

## **Buffy the Vampire Slayer: An Introduction**

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American serial drama has received considerable critical attention, not only in the English-speaking world but also (more surprisingly perhaps) in France. In the UK, the term "Golden Age of Television" evokes nostalgic memories of the 60s and 70s, of Armchair Theatre and the Wednesday Play, of writers such as Loach, Mercer, Allen and Potter, producers such as Garnett and Newman, an age whose demise coincided with an increase in American imports to British television. Ironic therefore that the July/August 2003 edition of the prestigious French film magazine, *Les Cahiers du Cinema* (Cinema Notebooks), should hail a new golden age, that of American serial drama, and argue that the pleasures of the cinephile are nowadays to be found in televisual form. For *Les Cahiers*, shows such as *24*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos*, *ER*, *The X-Files* and *The West Wing* form a "coherent and exceptional body of work". These sentiments were echoed by Chris Marker, the distinguished French documentary film maker (*La Jetée*), who speaks of "the wonderful American series . . . [where] you find a knowledge, a sense of storytelling . . . accomplished framing and editing, dramaturgy and acting skill which is unparalleled, and is especially not to be found in Hollywood (*Liberation*, 16 April 2003).

Many British commentators shared these sentiments, particularly about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. For Scotland on Sunday, we are "living in a truly stunning period of creative activity in television" (22 September, 2002). For Robert Hanks in *The Independent*, "four or five episodes of *BtVS* would be on my list of the 10 best pieces of television drama ever made" (1 July 2002). And Zoe Williams refers to Buffy's "metaphorical punch [which] gives the show its place in the intellectual life of the English-speaking world" (*The Guardian*, November 17, 2001).

Some of the programmes cited are produced in the privileged environment of the advert-free American subscription cable network, such as HBO, which produces, among others, David Chase's *The Sopranos*; but they also air on the big networks such as ABC, NBC and CBS, as well as their newer, brasher rivals such as Fox, WB and UPN, where the narrative has to be shaped to accommodate the frequent commercial interruptions – an environment traditionally

held to be inimical to “quality” television.

Perhaps the success of these programmes is due to the fact that television, the critical poor relation of cinema, exploits the narrative possibilities, almost Dickensian in scope, afforded by the long-running serial. (Strictly speaking, series - but at least since the 1980s, American series have been developing longer narrative arcs to exert an almost soap-like hold on their audiences.) *Les Cahiers* also cites the maturity of an economic and institutional structure comparable in certain respects to the classic Hollywood era of film.

Ironically, given the traditional view of conservatism of the television networks, scriptwriters, directors and actors often find a freedom in television no longer found in the increasingly high-concept production of Hollywood film. For example, Stephen Hopkins, director of *24*, interviewed in the same edition of *Les Cahiers*, makes the claim: "On television we are constantly encouraged to take risks. The products of the film industry are constantly shorn of anything controversial, for their audiences consists of adolescents. I feel that the relationship between cinema and television has been inverted. Before, TV was made for children, the cinema for adults. Nowadays it's the opposite."

Analysis of this flowering of American television drama is frequently based on a vaguely auteurist appraisal of creative individuals and their influence, of TV auteurs such as Gene Roddenbury (*Star Trek*), Steven Bochco (*Hill St Blues*, *NYPD Blues*), Chris Carter (*The X-Files*), David Chase (*The Sopranos*), Aaron Spelling (*The West Wing*) and Joss Whedon (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*) A more institutionalist analysis, however, would point to a crisis in audience demographics and the rise of alternatives to network television due to the advent of video, cable and the internet. These shows referred to were made in a period of audience decline (the obvious parallel that springs to mind is the flowering of the New Hollywood in the early 70s following the decline of the classic era), with networks chasing not just highest numbers but the most educated and affluent audience to deliver to their advertisers.<sup>1</sup> Which brings us to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, to which a number of articles in this edition of the MEJ are devoted.

