

## ***Slayage 21, Fall 2006 [6.1]***

**David Lavery and Rhonda V. Wilcox, Co-Editors**

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■ **Rhonda V. Wilcox** (Gordon College), In "The Demon Section of the Card Catalog": *Buffy Studies* and *Television Studies* (joint publication with *Critical Studies in Television*, Vol. 1, No. 1) | [PDF Version](#)

■ **Patrick Shade** (Rhodes College), Screaming to be Heard: Community and Communication in "Hush" | [PDF Version](#)

■ **Angie Burns**, Passion, pain and 'bad kissing decisions': learning about intimate relationships from *Buffy* Season Six | [PDF Version](#)

■ **Christine Jarvis** (Sheffield Hallam University) and **Don Adams** (Central Connecticut State University), Dressed to Kill: Fashion and Leadership in *BtVS* | [PDF Version](#)

### **Reviews of The *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses**

■ **Brett M. Rogers** (University of Georgia), The Whedonverses and the Sociology of Academe, or A Report on SC2: The *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses, Gordon College, May 26-28, 2006 | [PDF Version](#)

■ **Patricia Pender** (Pace University), "Where Do We Go From Here?": *Buffy Studies* and *Slayage* 2006 | [PDF Version](#)

<u>1</u> [1.1]	<u>2</u> [1.2]	<u>3</u> [1.3]	<u>4</u> [1.4]
<u>5</u> [2.1]	<u>6</u> [2.2]	<u>7</u> [2.3]	<u>8</u> [2.4]
<u>9</u> [3.1]	<u>10</u> [3.2]		<u>11-12</u> [3.3-4]
<u>13-14</u> [4.1-2]	<u>15</u> [4.3]	<u>16</u> [4.4]	<u>Archives</u>
<u>17</u> [5.1]	<u>18</u> [5.2]	<u>19</u> [5.3]	<u>20</u> [5.4]
	<u>22</u> [6.2]	<u>23</u> [6.3]	<u>24</u> [6.4]
<u>25</u> [7.1]			

**Recommended.** Here and in each issue of *Slayage* the editors will recommend or note writing on *BtVS* appearing elsewhere.

■ Nichola Dobson, The Regeneration of Doctor Who: The ninth Doctor and the influence of the slayer in *Flow*.



Rhonda V. Wilcox

## In "The Demon Section of the Card Catalog": *Buffy* Studies and Television Studies



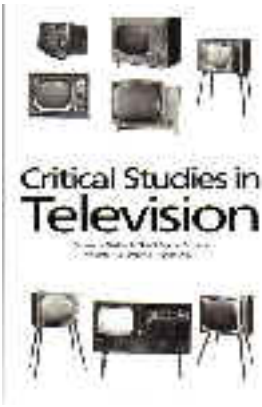
'May God have mercy on your souls.'

—email to *Slayage* coeditors David Lavery and Rhonda Wilcox

'Once again, I'm banished to the demon section of the card catalog.'

—Willow, 'The Puppet Show,' 1.9

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[1] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), created by Joss Whedon and realized by writer/director Whedon and a remarkable crew and cast, has inspired vigorous critical discussion from the start, and now boasts one of the biggest shelves in the scholarly television library. In fact, one might say *Buffy* the series is helping to fight the forces that sometimes demonize television studies. It would hardly be possible to explain with certainty all the causes for the intellectual interest *Buffy* provokes, much less to do so in a short article. But it is clear that *Buffy* is an important series at an important moment in television studies. A brief survey of the history of *Buffy* scholarship to date may suggest some reasons for its significance and some trends for the future of our work.

[2] The earliest writings about *Buffy* generally recognized as scholarly came in the summer of 1999: They are journal articles by Michael Adams, A. Susan Owen, and me[1]. These articles give some inkling of the variety of disciplinary angles from which the series has come to be viewed. Adams' two-part essay 'Slayer Slang' appeared in *Verbatim: The Language Quarterly* (24.3-4). His work analyzed examples of one of the elements for which the series is famed, its creative use of language. Owen's 'Vampires, Postmodernity, and Postfeminism: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,' in the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (27.2), discussed the series from a sociological perspective, particularly regarding another of the series' noteworthy qualities, its contested claim to feminism. My essay "'There Will Never Be a 'Very Special' *Buffy*": *Buffy* and the Monsters of Teen Life,' in the same issue of *JPFT*, discussed both language use and yet another of the series' important elements, its use of symbolism in purposeful literary style (both language and symbol working together to represent generational conflict). From the start, then, *Buffy's* language, feminism, and purposeful symbolism (semiotic and narratological) have engaged critics. And not long after, Graceanne A. DeCandido's

*American Libraries* article (September 1999) foregrounded the series' use of research and intellect as heroic: the library, as David Lavery later said, is the primal setting in *Buffy*. No wonder more scholars joined in the discussion.

[3] 2000-2001 brought many studies of *Buffy* and social issues. In 2000, Kent A. Ono's often-cited 'To Be a Vampire on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: Race and ('Other') Socially Marginalizing Positions on Horror TV' questioned the series' representation of race; in a television text often considered socially forward-thinking, the dearth of black and Latino characters was troubling. Ono invoked the show's well-known use of symbolism to suggest a troubling subtext as well, arguing that slain vampires equaled the racial Other. On the other hand, James South's 2001 essay "'All Trouble, Torment, Wonder, and Amazement Inhabits Here": The Vicissitudes of Technology in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*' identified vampires and other demons (especially in 'The Wish' and 'Anne') with capitalists controlling the assembly-line means of production, whereas *Buffy* wielded the hammer and sickle against them. The contrast in their approaches demonstrates the show's polysemy; *Buffy's* use of symbolism invites multiple readings. 2001 also brought Frances Early's 'Staking Her Claim: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as Feminist Woman Warrior.' Early, an award-winning peace studies scholar, discussed *Buffy* as a positive model not only from the perspective of feminism but also as a variation on the pattern of the Just Warrior. *Buffy's* position as a TV series subject to other pressures from networks was addressed by Kathleen McConnell in a less well-known *Gothic Studies* article, 'Chaos at the Mouth of Hell: Why the Columbine High School Massacre Had Repercussions for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*': *Buffy's* responsiveness to the zeitgeist was such that two of its episodes were delayed because of similarities between the fiction and real-life tragedy. The incident continues to be discussed by critics for a variety of reasons, including the series' creators' position in regard to the corporate world within which broadcast television operates. Dominic Alessio's 2001 essay "'Things Are Different Now"?: A Postcolonial Analysis of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*' discusses the politics implicit in Jane Espenson's controversial episode 'Pangs.' Like Ono, he argues that the series' subtext is somewhat unregenerate.

[4] Alessio had a new resource to cite: In January of 2001, *Buffy* gained its own journal, *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies*, founded and edited by David Lavery and me. Currently in its sixth year (having just published its twentieth issue), *Slayage* is a refereed quarterly which uses double blind review; the reviews are all done by members of the editorial board, an international collection of scholars who have published in a variety of fields including literature, linguistics, philosophy, film and television studies, religion, communications, gender studies, music, and sociology—all of which fields are represented by various essays in *Slayage*. *Slayage* authors range from renowned scholars such as Lawrence Rosenfeld to graduate students (and even one extraordinary high school student). *Slayage* provides a central clearinghouse for information about *Buffy Studies* in general and, as James South has said, is "a prime mover, I think, for ensuring that scholarship on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is up to high academic standards" (Stafford 43).

[5] One of the most important links on *Slayage* is to the *Academic Buffy Bibliography*. Provided by Temple University librarian Derik Badman, the ABB is an enormous asset to those who wish to research *Buffy* seriously. The interdisciplinary nature of television studies means that it has never had a single, central, predominant bibliography comparable to the Modern Language Association's annual bibliography for literature. [2] Each scholar brings to bear sources from her or his own discipline; however, *Buffy Studies* scholars have the added advantage of an extensive list of sources which focus on *Buffy* as a subject. David Lavery's bibliography of *Buffy* sources (on *Slayage*) builds on Badman's work and adds further value by arranging sources by subject.

[6] The first two issues of *Slayage* contained articles that had originally been submitted for a scholarly collection on *Buffy*. In the spring of 2000, David Lavery, already well-known for scholarly collections on *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files*, invited me to coedit a *Buffy* volume. The number of submissions of high quality meant that not all could fit into our 2002 book, *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which was comprised of chapters representing a wide variety of subject areas—

gender studies, music, language, audience studies, literary history, auteur studies and more. Lavery, inspired by *Whoosh*, the online *Xena* journal, suggested an online Buffy Studies journal; the title *Slayage* was suggested by video artist/art writer Richard Gess. During the production of *Fighting the Forces*, I was emailed by Roz Kaveney, who, learning that the collection was well along, decided to edit her own volume. Kaveney, well-known in the world of science fiction and fantasy, brought out *Reading the Vampire Slayer: An Unofficial Guide to Buffy and Angel* in 2001. These two collections—the first British-produced, the second US-produced; the first of ten essays, the second of twenty-two—helped establish the breadth and depth of Buffy Studies. And, in the world of the internet, *Buffy* scholars were starting to get to know each other (as Buffy fans were already successfully doing).

[7] *Buffy* scholarship was furthered in 2002 with the first academic conference on *Buffy*, sponsored by the University of East Anglia at Norwich, England. Originally planned as a one-day event, the number of good proposals led the organizers—Carol O'Sullivan, Claire Thomson, Catherine Fuller, and Scott MacKenzie—to extend the event to two days (19-20 October). I gave the opening keynote address and Roz Kaveney led the closing summative discussion; and the speakers in between, once again, represented a broad array of disciplines. Many in attendance felt a sense of exhilaration at the realization that *Buffy* could be praised in good conscience. The praise was neither monolithic nor, for the most part, uninformed (I do recall having to point out the existence of previous scholarship—Kent Ono's and Zoe-Jane Playdon's-- to certain graduate student presenters). In the closing session, UEA film professor Peter Kramer called for further work in a variety of areas including, for example, production elements. His call for further work, in itself a reasonable monitory note, became further entangled (correctly or incorrectly) with an ongoing matter of debate in television studies in general and Buffy Studies in particular: Does enthusiasm preclude (or dilute) responsible scholarship? (See Burr; Wilcox *Why*, Ch. 11.)

[8] *Buffy* scholars continued to meet and, in the process, seemed inevitably to continue to enjoy themselves. The next month, the University of Melbourne sponsored The Buffyverse: A Symposium. Organized by Angela Ndalians, this meeting presented only fifteen speakers, but drew an audience of hundreds. In July 2003, Geraldine Bloustien of the University of South Australia at Adelaide presented *Staking a Claim: Exploring the Global Reach of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a one-day symposium with concurrent sessions and keynotes by Douglas Kellner, David Lavery, and me. And finally, in 2004, the US held an academic *Buffy* conference, organized by David and me, sponsored by Middle Tennessee State University, in Nashville, Tennessee, Memorial Day Weekend: The *Slayage* Conference on the Buffyverse (SC1). The four keynotes included two professors, one journalist, and one novelist with behind-the-scenes knowledge of the series. Just under 200 scholars from around the world presented; approximately 400 registered. Thus the number of those who attended simply to listen and participate in discussions was more or less equal to the number of scholars presenting.

[9] In a world where scholars often only listen to themselves, this open interaction was a rarity. At this conference, some scholars felt the need to defend their right to criticize the series. Patricia Pender, for instance, argued that it was a mark of the maturity of the field of study that one did not need to be so protective as to eschew negative comment when it seems called for. Perhaps the history of television studies as an often denigrated (one might say demonized) field of endeavour—and/or one in which negative criticism seems required of those who wish for academic credibility—colored the discussion surrounding her remarks (and similar discussions). But most important is the fact that people were engaged in these discussions. And the content of the discussions had implications not only for Buffy Studies but also for the wider, still growing field of television studies. Most of the conference was spent in straightforward (and pleasurable) analysis of the series—text and contexts, creators and audience. SC2, the *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverse, was held on Memorial Day Weekend of 2006 (see the reports by Pender and Rogers in this issue). In the intervening year of 2005, Bring Your Own Subtext, a conference held at British university in July, considered the work of Joss Whedon from a sociological perspective. The title comes from a well-known, often quoted statement by Joss Whedon, inviting

the audience to engage in a variety of interpretations of the text (Whedon is a Wesleyan University film studies graduate and admirer of the work of critic Robin Wood, well-known for his recognition of multivocality in film.) This conference was, like the others, a lively meeting of scholarly minds. (See Ewan Kirkland's conference review in *Slayage* 18 [5.2]). But the university which sponsored it would not allow the word "Buffy" in the title of the conference; administrators were reportedly concerned that the topic would be viewed as inappropriate for academic study, concerned that it would evoke "bad press"—and indeed, it did receive public chastisement in the press from government education experts. Little wonder that television scholars are sometimes defensive; material which they consider to be valuable (whether for aesthetic or sociological reasons) can still be denied standing, denied its name.

[10] Nevertheless, during the course of time when these conferences were being held, more and more written work on *Buffy* was published. In 2003 Candace Havens published her biography of Joss Whedon, and while we may hope for a longer work in the future, we are fortunate to have a biography so early in Buffy Studies. In 2003 a special issue of *Refractory: The Journal of Entertainment Media* was devoted to Buffy Studies; editor Ndalianis published fifteen essays (including several presented at the 2002 Melbourne gathering). 2003 brought another major collection, James South's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale* (volume 4 in the Popular Culture and Philosophy series). Though its declared primary purpose was to serve philosophy (that is, *Buffy* was the means rather than the end), nonetheless many of the authors also valued the series, and, as South says in his introduction, their chapters 'reflect what it means to turn to a television show for philosophical stimulation' (3). The volume contained analyses of the role of science and rationality in the series, Faith the Slayer and Nietzsche, the means vs. the end, and more. Like South, Frances Early continued her Buffy Studies in 2003. With Kathleen Kennedy, she edited *Athena's Daughters: Television's New Women Warriors*. With a foreword by me, it included four essays on *Buffy* discussing violence, the role of women, class and racial issues, male fans. Dawn Heineken's *The Warrior Women of Television: A Feminist Cultural Analysis of the New Female Body in Popular Media* also devoted lengthy discussion to *Buffy*. And in 2003 Michael Adams published his Oxford University Press book *Slayer Slang: A Buffy the Vampire Slayer Lexicon*, which contained not only chapters on the formation of Buffyspeak and the value of ephemeral language, but also a detailed analytical dictionary of Buffy terms. *Slayer Slang* sported an introduction by *Buffy* writer Jane Espenson, a former 'student in the graduate linguistics program at U. C. Berkeley' (vii). Among its other qualities, *Slayer Slang* very carefully cited earlier Buffy Studies. At the 2004 Nashville *Slayage* conference, *Slayer Slang* was announced as the first book-category winner of the annual award for Buffy Studies, the Mr. Pointy. The article category was won by graduate student Jes Battis for "'She's Not All Grown Yet': Willow as Hybrid/Hero in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,' up against some impressive professorial competition.

[11] 2004 brought a dramatically revised version of Kaveney's collection, with many new contributions—perhaps most notably including interviews with *Buffy* writers Jane Espenson and Steven S. DeKnight. Also in 2004, two important books on religion in *Buffy* were published. Greg Stevenson's *Televised Morality: The Case of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* analyses *Buffy* from the perspective of the Christian values to be found in a show created by an avowed atheist and often criticized by right-wing Christians. It is a reasoned work which recognizes and applies earlier *Buffy* scholarship. It is significant, among other reasons, for its carefully argued defense of the long-term contextualization of morality to be found in the multi-episode arcs and seasons of *Buffy*—a type of analysis which, as he notes, should be applied to other series as well. Stevenson's thesis helps to demonstrate the role of *Buffy* as a groundbreaker in establishing the potential of television as a medium, and in establishing structural criteria by which other series should be judged. Its continuity of storyline (much more scrupulous than most series' before it) set an example and made such analysis possible. He explains the interconnection of structure and content available to long-term serial television. Jana Riess's *What Would Buffy Do? The Vampire Slayer as Spiritual Guide*, written by a Columbia University Ph.D. in religion, provides a broader

scope of religious interpretations, from Buddhist to Catholic to Hindu; for example, Riess discusses Buffy (and Angel) as a bodhisattva, with footnotes rich with reference. Riess's book won the Mr. Pointy book award for 2004. The nominees for the Mr. Pointy for best article published in 2004 tell us something about the variety of work in Buffy Studies. They included graduate student Yael Sherman's Bakhtinian study 'Tracing the Carnival Spirit in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: Feminist Reworkings of the Grotesque'; medieval literature professor Elizabeth Rambo's self-described traditional close reading "'Lessons" for Season Seven of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'; Patricia Pender's *Third Wave* feminist anthology contribution; James South's closely reasoned, emotionally resonant *Slayage* conference keynote—a defense of the much-maligned last season of the series, 'On the Philosophical Consistency of Season Seven'; [3] and David Lavery's "'I Wrote My Thesis on You": *Buffy* Studies as an Academic Cult,' which managed to dress wide-ranging scholarly exploration in a mix of humor and intellectual indignation. Perhaps it should not have been surprising that, when *Buffy* scholars voted, they voted for this impressively able defense of our field as the Mr. Pointy winner for best article of 2004.

[12] Lavery's work moves us into the realm of the metacritical, as does another major article of 2004: Sue Turnbull's "'Not Just Another *Buffy* Paper": Towards an Aesthetics of Television.' "'Not Just Another *Buffy* Paper,'" another SC1 keynote, proposes categories of aesthetic analysis for television using *Buffy* as an exemplary text. It was voted a Mr. Pointy for the best paper presented at the conference. Turnbull, a media studies scholar, authored (in 2003, with Vyvyan Stranieri) *Bite Me: Narrative Structures and Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a guide to teaching *Buffy*, and a *Continuum* article on 'Teaching *Buffy*' (among other *Buffy* essays). Another noteworthy *Buffy* publication of 2004 comes in the area of pedagogy: Issue 35 of the *Media Education Journal*, edited by Des Murphy, gives us five essays on *Buffy* by scholars such as Michele Paule, Laura Davies, and Laura Hills. Barbara Maio's 2004 introduction to *Buffy*, part of the Fiction TV series, has the distinction of being the first book-length study in Italian, with discussions of *Buffy's* feminism; the ethics and aesthetics of the undead; family, religion, and authority; fanfiction, etc. While Maio's is the first book-length work, other Italian scholars, such as Massimo Introvigne and Giada da Ros, had already published—Introvigne from the larger perspective of vampire studies and religion, and da Ros in analyzing *Buffy's* soap opera elements. And Maio now has a contract to produce a collection of essays in Italian on *Buffy*.

[13] 2005 has already seen major publications. In August, the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* published a special issue (edited by Dee Amy Chin and Milly Williamson) devoted to the *Buffy* character of Spike, a locus of discussion for gender, class, performance, and other subjects. The issue included seven articles. Three important books have appeared. The *Reading Angel* collection, edited by Stacey Abbott (with an afterword by me and David Lavery), expands Buffyverse scholarship to include the series' darker spinoff. (Abbott and others had already published articles on the series.) Lorna Jowett's *Sex and the Slayer*, titled to sell, is really a very careful analysis of gender issues in *Buffy* (the subtitle is 'A Gender Studies Primer for the *Buffy* Fan'). Its conclusion (to oversimplify) is that, as far as popular television gender presentation is concerned, *Buffy* is one-eyed among the blind. The journey to that conclusion moves through much lively observation on individual episodes. Battis's *Blood Relations* is a mixture of theoretical evaluations of the cultural implications of familial relations with engaging personal commentary on the author's response to the television text. Like *Sex and the Slayer*, it is often sharply observant. While Jowett's work is in the central tradition of *Buffy* Studies in terms of its topic, Battis's demonstrates that the series easily sustains book-length analysis of other subjects.

