

**K. Brenna Wardell: 'Fully Loaded, Safety Off. This Here Is a Recipe for Unpleasantness': Joss Whedon, John Ford, and the Dark Side of the American Mythos**

There's a moment in Joss Whedon's *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) that may pass almost unnoticed: Captain America moves towards the open door of a farmhouse, pauses in the doorway, then moves away from it. However, this is no throwaway occurrence. Echoing the conclusion of John Ford's iconic western *The Searchers* (1956), this moment not only connects *Ultron* with a seminal moment in American film but evokes the ambivalence of Ford's film and its protagonist Ethan Edwards: a wanderer without a home, a man both heroic and demonic.

As Cap walks away from the farmhouse and its evocation, literal and figurative, 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 becomes, like Malcolm Reynolds in Whedon's *Firefly* (2002) and *Serenity* (2005), a character aligned with Ford's complex, conflicted protagonists. Through this citation of Ford, as through others from the beginning of his career onwards, Whedon interrogates ideas of heroism and villainy, civilization and disorder, and the vexed mythos of America itself.

Scholars and reviewers have noted the connection between Whedon and Ford, particularly in discussing Whedon's western/science-fiction *Firefly* and its sequel *Serenity*, as exemplified by Mary Alice Money's discussion of *Firefly*'s "Out of Gas" in *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*. This essay explores this connection in-depth, tracing the manner in which Whedon has evoked Ford's films, especially his westerns, and the formal and sociocultural stakes of this citation, focusing on *Firefly* and *Serenity* in particular, while gesturing to the trajectory of this citation from *Buffly* (1997-2003) to *Ultron*.