Why, then, among august affairs of state of *The West Wing*, the apocalyptic *24* and the Jacobean

intrigue of *The Sopranos*, do we find the story of a Californian cheerleader called upon to use her superpowers to slay demons and save the world, battling evil in skimpy attire with not a hair out of place? It didn't match *Friends* and *ER* in the ratings but, finding its niche audience so beloved of the advertisers, it is the one which has generated the greatest fan engagement, as indicated by sales of DVDs and other products, and the highest number of on-line fan sites, its appearance in 1997 coinciding with the explosion of the Internet. It owes its popularity to a number of factors - comic writing reminiscent of the screwball comedy of Lubitch and Hawkes, complex characterisation, a rich and expansive mythology, sexual chemistry, a large ensemble cast, a great visual style, snappy and inventive dialogue ("slayer slang", analysed recently in a book by linguistics professor Michael Adams <sup>2</sup>). Occasionally it manages to be quite moving, such as in *The Body* in Season 5 where Buffy's mother dies (of natural causes) in an episode that abstains from all non-diegetic sound; occasionally scary, such as *Hush* (4.10\*), an episode which was almost wholly without dialogue; it manages to combine both of these with comedy in *Once More with Feeling*, a musical episode which references Steven Sondheim, the classic MGM musical, Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* and *Mary Poppins*, Jacques Demy's *The Young Girls of Rochefort*, Milos Forman's *Hair*, hard rock and a host of other texts and styles, while at the same time remaining faithful to the narrative arcs which dominate the season.

For those not familiar with the Buffyverse, a little background is necessary. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, although made by Fox TV, first aired on the WB network on 10 March 1997 and was based on a not very successful film, which Whedon wrote but didn't direct, starring Kirsty Swanson and Donald Sutherland. Buffy is Buffy Summers, a pretty LA teenager who discovers that she has been chosen as the Slayer – latest in a long line of young women gifted with prodigious strength and fighting skills and landed with the task of slaying humanity's supernatural enemies – mainly vampires. After burning down the gym in her previous school while fighting the fanged ones, Buffy moves to Sunnydale, a “one Starbuck town” in Southern California inconveniently sited over a Hellmouth, a portal to evil dimensions which attracts all sorts of monsters and demons. She is aided by her school friends: Willow, a computer nerd and, later, trainee witch, and Xander, who has no special powers but a big heart and a gift for snappy one-liners. These two form the core of what becomes known as the Scooby gang or Scoobies, in intertextual homage to the cartoon dog, *Scooby Doo*. Rupert Giles is her English "Watcher",

sanctioned by the shadowy English “Watchers’ Council” to guide her; he uses his role as school librarian as a cover for these activities, his library being full of heavy tomes which, along with Willow’s skill at surfing the net, provide the research back-up required for the Slayer to do the business. The Scoobies expand over time to include a variety of friends and lovers, notably Angel, a vampire whose soul has been restored and who is trying to make up for past misdeeds. He is the love of Buffy’s life but he left after Season 3 to start his own spin-off series. And of course there is the cool English vampire, Spike, whose hobbies include dog racing, listening to the Sex Pistols and supporting Manchester United. (Englishness or Britishness is a recurring motif in the show: Whedon seems as fond of English popular culture as Mike Myers). To an American audience, some of these references are quite arcane. For example, Spike, being a vampire, doesn’t need food but likes to crumble blood in Weetabix “to give it texture” (*Hush*, 4.10). Americans have learned from Spike that “shag” doesn’t refer to a Carolina dance and “wanker” is apparently beginning to enter the lexicon of American youth. At first Spike is Buffy’s arch nemesis but when a chip is inserted in his brain which prevents him from harming humans, his obsession with Buffy turns to love and he sets out on the road to redemption which ends with him acquiring a soul and becoming one of the good guys. Christianity is present in the show only as part of the iconography of the vampire genre – holy water, crucifixes – but the theme of redemption runs through *Buffy* with not only Angel and Spike, but vengeance demon Anya, Cordelia, arch-bitch of the high school social scene, and rogue-Slayer Faith, all coming over from the dark side. Buffy, when she sacrifices herself to save the world (again!) at the end of Season Five, jumps off a tower with her arms outstretched like the crucifixion.