[14] Among those subjects is aesthetic analysis. My own *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has now been released in the UK and should have appeared in the US by the time this article is published. It proposes *Buffy* as a test case for the aesthetic value of television. Two sections of six chapters each—*Panorama* and *Tight Focus*—develop the idea that good television supports analysis of both long-term patterns and of individual episodes. The book contemplates narratology, visuals, sounds, music—among other things. And Matthew Pateman's just released *The*

*Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* discusses aesthetics and ethics, aesthetics and ethnicity, and more—including four chapters focusing on the four dreams which constitute four acts of the episode 'Restless' (4.22); like me, he covers the big picture and the close-up. Already under contract is Lynne Edwards' *The Other Sunnydale: Representations of Blackness in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. (Edwards authored the *Fighting the Forces* chapter 'Slaying in Black and White: Kendra as Tragic Mulatta in *Buffy*.) These very recent books represent both social and aesthetic interests, which *Buffy* still strongly sustains.

[15] Sustained interest from students expanded the journal territory for *Buffy* as well. In 2005 Lynne Edwards and Katy Stevens, in association with *Slayage*, launched *Watcher Junior*, a refereed online journal for undergraduate work in *Buffy* Studies. It has just published its first issue.

[16] As the boundaries of the television text have become more and more difficult to define (previews? commercials? fanfiction?), so too have the boundaries of scholarship. *Watcher Junior* editor and doctoral candidate Katy Stevens is, among other things, the editor of the *All Slay* zine, three issues of scholarly essays on *Buffy*—and, in my view, a good source for a *Buffy* researcher, though not a traditional journal. There are thoughtful essays in the popular press, such as Stephanie Zacharek's *Salon.com* essays on *Buffy*. There is also a large group of supplementary publications. There are books of scripts published by Pocket Books. Keith Topping's *The Complete Slayer* provides significant background information—for instance, that '*Buffy* actually received its first airing in New Zealand, where it began on 2 February 1997, a full six weeks ahead of the series' US debut' (12 n.3). Of this type of publication, probably the best-known volumes are *The Watcher's Guides* by Nancy Holder and Christopher Golden. These contain not just episode summaries but valuable interviews with cast and crew members such as Director of Photography Michael Gershman and Production Designer Carey Meyer. The *Buffy* and *Angel* DVDs provide similarly useful interviews and commentaries, as Lavery points out in his article "'Emotional Resonance and Rocket Launchers.'" Nikki Stafford's *Once Bitten* provides a chapter surveying *Buffy* academia and providing advice about web sites such as the *Buffy* Dialogue Database, which allows users to search for particular phrases of dialogue. What does it tell us when people wish to call to mind a certain phrase from a text—in its exact form? What does it tell us when people are fascinated by the method of creation of a text to the point that they read interviews with production designers and costumers? That there is enough interest to sustain these publications demonstrates the powerful continuing appeal of the *Buffy* text.

[17] *Seven Seasons of Buffy* presents essays by science fiction/fantasy authors such as Holder and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro; they provide insight from a fiction-writer's perspective (as does the similar *Angel* book). Another kind of boundary-crossing can be seen in the work of Jane Espenson, the admired *Buffy/Angel/Firefly* writer who, as noted, has written the introduction to Adams' book and provided an interview for Kaveney: Espenson has now edited a collection of essays on Whedon's *Firefly*, part of the same SmartPop series of science fiction/fantasy-writer essay collections. Espenson also attended WriterCon, the conference for fanfic writers. There is genuinely dreadful fanfic, but there is also material of high quality, and fanfic on the *Buffy*verse (like *The X-Files* before it) tends to have a higher-than-usual proportion of good work. Fanfic, by its nature, is an interpretation of the television text. It is no more scholarship than any other fiction, but its writers, like the writers in the *Seven Seasons* book, sometimes have valuable insights. Scholars are willing to use fanfic authors as objects of study; one wonders whether or not they will be given status as subjects in the more and more complex conversation on the *Buffy*verse in general and television in particular. Scholars who already sometimes feel professionally defensive about their status (see Burr) may hesitate to wander these intellectual woods. There is certainly no dearth of traditional scholarship on *Buffy*, and it grows year by year. But why would one choose not to learn from whatever source can provide knowledge or understanding?

[18] Another element of the liminality of *Buffy* Studies is yet to be addressed. At the closing session of the UEA Blood, Text, and Fears conference, film scholar Scott MacKenzie questioned the term *Buffy* Studies, asking whether one would refer to

Shakespeare studies. Several literature professors in the audience called out "Yes!" He may have been thinking of *Hamlet* studies—although that term is used as well. The term *Buffy* Studies may be taken to refer to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and all its related materials, and the term Buffyverse to the diegesis of that series (and productions, such as fanfic, which take place in the same or a related fictional world); the terms may include reference to the spinoff series *Angel*, though some fans and scholars of that series prefer to distinguish between the two fictional worlds. Others use the term Whedonverse and Whedon Studies; the second *Slayage* conference, SC2, is the *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses. With the addition of Whedon's Western/science fiction series *Firefly*, television scholarship on Whedon is expanding into material which is not located in the fiction of the Buffyverse.

[19] It may seem at first thought that an appropriate Venn diagram would show the Whedonverse containing the Buffyverse, but that is not precisely the case, since there is work on *Buffy's* other creators—writer Jane Espenson, musician Christophe Beck, actor James Marsters, even stunt coordinator Jeff Pruitt—though every *Buffy* episode is touched by the hand of Joss Whedon. It is the nature of the multiplicity of television's creation that results in their being both *Buffy* Studies and Whedon Studies. There are those who are fascinated by, for instance, the gender positions invoked in *Buffy* who will not follow *Firefly*; there are those who are fascinated by Whedon's writing and direction who will. I believe both areas of study (the auteur centered and the text centered—not to mention the audience studies) will continue and flourish. The term *Buffy* Studies may win out simply because of the irresistible draw of assonance.

[20] And that comment on the power of language leads me to another point. (Wait for it—it will take a while to get there.) At some point, sociological elements of *Buffy* will have become a document of history, a sign of a moment in this world's time. But I have no doubt that we will continue to read *Buffy* and to write about *Buffy*. As Janet McCabe says, "No other single text attracts so much attention." There are some who do not consider it to be a completely respectable topic of study (well, hurray for that). Some still dismiss the idea of a good-looking young woman (who *wants* to look good) as a hero; many of us still have a Puritanical flavour to the virtue of our analyses. As I have noted, *Buffy's* status as feminist (or postfeminist) is contested, despite Joss Whedon's assertions that he wrote with feminist purpose, and despite the defenses of various critics (myself among them). Presumably the series would be more acceptable to some if its protagonist disdained her good looks and did not take pleasure in the physical goods of this world. There are even, dismayingly, some viewers who have the sense that *Buffy* the series is somehow genuinely aligned with demonic forces operating in this world (see, e.g., the opening email epigraph). While I hope that few if any scholars share this view, I suspect that its presence among the mothers and dads who pay tuition for college students is one reason that some administrators do not happily embrace *Buffy* Studies. In fact, the two views mentioned in this paragraph suggest that administrators might see positive dislike from both the left and the right.

[21] Television itself, of course, is new as an artistic medium; and in any given age, the most popular medium is suspect. When Shakespeare wrote, plays were not high art (that would have been nondramatic poetry); nor, when Dickens wrote, were novels. *Buffy* would also probably be given more respect if it came from a different genre than fantasy—if it satisfied the Puritanical lust for artistic virtue through "Realism." (Hence, for example, *The Sopranos* gets widespread respect.) But instead of being a mirror held up to nature, it is an undeniably human creation—the play of mind laid bare in its symbolism—a matter of rejoicing for some and disdain for others. Some otherwise intelligent people are simply mind-blind when it comes to the value of fantasy—an odd mental position in my view, given that "Realism" is just as much a fiction. (And many of these folks feel no qualms about enjoying *The Odyssey*, for example, because it has the seal of approval of ancient canon.) Some intellectuals react to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with a dismissal that is not far from the mental place in which we find book burners who have never read the books. And of course, something of that same dismissal can be seen in the reaction to television in general by many who consider themselves intellectuals, but who actually have simply warmed themselves at the tribal fires of canonical power.

[22] All right, that was a bit harsh (not to mention metaphorically pompous), but one does get tired of that reflex attitude towards television. It is remarkable that *Buffy*—in spite of the mocking and denigratory response by so many in positions of educational and cultural power—continues to interest more and more people, now three years after its last broadcast. Right now it is still sociopolitically alive, and I think people will continue, for many years, to write analyses of it in those terms. *Buffy* can be seen as mythic not just in that the pattern of the hero, the monomyth, can be seen there (as several of us have pointed out), but also because it has framed a truth for its own time. (Must not every myth have started in the mind of one person?) The social satisfaction of its story is of unquestionable appeal to many of us. And yet it is also true that *Buffy* spoke to many people by representing the complexity of social reality rather than giving polemical argument in fictional form. Perhaps social analysis of *Buffy* will never completely go away, but I believe that slowly, over the years, it will dim. I hope for the day when it will be less necessary.

[23] I may be naïve to think that history will cool these issues. I have also always thought (as, I know, do many others) that *Buffy* is a profoundly moral series. Perhaps it is inevitable that its morality is grounded in social elements. Perhaps we should acknowledge as well the morality of artistic authenticity, in which resolution is earned. Indeed, the mistaken impression that fantasy shortcuts the morally earned resolution may explain the dislike many feel for fantasy. (Both bad fantasy and bad realism employ such shortcuts.) Having said all that, I hope for a better world; indeed, works like *Buffy* may help us get there (and Whedon has said that is one of his goals). So I hope for the day when social analysis will be less necessary.

[24] But when and if that day comes, we will still be discussing *Buffy*. Four paragraphs back, I noted the power of language in the very sound of the phrase "*Buffy* Studies." People quote lines of *Buffy* (often Whedon) the way they quote Shakespeare, making the text a part of the way to see life. *Buffy* has at its command not only the power of language but of image and of music—woven in story over long years, with living characters who grow through time. Its complexity and use of symbolism allows for a multiplicity of interpretations. Nowadays, people sometimes learn history in order to better enjoy Shakespeare's plays—not the other way around. We love the language, we love the characters, we love the struggle of the characters—or their comedic play. The same is true for *Buffy*. *Buffy* lives in the memory of its viewers, many of whom invoke that memory by many re-viewings. Joss Whedon worked with a company of artistic collaborators (and I discuss this in the introduction *Why Buffy Matters*, among other places). A necessary part of the work of a television artist is the ability to generate such collaboration. That said, I will also assert that Whedon is probably the closest thing to Shakespeare that we have around these days. If we in television studies have a Shakespeare, it is no wonder that we have more and more scholarship and criticism engaged in praise of the medium. Whedon is helping to free television scholars to write about the inherent worth of television as art.

[25] Our work may, in the view of some educators and arbiters of culture, be "banished to the demon section of the card catalog." In fact one writer has suggested that *Buffy* scholars enjoy the sense of being the outsider who works for the good unrecognized by the majority—identifying with the role the *Buffy* characters play. That may be true—but there's more to *Buffy* Studies than role-playing. I'm not sure I can explain the miracle of incarnation that constitutes art. But recognizing it is a compelling reason, for some of us, to put up with quite a bit of mockery.

[26] Early in September, a woman who looked to be in her thirties, the student of another professor at our college here in middle Georgia, came to my office to tell me she had just learned of my work in *Buffy* Studies. She tried to express her happiness at the realization that she was not alone in her love for the series (her only obsession, as she put it). This woman was not excited about clothing styles or gorgeous stars or even a younger role model; she was excited about a work of art. That is what most of *Buffy's* fan scholars and the scholar fans have in common.

[27] This essay has been only the briefest of surveys; much excellent work in various fields (social and aesthetic) has gone unmentioned. *Buffy* Studies reveals many of the major questions about television studies—the nature of the text, the nature of

authorship, the liminality of scholarly undertakings. It invites us to continue our studies, and to study our studies. Both its social implications and its aesthetic success compel response. Most significantly, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is one of the major television texts, and it will not only continue to provoke scholarship on itself but will also, more and more, help justify scholarship on other television series. A century from now, heaven help us, it may even be respectable. In fact, it is one of those necessary creations which establish the value of certain kinds of art. In this case, the art is television.

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[1] In summer 1998, the *Transylvanian Journal* published an article by Michael Betancourt on "Education in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." The journal was short-lived and copies are not generally accessible. I am indebted to Elizabeth Miller for providing me with the bibliographic information and a copy of the article, which focuses its

examination on the first episode of *Buffy*.

[2] Some work on television is now cited in the MLA bibliography, including some articles and a few books on *Buffy*. In March 2006 Alys Hornick took over Derik Badman's role as bibliographer.

[3] Both fans and scholars are divided in their evaluation of season seven as successful or not, for reasons too various to detail here.



**Patrick Shade**

**Screaming to be Heard:  
Reminders and Insights on Community and  
Communication in "Hush"**



[1] Philosophers have long recognized the power of employing imaginative scenarios to illuminate meanings and structures we normally take for granted. Plato, for instance, sought to better understand justice not by examining existing institutions but by exploring a city *in logos*. Indeed, he discusses a city "with a fever" whose pursuit of luxuries (such as fine foods, furniture, perfumes, prostitutes, actors and artists) helps illuminate the genesis and nature of justice.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Descartes developed his malicious demon scenario to discover what certainty remained if he imagined a catastrophic epistemic situation in which such a demon tried to deceive him about everything.<sup>2</sup> The chief goal of such endeavors is to isolate ideas or elements that are otherwise confused or obscured. Imaginative presentation thus aids the analysis of complex phenomena, such as justice or the foundations of knowledge. Contemporary scholars increasingly recognize that television and film afford opportunities to imaginatively explore and test complex ideas, sometimes with significant depth of insight.<sup>3</sup> In the following, I will argue that the extreme scenario presented in "Hush" (4010) wherein all the citizens of Sunnydale lose the ability to speak deepens our understanding of the complex dynamics of communication.<sup>4</sup>

[2] The episode's chief value appears to be highlighting nonverbal modes of communication that are typically obscured by our penchant for talking. Indeed, writer/director Joss Whedon legitimates this interpretation in his commentary on the episode when he notes that "when you stop talking, you start communicating."<sup>5</sup> I say this theme "appears" to be the chief value of "Hush," however, for the episode creatively uncovers the various dimensions of both nonverbal *and* verbal communication.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, "Hush" illustrates a theme common to American philosophers like John Dewey and G. H. Mead who contend that communication provides the basis for community; a disruption in communication thus negatively affects the functioning of the corresponding community. I will argue that "Hush" gains dramatic and educative value by imaginatively exposing these diverse modes of communication and, importantly, their corresponding impact on community and communal living.

**The Dynamics of Communication**

[3] I begin by noting the limitations and virtues of verbal communication that "Hush" demonstrates. Attention to its virtues complicates Whedon's remark that "what ['Hush' is] about is the idea that when you stop talking, you start communicating—the idea

that language, because it's so specific and constrictive, can interfere with actual communication. Everything was about language." Even a casual viewing of the episode reveals its emphasis on the various limitations—and sometimes abuses—of talking or verbal communication; these include our use of it as a distancing tactic to separate ourselves from others and as white noise to avoid confronting real issues. Like all the best episodes of *Buffy*, however, "Hush" treats its topic with complexity and so presents more than a single simple lesson. The episode demonstrates not only the limits of verbal communication but also its virtues. Similarly, while it ostensibly celebrates the vitality of nonverbal modes of communication, it also displays their shortcomings.<sup>7</sup>

[4] The early scenes of "Hush" focus on ordinary ways in which talking impedes rather than facilitates genuine communication. Our main characters are at odds, failing to communicate with one another. Buffy and Riley each possess a secret vocation that leaves them unable to act on their mutual attraction. In a seemingly innocent exchange after Dr. Walsh's class, Buffy uses verbal banter to mask the truth.

Riley: So what have you got going on tonight?

Buffy: Oh, patrolling.

Riley: Patrolling?

Buffy: Eh, Petroleum.

Riley: Petroleum?

Buffy: Uh huh.

Riley similarly covers up his duties with the Initiative by explaining that his evening plan is to grade papers. As they lean in for what would be their first kiss, Buffy interrupts the act when she realizes that, since there are no papers to grade, Riley's comment does not make sense. The two part in relative confusion, without kissing. Buffy later acknowledges to Willow that talking is impeding the development of her romantic relationship.

Buffy: I get nervous and I start babbling, and he starts babbling, and it's a babble fest. Plus, every time we talk I have to lie. The slayer thing comes up one way or another. I wish I could just come clean.

Buffy and Riley both, perhaps unwittingly, allow verbal exchanges to construct barriers between them.

[5] Xander and Willow also face impasses arising from verbal communication. Confused about the status of their relationship, Anya asks Xander to explain how he feels about her. He resorts to jokes ("You really did turn into a real girl didn't you?") and finally a stuttering deferral to avoid addressing her concerns:

Anya: What do I mean to you?

Xander: I ... we, you know, we spend ... we'll talk about it later.

Xander's bumbled reply leaves Anya questioning whether the direct and obvious physical act of sex is the true basis of their relationship. In a different storyline, Willow wishes her Wicca group would move beyond idly chattering about witchcraft to actually

practicing it. She later gives Buffy the following overview of the latest Wicca meeting:

Willow: Talk, all talk. Blah blah Gaia. Blah blah moon, menstrual life force power thingy. You know after a couple sessions I was hoping we would get into something real, but ...

Hence, the opening scenes of "Hush" stress ways in which the spoken word can be used to mask the truth, forestall significant action, and deflect communication needed to help nurture relationships. These scenes reveal how readily we use talking to postpone overt action and to cover or lie about how we feel. Thus, even though it is such a pervasive medium, the verbal sometimes undermines the usual goals of communication—whether sharing meaning, preparing for consummating action, or presenting the truth.

[6] Once Sunnydale's ghoulish new visitors, the Gentlemen, arrive, "Hush" highlights the advantages of the nonverbal by creatively exposing the vast field of gestures that underlies and often goes unnoticed because of the verbal.<sup>8</sup> Although at an impasse early in the episode, our heroes' relationships show signs of renewed growth once the Gentlemen rob them (and all the citizens of Sunnydale) of their voices. Constrained to nonverbal modes of communicating, Buffy and Riley eventually reveal the truth about their relationship and respective identities. The night after losing their voices, Buffy and Riley run into one another on the street, each patrolling to help curb Sunnydale's chaos. At first, they show their concern for one another with an embrace and appropriate facial expressions (mostly through eyebrow movement); they also mouth simple sentences (e.g., "Are you ok?"). When they hear a crashing noise in the background, however, each remembers the secret nature of his or her nocturnal walk and moves to depart. Unable to resort to creative rationalizations about their reasons for abruptly leaving, Buffy and Riley allow themselves to express the depth of their concern for one another with a first kiss. The situation of losing their voices requires them to draw on means of communicating that verbal language obscures or enables them to ignore. In this new situation, a single look complemented by an overture to kiss is able to overcome the walls they have created with words. Nonverbal communication further erodes the barriers between them later in the episode. When the two encounter one another while fighting the Gentlemen, their skilled actions reveal their respective talents and vocations (Buffy as the slayer and Riley as a member of the Initiative) in a way that cannot be deflected with witty banter. While simply telling one another what they *do* would likely lead to incredulity (indeed, even after seeing Buffy in action, Riley remains confused about what a Slayer really is), their skilled actions reveal an unadulterated truth. The Buffy-Riley storyline, then, demonstrates how nonverbal physical gestures can reveal the truth about feelings and abilities.

