

Kevin Carmody

How do media texts construct national identities? - Firefly

Firefly was an American series created by Joss Whedon for the Fox Network that was aired between September and December 2002. The show crossed the genres of Science Fiction with classic American Western by placing the protagonists on the frontiers of space. The series is set in 2157 in a far off star system with “dozens of planets and hundreds of moons”. Many of the planets and moons have been “terra-formed” to make them as similar as possible to a fabled “Earth-that-was” and able to sustain human life. Despite the terra-forming, those on the outer planets tend to be on the edge of civilisation. The setting is post war scenario whereby the winning side, the Alliance, occupy the central planets but also govern those on the outer rim, many of whom fought for independence. The series follows a group of misfits, led by a captain and first mate who fought for the Independents, as they try to find their place in a world where they don't quite fit. In this essay I will first establish a clear theoretical framework before I examine the pilot episode and the cultural representations therein.

#### Nationhood and Identity

To define national identity we should look at the concept of nationhood. Anderson (1991, p6-7) describes a nation as an imagined community, whereby we perceive ourselves as part of a greater community based on social and ideological bonds. Therefore, national identity is something that must be seen in terms of the dominant cultural ideologies. Though Anderson's work focused on the printed word and its ability to communicate in the vernacular in order to provide a common medium for its readership (Anderson 1991, p38), we can still apply his theory to screen texts. Where Anderson falls short is that much of his work focused on the building of nationhood rather than the necessity to continually reinforce cultural ideals (Williams 2002, p3).

#### Society and Class Conflict

Another traditional theoretical approach, Marxism, would argue that nationalism is perpetuated through the use of a class based system. The media display the ruling-class ideology to audiences and in doing so actively counter any ideological rivals. It is through this approach that the ruling class ensured cohesion. This implies an economic foundation to cultural identity and in turn national identity. By ensuring that a false consciousness of liberty is embedded within the working classes the ruling class can avoid a revolt. The argument is that there are no unbiased ideas being perpetuated by media texts and so we must view all messages being transmitted as an attempt to

normalise the ideologies of the ruling class. It is through a belief that we will feel security in being part of the portrayed majorities' identity that these belief systems will be perpetuated through society.(Chandler, 2000)

The Marxist view has been countered frequently, often for its one-way of message translation approach. Dellinger (1995) points to an assumption within Marxism that the ruling classes act as a homogeneous group working coherently in subjugating the other classes. Alternatively, a consent is attained with the viewer through negotiation as to what is the correct construction of a national identity. It is this hegemonic viewpoint that is portrayed by the media rather than the propaganda of a ruling elite (Joseph 2002).

## Genre

The purpose of a genre is to present a natural textual code that is almost invisible to a viewer with a familiarity to it (Chandler, 2000). This is achieved through a semiotic code described as 'modes of address'. Though a genre may be used as a means to help an audience decide on what texts they wish to view, it can also be used as a means to portray an interpretation of ideologies and perspectives of the world. Althusser, a Structural Marxist, argued that we are always susceptible to ideological influence from an ideological standpoint we already associate ourselves with. He devised a theory called 'hailing' whereby he believed that people react to those texts that are 'calling us'. Within the hailing framework the audience becomes the subject the moment they start to react to the text because they believe it is them that are being personally addressed. (Chandler 2000)

I think the first point I should raise in my analysis of Firefly is the subtext I bring. Firefly was an American TV show, yet I am British and as such will look at it with my own cultural ideologies. For example, in the opening scene we see a battle between the Independents, who we are supposed to be empathising with, at war with the Alliance. Without a moments hesitation I recognised that the Alliance are coded as World War Two Germans, complete with Stahlhelme helmets, and the Independents as American troops. It is a British cultural background, which I'm sure the Americans share to a degree, that makes this unmistakable thanks to years of cultural conditioning that is part of my national identity. Yet, it took me some time to realise that the Reavers ("savages on the edge of space") are coded as the Indians of the Old West. Something I am certain would be obvious to an American reader at a glance.

Whedon intended the programme to display a melting pot of cultures with the two prevailing ones being American and Chinese. This could be construed as a coding for the growing rate of globalisation we see in our world today, exemplified by the Blue Sun Corporation, a Marxist styled corporate/government organisation that is developed slightly in later episodes as well as elaborated on by Whedon in interviews, which has control over both the media and the Alliance police. Despite this melting-pot, all the lead characters, and many of the supporting roles, are cast from the American culture, including the most oriental styled character, Inara. There are two potential readings we can take from this, either the text is specifically designed to hail an American audience or Whedon is stating that though two cultures emerged, only one really won. This is highlighted further by the fact that the use of the Chinese language by the main characters is almost entirely confined to swearing and exclamation. Though one could claim that this is due to restrictions in the inability of the audience to understand the language, it should be noted that Inara singularly doesn't use Chinese in this fashion.

In the pilot we encounter a British coded character called Badger. His coding, with a bowler hat and a cockney accent, is very clearly from an American perspective of British. Perhaps more importantly though, he is a character the reader is not supposed to empathise with. He is a criminal, the same as our lead characters, yet he is coded as a villain. This means we have a mix of cultures, but the only ones who are really good are the Americans.

Character portrayal in *Firefly* is almost always heavily coded with different national and cultural identities. Inara is coded as an exotic orient, representative of the promiscuous sexuality of a woman of colour. Similarly Zoe, the second in command, is given the appearance of a "sexually voracious black woman" (Amy-Chin, p185, 2006).

The *Firefly* universe is divided into two Marxist style classes. The ruling class, the Alliance, of whom the only encounters we have are with officious captains of the Alliance Cruiser IAV Dortmund (Dortmund is a German city that executed its mentally ill during WWII) and a once wealthy Doctor. This is one major aspect of the text's genre that makes it stand out from other space-faring Science-Fiction television shows like *Star Trek* or *Battlestar Galactica*. The characters that we follow are not of the ruling elite. Rather than following the flagship of Starfleet or the President and Admiral of the human colonies we instead see the struggling side of the class divide. This is where the Wild West genre plays its role in reminding the reader that America was founded by rough yet righteous pioneers.

Perhaps it would be fairer to say that Firefly's portrayal of class struggle represented a hegemonic change in the Science-Fiction genre. If we look at the aforementioned examples of Star Trek: The Next Generation (1987 - 1994) and Battlestar Galactica: Re-imagining (2004 - Present) we see a change in the portrayal of the lead characters. Star Trek is a classic false consciousness representation of an elite class benignly exploring and where possible taking care of lesser beings. Yet Star Trek has fallen from favour in exchange for programmes like Firefly and Battlestar Galactica where the lead characters are struggling against a superior class of being.

It is clear that Firefly does reaffirm much of the American hegemonic view of the world within its character representation, though often through the use of coarse stereotypes. We also find throughout the text references to God and the problems a lack of faith can cause. The wise voice of Shepherd Book is a reminder throughout of the importance of faith, a recurring theme in most recent American television programs. Yet despite this it perhaps didn't reflect enough of the views of its ruling class, Fox who paid for the programme, to be able to continue. The series was cancelled after only eleven of the fourteen episodes were aired.

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