One of the show’s greatest strengths is the way it examines the generation gap, a staple of every youth-oriented text since *The Wild Ones* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, and this is expressed not only in the general distrust shown towards adult institutions such as the school hierarchy and the law but through the very language of the show. As Rhonda Wilcox and David Lavery point out, there is “a striking differentiation of teen versus adult language in *Buffy* ... [a] linguistic separateness [which] emphasises the lack of communication between the generations.”<sup>3</sup> Buffy’s mother Joyce is a concerned parent but is in denial about what is going on around her. For example, when Buffy tells her mother she has to go out, Joyce says, “I know. If you don’t go out, it’s the end of the world. Everything is life and death to a sixteen-year-old girl!” Of course, it *will*

be the literal end of the world if Buffy doesn't stop it. (*The Harvest*, 1.2). Buffy finally "comes out" as the slayer but Joyce asks her: "Have you tried not being a slayer?" (*Becoming, Part 2*, 2.22).

Characters such as Giles and Joyce provide an entry point for a wider demographic, as *Buffy's* appeal is not limited to the teen and twentysomethings that provide the main target audience. One of the main attractions to this wider audience is perhaps that it constantly operates on this allegorical, metaphorical and symbolic level, (a fact acknowledged from within the text by Giles when he says, "Buffy, I believe the subtext here is rapidly becoming text" (*Ted*, 2.11); and by Buffy herself when in answer to a dying monk who says "my journey is done" retorts, "Don't get metaphory on me" (*No Place Like Home*, 5.5). The vampires and other demons form the central metaphor of the show: that they represent the troubles of adolescence, the beast through which the main characters wrestle with aspects of growing up.

With its self referentiality, generic hybridity, rapid tonal shifts and intertextual allusions to culture both 'high' and 'low', it is the post-modernist text *par excellence*. According to Robert Stam, (using the analogy of STD prevention), "Any text which has slept with another text has necessarily slept with all the texts the other text has slept with;"<sup>4</sup> what David Lavery refers to as "textually promiscuous"<sup>5</sup>, which *Buffy* certainly is. Buffy replies to a skeptical Giles, "I cannot believe that you of all people are trying to scully me", (*The Pack*, 1.6) a reference to Mulder's FBI partner, Dana Scully, in *The X-Files*. Or when Buffy says, "my spider sense is tingling", (*I robot, You Jane*, 1.8) it is clearly a reference to *Spiderman*. In *Hush* (4.10), a soldier in a secret government underground organisation bemoans the fact that he can't reveal his identity to impress girls but has to "Clark Kent [his] way through the dating scene and never use this unfair advantage," a reference to Superman's mild-mannered alter ego. The superhero references abound, typical of the self-referential process in *Buffy* which frequently draws attention to its own constructedness. In *Halloween* (2.6), when a spell cast by Ethan Rayne (another English villain) turns everyone into the persona their Halloween costume represents, Willow bemoans the fact that Buffy has dressed up as a terrified, simpering, eighteenth-century noblewoman and wishes she had picked a Xena the Warrior Princess costume instead. Giles is sometimes referred to as Alfred, after Batman's prissy butler.

The allusions range widely through both pop and highbrow culture. When Xander dresses as a Western hero for a fancy-dress party, he claims to come from "the country of Leone. It's in Italy, pretending to be Montana." (*Inca Mummy Girl*, 2.4). Principal Snyder tells Xander that everything from his mouth is "an airborne toxic event" (*What's My Line, Part 1*, 2.9), a reference to Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. Rogue-slayer Faith is so late in arriving that she "makes Godot seem punctual" (*Enemies*, 3.17). When Tara says, "Things fall apart, they fall so hard", Yeats's "Second Coming" is the source (*Entropy*, 6.18), as is Bergman in this exchange between the Scoobies:

*Cordelia:*     *You saw death?*

*Willow:*       *Did it have an hourglass?*

*Xander:*       *Ooh, if he asks you to play chess, don't even do it. The guy's, like, a wiz. (Killed by Death: 2.18)*

Shakespearian allusions abound, from the first season when the head vampire, the Master (based on Murnau's *Nosferatu*), echoes Salanio in *The Merchant of Venice* in asking, "What news on the Rialto" (*The Wish*, 3.9); and the English vampire Drusilla, Spike's paramour, playing a variation on *Othello*, declares, "We can love quite well. If not wisely." (*Crush*, 5.14). When the Scoobies go off to confront hell-god Glory and Buffy declares, "Everybody knows their jobs. Remember, the ritual starts, we all die," *Henry V* provides the comic interchange between Giles and Spike:

*Spike:* *Well, not exactly the St. Crispin's Day speech, was it?*

*Giles:* "We few, we happy few . . . ."