[7] Developments in the other storylines also reinforce these lessons. When Xander walks into Giles' place and finds Spike hovering over Anya on a couch, he mistakenly concludes that Spike has killed her. Unable to verbally interrogate him, Xander pummels Spike, even though Anya awakes and is quite notably alive in the background. Anya thus learns the depth of Xander's feelings and communicates her joy with a suggestive sexual gesture. The special events of "Hush" significantly affect Willow's storyline as well, since this episode marks the beginning of her romantic

relationship with Tara.<sup>9</sup> When the two flee to the laundry room to escape the Gentlemen, Tara observes Willow's attempts to mentally move the drink machine to block the door. Understanding Willow's power via her facial expression and body movements, Tara subsequently conveys her own power by joining hands with Willow. Although she was shy and stuttered at the Wicca meeting, Tara has little difficulty expressing her powers and interests in this context. Willow has now found what she was looking for in her Wicca group: a partner with whom she can actually practice witchcraft. Importantly, the two continue holding hands after they successfully block the door, their lingering contact signifying potential intimacy. Though they lack a shared past, they still communicate much about themselves without the assistance of written or spoken symbols and so begin one of the series' longest romantic relationships.

[8] Whedon thus rightly underscores the fact that genuine communication occurs in the absence of talking. Gestures can speak volumes, and they prove especially well-suited to revealing feelings and demonstrating abilities. While on first impression we might be tempted to interpret "Hush" as celebrating and even prioritizing the nonverbal, doing so would mask the manner in which the episode emphasizes that *both* the nonverbal *and* the verbal are vital instruments of ongoing communication, each with its attendant advantages and liabilities. By creatively exploring both in the same episode, "Hush" reminds us of the complexity of human communication and prevents us from simplistically overlooking or prioritizing one mode.

[9] Though "Hush" does emphasize the advantages of the nonverbal, a variety of scenes expose its limits by revealing how gestures can be misinterpreted, often with humorous results. A first example occurs during the expository scene in which Giles uses overhead transparencies to explain who the Gentlemen are and how they can be defeated. Indicating how she proposes to destroy the Gentlemen, Buffy gesticulates vertically with her fist to indicate that she should slay them. The gang, however, misinterprets her gesture to be sexual in nature and glances at her askew. Once she repeats the motion with a stake in hand, the misunderstanding is cleared up. In a second example, Buffy is held captive by the footmen and tries to direct Riley to smash the box containing the town's voices. The box is on a table with jars bearing the hearts of the Gentlemen's victims. Thrusting her body forward and raising her eyebrows, Buffy motions to the table to indicate that something should be destroyed. Riley mistakenly thinks a jar is the appropriate object and shatters it with exuberance. Buffy urgently corrects him by mimicking a hinge with her hands to indicate opening a lid. Riley finally understands and, smashing the box, frees the voices.

[10] These scenes expose important shortcomings that beset nonverbal gestures. First, these gestures are often imprecise and prone to misunderstanding. Compare Buffy's various moves with the proposal "I should stake them!" or the command "Smash the box!" Using the spoken word, Buffy readily could have directed Riley's attention to *the box*, or *the small brown box*, or *the box next to the jar*. We do well not to forget the power that adjectives and prepositional phrases possess in increasing our ability to discriminate and identify things; they enable us to communicate about relationships among objects and agents (both present and absent, both real and ideal) in ways the nonverbal can only dimly suggest. A second limitation is that nonverbal gestures restrict interaction and communication to the proximate environment. While body language possesses a significant directness (evidenced in the Buffy-Riley kiss, for instance) that heightens its capacity to convey truth (especially about feelings and

abilities), this immediacy is also a liability. The absence of the voice severely limits the scope of the environment with which we can interact, as is clearly illustrated when the Gentlemen extract their first heart. Their victim is alone in his dorm room. Although there are students in adjacent rooms, he is unable to summon them since he cannot communicate with anyone who does not see him. Verbal language enables us to extend the environment with which we interact, thereby increasing the number of people with whom we communicate. "Hush" exposes and plays on these limitations of the nonverbal just as readily as it draws our attention to the liabilities of the verbal. [11] An additional, albeit subtle, example underscores the contextuality of gestures. As they first learn they have lost their voices, Xander and Spike struggle to understand what has happened to them. Xander points an accusing finger at Spike, clearly blaming the vampire for this new condition.<sup>10</sup> Spike responds by raising two fingers in the form of a V (with his palm facing himself), the British equivalent of giving "the finger."<sup>11</sup> Whether Xander registers the insult is difficult to tell, since after a momentary look of confusion he turns his attention to the telephone, thinking he can contact Buffy with it. Even so, it is quite likely that he missed the point (as, apparently, did the broadcast censors) since he is not a particularly cosmopolitan character. This simple scene reminds us that different cultures not only have unique languages and verbal expressions, they also have distinctive means of moving and gesturing. Hence, even nonverbal modes of communication are affected by the limits of cultural context.

[12] While the episode's drama grows out of the impediments talking can generate, its development positively reinforces the value and virtues of verbal language. Although the verbal can obscure the truth, it also offers great precision and conveys complex information. The final scene of "Hush" shows Buffy and Riley unable to say anything even though they have regained their voices. Importantly, at the beginning of the next episode ("Doomed," 4011), they break their silence and finally talk honestly about their respective vocations. Progress in the storyline (and their relationship) requires revelations about their identities that can only be conveyed through stories about the past.<sup>12</sup> Just as it broadens our spatial horizon, verbal communication similarly expands our temporal horizon in ways nonverbal modes of expression cannot. Each person has a history and a present vocation whose complexity transcends what can be identified or shared by the nonverbal. Verbal communication is highly symbolic, making "present" what is strictly speaking "absent" from the environment so that it can bear on our behavior.<sup>13</sup> Talking, then, enables us to represent the past (and foretell the future) to ourselves and to one another, thereby enhancing our resources for interacting with one another.

[13] Consequently, "Hush" celebrates the limits and virtues of *both* the nonverbal *and* the verbal. The episode reminds us that each offers a unique mode of communication, even though each is also capable of distortion and correction. We tend to be most readily aware of verbal means, so closely linked are they to our conscious lives,<sup>14</sup> but "Hush" stresses that we are embodied creatures whose communication consists in more than the spoken word. It reminds us that we have multiple resources we regularly employ in communicating. These different modes of communication not only offer us unique possibilities for interacting but also frequently function in tandem. The verbal and nonverbal supplement one another to render our communicative acts all the more powerful. For instance, a dimly felt sense of danger complemented by a precise articulation of its source can render us that much more safe. Similarly, a kiss gains

significance (and is often complicated) when followed by a personal revelation. Consequently, meaning and communication are not simply located in words; each grows from and represents a vital facet of the living movement of interaction. These insights have practical import, especially to the extent that we (especially philosophers) tend to forget or fail to consider them. Human communication is not simply a matter of words or propositions; nor is it simply a matter of physical acts or gestures. It consists in interweaving *both* modes to express, direct, and enhance meaningful action.

### **Communication and Community**

[14] What happens, then, when one of these modes is denied us? Our ability to communicate is obviously restricted, but—and this is my second main point—so are the possibilities for communal action. To interpret “Hush” as romantically celebrating the more embodied and often primitive forms of nonverbal communication is to overlook the lessons it teaches us about the complicated dynamics of human community. Indeed, the episode offers significant insights concerning the connections between communication and community.<sup>15</sup> In his commentary, Whedon acknowledges that he took pains to make the presence of community palpable in “Hush.” For instance, he used large sets and many extras so that the larger communal life of Sunnydale would be more apparent to audience than it usually is. Also important is the introduction of the two new characters, Olivia and Tara. Their responses to the Gentlemen are less sophisticated than those of the Scoobies, and so they are representative of the larger community (and, quite likely, of the viewer). Because they lack the powers and abilities of the Scoobies, Olivia’s gasp on seeing a Gentleman pass by her window and Tara’s realization that she is being followed while walking across campus heighten our sense of vulnerability and so make these scenes more frightening. The Gentlemen are nightmarish not only because of their deathly skeletal appearance, but also because they weaken shared habits and institutions vital to the functioning of the community at large. In the process, they restrict modes of interaction, thereby cutting people off from one another and circumscribing the human self.<sup>16</sup>

[15] Drawing on insights of American pragmatists helps us articulate the lessons concerning community implicit in “Hush.” A central thesis Dewey and Mead defend is that communication makes community possible in the first place. Dewey, for instance, argues that language utilizes sounds as signs for mutual assistance and direction, making participation—acting *with* rather than merely *alongside* others—possible.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, community signifies an extension of our field of action, since it represents our capacity to coordinate and cooperate via communication, thereby realizing goals impossible to achieve individually.

[16] At the heart of communicative acts is a tripartite relationship between at least two individuals.<sup>18</sup> One person expresses something via a gesture, sign, or symbol to another person. This transaction allows for shared interaction wherein each participant’s contribution is a constitutive element of the other’s act, thereby creating richer modes of association. Mead explains that while others’ basic gestures may stimulate us to respond in a specific manner (as when in a dog fight, the growling of a larger dog typically calls out a cowering response in the smaller dog), *significant* gestures call out the *same* response in the self and in others, thereby establishing shared meanings that form the basis of concerted (rather than reactionary) behavior.<sup>19</sup> Hence, communication is predicated on common responses that make possible cooperative actions each individual may identify as belonging to him or her

self.<sup>20</sup> When playing a baseball game, for instance, Mead explains that the players select their individual actions according to the team's goal (namely, to win the game). Each player identifies his or her function in reference to common meanings and responses (e.g., to catch the ball to stop the other team) that are defined in light of a shared purpose. Consequently, the players act in reference to one another; their collective actions make possible the realization of a common goal via different but coordinated activities. Without communication, we could *react* to our environment but we could not *deliberately coordinate* our actions to realize a shared goal. The metaphor of a game happily implicates the various nonverbal abilities and embodied habits that operate and are organized by means of explicitly articulated strategies, reinforcing the themes of the first section of this paper.

[17] From a pragmatist perspective, communities are constituted of complex patterns of nonverbal and verbal habits whereby we share meanings and participate in common actions. The reaction of the tight-knit Scoobies to the Gentlemen illustrates how these communal dynamics function. As a general rule, the Scoobies' witty verbal exchanges help identify and define their membership in this "gang" or community.<sup>21</sup> In "Hush," of course, they lack recourse to such resources, but their shared history gives them a common understanding of the meanings of gestures, artifacts, and acts related to the practice of slaying that remain intact. Congregating at Giles' primary abode (initially the library, and in "Hush" his home) bears special meaning for the Scoobies, for it represents central headquarters where they do research and begin to address whatever threat they face. The Scoobies all know that when danger arises they should meet at Giles', and this is exactly what they do the morning after losing their voices. A second dynamic of the Scooby community whose meaning is embedded in the network of slaying activities is the apparently simple act of walking the streets of Sunnydale.<sup>22</sup> Far from merely wandering around or getting from one place to another, this act signifies (to the Scoobies and to viewers) that Buffy is patrolling for dangers to which most Sunnydale citizens are blind. Finally, a stake represents Buffy's primary weapon, and it has a significance which all the Scoobies comprehend. This, however, was not always the case. In the first episode of the series, Xander jokingly proposes that Buffy is carrying around a stake to build "a really little fence" ("Welcome To The Hellmouth," 1.01). Now, however, its use is familiar to him and the other Scoobies so that Buffy is able to clarify the true meaning of her pseudo-masturbatory gesture by simply grabbing a stake. Without the shared background of the activity of slaying, these objects and acts would lack their specific meaning; they would puzzle the outsider and be as meaningless as Spike's V gesture is to most non-British viewers. Context shapes the shared meanings conveyed by communication (whether verbal or nonverbal) which allow a community to function.

[18] The Gentlemen and their footmen also constitute a community, albeit one whose purposes seriously threaten the Scoobies and Sunnydale.<sup>23</sup> Even though they lack any form of speaking, the Gentlemen appear to have a clearly structured way of life and their own unique way of communicating. Their activities are governed by norms of politeness and deference, and they have footmen who do their dirty work. Theirs is, unsurprisingly, a patriarchal community built on sharp class distinctions.<sup>24</sup> The Gentlemen are the brains of the community, using instruments of precision and following norms of civility that regulate their relations among one another. Their footmen, by contrast, are thoroughly embodied beings whose actions are wild and imprecise, representing brute force that lacks its own direction.<sup>25</sup> Together these

classes form a community with its own structures and purposes—albeit modes impenetrable to Buffy and to the audience.

[19] While the Gentlemen aim to achieve their objective by robbing humans of voices, it is important to note what the Gentlemen do and do not accomplish. Although they silence everyone, they do not paralyze the city. We have already noted that the Scoobies respond to the crisis with well-established habits, such as meeting at Giles' and patrolling. Much in Sunnydale's communal life also remains intact. This should not be a surprise, especially if community employs nonverbal means of communication as well as verbal. An early scene after the Gentlemen steal the voices brings to light some of the deep-rooted communal structures that persist in the absence of talking. Buffy and Willow walk the streets which are populated by various individuals who seek consolation in either religious or commercial activity. They see a man hurry from a liquor store, one of the few establishments open for business. Further along, a group gathers around a minister, with one participant holding up a sign indicating Revelation 15:1.<sup>26</sup> Also, an enterprising fellow is selling message boards (at inflated prices). In his commentary, Whedon rather sarcastically describes these actions as "religious craziness" and "rampant capitalism." His apparent disdain for such responses to the chaos caused by the Gentlemen should not obscure their significance. Mead, for instance, identifies the economic and religious attitudes as two of the most basic forms of cooperation which make community possible. Each requires its participants to occupy the perspective of the other and to share meanings; without this fundamental act, we would not be able to help others (the focal goal of the religious attitude) or trade goods each party deems of comparable value (the core of the economic attitude).<sup>27</sup> Such forms of cooperative activity are both common and familiar, representing basic social patterns that structure interaction in established communities. Unsurprisingly, in the face of danger we resort to basic resources which include not only personal relationships of friends and family, but also the public structures represented by economics and religion.<sup>28</sup> Even though they may weaken them, the Gentlemen are not able to eradicate these basic communal forces. Neither economics nor religion could develop or last indefinitely in the absence of verbal communication, but each is anchored in shared ways of acting that habitually assert themselves even after voices are silenced.

[20] Although communal action is still possible following the theft of voices, it is nevertheless deeply impoverished. The Gentlemen successfully interrupt and restrict the activities of both the Scoobies and Sunnydale.<sup>29</sup> While the Scoobies share many habits that enable them to function as a group, the absence of language impedes the more complex coordination of their actions. Importantly, the gang does not act as a unit to confront or destroy the Gentlemen. Defeating the Gentlemen is left to Buffy, with the accidental assistance of Riley. The larger community of Sunnydale is more loosely related and so even more seriously damaged. By silencing the town, the Gentlemen effectively isolate Sunnydale citizens from one another. In the process, they destroy the basis of rights and duties which define human interactions. Joel Feinberg notes that rights are closely linked to the ability to cry out.<sup>30</sup> Having a right is akin to having a claim against others, so that when the claim is not met, we are justified in crying out in a manner to which others must respond. Rights function to protect us and provide a partial basis for inclusion in community. The isolating effects of the Gentlemen's activities are apparent when they corner their first victim. The boy struggles against the footmen and tries to cry out, but to no avail. He is physically and

socially alone, trapped in his room as though on a desert island. Tara's flight from the Gentlemen bears similar overtones. After encountering them, she understandably flees to seek safety in a dorm. She frantically bangs on doors, but the community has been so fractured that no one will respond (until Willow does). Tara is now isolated both by her own inability to communicate and by the fear others have of the Gentlemen.<sup>31</sup> Hence, the Gentlemen undermine human community both directly and indirectly. Their task is one that requires the destruction of another community; in turn, the only way to destroy their community is to restore our capacity to cry out.

[21] "Hush" thus offers us a political allegory representative of significant ways in which we are oppressed by (and also oppress) others. Michel Foucault contends that power is frequently disseminated by governing what can be spoken and what must remain silent, thereby underscoring the centrality of communication to communal structures and interaction.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the educational writer Paulo Freire argues that a key ingredient in liberation from oppression is the power to speak, a power that the oppressed must win for themselves. Freire explains that "[t]he dialogue which is radically necessary to revolution corresponds to another radical need: that of men and women as beings who cannot be truly human apart from communication, for they are essentially communicative creatures. To impede communication is to reduce men to the status of 'things'—and this is a job for oppressors, not for revolutionaries."<sup>33</sup> "Hush" sounds the same liberationist message, especially since Buffy can only defeat the Gentlemen by regaining her voice and breaking the silence with a scream.<sup>34</sup> She cannot expect salvation or even aid from external agencies—whether in the form of people outside the community (Sunnydale has been quarantined) or authorities within it (although language can be affected by power structures, none of these can return it to existence; that requires the concrete act of individuals). As in the revolution recommended by Freire, the oppressed must assume responsibility for their liberation. It will not be given or handed over to them; they can only achieve it by crying out and exercising their own voices.<sup>35</sup>

[22] We see, then, that "Hush" does considerably more than celebrate the nonverbal. It offers a complicated view of both the verbal and the nonverbal, prompting us to note their virtues and limits even as they interrelate in human communication. Moreover, "Hush" demonstrates that what affects communication affects communal activity. In the process it offers us a powerful reminder that community and communication are not ready-made artifacts that we can take for granted. They are not pre-existing entities with an independent existence but vital instruments we use and constitute. Community and communication are achievements that continuously challenge us, especially as communal life responds to the ebb and flow of communicative acts and resources. Each is living and requires reconstruction in the face of new problems and threats. "Hush" uncovers the complex dynamics which constitute the life of communication and community and so helps us prepare to meet those challenges.

## NOTES

[1] See Plato's *Republic* 372d-373a.

[2] See Descartes, *Meditation I*.

[3] Witness the publication of Open Court Publishing's *Culture and Philosophy Series* that includes such titles as: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*, *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy: One Book to Rule Them All*, *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, *Seinfeld and*

*Philosophy: A Book about Everything and Nothing*, and *The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'oh! of Homer*.

[4] I build on the theme of reminders suggested by Ludwig Wittgenstein's claim that "the work of a philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (*Philosophical Investigations* §127). My special concern in this paper is to demonstrate that examples drawn from popular media similarly function as reminders.

[5] Comment by Joss Whedon in the "Hush Featurette" on the Season Four DVD. Whedon offers a similar statement in the audio commentary that accompanies "Hush": "I had a general notion that what [the episode] was about was the idea that when people stop talking they start communicating – that language can interfere with communication because language limits. As soon as you say something, you've eliminated every other possibility of what you might be talking about. And we also use language to separate ourselves from other people. We also use language as white noise. There's [*sic*] many ways we also misuse it horribly. All of those things appear on the show because once I realized that the episode was about communication, I then found that absolutely everything I wrote was completely on theme."

[6] Alice Jenkins and Susan Stuart have thoughtfully explored the role writing plays in "Hush," arguing that the episode inverts our tendency to prioritize the spoken over the written word. See Jenkins and Stuart's "Extending Your Mind: Non-Standard Perlocutionary Acts in 'Hush'."

