

Dietmar Dath

Praise the Heavens

*Joss Whedon's film „Serenity“: A small, quirky science fiction masterpiece*

As printed in the large German national daily newspaper “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”, more or less accurately translated from the German by the author.

In the beginning, we're comforted by the voice of a teacher who seems to wish to explain the movie which is about to follow. That voice says that all is right with the worlds of the 26th century. Americans and Chinese have staked out their claims to infinity. Then the balloon of childhood memory, where such soothing words are found, is pierced with a long needle, and we find ourselves in a torture chamber. A hasty escape is made; but even this is not quite the real beginning – it was only a recording, played by a government operative (Chiwetel Ejiofor) who wishes to study MO and motivation of the girl who got away. His task is to hunt River “Gretel” Tam (Summer Glau) who was sprung from the tight-security prison of a military behavioural research facility by her brother, Simon “Hänsel” Tam (Sean Maher).

River is a mind reader, a telepath who, after numerous cruel brain-altering experiments, was put on display for some very important government officials to admire, where she mentally picked up politically sensitive knowledge not meant to reach the public.

The operative, no shrill sadist but a highly disciplined man of conviction he, stops the recording and says quietly: “Where are you hiding, little girl?”

The answer, which slowly moves into frame accompanied by melancholy music, is a banged-up spaceship – a plucked bird made of metal and a symbol of adventurous spirit, cheekiness, courage, generosity and resistance to oppression: “Serenity”.

That’s when the main course starts, about which people who know what they’re talkin about are saying more nice things than about most other things that came to pass in cinemas during recent years. Stephen King says: “I love this film”.

He has every reason to. One has to search one’s memory for quite some time before coming up with a science fiction picture which chooses the right thing over the wrong thing at so many points in the script, the set design, the acting, and so consistently steers clear of all the easy, seductive and wrong ways taught to the world at large by Spielberg and Lucas.

Just one instance out of many: There is a scene here where Captain Malcolm Reynolds (Nathan Fillion), having taken on board the persecuted siblings, is subtly arguing about matters of life and death with his right hand officer (Gina Torres). The conversation takes place in a corridor of the ship, just below the bridge. The woman chides the man, he does not accept her criticism, and at the very moment when he says his decisive words, we observe and hear that the warm light in the ship’s windows disappears and all sound surrounding the ship’s hull dies, signalling that we are now leaving the terrestrial shelter of society and are about to enter the realm of vast black emptiness, where “The Cold Equations” govern, as the title of Tom Godwin’s famous science fiction story from 1954 has it – a story which, not accidentally, examines the issue of leaving someone behind – exactly the moral dilemma which is being looked at and photographed in this small but very effective scene of pure dialogue reflected in the ambient details thereof.

Any sense of awe and wonder at sudden knowledge or unexpected understanding which is triggered by fine science fiction necessarily implies a moment of confusion, an instance of not knowing which is which – the coldly cosmic or the hotly subjective –, of absorbing interstellar abstractions back into narrative circumstance: I am sitting on my porch after a gust of summer rain, wet and happy, and all of a sudden, for a fraction of a second, I do not now whether the pin-prick light that I see is the planet Venus or a firefly.

Joss Whedon, the writer/director of “Serenity”, has made these wonders shine before, in a television show called “Firefly” which lends its story-framework to this movie, as well as its habit of delighting the audience with humorous turns of phrase: “We may experience slight turbulence and then explode”.

On television, these riches had to be tightly jammed into packets of forty-five minutes each. The challenging experiences one is fond of encountering both in space opera and western settings – the renegade western being the other genre which is renewed by what Whedon does with it in “Serenity” – are now breathing sharper airs in the cinema theatre, where everything can be presented at a different and more rewarding pacing. Worlds cradled in ion clouds, moons on which ethane storms are raging, continents of ice glazed with hydrocarbons, the colourful ribbons of mighty engine exhausts, all colors of the celestial mechanics of the imagination, ranging from metallic green to lasery mauve – “Serenity”, a film which cost considerably less than these sorts of pictures usually do, shows all this; but it is just a splendid background for another, much smarter achievement.

Because in weighing the ultimate artistic merit of a film, it is of little or even no importance how well that film conforms to the rules of its genre. This is as true for science-fiction as it is for any other sort of motion picture: One might argue that Stewart Raffill’s “Ice Pirates” (1984)

with Robert Urich and Anjelica Huston is a more attentively crafted and funnier space adventure flick than all six installmenst of “Star Wars” put together, yet it does not reach their rank since it lacks their silly yet awesome republican gravitas. And whereas Doug Trumbulls “Silent Runing” (1971) with Bruce Dern is often cited as making more sense from a narrative point of view than Stanley Kubricks monstrous creation “2001 – a Space odyssey” which came three years before, “Silent Running” does not, on proper reflection, even begin to come close to the effect of Kubrick’s confusing, overblown and hypnotically unforgettable masterwork of higher nonsense. The reason for this is that good science fiction, in order to become really great science fiction, has to do two more things than just do a painting-by-numbers-job on genre patterns: firstly, it has to use these patterns in order to express an idea whose time has come, and secondly, it has to pick said idea out of the current pool of ideas and find one that can be expressed with science-fictional means in a way which is superior and more fitting than any other mode of expression for that particular idea. George Lucas picked up the Reaganite and New Age-Vibes a few years early in 1977, Stanley Kubrick, back in 1968, managed to pull late 60s psychedelic neo-romanticism inside out and project it to the sky.

“Serenity”, too, is infused by such an idea: Today’s Americans are facing an imperial situation while also being confronted with technological conditions experienced by no other imperial power ever before. The sort of greed an lust for control which spring from such circumstance can only be held in check by re-defining what “democracy” and “the public sphere” might mean as correlated to the given technological framework of modern means of communication. Every artistic stroke of genius, moment of humour or line of wisdom which can be found in “Serenity” ultimately serves to engage with this issue.

The marauding monsters which terrorize this future ruled by oligopolists are important message-carriers in that sense, and so special care was taken in having some of them designed by the brilliant horror illustrator Berni Wrightson. The camera work shows the same level of dedication: it does not just pass through complex technological spaces as so much computer animated dross nowadays does, but rather follows people on the multiple difficult ways they have to go in these spaces. And the abundance of allusions to the rich past of the phantastic in the arts – such as Coleridge’s poetry, Shakespeare’s “The Tempest” or the classic space picture “Forbidden Planet” – never degenerate into showy intellectual posturing, but rather add to our overall enjoyment by providing clever footnotes or quasi-bibliographical asides. The more you know, the more you love it; but even those who come without any such baggage are guaranteed a first-class ride.

Overall, “Serenity” thus impresses as both a new bright light in the genre’s sky and a rare and wonderful glowing bug for futurist insect studies: fast, warm, funky, graceful, funny and politically smart. This brave new world is vast; it has got everything that is needed, and all that is there shines, speaks and sings.