*Spike:* ". . . . we band of buggered." (*The Gift*, 5.22)

(This line, like many another, was censored in the early evening BBC showing of the episode). Not since *Twin Peaks* has a television show excited such interest among scholars and cultural commentators (one international academic conference in Norwich in October 2002; another in Tennessee this spring).

The allusions tend to be for comic effect and this might give the impression that it is essentially spoof but this is not so. Perhaps one of the reasons the original film did not work was that it was campy and nothing else. According to Joss Whedon:

In the [*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*] movie, the director took an action/horror/comedy script and went only with the comedy. In the television show we're keeping to the original formula. We take our horror genre seriously. We are not doing spoof. It's larger than life but we are very much involved with these characters... The description I like best is *My So-Called Life* meets *The X-Files*.<sup>6</sup>

Joyce Millman has noted that “Buffy is daring because it defiantly and lovingly takes its tone and shape from oft-dismissed genres like daytime soaps, gothic romances, Grade-B horror flicks and supernatural fantasies, and it elevates – no, celebrates – these misunderstood and mistreated pop-art forms.”<sup>7</sup>

Like most shows which can be loosely described as postmodern, Buffy requires its audience to be able to be able to follow the rapid transitions in mood and genre, what Jim Collins refers to as “tonal variation”:

At one moment, the conventions of a genre are taken ‘seriously,’ in another scene, they might be subjected to [a] sort of ambivalent parody . . . These generic and tonal variations occur within scenes as well as across scenes, sometimes oscillating on a line by line basis, or across episodes.<sup>8</sup>

Comedy is perhaps the dominant tone throughout the show. (*The Body*, 5.16, where Joyce Summers, Buffy’s mother, dies of an aneurysm, is exceptional in that comedy is almost entirely absent). The humour goes from slapstick to irony, from dreadful puns (*Maggie Walsh: So, the Slayer. Buffy: Yeah. That's me. Walsh: We thought you were a myth. Buffy: Well, you were myth-taken*) to the most subtle wit. Buffy frequently dispatches her demon foes with Bond-like quips. As she says to one startled vampire: “We haven't been properly introduced. I'm Buffy, and you're . . . history!” (*Never Kill a Boy on the First Date*, 1.5) She confronts a demon who has been kidnapping young people and making them slaves in his hell dimension. Wielding hammer and sickle, she asks him if he wants to see her imitation of Gandhi. After smashing the demon’s brains in, she says to her bewildered companion, “ Well, you know, if he was really pissed off” (*Anne*, 3.1). Buffy is more of an action-gal than an intellectual, and much of the show’s comedy

derives from Buffy's lack of scholarship. When Xander asks Buffy if she's "up for a little reconnaissance", she responds, "You mean where we all sculpt and paint and stuff?" Buffy, quarrelling with Angel, says, "I don't trust you. You're a vampire" and when he looks hurt goes on, "Oh, I'm sorry, was that an offensive term? Should I say 'undead-American'?" (*When She Was Bad*, 2.1) - sending up linguistic political correctness. This verbal agility extends to the other characters. When Buffy (for once) behaves badly, even bitchy Cordelia thinks she is going too far and tells her, "Whatever is causing the Joan Collins 'tude, deal with it. Embrace the pain, spank your inner moppet, whatever, but get over it," (*When She Was Bad*, 2.1), thereby showing her familiarity with both American soap and Californian psycho-speak.