[7] We could employ more technical terminology (e.g., propositional claims vs. embodied corporeal acts), but the distinction between *verbal* and *nonverbal* forms of communication serves my purpose here. By the latter, I mean physical gestures, body language, and bodily comportment. By the former, I mean vocal symbols. Written symbols are closest to the verbal, though I shall not discuss them here.

[8] It thereby sounds a theme emphasized by Dewey and Mead that our cognitive life, of which verbal communication is a principle part, is rooted in and represents a sophisticated development of more basic organic modes of interaction. This position differs from the more traditional view (represented by Descartes, for instance) that renders verbal communication the external vehicle for cognitive processes that are thought to occur independently of biological and physical activities. Mead, by contrast, argues that although verbal gestures function via sophisticated symbols, they derive from more basic gestures. The verbal is then better thought of as a refinement than an alternative or opponent of basic nonverbal cues. We regularly employ body language—whether gestures of the hand, comportment of the body, or more notable movements in which the entire body is a communicative instrument—sometimes by itself but also sometimes in tandem with verbal symbols.

[9] It is most appropriate that this lesbian relationship should begin in an episode dominated by silence, since homosexual love has frequently been characterized as the love that dare not speak its name.

[10] The irony here is that Xander repeatedly told Spike to shut up the night before.

[11] My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this example.

[12] Note, for instance, that in "Doomed" Buffy appeals to the Slayer's ancestry (both early on and in her fry cook analogy) and questions Riley about his home state. Both acts underscore the significant role stories about the past play in explaining present identities and meanings.

[13] It is for this reason that Josiah Royce emphasizes the link between time,

communication, and community. See *The Problem of Christianity*, especially chapter 9. [14] Indeed, as Mead and Dewey both argue, mind itself is not a *thing* but a capacity made possible by language. See George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self & Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Jenkins and Stuart end their article with a similar conclusion.

[15] As others have noted, it is certainly true that *BtVS* series problematizes community and the institutions that constitute it. (See Asim Ali's "Community, Language, and Postmodernism at the Mouth of Hell" for a nice presentation of this point.) Even so, and true to form, the series offers us multiple and complex perspectives on the issues it addresses. Consequently, we should not be surprised to see community celebrated even as it is questioned or transformed by the drama of the episode. **Editors' note:** See also Wilcox's "Hush" chapter, e.g. her discussion on "the difference between formal groups and organic communities" (159-60): ". . .the organic, domestic, linguistically playful group is posed against the formality of those who wish to replicate an unspoken agenda or 'power thingy'" (160).

[16] One could go so far as to say that in threatening communication and thereby community, the Gentlemen attack our humanity, our ability to form human modes of association.

[17] John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, pp. 138-9.

[18] The self can perform both roles, as occurs when we communicate with ourselves.

[19] See Mead, pp. 66-7. These shared meanings need not be thought of as merely linguistic, for as Dewey and Mead would both argue, we share meanings through common habits.

[20] Royce similarly contends we belong to a *community of memory* when different individuals interpret the same historical event as belonging to their identity. Common purposes provide the basis for a *community of hope*. See *The Problem of Christianity*, pp. 248-9.

[21] For more on the Scoobies' creative use of language, see Karen Overby and Lahney Preston-Matto's "Staking in Tongues," Rhonda Wilcox's "There Will Never Be A 'Very Special' Buffy," Michael Adams' *Slayer Slang*, and the articles in *Slayage* 20 (May 2006).

[22] Of course, Buffy typically patrols not streets but cemeteries. This difference is an additional factor that stresses the centrality of community in "Hush."

[23] This point is significant in indicating that community per se is not necessarily good. In a pluralistic society like our own, communities are evaluated in light of their tendency to silence, exclude, or crush alternative modes of associated living. Royce argues that to avoid the insulation and provincialism that often arises in communities, we need to cultivate not a loyalty to our own community, but loyalty to loyalty per se. See *The Philosophy of Loyalty*.

[24] Whedon even describes the relation of the Gentlemen to the footmen as a "class thing" in the Featurette. In addition, this relation also parallels the classic philosophical dichotomy of mind and body. Rhonda Wilcox notes that the Gentlemen are more than a political symbol. She argues that "they also symbolize mortality and something about sex, something we can all relate to—the kind of basic foundational experience and fear that make the bones of a good fairy tale" (151).

[25] The footmen probably represent the likely fate for Sunnydale citizens who, lacking the resources of community, will lose their autonomy and become enslaved by the Gentlemen.

[26] The content of the verse is the following: "And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is filled up the wrath of God." The passage evokes apocalyptic imagery, with ties to the seven hearts required by the Gentlemen. Unsurprisingly, an apocalypse is the theme of the next episode, "Doomed."

[27] See Mead, pp. 289-98.

[28] U.S. citizens demonstrated similar responses to September 11, as Whedon notes. An additional response, importantly related to these, is turning to family and friends. "Hush" demonstrates this as well in a number of scenes. Upon awakening without a voice, Xander calls Buffy, his friend. Also, as we have noted, the Scoobies' first reaction thereafter is to convene at Giles' apartment to learn what has happened and plan a response. Reid B. Locklin explores the relations between family and the larger community in "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the Domestic Church: Revisioning Family and the Common Good."

[29] The Initiative has its own structures and resources that remain relatively intact. Still, the Initiative as a community contributes little to the fight.

[30] See Feinberg, especially pp. 142-3. Pragmatists would add that rights, though a significant refinement of the more basic cry, are nevertheless organically related to it.

[31] All noise has thus become suspect. With voices, we could at least call out, "Who's there?" This fact again reinforces the idea that verbal language represents the possibility of community. Of this scene, Whedon offers the following comment: "The idea that society is crumbling, that everybody is too frightened to help [Tara]. Very important."

[32] See, for instance, his discussion of the modes of regulating discourses of sexuality in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, especially pp. 17-35.

[33] *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 128. Lord Byron makes a similar point:

"Hereditary bondsmen! know ye not, / Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow?" (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto ii. Stanza 76).

[34] This suggests that the basic ability to vocalize—to exert that power even without specific symbols or words—is enough to shatter the oppression of the Gentlemen.

[35] Exercising rights requires the more complex and sophisticated modes of interaction made possible by verbal communication. This is one of the special offices of the verbal.

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**Angie Burns**

**Passion, Pain and 'bad kissing decisions':  
Learning about Intimate Relationships from *Buffy*  
Season Six**



ANYA: Next thing you know ... I'm changing to please him. (a little more upset) I care if he cares!

SPIKE: (nodding) Right.

ANYA: And I'm off my guard. Happy! I'm singing in the shower and doing my sexy dance?! ("Entropy," 6018)

[1] Many feminists have been critical of both romantic love and marriage because romantic love narratives can be seen to obscure power differences between men and women. Heterosexual marriage arrangements were traditionally economic and patriarchal in that they gave men cheap access to women's domestic labour and sexual services, while women gained a breadwinner. 'Love' was an ideological concept which disguised this inequality. The woman was 'grateful' to be in a relationship because she 'needed' a man in order to have status, but she had nevertheless been duped into domestic servitude, rather than happy-ever-afterness. Where such extreme material inequality has diminished, psychological gender differences are now taken to lead to 'normal' gendered behaviour in heterosexual relationships (e.g. Gray 1992). Women are expected to be the emotional specialists, while men are assumed more likely to be emotionally inexpressive or emotionally illiterate, and so should not be expected to reciprocate. Women are expected to want love, and men sex. These gender differences are commonly taken to be natural and irrefutable, and as such they impinge on our ability to have equitable relationships. As a critical feminist psychologist, I have previously conducted research into intimate heterosexual relationships by analysing how people talk about love and intimacy. I found participants often reproduced gendered versions of love stories (Burns 1999, 2002, 2003). Romance was constructed as more important to women, partly to function as a reason for sex, but my women participants constructed themselves as reflexive and ironic romantics rather than romantic, sexually exploited dupes. The research demonstrated how difficult it was for women participants to tell stories of 'love' without drawing on constructions of women's emotionality and men's emotional inexpressivity and difficulty with love and commitment. Men's stories tended to construct men as rational, but able to do relationships, though women's emotionality could be a problem. In complex ways both sorts of stories privileged men's position in intimate heterosexual relationships (Burns 2002).

[2] There is already an extensive body of critical feminist work around romantic fiction and film (e.g. Christian Smith 1988, McRobbie 1991; Modleski, 1982; Pearce and Stacey 1995; Radway 1987; Walkerdine 1990), and on self-help literature (e.g. Potts 2002). There is increasing interest, too, in critically deconstructing science fiction and other fantasy genres in terms of gender, relationships and romance (e.g. Barrett and Barrett 2001; Larbalestier 2002). This seems important as many young people eschew explicitly romantic fiction, finding it silly and girly, but encounter and engage with fictional romantic themes in science fiction films (like the *Star Wars* films, *The Terminator*, *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*) and in fantasy TV series such as the different *Star Trek* incarnations and *Babylon 5*. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has been especially concerned with the relationships of its largely young (16-20ish) protagonists: their intimate sexual relationships, their friendships and their family relationships. The extensive academic cross-disciplinary literature devoted to *Buffy* (e.g. Kaveney 2004; Wilcox and Lavery 2002) which includes its own online international academic journal, *Slayage*, as well as a text on Buffyspeak or *Slayer Slang* (Adams 2003) attests to its academic relevance. Its active fan base also shows how well it 'speaks' to their interests.

[3] Inherent in science fiction and fantasy texts is an attempt to subvert, to go beyond or challenge the current state of the world. Yet, like all texts, they inevitably engage with current social relations through the discursive means they employ (Barrett and Barrett 2001; Larbalestier 2002). This is because we have no direct access to the meanings of a text. We have to make sense of it, and we do this in part by recognising what already makes sense to us. Experiences (whether fictional or 'real-life') may defy closure and definition, seeming to take form only when ways become available to speak them. This is how life experience becomes 'real'. For fictions and stories to be intelligible, they have to be narrativized in some recognisable ways. So the deconstruction of a story of fiction may identify familiar narratives to a 'real life' story. For example, the construction of the 'romantic epiphany', as desired by a fictional Bridget Jones, was much in evidence in my previous research since women participants' stories contained recurrent descriptions of 'suddenly' realising they were in love (Burns 1999). So-called truths are embedded in narratives, in how stories are told, as well in the actions and characters talked about. In analysing or deconstructing texts, the analyst's intention is not to tie down meaning, but to open it up to question and to explore contradictions, for in contradictions we can trace the juxtaposition of competing discourses and assumptions about the world.

[4] Love and desire have been a driving force behind major plotlines in *BtVS*. In watching the first seasons, it seemed that Buffy and Angel's mutual love, and whether it could ever transcend the problems they had, would be a key backdrop for *Buffy*. Who would have thought when Spike arrived in Sunnydale in "School Hard" (2003) that Buffy would ever be in an intimate sexual relationship with him without the intervention of a spell, as in "Something Blue" (4009)? Love stories are often our mundane tragedies and a happy relationship is not something we alone can bring into being, so for an engagement with the difficulties of relationships we might turn to *BtVS*. However, the writers warned us early on, in Season 1, that Buffy, Willow and Xander would struggle when it came to intimate relationships. At the end of "I Robot – You Jane" (1008), Buffy says, 'Let's face it: none of us are ever gonna have a happy, normal relationship', supported by Xander's 'We're doomed' and Willow's 'Yeah'. But the struggle for happy intimate relationships is part of what makes romantic love stories romantic (Burns 2003).

[5] *BtVS* is open to multiple readings. Buffy can be seen as a feminist (Vint 2002). Identifying discursive themes in *BtVS* can point up some of the psychological identifications made available to viewers. This doesn't mean they'll take them up. As Alison Light (1984) has suggested, reading a Barbara Cartland novel might turn a reader towards feminism rather than romance at its most banal. We are bombarded with self-help books on intimate relationships (e.g. Gray 1992). The knowledges about intimacy available in *BtVS* might cut through what is categorical, ponderous or didactic elsewhere to address important issues in ways which are funny, touching, serious and, ultimately, real. And one of the things which makes *BtVS* so entertaining and engaging is its clever, referential and surprising use of language and metalanguage. This is what really hooked me as a fan. For instance:

SPIKE: You're a tease, you know that, Slayer? Get a fellow's motor revving, let the tension marinate a couple-a days, then bam! Crown yourself the ice queen.

BUFFY: Need a few more metaphors for that little mix? ("Smashed," 6009)

[6] I hope to add something distinctive to the fascinating array of already available analyses of relationships and sexuality in *BtVS* (e.g. Burr 2003; Jowett 2005; Larbelestier 2004). The following analysis of intimate relationships in *BtVS* focuses on Season Six. I'm a critical feminist psychologist using discourse analytic techniques. As a discourse analyst, I focus, in detail, on the language used in the 22 episodes. I am not seeking the gist of what is said, but am analysing the words in detail, in order to explicate what the words are doing, in terms of reproducing knowledge about relationships. As well as rewatching the episodes, I read and reread the scripts,<sup>1</sup> and organised together all those parts which related to intimate relationships, love, romance and sex. I studied these parts, still focusing on the language in detail, in order to identify how relationships and identities were discursively constructed as 'normal' or suitable or otherwise. I also examined in what ways the relationship experiences were storied, being attentive to issues of gender, power, abuse and attempts at control. This allowed me to identify assumptions underlying intimate relationships in *Buffy* Season Six and question how these related to commonly accepted expectations of intimate relationships. This sort of analysis is based on the understanding that there are no knowable universal truths about psychological phenomena like love or sexual desire and that identity is unstable and negotiated rather than fixed. Any apparent orderliness of intimate relationships is reinforced by its pervasive rearticulation. For instance, the notion that 'women want love and men want sex' is taken to be 'true', and people act as if it is true, as a result of its being so articulated or claimed (Burns 1999). *BtVS* reinforced this when Angel's moment of true happiness was having sex with Buffy, as well as drawing on another 'truism' that claims men change after women have had sex with them! I want to further discuss *BtVS* by highlighting the difficulty of creating potentially new discourses of relationships without reproducing stereotypic evocations of 'proper' behaviour - often gendered behaviour. In doing this, I am alert to my potential position as the producer of yet another 'translation' of the material (Parker et al 1999).

[7] Although I'm focusing on Season Six, it is difficult not to make links to other seasons. I try to do this only if it illuminates the analysis of Season Six. I've had to be very selective - as anyone else who is working with this material knows, there is just so much that could be done. Any analysis is ongoing and partial. I've focused more on heterosexual relationships than gay or lesbian, for brevity and to be more able to relate the analytic themes to previous research on the relationships between gender, power,

love and romance. Also, unlike some other *Buffy* academics (e.g. Burr 2003), I'm not attempting to differentiate between vampires and humans. I take the characters to be gendered and understand monstrosity to be constructed through language, not invested unequivocally in a fixed monster or non-monster identity.

### **'Bad kissing decisions' – bad girls?**

#### **For girls and women, sex should not be just sex but must 'mean' something**

[8] Despite Joss Whedon's creation of Buffy as a kick-ass heroine, in the narrativization of heterosexual relationships there is an underlying assumption that for girls and women, sex should not be just sex. Unless there is also some emotional or psychological connection to their lovers, we see women torturing themselves or being castigated. So, for Buffy, her sexual relationship with Spike (putting aside the obvious problems of his being a vampire with a chip that no longer keeps him from hurting her) is a problem. The alternative is that there are problems with her, something she tells Tara at the end of "Dead Things" (6013).

TARA: Buffy, I-I promise there's nothing wrong with you.

BUFFY: There has to be! This just can't be me, it isn't me. Why do I feel like this? Why do I let Spike do those things to me?" ("Dead Things," 6013)

[9] The construction of Spike as the dominant lover in their sexual encounters is at odds with the physical sex acts we have seen or heard enacted or implied thus far in Season Six. As viewers (or analysts) we might understand this as Buffy projecting her bad feelings on to Spike. However Buffy, to Tara, positions herself as victim or addict.

BUFFY: Why can't I stop? Why do I keep letting him in?

TARA: Do you love him?

TARA: I-It's okay if you do. He's done a lot of good, and, and he does love you. And Buffy, it's okay if you don't. You're going through a really hard time, and you're...

BUFFY: (still tearful) What? Using him? What's okay about that?

TARA: It's not that simple.

BUFFY: It is! It's wrong. I'm wrong. Tell me that I'm wrong, please.... ("Dead Things," 6013)

The first reason Tara offers is that Buffy might 'love' Spike, linking love and sex as is usual for women, good women that is (Jowett 2005; Larbelestier 2004; Lees 1997). However, Tara is careful to dismiss this as necessary, offering an alternative to Buffy, that she has had a hard time and so is vulnerable.

[10] Having sex because you're feeling bad is made understandable elsewhere in Season Six. Buffy tells Spike that her 'bad kissing decisions' (kissing Spike) happened because she was upset that Giles was leaving ("Smashed," 6009). Anya explains to Xander (her ex) why she had sex with Spike in the Magic Shop. 'It was just, it ... it was just a thing. I ... I felt bad, and he was just ... there' ("Entropy," 6018). And Buffy says to Xander, 'She loves you. You know that. Anya was just ... She was hurting. She was ... hurting and, and she did this really stupid thing' ("Seeing Red," 6019). These examples, among others, suggest women need psychological motivations for sex. Buffy ends her relationship with Spike ('It's over') in "As You Were" (6015).

BUFFY: I do want you. ... I'm using you. ... I can't love you. I'm just ... being weak, and selfish...

SPIKE: Really not complaining here.

BUFFY: ...and it's killing me

What we read here is that it is not acceptable for Buffy to continue to have sex with Spike when she can't love him or wants no more than sex with him. His response that he doesn't mind ('Really not complaining here') evokes the stereotypic view that men are always up for sex. It's Buffy who can't cope with 'using' him ('it's killing me'). Nice girls don't do this as their sexuality should be bound by romance. But if it's not acceptable for women to use men, the reverse is much less clear.

### **'I'm gonna make you (feel it)'. Forced sex is not okay (but heterosexual men may not realise this!)**

[11] Season Six addresses attempted rape in different ways. Both excerpts I use here make clear that attempted rape is wrong and will produce pain and other bad effects for both victim and perpetrator (and this theme continues into Season 7). There is no sense that *BtVS* condones such actions. The attempted rape plots also demonstrate the potential for men to come to understand what they have done, but unfortunately this gives credence to the myth that they did not know what they were doing. It allows the denial of a problem with forcing sex on a woman and little recognition, or a distorted understanding, of her rights and ability to state what she wants and doesn't want.

[12] Spike's attempted rape of Buffy has been taken by some commentators as demonstrating his monstrosity. But as Symonds (2004) has pointed out, the attempted rape is not done with his vamp face, but with his human face. The rape scene can be seen to have its roots in traditional romantic love narratives which link violence and love (e.g. Jackson 2001). Male jealousy and his 'going too far', or being unable to control himself, may be taken to indicate the male protagonist's strong desire and love for the heroine, either together with, or in the absence of, any declaration of it. In the absence of clear indications of his love, any of his behaviour may be interpreted to mean his (repressed) love and desire (Radway 1987). In "Tabula Rasa" (6008) Spike had evoked *Gone with the Wind*. ('We ... we kissed, you and me. All *Gone With The Wind*, with the rising music...'). This could be seen to foreshadow rape, Rhett Butler style. But Buffy wasn't going to be Scarlett O'Hara and it is not the 1930s.

