "Kaylee Speaks: Jewel Staite on *Firefly*," *Finding Serenity*, 217-227.

December 8:

Serenity (Joss Whedon, 2005)

TAKE-HOME EXAM DUE