In the hilarious, *Buffy versus Dracula* episode (5.1), the prince of darkness himself makes an appearance and the Scooby gang are star struck. Buffy is flattered, "I mean, can you believe that? Count Famous heard of me." "What about that thing where he turned himself into a bat?" gasps Willow. "That was awesome!" Xander calls Dracula "the Dark Master – bator" (another line edited out of the episode when it appeared on the BBC) and makes fun of him: "And where'd you get that accent, Sesame Street? [Imitates the Count on *Sesame Street*] Vun, two, three -- three victims. Mwa ha ha!" But Xander soon falls under his power, becoming the Renfield character and starts eating flies. Sending up its own improbabilities, this episode has the Scoobies track Dracula to his dark mediaeval castle causing Riley to remark, "I've lived in Sunnydale a couple of years now. Know what I've never noticed before? A big honking castle". The straight-laced Giles is trapped by the three sexy female vampires (the ones who captured Jonathan Harper in Bram Stoker's "Dracula") and when he escapes he is teased: "At least you weren't making time with the dracu-babes like Giles here", to which Giles replies: "I was not making time! I, I was, uh, just about to kill those, uh, loathsome creatures when Riley interrupted me", to which Riley replies, "You were gonna nuzzle 'em to death?" Characteristically, Buffy overcomes Dracula not simply because of her slayer powers but because of her media literacy: Dracula disappears but when he reappears she is ready for him: "You think I don't watch your movies? You always come back," she says as she stakes him to death.

The interaction of the English characters frequently provides comic opportunities. In *Tabula Rasa* (6.8), Willow makes a spell that goes wrong and everyone loses their memory. Giles

reassures everyone, “ We'll all get our memory back, and it'll all be right as rain” to which Spike (not realising he himself is English), retorts, “Oh, listen to Mary Poppins. He's got his crust all stiff and upper with that nancy-boy accent. You Englishmen are always so... (pauses) Bloody hell! Sodding, blimey, shagging, knickers, bollocks, oh God! I'm English!” Giles and Spike assume that, being English, they are father and son. Spike examines a suit which he had borrowed and finds a label on the inside of his suit jacket, which says, 'Made with care for Randy' and angrily accuses his “father” of lumbering him with an embarrassing name: “Randy Giles? Why not just call me 'Horny Giles,' or 'Desperate for a Shag Giles'? I knew there was a reason I hated you!” However, this essentially comic episode ends in a very dark tone. Tara leaves Willow because of her over-dependence on magic (clearly a metaphor for drug-addiction), and Giles flies back to England so that Buffy can become more independent. The final sequence cuts back and forth between shots of these while a sad song (“Goodbye to You” by Michelle Branch) plays on the soundtrack, another example of the tonal shifts which the audience has become familiar with.

The Tara-Willow relationship, a prime-time representation of lesbianism which presents it in a fairly matter-of-fact way and doesn't make an issue of “coming out” (though in deference to the network's nervousness, the relationship was at first presented metaphorically as witchcraft), points to the fact that sexuality is a major focus on the show. For Whedon, high school was “a horror movie.”<sup>9</sup> According to Michael Adams, *Buffy* is one of the most sexually blunt shows on the air and, “ for its family-hour time slot, almost subversively so.”<sup>10</sup> Sex includes sexual politics and, for the magazine, “George”, Sarah Michelle Gellar, who plays Buffy, “represents real girl power, the kind that can kung-fu the undead back into oblivion . . . but what she's really taking on is the regular assortment of challenges that threaten to suck the lifeblood out of teenage girls, like a suffocating school hierarchy and a sexual double standard.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the original idea of the show, according to Joss Whedon, came with the reversal of an image from traditional horror: a fragile looking girl walks into a dark place, is attacked – and then turns and destroys her attacker. And the reversal of traditional gender stereotypes appears in the very first scene of the first episode (*Welcome to the Hellmouth*, 1.1) where we see a high school boy leading an anxious-looking girl into school for an after-hours “make-out” session. The generic expectation is for the girl to be in danger but in fact it is the vampire Darla who sinks her fangs into the boy's

neck.