[13] In "Seeing Red" (6019), Spike has good reason to believe that Buffy was upset he had sex with Anya, as Dawn has told him so ('But what you did last night ... If you wanted to hurt Buffy, congratulations. It worked'). What seems key, in the attempted rape, is Spike's reiteration and insistence that Buffy **feels** something and that forcing sex on her will make her realise this. But he has this, and her, wrong. From his 'Buffy, my god, I didn't-' and his 'horrified' facial expression (according to transcribers), we know he knows it. Buffy has clearly denied the link between love and forced sex, and Spike has to accept this.

SPIKE: (whispers) Let yourself feel it.

He moves forward, puts his hands on her waist, pulls her toward him.

BUFFY: No....

SPIKE: You love me.

BUFFY: Ow, no, stop it.

()

BUFFY: Please don't do this...

SPIKE: I'm gonna make you feel it.

()

BUFFY Ask me again why I could never love you.

Spike looks like he's just realizing what he was doing.

SPIKE: Buffy, my god, I didn't-

BUFFY: (angrily) Because I stopped you. (quieter) Something I should have done a long time ago.

A tear runs down Buffy's face. Spike stares at her looking horrified. ("Seeing Red," 6019)

[14] In "Dead Things" (6013), Warren has abducted his ex-girlfriend, Katrina, so that he and his geek partners, Andrew and Jonathan, have a 'sex slave'. The trio had devised a cerebral dampener to control a woman (any woman they find attractive enough!). This extract follows the influence of the dampener wearing off.

KATRINA: () You bunch of little boys, playing at being men. (yelling) Well, this is not some fantasy, it's not a game, you freaks! It's rape!

JONATHAN: (stunned) What?

ANDREW: No ... we didn't-

KATRINA: (crying, and still angry) You're all sick. And I'm going to make sure you get locked up for this. And then we'll see how you like getting raped.

[15] *Buffy* allows viewers to question such behaviour, to see that attempts to control and force sex is a problem. It names rape. However, these depictions of attempted rape seem to also reinforce gender stereotypes around sex, desire and control. As Willow said in "Beer Bad" (4005):

I mean, you men. It's all about the sex! You find a woman, drag her to your den, do whatever's necessary just as long as you get the sex. I tell you men haven't changed since the dawn of time.

### **Men want compliant women (robots and sex slaves)?**

[16] Despite the naming and problematizing of rape, the way in which Katrina and other women are positioned for men's use is of concern. Under the influence of the cerebral dampener, Katrina has dressed in a frilly, black and white French maid's outfit, the stereotypic image of someone who looks after men's needs. She is addressing Warren, Jonathan and Andrew as 'Master'.

WARREN: ... She's mine. But don't worry. () You can play with her all you want ... after I'm done with her. ("Dead Things," 6013)

[17] In the context of *BtVS*, we are expected to know that the geek trio are poor examples of men. Warren seems irredeemable. What is also made understandable is that men will go to (m)any lengths to have a sexually compliant woman, including using technology to build robots (April and the Buffybot) and turn women into passive

sex objects. Though Spike may complain that Buffy has made him fall in love with her and turned him into 'her soddin' sex slave' ("Normal Again," 6017), this was not intended by her, and as a previous extract suggests, he's mostly not complaining about the 'sex slave' part. Treating women as sexual commodities is not presented as exceptionally dysfunctional or reprehensible, but as part of what may be expected of men.

[18] Issues about the relative power of women and men are raised explicitly, though subtly and funnily, in "Hell's Bells" (6016), for example when Anya practises her marriage vows.

I, Anya, promise to ... love you, to cherish you, ...to honor you, uh, but not to obey you, of course, because that's anachronistic and misogynistic and who do you think you are, like a sea captain or something?

Yet Anya, the straight-talking voice of rampant individualism and vengeance for women, struggles to use emancipatory discourse

[I promise] ...to have sex with you whenever ... \*I\* want, and, uh... uh, pledge to be your friend, and your wife, and your confidant, and your sex poodle....  
("Hell's Bells," 6016)

Tara questions whether Anya should say 'sex poodle' in her vows. Even in the context of romance and marriage, is this bringing sexuality, especially women's sexuality, too much to the fore or challenging Anya's apparent sexual submission?

[19] Despite Xander's position as a not particularly dominant male, he is still constructed as a male who fears commitment. He is given dominant male credentials when Anya is seen to have to nag him about his reluctance to be open about their relationship and to get married. She also positions herself as having changed to please him.

ANYA: Next thing you know ... I'm changing to please him. (a little more upset) I care if he cares!

SPIKE: (nodding) Right.

ANYA: And I'm off my guard. Happy! I'm singing in the shower and doing my sexy dance?! ("Entropy," 6018)

[20] The themes I've suggested so far suggest that gender stereotypes around sex, desire and power, though questioned and sometimes made explicit, are still also reproduced. Thus *Buffy* inevitably fails to avoid partly reinforcing gender stereotypes around sex and control. This points up the pervasiveness and dominance of these stereotypes, and the difficulty of creating relationships which move beyond them in both fiction and real life.

### **'Love's a funny thing'**

[21] In my previous research in which I undertook and analysed interviews with women and men about their intimate relationships, it was the powerfulness and weirdness of their feelings which were claimed by women as evidence of knowing they must be in love (Burns 1999). This is part of the common romantic discourse of love, and it is similarly employed in *BtVS*, but for both women and men. 'Love's a funny thing' says Clem in "Seeing Red" (6019) reprising what was said previously by Spike in

"Lover's Walk" (3008). 'Love' also 'makes you do the wacky', as Willow and Buffy both say in "Some Assembly Required" (2002). What is clear, in *Buffy*, is that love is neither simple nor straightforward, no matter how great the sparkage between characters, and viewers are not subjected to the idea that you can or should do anything for love. At the end of Season Two, after mutual 'I love you's,' Buffy had to kill Angel ("Becoming, Part Two," 2022). In Season Six, Tara won't stay with Willow after she has manipulated her and her memories once too often.

[22] The romance in *Buffy* is, in part, Gothic, in that it is driven by powerful emotions and the more difficult the obstacles to the romance, the more dramatic and romantic the love story that may be told, something also demonstrated in 'real-life' love stories (Burns 2003). So a relationship between a vampire slayer and vampire is going to be a serious contender for a dramatic, romantic story. In the love narratives we find pain and pleasure, ups and downs (very dramatic downs – Angel becomes Angelus, Tara has her brain sucked out, Oz is a werewolf and often the men just leave!). Victoria Spah (2002) has delineated the ways in which Spike can be seen, in part, to be carrying on the tradition of courtly love, attempting a tortuous quest, with some potential for transformation. But where this traditional romance narrative, in part, holds out the possibility of a future happy ever after for any couple in love, Buffy and Spike don't seem like a long-term prospect. It is only the most romantic of viewers who can see a future happy-ever-after for the 'Big Bad' and Buffy. However, it is often Spike who is shown as knowledgeable about love and seduction. Take, for instance, his comments on Parker's strategy with Buffy. 'Did he play the sensitive lad and get you to seduce him? That's a good trick if the girl's thick enough to buy it' ("The Harsh Light of Day," 4003).

[23] Passionate love in *BtVS* is constructed as fragile and temporary, which, in part, reproduces the passionate love/ companionate love binary of mainstream psychology (Berscheid and Walster 1978).

BUFFY: I have feelings for you. I do. But it's not love. I could never trust you enough for it to be love.

SPIKE: (laughing) Trust is for old marrieds, Buffy. (Buffy rolling her eyes) Great love is wild ... and passionate and dangerous. It burns and consumes.

BUFFY: Until there's nothing left. Love like that doesn't last ("Seeing Red," 6019).

D'HOFFRYN: Ah. Hymen's greetings.

DAWN: Hy - what?

D'HOFFRYN: Hymen, the God of Matrimony. His salutations upon you. May the love we celebrate today avoid an almost inevitable decline. ("Hell's Bells," 6016)

[24] Viewers of *BtVS* are given contradictory and partial meanings of love, which allow an active engagement in understanding it. The relationship between Buffy and Spike has led to intense online argument about its suitability. We can question how we know Spike loves Buffy – he has counted the days (147) she was dead and has proved himself in many ways--while also doing what cannot be commensurate with love in trying to hold on to his 'big bad' persona. We are also reminded by Tara (the most level-headed and supportive Scooby) that relationships are about work and trust, a long and important process. But, even for her, passion and feeling may take precedence.

TARA: [To Willow about getting back together] There's just so much to work through. Trust has to be built again, on both sides ... You have to learn if ... if we're even the same people we were, if you can fit in each other's lives. It's a long... important process, and ... can we just skip it? Can-can you just be kissing me now? ("Entropy," 6018)

*BtVS* also demonstrates that love hurts (Symonds 2004).

**Love hurts: 'You always hurt the one you love'**

ANYA: ...and I had seen what love could do to people, and it was ... hurt and sadness. Alone was better. And then, suddenly there was you, and ... you knew me. You saw me, and it was this ... thing. You make me feel safe and warm.

()

ANYA: So, I get it now. I finally get love, Xander. I really do. ("Hell's Bells," 6016)

[25] Having taken so long to 'get it', to feel love, Anya is going to be very hurt.

SPIKE: You always hurt ... the one you love, pet. ("Dead Things," 6013)

[26] Breaking up is shown to be hard to do, and it will hurt. We also see that people survive, and unless they have special powers, they won't end up almost destroying the world. A good deal of break-up heartache is articulated in *Buffy* by using music with pertinent lyrics, rather than dialogue. We hear Michelle Branch's 'Goodbye to You' when, at the end of "Tabula Rasa" (6008), Tara leaves Willow because she has abused her trust yet again, not because she no longer loves her. '*I want you But I'm not giving in this time Goodbye to you*'. So love, in *Buffy*, does not mean having to give in to your partner or put up with being manipulated - a good feminist sentiment.

[27] A common expectation found in my previous research on 'real' relationships was that women anticipated being left by men, rather than the reverse. This expectation meant that women doubted whether their men would stick around in the future, and men constructed themselves as less tied to relationships than women (Burns 1999). This privileges men in relationships, giving them more of a choice about staying or not. In *Buffy* too, women seem more likely to be left by men, than they are to leave. In major break-ups in earlier seasons, Buffy and Willow are left by men. Buffy is left by Angel and later by Riley, Willow by Oz, though we are supposed to allow that Angel and Oz leave because they care about Buffy and Willow, and want to protect them, whether or not Buffy and Willow wanted this. The decision was taken from them. Women in *Buffy* are shown as very vulnerable to break-up heartache. Anya, left at the altar ("Hell's Bells," 6016), is positioned as very damaged by being abandoned by Xander.

XANDER: Was she looking for me? (Willow fidgeting) Before she left, did she say anything?

WILLOW: You mean, between sobs? (Xander looking guilty) There was mostly just wheezing.

BUFFY: She was a little ... she was ... kinda broken. ("Normal Again," 6017)

Later to Spike, about the non-wedding,

BUFFY: It was awful. (sits nearby) Anya was devastated. ("Normal Again," 6017)

Yet, despite being left, they survive.

### **Friendships last unlike sexually intimate relationships**

[28] The 'will they/ won't they's' of intimate relationships often drive plot lines, and the obstacles put in the path of 'true love' are part of the drama expected. But *Buffy* has not been afraid to end intimate relationships (an occupational hazard as actors leave). Though intimate relationships have always been important in the series, it has been the friendship of Buffy, Willow and Xander (with the support of Giles, Anya, Tara, Spike, Angel and Dawn at different times) that has been the solid central ground. When Willow goes bad (very bad indeed), it is her friend Xander and their friendship which saves the day and brings her and the world back from the brink.

[29] *BtVS* does not offer us examples of a romantic happy-ever-after. There are few older adult characters in general, and among them there is an absence of happy adult relationships. Buffy's parents are divorced and are only seen together in Buffy's psychotic alterworld in "Normal Again" (6017). Giles is mostly single through the series, his most significant intimate relationship with Jenny Calendar doomed from the outset. Riley and his wife may be happy – we'll never know. Xander and Anya's faked future together was unhappy, mirroring his parents' marriage. We see and hear Xander's parents, in their full unhappiness, in "Hell's Bells" (6016) when his father verbally attacks his mother.

MR. HARRIS: ...and to my wife, Jessica. Where are you, honey.

()

MR. HARRIS: There she is. (raising glass) To my wife. What would I do without you, beautiful?

Mrs. Harris looks a bit surprised, smiles.

MR. HARRIS: Welllllllll, for starters, I probably wouldn't need to drink so much, would I.

Mrs. Harris looks hurt. The other guests look uncomfortable.

MR. HARRIS: On the brighter side, marriage has probably saved me from a nasty dose of the clap. (chuckles) Here's to ya. (drinks)

So *Buffy* Season Six is not promoting a happy ever after wonderland, with or without marriage. But life is seen to go on.

[30] My analysis has shown how assumptions about gender, gendered behaviour and emotion are difficult to avoid, even in a show where the two strongest characters are women, Buffy and Willow. Their strength does not protect them from heartache but they are not going to be romantic dupes, as *Buffy* is not promoting the need for women to be in a relationship. As in soap operas, a consistent lesson about intimate relationships in *Buffy* Season Six (and other seasons) is that relationships are fragile and that they can and do change. They change as we change, they change as our situations change, and they change whether or not we want them to. They change in predictable and unpredictable ways, and trying to control the other person is not going to get us love. Where traditional romantic stories have tended to imply that people are somehow fickle and untrustworthy if their feelings are mutable, *BtVS* is much more

realistic and pessimistic about the possibility of something we would call 'lasting love' when the world is changing around you, and in *BtVS* the world can change dramatically and very quickly. Intimate relationships are contingent and often temporary and though the end of Season Six is held out the possibility of a romantic future for Buffy and an ensouled Spike, the series' end (with Spike's death) made it seem ultimately doomed or unlikely (despite his rebirth on the *Angel* series). Willow and Xander end the season single. This means that *Buffy* is showing that it is not the end of the world, or even a big disaster, if your relationships end and you're not in an intimate relationship. Your life and future possibilities are still there for you. Identity is unstable, and it doesn't make you a bad person if you change. You're like Buffy, like 'cookie dough' ("Chosen," 7022). And you won't ever be fully baked unless and until you believe you are.

[31] The intimate relationships in *Buffy* Season Six differ, however, from fictional relationships in romances and soap operas, and real relationships, in that there is an absence of sexual infidelity. When Anya and Spike have sex, their relationships with Xander and Buffy are over. We are expected to see this as emotional infidelity, as infidelity to the person they are expected to still love, because they are censured for doing this. In real-life love stories, 'falling in love' is often adulterous as it is one common way to tell a dramatic and emotional love story (Burns 2003). Despite the overarching notion of the fragility of relationships, infidelity is not being offered as the way out of a relationship or to dramatise love, which is unusual.

[32] In conclusion, femininity and masculinity are constructed in Season Six in both recognisable and challenging ways. I've shown here some of the difficulties of moving beyond assumptions of gender difference, in order, partly, to demonstrate how difficult it is to do this. Some *Buffy* scholars have been reflecting on and writing about 'feminised' male characters in *BtVS* (e.g. Heineken 2004; Jowett 2005), and I think this is a worrying trend as it reifies and reinforces the notion of fixed feminine characteristics and reproduces the gender binary.

[33] Despite my feminist concerns about the evocation of gendered myths, which I've outlined in this paper, ultimately *BtVS* offers us choices, not prescriptions. It allows viewers to engage with common dilemmas, presenting possibilities which may help us live our lives and experience relationships more fully. Analysing *BtVS* shows how difficult it is to refute or subvert common gendered stereotypes, especially around sexuality and emotion. But *BtVS*'s dialogic approach to intimacy, gender, sexuality, power and emotion, opens them up for discussion. For both academics and fans, this, in part, is what makes *Buffy* so important and enduringly watchable.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Joan the English Chick for her excellent transcriptions of *BtVS* episodes available via [www.Buffyworld.com](http://www.Buffyworld.com). Conventions for transcripts for discourse analysis usually use ... for ellipsis. In her transcripts they indicate a pause or stutter. Empty brackets () indicate where I've omitted parts, usually descriptions of action rather than words.



## **Christine Jarvis and Don Adams** **Dressed to kill: Fashion and leadership in *Buffy*** ***the Vampire Slayer***



### **Introduction:**

[1] Using classical and feminist frameworks to analyse the concept of leadership, this essay explores the relationship between Buffy as a leader and Buffy as a leader of fashion.

[2] Köver (2005), commenting on the polarised nature of the critical debate about Buffy's potential as a feminist role model, draws on Butler's (1990) work on performativity to frame her analysis of the multiple ways in which this character can be read. Thus, she argues, Buffy's capacity to be 'strategically useful to the feminist project of emancipation' depends not on her 'intentional resistance' to patriarchy, but on 'resignification' through performance.

[3] This emphasis on performance, rather than on an essentialist redefinition of femininity, is helpful for a consideration of the feminist implications of Buffy's costume. It is possible to think about costume as performance on two overlapping levels, that of the fictional character and that of the production team. The character performs the role of female leader in various guises, reconstructing her identity in relation to the other characters and in response to the current context and her state of mind. The production team, including writers, actor, director and wardrobe staff, are also engaged in creating a performance of female leadership in which they collectively create a series of images which engage the viewer and are reconstructed through the viewer's interpretive focus.

[4] The wardrobe for these performances often suggests that Buffy is constructing a form of female leadership that could be understood as a synthesis of two leadership styles expressed as oppositional by Plato. Plato's analysis of failures in Athenian leadership centered on a conflict between traditional values. He discussed whether it should be regarded as more contemptible to do wrong than to suffer wrong. Zeus is the father of Dik (Justice) and so sees to it that those who do wrong are punished. Doing wrong offends Greek religious sensibilities and so is contemptible. But on the other hand, Athena carries Nik (Victory) and so sees to it that one does not suffer at the hands of others, but rather is the victor and has the power to treat others as desired. Suffering wrong at the hands of others makes one a loser, abandoned by Athena, and this too makes one contemptible. Victory and justice appear to be antithetical in this analysis, but, we argue, Buffy's leadership performance locates her at different places on the axis between the two and ultimately suggests a reconciliation.

[5] Buffy has a well-equipped closet filled with mainstream fashion. Her room, closet, and two tiered trunk could be compared to Batman's cave and utility belt, in that they are all part of her super-hero toolkit. Her use of costume differs from that of the conventional

comic book hero, though, insofar as her super-hero status is not determined by it. As both Levy (2003) and De la Rosa (2002) have noted, Buffy does not have to don a specific, single outfit in order to be the Slayer. Instead (as De la Rosa observes) she 'prefers to wear designer brands that she and her female youth audience can easily buy from the nearby mall.' This exploration of the variety offered by mainstream fashion enables her continually to reconstruct the Slayer through her closet. The way she does this, we argue, suggests a desire to establish a leadership style that is relational, in which her identity as the Slayer is expressed in terms of her position with respect to the rest of society and those she loves.

### **Fashion, feminism and leadership**

[6] As Barnard (2002) notes, there have always been complex and shifting discourses connecting women, feminism, leadership and fashion. Many early second wave feminists took an interest in the way fashion contributed to the challenges women faced. They noted that women's clothing was often restrictive and designed to exaggerate secondary sexual characteristics (De Beauvoir, 1972). The argument ran that the fashion industry contributed to the establishment of women as functionally inadequate creatures who were designed as objects of desire for men, whereas men wore functional clothing that coded them active rather than passive. Fashion, it was argued, contributed to our inability to take women seriously as leaders and workers (see Hollows, 2000 for a discussion of shifting feminist approaches to fashion).

