

Craig Franson: ‘There Are No Strings on Me’: Joss Whedon’s Vision and the Global War on Terror

Hollywood’s “post-9/11” period has been characterized by a dramatic escalation in cinematic violence, spectacle, and fantasy, and the superhero film has become one of the period’s defining genres (Pollard). Joss Whedon’s two Avengers films top the genre’s earnings lists, and they also stitch together the dozen narrative threads running through the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Providing both the financial engine and the imaginative infrastructure for the world’s biggest film franchise, Whedon’s superhero blockbusters have had an outsized impact on global cinema. Despite their institutional and cultural prominence, however, and despite, too, their largely positive critical reception, only a handful of critics and scholars have explored the films’ larger cultural and political significance.

Yet, both *Marvel’s The Avengers* (2012) and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) merit sustained critical attention. Ensley F. Guffey and John C. McDowell have demonstrated the first film’s relevance to U. S. war cinema and to the American Civil Religion, and I have previously discussed its incorporation of iconography from the 9/11 attacks on the United States. *Age of Ultron*, in turn, centers itself around an internal struggle that echoes U. S. political debates from the Bush-era over unilateralist responses to global terrorism. In focusing its critical gaze inward, *Ultron* is no different than other prominent MCU offerings, many of which concern themselves with atavistic authoritarian movements suddenly emerging within decaying liberal societies. Yet, both of Whedon’s Avengers installments are different in their deployment of Romantic irony—a sustained meta-critical reflection that disrupts aesthetic satisfaction, refracts interpretation, and opens these texts up to supplementation and radical redirection. Not only does Romantic irony turn Whedon’s superhero film against both its franchise and its genre, it also turns Whedon’s film against its author, revealing some of the ideological strings that animate his organic vision. Drawing upon recent work in literary Romanticism (Simpson, Redfield, Pyle) and in political science and philosophy (Laclau, Mouffe, Butler), this project will analyze the film’s complex political agency, asking what capacity a blockbuster superhero film has to oppose a mode of warfare that may be its real word double.