### **Teaching *Buffy***

From the above it will be clear that *BtVS* has considerable potential as a text for teaching media studies. A quick tour through the key concepts reveals the potential of *Buffy* to spread much light on important areas of media culture and as such makes a highly suitable text for media studies courses, including NQ Higher and Intermediate Media Studies

### **Categories**

With regard to medium, *Buffy* puts into question some of the orthodoxies about the contrast between film and television. For many of its spectators, *Buffy* can be considered a “primary” as much as a “secondary” text, and its status as “must-see” TV raises interesting questions about Raymond Williams’ characterisation of the televisual “flow”, where television is consumed not so much on the basis of discrete programmes but as a flow or sequence of images that we absorb over a whole evening’s viewing, where different programmes and genres meld into one another. The changes in technology, where TV sets have become bigger and clearer, allow an attention to style that is frequently cinematic. Of course, networks will use one “must-see” programme as a hook to win an audience for the next one. The experience is still disjointed, especially in contrast to cable channels like HBO, with programmes being constantly broken up with adverts and trailers, but television writers have perfected the art of organising the narrative of the hour-long drama (with approximately 43 minutes of viewing time) into the four-act structure, with each act ending on a climax to prevent viewers zapping to another channel.

In terms of genre, *Buffy* is a generic hybrid. At its core, the main generic elements are of gothic horror and the American youth/high school drama. From the repertoire of elements of the former, we have the wooden stakes, crucifixes, holy water and the thresholds which uninvited vampires cannot cross. There are also witchcraft, werewolves, zombies and even a “Frankenstein” monster – Adam in Season 4 (in which there is a shot where Adam comes upon a child is framed exactly as in Tod Haynes 1932 film *Frankenstein*). From the latter, we have the popular set versus the “geeks and nerds”, the authoritarian school principal, the jocks and the cheerleaders, the school

lockers and the proms. (When the characters move on to University, elements such as college dorms, lecture theatres and college professors – usually unsympathetic, especially the professor of popular culture who appears in *The Freshman* (4.1) - are added). Other genres which make a guest appearance include science fiction (particularly the Initiative arc in Season 4, the underground facility with its shiny surfaces, cold blue lighting and scientists in white lab coats – including the “mad scientist” who goes too far); the musical (*Once More with Feeling*, 6.7), kung fu and Hong Kong action film, and even the art film (such as *Restless* (4.22), the dream episode that ended Season 4).

Among the other categories which might be studied, tone is central, particularly the tonal shifts referred to above. The rise of the television auteur might also be profitably examined. The theory of authorship has tended in the past to be limited to film, but the central role of Joss Whedon, not only as writer and director of key episodes but his very “hands-on” role as Executive Producer, is a fruitful field of study. As suggested above, study of *Buffy* as postmodernist text, with its eclectic mixture of styles and generic elements, its self-referentiality and intertextual allusions, is an essential area for understanding a key feature of cultural artefacts in recent times.

## **Language**

The highly cinematic mise en scene makes the study of the language of *Buffy* a particularly rich area. Whedon and his colleagues make use of many of the standard tropes of the horror genre such as the use of POV shots, chiaroscuro lighting, atmospheric music and rapid shifts in the rhythm of the editing, from long takes (for which Whedon has a particular fondness) to rapid cutting. The analysis of the title sequence, featuring Nerf Herder’s theme tune, rewards close study; even the first few bars of organ music (a staple of gothic horror) followed by raucous rock music, provides an effective entry into the generic hybridity of the show as a whole. However, the best approach to Language is, perhaps, to look at specific episodes and specific scenes within those episodes.

Among the ones which are particularly worth close study are:

- *Welcome to the Hellmouth* (1.1), the first episode, where the light-darkness opposition (referred to above) is first established, contrasting the sunny ambience of Southern Californian with the darkness that prevails underground in the Master's lair.
- *Lie to Me* (2.7), particularly the atmospheric opening sequence which sees the introduction of Drusilla. The mise en scene and cinematography where she is approaching a small boy on a swing make for a very spooky few minutes.
- *Hush* (4.10) (see Alastair Allison's article later in this edition)
- *Restless* (4.22). Unlike in other seasons, the closure to the seasonal arc is in the penultimate episode, *Primeval* (4.21), and in this episode Buffy, Giles, Xander and Willow unwind in front of the VCR but they fall asleep and each has a dream. In terms of genre, this is very much *Buffy-as-art-film*, surrealist in style as appropriate for a dream sequence. The opening of Willow's dream sequence is particularly effective.
- *The Body* (5.16), where Joyce Summers dies of an aneurysm. This episode is noteworthy for the absence of all non-diegetic sound and the stunning use of silence. Study could also focus on the way the editing combines with cinematography, where the visual style shifts from very dynamic camera movement (including jump-cuts) and asymmetrical compositions - for example, in the sequence where the paramedics arrive - to more static and balanced shots as the truth sinks in that Joyce has gone and each of the characters tries to deal with it as best they can. The editing and the sound are particularly effective in the scene where Buffy goes to Dawn's school to break the news, with inserts and cutaways used to build tension.
- *Once More with Feeling* (6.7) – aka *Buffy the Musical* – is useful not only in looking at the way the generic range of the series is expanded but by specific stylistic markers, for example, Xander and Anya's classic-MGM retro-pastiche number, "I'll Never Tell".