[7] Entwistle (1997) discusses the way some women sought to appropriate the power associated with male clothing by adopting it themselves, accepting the suit as powerful and the dress as a signifier of powerlessness, but resisting the gender specificity of the attire. During the 1980's power dressing, smart tailored clothing, with features such as shoulder pads that created a more masculine silhouette, was in vogue. Molloy's (1977) *The Women's Dress for Success Book* promoted strict tailored suits with padded shoulders that helped identify women as serious beings. This is the sort of feminism Plato defended in his *Republic* according to which women should be allowed access to power only to the extent that they approximate male functionality (*Republic* 451b- 466d). Women and men are equal only to the extent that women become masculine. The uniformity of the suit ensured it could be associated with the protestant work ethic, with sobriety, consistency and discipline. Thus women adopting it could be accused not only of trying to count functionally as men, but as male leaders in a capitalist economy. Not surprisingly, therefore, later feminists saw power dressing as an appropriation of feminism with its democratic and inclusive goals, by capitalism and consumerism, and derided smart successful women as 'lifestyle feminists.'

[8] In the Whedonverse the suit characterises the corporate power of organisations such as Wolfram and Hart, where Lilah's suits are indicative of her ambition and status. Quentin Travers, the head of Watcher's Council, and the rookie Watcher Wesley are buttoned-up in style. Although Quentin and Wesley are officially on the right side, against the forces of evil, they represent excessive conformity to tradition and regulation, and their suits help to signify this. In stark contrast to many demon enemies, the sinister Gentlemen on their quests for hearts also wear smart and identical suits. The heart is a symbol of emotion and humanity as is the capacity for speech and human interaction; the fact that they take these from people codes their power as particularly dehumanising. Thus the suit appears to be associated in these programmes with a particular kind of leadership and power, one which is exploitative and cold. Wilcox (2004) notes that they look like 'dead white men.' We think the suits reinforce the weight of historical power carried by the white and deadly; suits are meant to intimidate.\* When Buffy leads, however, she sees no need to

powerdress. Whether she leads the fighting or the planning, she is likely to do this in any number of costumes, ranging through glamorous, sporty, sexy, smart and childishly girly. Focusing on these can offer insights into some of her ideas about leadership.

[9] In "Graduation Day, Part Two" (3022), Buffy's leadership is cemented. She plans the battle and co-ordinates it, as well as operating as the warrior-hero who challenges the enemy to single combat when she lures the mayor-demon into the school. Here all the students 'graduate' by casting off the symbols of conventional graduation, the cap and gown. Buffy then leads in a fashionable leather coat and tight trousers. Historically, in line with Plato's comments, a few women have been able to undertake restricted leadership roles by renouncing their femininity, particularly their sexuality, and this has been signalled by their attire. The most obvious and complete example of this is the nun's habit, but to a lesser degree women have been able to lead at work by hiding behind academic gowns and doctors' coats. Here Buffy reclaims the right to lead as a woman. This is rolled out through various images of mainstream femininity. For example, in "Reptile Boy" (2005) she looks like the typical whore/horror victim, dressed in a skimpy short black dress. She has broken all the rules for good girls, wearing sexy clothing, disobeying the male authority figure in her life (Giles) and getting involved in an event that clearly signals adult sexual danger. This is accentuated when her accessories become the chains the boys use to bind her to the wall, whilst they await the arrival of the giant phallic symbol they think will eat her. She doesn't accept her punishment (death), kicking with remarkable agility in the dress and transforming the chains into weapons that kill the monster. In "Homecoming" (3005), Buffy is all dressed for the ball in a rose coloured evening gown that cost a 'year's allowance,' but it does not inhibit her ability to use a semi automatic weapon, swing from the light fittings during a fight or leap athletically out of a window. Her discussion with Cordelia makes it clear that she wanted the image of Homecoming Queen so that she could avoid being defined solely by her slayer duties. The conflation of the two that occurs when she uses her intelligence, skill and physical power to defeat the enemy, whilst still dressed for the Homecoming Ball, bundles all the associations of conventional schoolgirl femininity into the leadership performance she gives, and helps to challenge restricted perceptions of leadership. When she calls the bluff of Quentin Travers and the Watcher's Council in "Checkpoint" (5012) she is in effect in high powered negotiations about her business, slaying. The other participants are formally dressed, and a suit might be appropriate for this. Instead she comes in late, fresh from firstly organising protection for her family, then winning a fight, in a large fluffy white coat, which she discards to reveal casual clothes: a tight V necked black sweater and black trousers. In this way she signals the non-institutional nature of her authority, vested primarily in herself and in her sense of responsibility. Her body language and her clothing contribute to this performance of Slayer as confident woman, at ease with her own power. In effect, Buffy has seen through the sexist logic of Plato's feminism and displays in her fashion of leadership the belief that a woman does not need straight jacketing into a male role or male clothing before she can lead.

## **Resistance through style**

[10] Critics have drawn attention to the way *BtVS* operates in opposition to the forces of capitalism and consumerism. Pasley (2003) notes that in '*BtVS* and *Angel* there is a persistent association of capitalist values with literal inhumanity' (p. 258). Wall and Zryd

(2001) offer a scrupulous analysis of *Buffy* and *Angel's* 'self-conscious and deeply critical stance towards capital and consumerism' (p.76). Both cite the hell-god Glory's obsession with shopping and shoes. It is interesting to note, however, that Buffy's fight against the demons of capitalism takes place whilst she simultaneously celebrates consumption through her constantly changing wardrobe and declarations of affection for shopping.

[11] She tries out many looks, but these are predominantly mainstream; two she avoids are the two most consistently cited by cultural studies theorists as indicative of subcultural resistance to consumer capitalism – goth and punk. The development of styles such as punk and goth have often been read as subversive acts of resistance to fashion's capacity to reinforce gender and class hierarchies (Baddeley, 2002; Hollows 2000). Baddeley comments on the 'gender ambiguity' of male goth fashion (p. 216), whilst Macdonald (1995) notes how:

Punk especially, broke every rule of appearance, sweeping feminine hairstyles, make-up and clothing within its black dustbin liner and mocking jewellery and adornment conventions by transferring them from their usual place on the body to new and more obtrusive locations. (213)

By drawing attention to the artificiality of all fashion, these subcultural styles undermine fashion's capacity to present socially constructed categories as natural elements in the social order, but they are not part of the Slayer's wardrobe.

[12] Diehl (2004) notes Drusilla and Darla's 'pop-punk Gothic aesthetics' and associates these with the characters as sources of transgression and disruption (§ 1). In *BtVS*, though, far from being automatically associated with resistance, the goth look, particularly when adopted by humans, is often associated with weakness. Lily, in for example, adopts a goth look as part of her wannabee-vampire project, but all this signifies is her failure to understand the kinds of forces her wardrobe is meant to represent. The goth Drusilla-replacement whom Spike takes to the Anya and Xander's wedding never interacts with anyone except Spike, and she is so passive that she is repeatedly shown as limply being dragged around by him ("Hell's Bells," 6016). Michael, the black clad witch in "Gingerbread" (3011) is mocked and sad. Humans who attempt to look like the undead don't come off well in *BtVS*. Even Drusilla for all her vampire power is fey, distracted, even loopy for most of her *BtVS* appearances. Jowett (2005) notes that although she is powerful and threatening, she has a 'childlike manner' (p. 77).

[13] Punk fashion is displayed to some extent by Faith. Faith's attire does appear to mark her as a rebellious outsider initially, as suggested in a very brief scene where Buffy, Xander and Willow await a test in class when Faith shows up ... outside. Faith breathes on the window pane and in the condensation draws a heart with what looks like an arrow through it and beckons for Buffy to leave school. The closest she gets to joining a social group is to have someone join her outside, which Buffy does for a while. Faith, especially in those earlier episodes, is coded deviant rather than subversive in any positive sense. Her resistance is presented as resistance to community, and to respect for humanity, rather than resistance to oppression. She is a rebel, but in a series in which the central

characters are already outsiders who challenge the oppressive powers of authorities and institutions, those who stand against them become perversely allied with conservatism. Thus Faith is adopted by the mayor with his family values, home-spun wisdom and clear associations with the power of institutions and political authority.

### **Concepts of leadership: "Restless" and "Helpless"**

[14] The rejection of the suit, with its connotations of socially sanctioned corporate power, and of punk and goth, with their subcultural and deviant associations, helps locate Buffy in philosophical terms in a paradoxical position on the distinction between *phusis* and *nomos*, a distinction Plato introduces in the *Gorgias* through the character Callicles. These two properties clearly relate to an individual's capacity to prioritise *Nik* (Victory) or *Dik* (Justice). According to Callicles, it is true by *nomos* (custom, convention, law) *nomoi* in the plural, that it is more contemptible to do wrong than to suffer wrong because society creates many norms of behaviour and heavily sanctions breaches of those norms (*Gorgias* 482e-483c). However, he argues that it is true by *phusis* (nature) that to suffer wrong is more contemptible than to do wrong because those who suffer wrong are losers and those who are powerful enough to do wrong to others are winners (*Gorgias* 483b-486c). This is Spike's logic in "Pangs" (4008) when the Chumash warrior seeks vengeance against the descendants of those who killed his people. Buffy is conflicted in this episode. At the beginning an association between Buffy and those who obliterated Native Americans is created for the viewer by giving her a prominent cowboy hat to wear. In the end, Buffy must fight the Chumash warrior and defeat him, but she is very uncomfortable doing that because she feels guilty about how his people were treated. Spike is disgusted:

Spike : I just can't take all this mamby-pamby boo-hooing about the bloody Indians.

Buffy : Uh, the preferred term--

Spike : You won. All right? You came in and you killed them and you took their land. That's what conquering nations do. It's what Caesar did, and he's not going around saying, "I came, I conquered, I felt really bad about it." The history of the world isn't people making friends. You had better weapons, and you massacred them. End of story.

Buffy : Well, I think the Spaniards actually did a lot of - not that I don't like Spaniards.

Spike : Listen to you. How you gonna fight anyone with that attitude?

Willow : We don't wanna fight anyone.

Buffy : I just wanna have Thanksgiving.

Spike : Heh heh. Yeah...Good luck.

Willow : If we could talk to him--

Spike : You exterminated his race. What could you possibly say that would make him feel better? It's kill or be killed here. Take your bloody pick.

[15] For Spike, it is more contemptible to suffer wrong than to do wrong, and this is based on his observations of the history of the world, including Julius Caesar. From his perspective, Spike is simply recognizing plain facts, the way things are (*phusis*). Prescribing the way things ought to be is where the 'mamby-pamby boo-hooing' begins (*nomos*).

[16] In *BtVS*, it's not that simple. Aristotle clearly points this out early in his *Politics* when he makes the following paradoxical claim: 'we thus see that the city exists by nature (*phusis*) ...' (1.2.1253a25-b1). For Aristotle, there is something of *phusis* in human *nomos*, and there is something of *nomos* in human *phusis*. In Aristotle's view societies are constructed by people, but it is perfectly natural for them to construct societies, the *Nichomachean Ethics* vii.1, 114a-15-34; *Politics* 1.2, 1253a 2-25.).

[17] Aristotle would argue that while Spike is correct to point out that the history of the world isn't people making friends, he does not have the whole truth. Conflict cannot simply be assigned to some *phusis* which is pure from all *nomos*. It is only human nature to construct, follow, interpret, apply and protect *nomoi*. Buffy is not a loner as a leader, because for human beings, standing outside the social group as an enemy is weakness. Buffy creatively takes up her position in society, using all her skills to make the best life that she can for herself, her family and her friends. Her fashion does not represent weakness, or the position of a powerless object either of male desire or of consumer marketing. Her fashion choices do not set her against her society; they position her firmly within society. Thus, how she dresses often signals her feelings relative to others. For example, in Season 7, where she is struggling with the increasingly uncomfortable position as leader of the potentials and is anxious not to be seen to be over-asserting her authority, she dresses in girly feminine tops that send out non-threatening messages. As she gradually distances herself from Faith in Season Three, her demure clothes and neat tailored coats reflect her alliance with social rules and mores. Finally, her fashion choices recognize that her power, and indeed the power of every person, derives not from some primal, savage, animal energy; rather it derives from our own constructive participation in the construction of human social life. We think this is nicely presented in the conclusion of "Restless" (4022):

Tara (speaking for the First Slayer): I am destruction.  
Absolute ... alone.

Buffy: The Slayer.

Tara (speaking for the First Slayer): The first.

Buffy: I am not alone.

Tara (speaking for the First Slayer): The Slayer does not walk in this world.

Buffy: I walk. I talk. I shop, I sneeze. I'm gonna be a fireman when the floods roll back. There's trees in the desert since you moved out. And I don't sleep on a bed of bones. Now give me back my friends.

First Slayer: No ... friends! Just the kill. We ... are ... alone!

Buffy: That's it. I'm waking up. (They fight.) It's over. We don't do this any more. Enough! (Buffy wakes up, the First Slayer lands atop Buffy and starts stabbing her.) Are you quite finished? (First Slayer stops stabbing Buffy.) It's over, okay? I'm going to ignore you, and you're going to go away. You're really gonna have to get over the whole ... primal power thing. You're NOT the source of me. Also, in terms of hair care, you really wanna say, what kind of impression am I making in the workplace?

### **Down in the dungarees**

[18] Having suggested that Buffy's clothing reflects her position regarding leadership with respect to the distinctions between *phusis* and *nomos*, we want to argue that it also reflects the series' contribution to feminist debates about fashion, power and consumerism. In "Helpless" (3012) Buffy would appear to be removed from her sources of power and leadership. She is physically weak because she has received a drug that removes her slayer powers. The drug is an adrenaline inhibitor, which suggests that it is her personal power and drive, her *phusis*, which is under attack. She is also emotionally weak because she was hurt by her father, then betrayed by Giles. And she has been stripped of leadership because she has been manipulated, because she is a tool of The Council rather than an autonomous individual, let alone a leader and decision maker. She is also stripped of leadership because the trial she undergoes has to be faced alone.

[19] It is significant, then, that in this context, where she is not a leader and not powerful, she chooses to wear the stereotypical badge of the feminist –dungarees. It is worth considering the complex semiotics of the dungaree. These are difficult to unravel because they are overlaid with contradictory responses to their supposed impact. They carry most obviously signals of class and gender having a primary association with male working class clothing. They could be adopted as an indication of solidarity with the class struggle and also, because of their association with manual labour, as an appropriation of strength typically associated with men and a rejection of socially constructed feminine weakness. Their plainness offers a challenge to expectations that women should seek to be objects of desire for men. They are associated with feminism, whether or not feminists ever actually wore them. These might be considered the primary almost innocent connotations of these modes of attire. At the same time, as has often been noted, dungarees became a fashion item in themselves, one which accentuated rather than confined femininity. They could be used to emphasise the smallness of the woman wrapped in the big baggy male outfit, to provide a contrast that highlighted her feminine features, hair, hands, breasts, so that the effect is not gender neutral or masculine, but extremely feminine.

[20] There is an incident in "Helpless" (3012), before the final dungareed show down with

Kralek, when Buffy, dressed in a demure white twin set and a red coat with a hood, is taunted in the street at night by a group of men, asking her for a lap dance. Stripped of her slayer powers, she cannot confront them, depriving the audience of the usual satisfaction of a wise-crack followed by violent revenge. Instead she has to pull her coat on further, almost as though she is hiding her femininity inside it, only to have it torn off by the escaped Kralek. The associations with Little Red Riding Hood, the archetypal female victim, are clear. Immediately following this she takes to her dungarees, suggesting that it is only when she actually is weak that she rejects typical female fashions and their connotations of weakness. When she is powerful, she is able to transcend the interpretations placed on female fashion, such as weakness, sexual objectification and passivity.

[21] Of course the series frequently exploits the overturning of expectations created by girly fashions, from the opening sequence where Darla, dressed in neat skirt and blouse, devours her would be suitor, through all the scenes in which little blonde Buffy shocks yet another male/group of males who thought she was to be their victim. By fighting and winning as she does, in clothes that have been understood in terms of a kind of complicity between consumer culture and patriarchy, she reclaims those clothes and contributes to the re-appropriation of fashion identified by various post-modern feminist writers who have argued that women were agents rather than victims in their relationship with fashion, using style to reinvent themselves and forge a range of personae. Writers like McRobbie (1989, 2000) have argued that fashion choices can be understood less as indications of slavish adherence to the blandishments of big business and more as a kind of bricolage, through which women are able to produce meanings and express creativity.

### **Conclusion: Style Matters**

[22] Fashion, particularly mainstream consumer fashion, is often regarded as trivial. However, as Jowett (2005) notes, Buffy's 'style conscious and "feminine" appearance has always been part of her appeal and viewers frequently comment on clothes and hairstyle in the series (p. 21). Early's (2002) essay on transgressive women warriors discusses the emergence of women like Xena, La Femme Nikita and Buffy, 'disarmingly recognizable women (who) battle evil on a daily basis and without much fanfare repeatedly save the world from untold horror' (¶ 1). Buffy's use of mainstream consumer fashion enhances this recognizability, in stark contrast to Xena in her battle gear. The importance the characters place on fashion can be seen in the final episode ("Chosen," 7022) where there are two references to shopping. During the pre-battle repartee we have this exchange:

Buffy: So what do you guys want to do tomorrow?

Willow: Nothing strenuous.

Xander: Well mini-golf is always the first thing that comes to mind.

Giles: I think we can do better than that.

Willow: There's an Agnes B in the new mall.

Xander: Good. I could use a few items.

Giles: Aren't we going to discuss this? Save the world and go to the mall?

Buffy: I'm having a wicked shoe craving.

(Discussion about a whole new pirate look for Xander)

Giles (to himself): The earth is definitely doomed.

[23] Later, following all the death and destruction and looking at the gaping hole that was Sunnydale, we have this exchange which is characteristic of the camp gravity applied to

mainstream fashion and consumption.

Willow: We changed the world. I can feel them, Buffy. All over. Slayers are awakening everywhere.

Dawn: We'll have to find them.

Willow: We will.

Giles: Yes, because the mall was actually in Sunnydale, so there's no hope of going there tomorrow.

Dawn: We destroyed the mall? I fought on the wrong side

Xander: All those shops gone. The Gap, Starbucks, Toys R Us. Who will remember all those landmarks unless we tell the world of them?

[24] Although the fashion icon Cordelia is generally represented as shallow, Buffy shows at least as much interest in fashion in ways that could be read as indicative of a slavish mentality, rather than characteristic of leadership. Giles interpreted this initially on these lines in "Earshot" (3018), thinking "if a magazine told her to, she would wear cats strapped to her feet," but there is another way of looking at this. Buffy's interest in fashion and consumption is part of her engagement with a creative process of identity construction. The meaning of Buffy's outfits can only be understood contextually, in terms of her relation to those around her, her situation and the challenges she faces. Within this network she constructs the kind of leadership identity she wants to have. As learning to lead is challenging to her, and the meaning of leadership is not fixed, so she finds she can enjoy the various images offered by mainstream fashion to reflect a multi-faceted leadership identity, grounded in a concept of leadership that is simultaneously about *nomos*—her natural power as the Slayer--and *phusis*—her human relationship and responsibility as the Slayer.

\*Editors' note: Whedon himself comments on the Gentlemen's suits, as quoted in Wilcox (2005); see pp. 151, 153, 156 on the 'monied male power structure.'

