

The Future Isn't So Shiny: *Blade Runner*, *Firefly*, and the Effects of American Consumerism in Modern China

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In “The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs,” his controversial monologue exposing human rights abuses in Apple’s supplier factories in China, Mike Daisey states:

Shenzhen looks like *Blade Runner* threw up on itself. LEDs, neon, and fifteen-story-high video walls covered in shitty Chinese advertising: it’s everything they promised us the future would be.

Although Daisey later came under fire for this piece, his observations are telling: China’s explosive industrialization and transformation into the world’s largest economy has no precedent in history, save for the cautionary tales of science fiction. Ridley Scott’s 1982 masterpiece *Blade Runner* offers a terrifying vision of the future where people are disconnected from one another, separated by poverty, language, race, gender, and class.

This is interesting when examined against Joss Whedon’s immensely popular 2002-2003 television series, *Firefly*, and its 2005 film, *Serenity*. *Firefly* is about Hollywood westerns vs. outer space, traditionalists vs. pioneers, corporations vs. individuals, and nostalgia for the past vs. hope for the future. The series ultimately offers another possibility for what the future could look like when the Far East Meets the Far West.

This essay, an excerpt from a longer paper that will be published in *Joss Whedon’s Firefly*, edited by Michael Goodrum and Philip Smith, connects Scott’s and Whedon’s visions with the current controversy of American consumer demands fueling morally sweatshop conditions in China.

Using Mike Davis’s *City of Quartz*, Joan Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Eric Avila’s *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, and Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, this essay reveals how Whedon’s vision of a corporate-dominated alliance in the future builds upon Ridley’s vision in *Blade Runner* and how both prescient fictions can help us to understand the current tensions between American and Chinese interests in China.