## **Narrative**

Not only is *Buffy* a generic hybrid: it is also a narrative hybrid, combining elements of the serial with those of the series. Although it is basically a series, it has strong characteristics of the serial, with its narrative arcs running over several episodes, indeed several seasons, which resist closure, in contrast to the "monster-of-the-week" episodes. In the latter, where Todorov's model

is particularly useful, the equilibrium frequently consists of the friends meeting in the high school grounds, all sunny and leafy; or in Giles's library where "ordinary" students rarely venture (as everyone knows, young people never read books) or, in later episodes, in the Magic Box. (There is often a prologue or "teaser" which prefigures the disruption to come). The disruption is repaired by some kind of climactic battle, with Buffy despatching the demon in the nick of time; and a return to equilibrium where the episode's events are discussed and closure achieved. Another area of narrative worth investigating is the four-act structure to be found in much US network TV drama, including *Buffy*, where the commercial breaks help shape the narrative structure, with cliff-hangers frequently occurring over commercial breaks.

Propp's Functions and Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey" monomyth come into their own when considering the mythic aspects of the show, especially in the longer narrative arcs which, like soap, resist early closure. (Interestingly, the stairwell of the Summers house, which features in many episodes over several seasons, has pictures of thresholds on the wall. <sup>12)</sup> Buffy is called to adventure, refuses the call, meets her mentor, and on a number of occasions meets death and resurrection. The study of Barthes' Codes are also useful here, particularly the hermeneutic and proairetic codes, the twin engines which combine to drive the narrative; the cultural code which plays on the generic knowledge we bring to the text, and the symbolic code with the binary oppositions (cf Levi-Strauss) of good and bad, light and darkness, which run through the series. For example, in the opening episode of season 1 (*Welcome to the Hellmouth*), the camera pans down from a scene which is iconic of California, sunny and "normal", with its yellow school bus, to the master's lair beneath the ground.

## **Representation**

The generation gap has already been referred to. As for gender and sexuality, these are central to *Buffy* and, as stated earlier, *BtVS* reverses gender stereotypes, with Buffy constructed as assertive femininity, in contrast to the stereotypical passive victim frequently to be found in the genre. The positive portrayal of a lesbian relationship is a notable feature of the series. The anguished outcry from lesbian fans at the killing off of Tara raises interesting questions about the needs of narrative – Tara was killed as a catalyst to push Willow over to the dark side and this narrative

logic came into conflict with the show's social role as a provider of positive models. It is interesting to note that the provision of Willow with another love interest in the form of potential slayer Kennedy in Season 7 may have been probably an attempt to pacify a particularly vociferous section of the show's fan base.

Englishness (or Britishness – the show doesn't make the distinction) is, as suggested above, an important aspect of *Buffy*, with not only Giles and Spike, but Drusilla, Leslie Wyndham-Price (Giles' replacement when the – largely English – Watchers' Council sack Giles for his over-paternal attitude towards Buffy), Ethan Rayne, Giles' former associate in the black arts, and Gwendolyn Post, a rogue member of the Watchers' Council. English characters are represented mostly as posh and effete or plebeian and tough. Spike represents both: the former in his pre-vampire days as William and the latter as Spike. (When Giles, under the influence of drugged candy, reverts to being an adolescent, steals a policeman's handcuffs and has sex with Joyce Summers on top of a police car, his accent drops down several rungs on the social ladder.) A related area might be the representation of the pre-Angel(us) Liam, the drunken violent Irishman of Anglo-Saxon stereotyping.