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## The Whedonverses and the Sociology of Academe, or A Report on SC2: The *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses, Gordon College, May 26-28, 2006

**PDF**  
Version

**Brett M. Rogers, University of Georgia**

(1) The events of the weekend of May 26-28, 2006 bode well for scholars of the Whedonverses. Three years after the end of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the premature demise of *Firefly*, two years after the cancellation of *Angel*, and less than one year after the box-office debacle of *Serenity*, scholars and fans alike were still willing to travel across the globe to discuss the sophisticated texts produced by the indomitable Joss Whedon and his talented ensemble of cast and crew. Moreover, some 210 people were not only willing to travel from all over the globe to attend the *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses (henceforth called "SC2"), but were willing to travel to Gordon College in the quiet hamlet of Barnesville, Georgia (or, as I have heard it called by several fellow Georgia state residents, "Barnes-where?"). As opposed to the first *Slayage* conference, which took place in 2004 in the tourist-friendly destination of Nashville, Tennessee (and even featured a day trip to Memphis after the conference, adding to the tourist appeal), SC2 required participants to possess a valiant devotion to scholarship on the Whedonverses in order to make the trek. And devoted these attendees were, for SC2 absolutely buzzed with three days of animated lectures and even more animated conversations. SC2 certainly showed that, for the moment, interest in and scholarship on the Whedonverses is alive and well.

(2) SC2 consisted of a variety of talks covering a diverse body of topics including gender, race, mass media, pedagogy, literature, linguistics, anthropology, comparative mythology, philosophy, morality, and more. (For a complete listing of papers delivered at SC2, the conference program is still available online at [http://www.slayage.tv/SCW/SC2\\_Program.htm](http://www.slayage.tv/SCW/SC2_Program.htm). See also Patricia Pender's review in this issue). Some papers were truly outstanding contributions, such as Roz Kaveney's keynote address and David Kociemba's riveting paper on media addiction in *BtVS*; others offered tantalizing hints of scholarly directions to come, especially the many papers exploring the social, economic, and political underpinnings of *Firefly* and *Serenity*; and still others were the standard conference fare. Perhaps most intriguing at SC2 – and a new development since Nashville, as far as I can tell – was the small number of papers that were not really academic papers *per se*, but meditations on the pleasures of the Whedonverses, a kind of intellectual fandom seeking to situate itself in the nebulous space between fan

appreciation and the traditional academic conference.

(3) The variety of papers mirrored another intriguing facet of SC2, the visibly large number of undergraduate students, 'independent scholars,' and non-professional scholars in attendance. In my native field of classical literature and languages, international academic conferences are primarily occasions for professionals and soon-to-be professionals (i.e., graduate students) to meet, converse, and socialize with one another, expenses usually paid by their home institution; a modest number of local undergraduates usually attend, while the independent scholar is a *rara avis*, although not totally unheard of. (Regional conferences are a slightly different case, where secondary school educators and undergraduates have somewhat greater visibility.) The conference on the Whedonverses, however, consisted of a quite different crowd: professors coming from a wide array of disciplines, professional cultural critics, graduate students, undergraduates, independent scholars with no affiliation to professional scholarship, and fans of the Whedonverses just there to hear papers. I suspect that there were even one or two high school students in the crowd. Attendees were present not just because professionalism demanded fealty, but because this was a labor of love. This became abundantly clear during a paper presented by Wayne Chandler in the "Genre & Intertextuality" panel. Chandler asked the room how many people could claim on their *curriculum vitae* that they earned their livelihood from *Buffy* studies; one lone hand waved in the air.

(4) I rehearse the social composition of the audience at SC2 at length because I believe that this is one of the great strengths of the *Slayage* conferences. I recall in 2004 that, after I returned home from the first *Slayage* conference in Nashville to the removed pastures of Stanford University, I remarked to a fellow graduate student that I had perceived a certain degree of "academic egalitarianism" at the conference. SC2 proved no different, similarly offering a view of an academy that supports professionals and non-professionals alike, bringing together minds and voices rarely heard together in the more traditional disciplines of the academy. In both Nashville and Barnesville I had stimulating conversations in and out of the lecture hall with undergraduates, graduate students, high school teachers, community college instructors, college professors, professors from colleges well off the beaten path, foreign administrators, as well as a host of non-professional scholars, including video technicians, comic book store owners, and anonymous fans. While it is increasingly common to see defenses of why *Buffy* matters – see, for instance, the literary and cultural *apologia* offered by Rhonda Wilcox in her recent study entitled *Why Buffy Matters: the Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2005) – the *Slayage* conferences organized by Wilcox and David Lavery have implicitly addressed the question "Why does *studying* *Buffy* matter?" There really *is* something important at stake here – pun only slightly intended – as the mixed social composition of the *Slayage* conferences offers a stunning vision of what the academy could be when we move beyond the social order repeatedly affirmed in traditional academic discourse.

(5) There are several factors that might account for the *Slayage* conferences' 'academic egalitarianism.' From a purely pragmatic perspective, although the field of *Buffy* studies is increasingly growing (for which, see Wilcox's article in this issue), it is still a young enough field in need of as many voices and insights as possible if it is even to survive until it might develop its own distinctive voice and find a permanent home in academic syllabi. Moreover, just as fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Firefly* have generally forged quite hospitable communities – no doubt having learned the virtues of idiosyncratic, self-made communities from the shows themselves, as many

papers at SC2 pointed out – so too have the organizers and attendees made great efforts to invite everyone into the conversation. It is clear that these communities are shifting and still very much in the process of formation, not yet plagued by the discrimination, academic genealogies, and rivalries that lurk in other fields. It is perhaps an interesting coincidence (or corollary?) that neither SC1 nor SC2 included many papers given by faculty and students from ‘elite’ research universities. Whether this merely reminds us of the generally conservative nature of academic discourse, or hints that change must come from the fringes of society, or suggests some different *tertium quid* altogether, I leave open to discussion.

(6) I mention so-called ‘elite’ research universities because this is also forms part of the problem faced by scholarship on the Whedonverses. Some scholarship is simply outstanding; I need only point to Michael Adam’s *Slayer Slang* (2003), as well as his stimulating keynote address at SC2 on the ‘clipping’ of phrasal verbs in *BtVS*, or to the high quality of many articles that have appeared in journals and edited collections over the last seven years (again, see Wilcox in this issue). As I said above, SC2 featured many excellent, very good, or pleasantly stimulating talks. However, many of the papers at SC2 did not attain such a quality of research, taking on the appearance of fan rants as it were, and I, among a number of other individuals with whom I spoke during the conference, found myself frustrated on more than one occasion. Many papers failed to answer what I consider the two fundamental questions of every good paper, article, and book: (1) “What’s the thesis?” and (2) “What’s the pay-off?” or, to put it in *Buffy*-speak, “Where do we go from here?” (This, of course, is not a feature exclusive to SC2 but to more conferences than I care to count.) If scholars of the Whedonverses do indeed desire to attract the attention of and find a more permanent place in the ‘Ivory Tower,’ I suspect that the *Slayage* conferences will have to show greater selectivity in the papers that are presented or express more rigorous standards. Of course, that could compromise or even seriously jeopardize the admirable ‘academic egalitarianism’ I identified a moment ago; however, by virtue of its content and the passion of *Buffy*, *Angel*, and *Firefly* fans, so-called ‘Whedonian studies’ has an unique opportunity not just to get non-academics excited about scholarship, but also to model critical integrity and educate audiences in the value of such methodologies. In turn, I should hasten to add, professional academics have much to learn from some of the non-professional scholars; at both Nashville and Barnesville some of the best talks came not from professional academics but from non-professional critics who possessed a clarity found too rarely in academe.

(7) In the end, SC2 was a great success, simultaneously informative, stimulating, and full of potential. After all, where else can a discussion of the complexities of intratextuality in *BtVS* or the alternate vision of capitalism offered on *Firefly* be coupled with passionate disputes about the hotly contested ‘Angel vs. Spike’ question. All this attests to the verve and value of SC2. Nevertheless, I cannot help but wonder what would happen if SC3 were to take place in a more publicly visible locale, in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, or Los Angeles. Could the *Slayage* conference attract more curious academics to enter and explore the field? Could studies of the Whedonverses continue to change the way fans think about scholarship and academic conferences? Could studies of the Whedonverses let us forge a new vision of the scholarly community? Only SC3 will tell.



## "Where Do We Go From Here?": *Buffy* Studies and *Slayage* 2006

Patricia Pender, Pace University



[1] SC2, the *Slayage* Conference on the Whedonverses, took place over the 2006 Memorial Day weekend in Barnesville, Georgia. Hosted by Rhonda Wilcox and her Gordon College colleagues, the conference provided a triumphant sequel to the first *Slayage* conference hosted two years previously in Nashville, Tennessee, by fellow *Slayage* editor, David Lavery. SC2 embraced the broad sweep of Joss Whedon's *oeuvre*, with papers on the flagship *Buffy*, the "spin-off with a soul," *Angel*, [1] the unjustly abbreviated *Firefly*, and its big screen adaptation, *Serenity*. Thoroughly multi-disciplinary in scope, the conference brought together academics and independent scholars working in the fields, not only of literary, film, and television studies, but also of sociology, psychology, religious studies, media studies, American studies, mathematics, philosophy, law, music, art, performance studies, women's and gender studies, linguistics, bibliography, rhetoric, and pedagogy. The range of methodologies adopted by individual papers and panels was equally eclectic; in addition to traditional analyses of character, genre, narrative, and symbolism, presenters also explored the influence of intertexts as diverse as Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates, Shakespeare and Byron, *Dracula* and *Alice in Wonderland*, the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the western, opera, cyberpunk, and comic books. Several panels examined the ever-expanding worlds of Whedon fandom, providing ethnographies of fan communities and reports on various fandom projects. Others considered questions of morality and ethics, citizenship and belonging, consumption and containment, race, class, gender, sexuality, science, geography, and ecology. To that vexing question (a question I admit to asking myself from time to time), "Is there really anything new to say about *Buffy?*," the conference provided a resounding "Duh!" To skeptics questioning the longevity and relevance of *Buffy* Studies, the conference moreover offered ample evidence of the ongoing importance of Whedon's texts to an international scholarly community.

### ***Once More, with Feeling***

[2] The astonishing success of the 2004 *Slayage* conference in Nashville must have made it clear that if a sequel were to be attempted, it would have a lot to live up to. If it were going to be done at all, it would have to be done, to borrow the title of that perennially popular *Buffy* episode, "Once More, with Feeling." It is, after all, one thing to celebrate the ascendancy of a single television series at the height of its popularity – something the first *Slayage* conference did with gusto and good humor (well, ok, sometimes with really *bad*

humor); it is another thing altogether to organize a second conference around the idea of “the Whedonverses,” a nomenclature that simultaneously signals the complex melding of fan and academic sensibilities informing this particular articulation of the field and the elevation of Joss Whedon himself to the role of auteur, of author function, invoked, whether ironically or unabashedly literally, as the veritable deity of an alternate universe. [3] Over 180 papers were presented at the Nashville *Slayage* conference and more than double that number attended. The figures for SC2 were slightly smaller, but still surprisingly impressive. Approximately 150 scholars presented papers at Gordon College and over 60 more attended. People traveled to Barnesville from Australia, Canada, England, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Norway, and all over the United States. All this – without the lure of Graceland! As Wilcox and Lavery indicate in their introduction to the conference program, “[i]n terms of travel logistics, coming to Barnesville is not as simple a matter (especially for international travelers) as coming to Nashville; and it is a mark of the seriousness of intention of students of the Whedonverses that they—that you—have made this journey.” [2] Overcoming the not-inconsiderable obstacles of geographical isolation, lack of public transportation, and the distance between the college and the conference hotels, SC2 was in fact meticulously organized and coordinated. Superlative timekeeping of papers and panels respected presenters and audience equally, a mark of consideration all the more welcome at a conference offering up to five parallel sessions, from 9am to 7pm, for three full days. It is one indication of the appeal of the SC2 program that I almost always found myself in a quandary about which session to attend. And I wasn’t the only one. It is a rare thing in academia when a three-day conference leaves you wishing you could have heard even more papers. For every panel I got to see, there were another two I wished I could have gone to – a fact that was energizing at the time but which inevitably limits the scope of the reflections I am able to offer here. [3]

### ***Going Through the Motions?***

[4] “I was always brave, and kind of righteous. Now I find I’m wavering:” thus sang Buffy in the self-consciously Disney “I want” song at the beginning of Season Six’s musical, “Once More, with Feeling.” Dredging up the energy to attend yet another scholarly conference, this one outside my primary field, at the end of the academic year, I found myself in a similar frame of mind. I was having trouble dragging myself from the “untold hell dimension” of end-of-semester grading: “ergo the weirdness” (*pace* Xander). If not brave, exactly, I *had* always been kind of righteous about defending the scholarly legitimacy of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which I had started writing about for undergraduate literature classes with the release of the Twentieth Century Fox film in 1992. (It has become *de rigueur* in *Buffy Studies* to bemoan the shortcomings of this early incarnation and, following Joss Whedon’s lead, to deem it infinitely inferior to the final product. I can only say that making the female lead’s “secret weapon” PMS was a masterstroke of cinematic bathos that I remain profoundly grateful for and that Joss Whedon is only one – albeit it an important one – of the many readers of the texts he helps to produce.) But fourteen years (eek!), a smattering of international conferences, and many a monograph later, in May 2006 I was feeling decidedly less sanguine about the radical potential of Buffy in general and *Buffy Studies* in particular.

[5] At the first *Slayage* conference in Nashville, some scholars and fans were already betraying an incipient impatience with the state of *Buffy* scholarship. “It’s a relief to hear papers that don’t go on about feminism” is a rough paraphrase of a comment I heard in a panel on colonialism – a remark that sets up an unfortunate and spurious mutual exclusivity. In her Mr. Pointy award-winning keynote address, “‘Not just another *Buffy* paper’: Towards an Aesthetics of Television.” Sue Turnbull offered a wittily self-reflexive

account of her struggles to justify her own *Buffy* scholarship to her colleagues (“Why I sometimes wish I was studying orthodonture”) and to do something different with the Slayer text (“a new aesthetics of television study”). A year previously, in their now somewhat notorious 2003 essay, “Feeling for Buffy: The Girl Next Door,” Michael P. Levine and Steven Jay Schneider, had offered a scathing critique of the state of *Buffy* scholarship, writing that, “[t]he irony here is that, in attempting to bring scholarship or serious discussion to bear on *BtVS*, the scholars in question evince their own lack of understanding of, and insight into, the show, and perhaps more importantly, into the kinds of tasks, purposes, and methods that cultural theorists and others who engage with popular culture set for themselves and employ” (299). Levine and Schneider went on to say, not without some justification, that “there has been much less of the kind of self-reflective work about the nature of *BtVS* scholarship – what it is about and what it is trying to accomplish versus what it should or could be about – than there should be, or than there in fact is within various disciplines in the humanities generally as regards their objects of study. It is *BtVS* scholarship that warrants study and this point, not *BtVS* itself” (301). [4] What were the chances – in 2006 – that SC2 would do more than go “through the motions,” that the conference would move through, beyond, or even more deeply into these problems – the purported redundancy of content (“not *more* feminism!”), the search for new approaches, the lack of reflexivity?

### ***The Same Old Trips – Why Should We Care?***

[6] One answer is, that in a very basic sense, SC2 had just about the same chance as any other academic conference of unearthing new content, unveiling new approaches, and being self-conscious about the state of the field. I feel sure that I am not alone when I say that during several presentations and even entire panels I was haunted by a sense of *deja vu*. Why does it feel like people are just telling us what we already know? Is the alternative to papers that assume too much insider knowledge simply presentations that include a lot of plot or character synopsis? How do we make a series we know so well new again to an informed audience? What *can* we assume about our audience? The regular conventions of paper presentations don’t seem to hold here – or do they? Admittedly, what I hear as “mostly filler” others will hear as a “break-away pop hit” or favorite “book number.” What’s new to me might be old to someone else, and vice versa. I am not arguing here for the priority of my sense of what is new and important in *Buffy* scholarship, but simply pointing out that that standard itself is an ineluctably subjective one.

[7] However, one difference, I suspect, between the experience of attending the biennial *Slayage* conference and, say, the annual Shakespeare Association of America conference is that the beloved object of study is also a maligned and imperiled object of study, so we *care* more when what we hear is substandard, even if we know that “substandard” inevitably means different things to different people. Having been asked to write a report of the conference in advance, I know that I was morbidly preoccupied with what I perceived as “filler” papers until a fellow attendee made the candid observation that when she attended an academic conference in her primary field, she was satisfied if she heard one good paper over the course of the conference. Having just heard five great papers in the space of a single day, and holding similarly low expectations of academic conferences in general, this contrast gave me pause. Do we hold higher hopes (and greater dread?) of *Buffy* scholarship than we do of other scholarship because, following Sue Turnbull, the study of *Buffy* is clearly such a joke to some of our colleagues? Does what Rhonda Wilcox has recently called the “demonization” of television studies within the wider academy influence the nature of our critical and emotional investments in the series and in the

scholarly paraphernalia (books, conferences, journals) with which the study of *Buffy* endeavors to legitimize itself? [5] And how does the embattled nature of the field impact the quality of community and conversation, and perhaps more importantly, the possibilities for disagreement and dissent, when large numbers of *Buffy* scholars congregate *en masse*?

### ***What Can't We Face If We're Together?***

[8] With *Buffy* scholarship and, perhaps more pertinently, *Buffy* pedagogy expanding so rapidly, it makes sense that the second *Slayage* conference would involve people from many levels of the academy and beyond – distinguished professors, common or garden professors, undergraduates, graduate students grappling with different stages of their masters or doctoral programs, independent scholars, professional writers, struggling writers, and loyal fans. Levels of familiarity with Whedon's texts and with the existing scholarship differed markedly as well, without necessarily corresponding closely with individuals' professional development. This is in no way a bad thing. In fact, it is one of those egalitarian, perhaps even utopian, features of this field that Wilcox and Lavery, as conference coordinators and editors of *Slayage*, have deliberately fostered and promoted. *Buffy* Studies is unusual in its inclusivity, in the deliberate efforts it makes to welcome scholars and students with different levels of expertise. Particularly at a gathering like SC2, those who write about *Buffy* are justifiably proud that – as scholars, fans, academics, and students (and often more than one of these simultaneously) – they are “in this thing together.”

[9] One of the most impressively put together visual presentations I saw at the conference, “‘Where Do We Go From Here?': A Look at Female Heroes in a Post-*Buffy* Context,” was by an independent scholar, Jennifer Stuller, who, outside the confines of academe, is writing a book about the subject (and is currently looking for a publisher). Roz Kaveney, an independent scholar whose contribution to *Buffy* Studies is already well established, shared her encyclopedic knowledge of all things Super- in her erudite keynote exposition, “Gifted and Dangerous: Joss Whedon's Superhero Obsession.” [6] The diversity of the *Slayage* audience and the reach of *Buffy* pedagogy are further indexed when undergraduates can produce papers as intriguing as those of the featured speakers. Under the editorship of Lynne Edwards and Katy Stevens, the newly established journal *Watcher Jr.* provides a unique venue for the publication of undergraduate papers, further contributing to the egalitarian development of the field.

### ***Something to Sing About***

[10] Three separate sessions at SC2 were devoted to the burgeoning field of *Buffy* pedagogy. I was fortunate to attend “The Whedonverses Across the Curriculum II,” the second of a two-part series chaired by Vivien Burr and Christine Jarvis, which set out to explore developments and continuities in *Buffy* pedagogy since the 2004 Nashville conference. Christine Jarvis, in presenting “Shifting Perspectives on Death – Using *BtVS* with First Year Undergraduates Considering Renaissance Attitudes Towards Morality,” drew some startlingly *apropos* connections between *Buffy*'s treatment of death and the work of seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets John Donne and George Herbert, in the process providing an exemplary model of the short conference paper – a veritable “how-to” for those of us less proficient with the genre. Jason Winslade's “Aspects of Metatextuality – Using *BtVS* to Illustrate Performance Theory and Cultural Studies” offered an engaging account of student responses to his use of *Buffy* in compulsory first year writing classes at DePaul University in Chicago, and Kris Woofter provided audience members with a treasure trove of teaching materials from a module he teaches on *Red Riding Hood*, using

the Season Five's *Buffy Vs. Dracula* to "illuminate literary terms and concepts." Through their insights, interactivity, and methods of delivery, each of these presentations managed to discuss engaged *Buffy* pedagogy and at the same time *perform* engaged *Buffy* pedagogy. The audience was appropriately appreciative, proposing an online archive of *Buffy*-related syllabi, and suggesting that this may well be the "next frontier" of *Buffy* scholarship.

[11] Other frontiers were broached at SC2 as well. In defiance of what I see as the patently premature suggestion that feminist analysis of *Buffy* has been exhausted, the conference offered two panels on "Gender" and another on "The Patriarchy." Inevitably some of these papers traversed familiar terrain, but welcome inroads were made by Monique Hyman's theoretically savvy "The Geography of *Firefly* and *Serenity*: Feminist Spaces on the Patriarchal Frontier" and featured speaker Lorna Jowett's wide-ranging presentation on "Science, Power, and Gender in *Buffy* and *Angel*," a talk that offered a tantalizing taste of her new work on "Geek Chic." If gender analysis might seem to some hardened cases "the same old trip," decidedly new trips in content and approach were offered by David Kociemba's appealing and innovative "'Fake It 'till You Make It': Media Addiction in *BtVS*," which applied the theory of addiction promulgated by Alcoholics Anonymous to the fannish proclivities of *Buffy*'s "Evil Trio," and featured speaker Lynne Edwards' bravura performance (there really is no other word) of her forthcoming book, *The Other Sunnydale: Reflections of Blackness in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

[12] If the above examples illustrate new content and new approaches in scholarship on *Buffy*, a question arguably remains about capacity of the field for self-reflection, and papers at SC2 that answered the "so what?" question ("so why should what you have to say be of interest to anyone not already interested?") provide a particularly important contribution to *Buffy* scholarship at this stage of its development. For *Buffy* Studies to develop beyond its cultish counter-canonical cachet (admittedly part of its appeal), it needs to explicitly demonstrate the kinds of contribution it can make to the disparate disciplines its exponents engage with. Michael Adams' keynote address, "The Matrix of Motives in Slayer Style" did this with predictable panache when he teased out the implications of "clipped phrasal verbs" not only for *Buffy* studies, but also for the broader field of linguistic analysis. Michelle Dvoskin's "Under Their Spell: 'Once More, with Feeling' and Queering the Audience" departed from existing scholarship on musical theater to ask what happens when the queer subtext becomes lesbian text, and Cynthea Masson's "'What Did You Sing About?': Acts of Questioning in 'Once More, with Feeling'" deployed a sophisticated rhetorical analysis to challenge what has become the "canonical" reading of this episode, that "each of the characters sings what they secretly feel, so the songs represent the real and the true" (in Richard Albright's elegant synopsis, but see also Wilcox and Halfyard) [7] to instead suggest that "the truths revealed in 'Once More, with Feeling' may be a *distraction* from other truths or secrets that the characters are not yet able to admit out loud, even in song, even to themselves" (emphasis added).

### ***I'm just worried that this whole session's going to turn into some training montage from an 80s movie***

[13] With the plethora of excellent papers on offer, it might seem churlish to probe what I see as some of the more problematic aspects of the conference, but I feel this is also part of my brief. At the first *Slayage* conference in 2004, I voiced the concern that while original and informative papers abounded, *Buffy* scholars seemed surprisingly reluctant to critique the show, and that when such critiques were offered, they were often perceived as arresting rather than furthering scholarly dialogue. [8] I am most familiar with this tendency in feminist scholarship. The last decade has produced a wealth of exciting

feminist criticism of *Buffy*, but with significant exceptions, there is a tendency to focus on the series' transgressive play with gender at the expense of considering other, less obviously liberatory aspects of the show. [9] In this context, critical scrutiny of say, *Buffy's* postcolonial or racial politics, is seen by some to willfully undermine or detract from the series' feminist credentials, and perhaps by implication from the work of scholars who have celebrated it. A critique of *Buffy's* less progressive politics becomes a treacherous act of double-crossing. And if feminist scholars see a critique of *Buffy's* racial politics as an attack on *Buffy Studies* itself, then this separation will solidify by degrees. In Nashville I suggested that it is a poor reflection on *Buffy Studies* if serious minded critique of the show is somehow seen as an *inappropriate* response to the text.

[14] This tension is not unique to feminist scholarship of *Buffy*, indeed similar, sometimes unspoken conflicts might be discerned in discussions about the putative "success" of Season Seven and the respective merits of formal (often deemed "aesthetic") and ideological (often termed "sociological") criticism in *Buffy Studies*. [10] Far from endangering its development, I believe such tensions indicate some of the field's most promising avenues of exploration – but only if they are explored deliberately and self-consciously. This will require that new scholarship will sometimes take issue with existing scholarship, and such disagreements should not be seen as a threat to the field but rather as an important source of its strength. Cynthia Masson's SC2 paper offers a wonderful example of work that engages usefully with existing *Buffy* scholarship and departs from it in several pertinent respects to produce a vigorous new reading of a familiar text. Masson argues that in "Once More, with Feeling," "Buffy's words of confidence – her apparent truth of faith in togetherness – is not so confident or truthful when viewed rhetorically." Instead, Masson suggests, "she asks rhetorical questions that overtly imply togetherness, while covertly gesturing toward her ongoing separation from the group." In a different but nonetheless related way, some attendees at SC2 expressed discomfort with the fact that when they asked questions that were perceived as critical – of the series itself, of the conference papers in question – they were essentially shut down in a sort of default collective strategy that discouraged dissension. In analyzing a series as invested in the slippage between text and subtext as *Buffy*, we should be equally wary of misreading rhetorical questions as we are of mistaking genuine questions for a species of assault. One of the flip sides to the inclusive sense of community that the *Slayage* conferences foster is the sense that any critical take on *Buffy* – its politics, its narrative strategies, Spike (!) – can be misread as an attack on that community itself – a community that is necessarily (and thankfully) less unified than its own rhetoric might suggest.

[15] In "Once More, with Feeling," Buffy's anthem, "What Can't We Face," celebrates the sense of community that is a celebrated feature of the show. But as several critics have noted, this song is a wishful affirmation of unity in the face of decided differences, and, I would suggest, the state of *Buffy* scholarship is no different. [11] Similarly, when Buffy warns Giles, "I'm just worried that this whole session's going to turn into some training montage from an 80s movie," she voices a fear that the discipline and rigor of their training is about to be cheapened by caricature, portrayed with a sentimentality that drains it of significance. The extraordinary goodwill and intellectual generosity that have informed the last two *Slayage* conferences should not blind us to the fact that the field of *Buffy Studies* unwittingly courts trivialization if it pursues critical consensus at the expense of a dynamic discussion of differences. In this spirit, I want briefly to consider two developments in *Buffy* scholarship that I believe warrant further scrutiny.

### ***It's Getting Eerie. What's This Cheery Singing All About?***

[16] The level of affective response elicited by *Buffy* is demonstrably and designedly

powerful. We know that Whedon developed the series with this aim in mind: "I designed the show to create that strong reaction. I designed Buffy to be an icon, to be an emotional experience, to be loved in a way that other shows can't be loved." [12] One of the most unusual moments I experienced at SC2 occurred at 11am on a Sunday morning when Claudia Rollins' careful analysis of Anya's response to Joyce's death in *The Body* left half of the audience unexpectedly blinking back tears. We do not generally expect to be moved this viscerally by a television show, still less by an academic presentation, although perhaps we should more often. Participation in the *Slayage* conferences often blurs the boundaries between academic "distance" and fannish "immersion" in ways that help to dismantle this obdurate binary. The results can sometimes be exhilarating, as with Rollins' talk above. They can also be unnerving.

[17] Vivien Burr, in her lucid account of the interplay between fan and academic identities at the first *Slayage* conference, testifies to the mixed feelings many experience when their personal and professional passions find a common object. She explores the "tension and conflict implicit in the relationship between academic and fan identities, and the defensiveness and anxiety associated with trying to have a foot in both camps" (375-6). Based on her own experiences in Nashville and the insights of 13 interviewees, Burr examines attendees' efforts to balance emotional engagement and academic rigor. One respondent, Ben, writes:

I know that my engagement with the show is a peculiar combination of scholarly curiosity, appreciation, and deep emotional attachment . . . The best and most responsible critiques, I think, emerge from profound emotional engagements – but that emotional engagement needs to be invested with criticism and political interest, not simply taken up as an uncritical celebration. (379)

Given that SCBtVS "quite clearly identified itself as an academic conference," Burr notes, "it is not surprising . . . that it was almost exclusively the more fannish aspects of the activities that sometimes felt problematic" (376-7).

[18] The fannish aspects of SC2 that felt most problematic to me were the recurring use of two words: "Joss" and "genius." In academic circles we call Dante simply by his first name but even this is a mistake of literary history. When I'm talking to my friends, or discussing my struggles with this essay to colleagues, I will refer to the creator of *Buffy* as "Joss." But this doesn't mean it's good practice. I want to make the puny, pedantic plea that in academic conference papers we refer to Whedon by his full or last name. The problem is compounded when "Joss" becomes synonymous with "genius" and the two are collapsed in a way that forestalls conversation. "Joss" is a "genius," "Joss" "wrote" this episode, therefore, this episode is "genius." If there is a case to be made for Whedon's "genius," then that case needs to be *established*, and not just assumed. [13] I suppose one of the pleasures of conferences such as *Slayage* is precisely the fellow fannish feeling that allows such assumptions to be made, but the fact remains that we are all fan-scholars and scholar-fans with different political and theoretical investments. "Genius" is a particularly loaded term in literary criticism, with a history that harkens back to Romantic notions of individual creativity and transcendence, and which was responsible in part for the exclusion of women and other minorities from the canon of English literature for several centuries. The term "genius" is certainly part of my fannish vocabulary for Whedon, but when we use it in academic contexts I suggest we need to be careful to define, and delimit, exactly what it is we are trying to say.

[19] These admittedly anal comments are not intended to silence fan discourse on *Buffy*, or to endorse any particularly rigid code of academic etiquette. As Alan, one of Vivien

Burr's respondents eloquently argues:

I feel that fandom can certainly inform a scholar's work and adds to the playfulness that can make scholarly papers interesting. But a scholar needs to balance that with a more measured approach. I refrain from using the term "objectivity," since that notion is as mythical as vampires are. But an academic writing on these topics needs to learn to coax his or her fandom into the service of scholarly inquiry. (379)

Nor do I mean, in voicing my beef with "Joss" and "genius," to reinforce a strict division between fan and academic identities. As Burr, following Hills, notes, these identities are performative, "they are things that we *do*," not things that we, essentially, are (376). And while turf struggles between fans and academics might seem potentially divisive of the inclusive community fostered by *Slayage*, the fact that the study of fan cultures has developed alongside *Buffy Studies* and has from the outset constituted an important part of its literature suggests instead that the vagaries of academic/fan interaction within this community will continue to prove a particularly fertile field of research. In its energetic embrace of fan communities and fan idioms, *Buffy Studies* has already gone a long way to answering the call Matt Hills makes at the end of *Fan Cultures* (and which David Lavery reiterates in his Mr. Pointy award-winning paean to *Buffy Studies*, " 'I wrote my thesis on you': *Buffy Studies* as an Academic Cult"), the call for "academic commitment . . . modeled on fan commitment," for "affective reflexivity" and for "*impassioned thought* rather than the parroting of academic discursive mantras" (184). I still think we should use his last name.

### ***I've Got a Theory***

[20] Closely related to the celebration of "Joss" as "genius" has been the swift rise of auteur theory as a model for Whedon's authorship. Several presenters at SC2 invoked Whedon as an auteur, notably Jennifer Stokes, who explored "The Rise of Whedon as Auteur" in her industry-aware analysis, "Joss Whedon and Contemporary Programming," and David Lavery, whose featured address, "Joss Whedon, Wonder Boy," offered an entertaining tour of his eponymous book project for I. B. Tauris. Lavery explained that his book will model its methodology on John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination*, in which Lowes seeks to "systematically trace the origin of each and every image/symbol/metaphor in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner,' to discover how the raw material that inspired the great British romantic's belief suspending words arrived in his imagination in the first place." Lavery hopes to "scrutinize Whedon in much the same way Lowes investigated Coleridge," with one chapter of his book, "Joss Whedon, Television Auteur" devoted to exploring how "Whedon's signature writing and directing are elucidated through examination of such singular episodes as 'Hush,' 'Restless,' 'The Body,' 'Once More with Feeling,' 'Waiting in the Wings,' and 'Objects in Space.'" Lavery claims that he borrows this approach from "back in the good old days" when "the discouraging words structuralism and deconstruction had not yet been heard." And, disarming self-deprecation aside, it is not without significance that one of the more recent proposals for *Buffy* scholarship, from an acknowledged leader of the field, draws its theoretical underpinning from a time before High Theory.

[21] Auteur theory is useful for *Buffy* scholars for a number of reasons: it asserts by fiat the "genius" of the object of analysis; it makes a polemic argument for reading those who produce television as seriously as those who produce film; it canonizes Whedon as innovator and master of his craft at an early stage in the development of television

studies; and it retrieves from the theoretical remains of the death of the author a single, self-conscious, self-evident author – all good grist for the New Critical mill. But it also begs the question of this scholarship's relationship to the critical theory that, over the last 40 years has spawned the very fields – of feminism, film studies, cultural studies, etc.– that gave a home to *Buffy* Studies to begin with. When I mentioned in the SC2 panel on "Media/Television Studies" that it was uncanny that auteur theory, itself the subject of fierce debate in film studies, should be resurrected in television studies 40 years after the death of the author, another audience member replied that she thought that the death of the author had been exaggerated. This moment exemplifies, as clearly as I think any can, the very different theoretical agenda that *Buffy* scholars bring to their work. And again, I would like to make the pitch that I think these divisions can be potentially productive and powerful if they are brought out into the open.

[22] In that spirit of constructive engagement, then, let me be a little less cryptic. I've already expressed my reservations about the use of the term "genius:" if it is defined in such a way as to *open up* our investigation into the nature of Whedon's artistry, then that is all to the good; if it is used simply to assert aesthetic value, then, like Buffy singing before Sweet at the conclusion to "Once More, with Feeling," it "needs back up." Similarly, while the argument certainly needs to be made that television shows are as worthy of scholarly scrutiny as film texts or literature, it seems counter-intuitive to make this claim using the *same* values of "quality" and "excellence" that have kept television from being taken seriously in the first place. The mechanism of canonization is, in some ways, inimical to the progressive politics that the *Buffy* series and many *Buffy* scholars uphold. Moreover, while auteur theory was, in its heyday, certainly a polemic movement, it was also, as Bill Nichols notes (citing John Hess in his commentary on Truffaut's watershed essay, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema"), "a justification couched in aesthetic terms, of a culturally conservative, politically reactionary attempt to remove film from the realm of social and political concern" (224). While auteur theory has developed in decidedly different directions since then (in the distinctive styles of Andrew Sarris, Peter Wollen, and Robin Wood, for instance), it seems important for *Buffy* scholars in 2006 to carefully historicize the theory they employ, to identify which strain of this theory speaks most to their concerns, and to unpack the theoretical baggage that travels with the label "auteur," not least of which is its gendering (like the label "genius" before it) as precocious masculine talent.

[23] Finally, I want to glance briefly at the solidification of the author function that attends *Buffy* Studies' adoption of auteur theory. While it makes sense for the immediate promotion of the field, the elevation of Joss Whedon to auteur, to single-author status, also comes at a time when *Buffy* Studies might contribute meaningfully to broader, cross-disciplinary interests in the nature of collective authorship, in intellectual property, in the dynamics of television production, and in the mythology of the author function as it relates to media studies more generally. No TV episode, still less a TV series, is a single-authored work, and to proceed as if it were seems to me to jettison one of the most compelling contributions the study of *Buffy* might have to offer the wider academic community. I am not arguing here for the whole-scale rejection of auteur theory, but merely for a more nuanced exploration of its applicability. A critical analysis of the ways in which Whedon's authorship confirms *and resists* various strains of auteur theory might be able to take in new directions not just *Buffy* Studies but auteur theory as well.

### ***Where Do We Go From Here?***

[24] *Buffy* Studies in its present incarnation offers unique opportunities to explore the peculiarities and problematics of television "authorship." Whether approached via auteur

theory or from a more deconstructive position, *Buffy* has much to offer. *Buffy* Studies also offers fertile fields for the study of fan cultures and, more particularly, for the interrogation of the fan/scholar continuum. It continues to foster exciting scholarship in feminism and has branched out into many other exciting new fields. As SC2 demonstrated to admiration, *Buffy* will continue to elicit challenging responses from both the formalist and poststructuralist sides of the critical divide. The trick will be to bring the two into conversation.

## Notes

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[1] The phrase comes from Stacey Abbott's edited collection of essays, *Reading Angel: The TV Spin-off With a Soul*.

[2] Rhonda Wilcox and David Lavery, Introduction to Conference Program, "SC2: The Slayage Conference on the Whedonverses."

[3] Brett Rogers and I endeavored to attend different sessions in order to jointly cover as much of the conference as we could but the result is necessarily still incomplete, and my account of the sessions I did attend, inevitably partial. Apologies for any errors or omissions of attribution in the account that follows.

[4] I disagree with most of Levine and Schneider's assessments, both about the *Buffy* series and *Buffy* Studies, but the charge that there is not enough self-reflexive analysis of the field does have some merit. Significant exceptions are provided by Vivien Burr's "Scholars/'shippers and Spikeaholics," Rhonda Wilcox's "In 'The Demon Section of the Card Catalogue,'" and David Lavery's "'I Wrote My Thesis on You.'"

[5] Rhonda Wilcox, "In 'The Demon Section of the Card Catalogue': *Buffy* Studies and Television Studies," 37.

[6] Kaveney edited the first published collection of *Buffy* scholarship, *Reading the Vampire Slayer: An Unofficial Critical Companion to Buffy and Angel*, revised and updated as *Reading the Vampire Slayer: The New, Revised, Unofficial Guide to Buffy and Angel*.

[7] Richard S. Albright, "'Break away pop hit or . . . book number?': 'Once More, with Feeling' and Genre," par. 11. See also Rhonda Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters* and Janet K. Halfyard, "Singing Their Hearts Out."

[8] See Pender, "Whose Revolution Has Been Televised?"

[9] I discuss this more fully in "'Kicking Ass is Comfort Food: Buffy as Third Wave Feminist Icon."

[10] For one take on the "aesthetic" versus "sociological" debate, see Rhonda Wilcox, "In 'The Demon Section of the Card Catalogue.'"

[11] See especially Wilcox's chapter on "Once More, with Feeling" in *Why Buffy Matters*.

[12] Joss Whedon interview, the *Onion AV Club*.

[13] This is, in fact, what David Lavery does in "The Genius of Joss Whedon."

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