Another aspect of ethnicity is the under-representation of ethnic minorities in *Buffy*, particularly African-Americans; a criticism recognised from within the text in Season 3 by Mr Trick, a black vampire in the service of the genial but evil Mayor Wilkins, who comments on Sunnydale's racial monotony: "I mean, admittedly, it's not a haven for the brothers... you know, strictly the Caucasian persuasion here in the 'Dale, but... you know, you just gotta stand up and salute that death rate." (*Faith Hope and Trick*, 3.3). Black characters, such as the West Indian slayer Kendra and Initiative soldier Forrest, don't tend to last too long. An exception is Season 7's school principal, Robin Wood, a positive model who manages to survive to the end of the series.

The way science and the military-industrial complex are represented (*The Initiative*, Season 4), as well as teachers (who tend to be represented negatively) and librarians (represented stereotypically but on the whole positively by Giles) would also be an interesting field of study.

## **Audience and Institutions**

These are perhaps best studied in tandem, as they are so closely related. The institutional history of American television and how the film studios and the television companies eventually merged is a key area. Buffy is made by Fox TV (which sub-contracts to Whedon's *Mutant Enemy*) but shown for the first five seasons of its seven-season existence. This raises interesting questions about vertical integration in the television industry and the perceived benefits of synergy – and, more interestingly perhaps, why Fox did not exercise this potential for synergy by selling the show to a rival network. The economics of network television can be looked at by studying the deal that saw UPN (like the other two, part of a giant media conglomerate) paying over the odds to “steal” Buffy from WB.

The underlying rationale resides in the study of audience, since the economic function of most television shows is to deliver audiences to advertisers. With the rise of alternative forms of entertainment to network TV, such as cable, video and the internet, and the decrease in regulation, much of US television is about “narrowcasting” rather than broadcasting, with the networks trying to provide a more homogeneous niche audience for their advertisers. WB had a particular niche audience of young women, as reflected in the type of advertising that dominated the commercial breaks. The other fledgling network, UPN (Fox and the other traditional networks, CBS, ABC and NBC might be considered a “big four” beside “the little two”) had its niche in young males (wrestling was one of its most attractive shows) and the acquisition of Buffy helped extend this to other demographics and so put UPN on the map and extend its audience. The role of the Nielson ratings and the seasonal “sweeps” which affect advertising rates are also worth studying, particularly when we see that the more “special” episodes of Buffy frequently coincide with the sweeps.

The study of institutional controls can be focused on a case study of the network's role in the postponement of particular episodes, especially the Season 3 finale which came shortly after the Columbine massacre. The fact that Buffy is able to “get away with” a certain sexual frankness, especially for prime-time network TV, is also worthy of study, along with the ratings system.

Most *BtVS* episodes broadcast in the USA are classified as TV14 – which cautions parents that it's unsuitable for under-14s. The show was labelled with “DSLTV warnings” (D for suggestive dialogue, S for sex, L for strong language and V for violence). However, both Whedon and WB and, later, UPN, saw the target audience as being older, at least 16+; and when it was broadcast in the UK, this resulted in problems. The BBC (and to some extent Sky) saw the show as being targeted for a younger audience, and therefore scheduled the show for an early evening slot, earlier than in the USA when it would air at 8pm and 9pm. Given some of the adult content, the early evening showings came into conflict with the “nine o'clock watershed”. This caused both Sky and the BBC to cut offending scenes which caused a strong reaction from UK fans who petitioned the BBC which eventually agreed to show uncut versions late at night.

Other aspects of audience worth studying include differential decoding, especially in the way that postmodern texts frequently address the audience in different ways, with the “media-literate”, “smart” audience gaining pleasure at the intertextual references which might elude the reader without the same “cultural capital” (cf Categories – above).

## References

*\* There have been seven seasons of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, each consisting of 22 episodes, with the exception of season 1 which had 12. The references are to Season and episode, such as Hush (4.10)*

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5. *ibid.*
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10. *ibid.*
11. *ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
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Anglia, October 2002.

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