

***Buffy, The Vampire Slayer as Spectacular Allegory: A Diagnostic Critique.***  
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Since the appearance of the 1992 film Buffy, The Vampire Slayer (hereafter BtVS) and the popular 1997-2003 TV series based on it, Buffy has become a cult figure of global media culture with a panorama of websites, copious media and scholarly dissection, academic conferences, and a fandom that continues to devour reruns and DVDs of the 144 episodes. The series caught its moment and its audience, popularizing Buffyspeak, the Buffyverse (the textual universe of the show), and Buffypeople, who dedicated themselves to promoting and explicating the phenomenon and exemplified the British cultural studies ideal of the active audience, able to both quote and interpret, while citing episode and season. A global popular, by the time the series reached its apocalyptic conclusion in summer 2003, it was widely recognized as one of the most striking cult TV shows of the epoch.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I argue that BtVS functions as an allegorical spectacle about contemporary life and provide a diagnostic critique concerning some of what the series tells us about life in the USA today and the situation of contemporary youth. Popular television articulates in allegorical forms fears, fantasies, and dreams of a given society at a particular point in time. Reading popular TV like The X-Files and BtVS provides access to social problems and issues and hopes and anxieties that are often not articulated in more "realist" cultural forms. The richness of symbolic allegorical structure and content in these shows allows the production of meanings and identities beyond that of more conventional TV and provides a wealth of different readings and appropriations.

**Three levels of Reading Buffy, the Vampire Slayer**

BtVS features the adventures of Buffy Summers (played by Sarah Michelle Gellar), a 16 year old high school student who had just transferred to the small town of Sunnydale from Los Angeles, where she got into trouble with school authorities for her erratic behavior (which we learn was fighting vampires). Buffy's parents were divorced and so she and her mother attempt to begin life anew, a theme of renewal and change that will become central in the unfolding episodes.

In the series mythology, Sunnydale high school is located on the Hellmouth, a portal to nether regions where demonic forces enter to threaten everyday life and wreak havoc, portending apocalypse. The opening episode introduces a hideous Master who plans to open the Hellmouth to legions of monsters who will unleash their demonic fury. Buffy learns that she is the Chosen One with the powers to fight evil monsters and bonds with the bookish Willow (Alyson Hannigan) and awkward but loyal Xander (Nicholas Brendon) who are all tutored by the English librarian Giles (Anthony Stewart Head), who possesses a vast collection of books that identify the various monsters who emerge in Sunnydale. Giles serves as Buffy's "Watcher," providing guidance and mentorship to help her deal with her occult powers and provides a rare TV-image of a nurturing mentor able to relate to and work with youth.

Buffy's "Scooby gang," named after the Scooby Doo cartoon series featuring young detectives, fight various vampires and demons each week, as well as grabbling with their own personal and interpersonal problems. Encompassing realist, mythological, and allegorical levels, BtVS provides a polysemic and complex hermeneutical challenge to contemporary criticism to depict how the series works and how it presents a startling diversity and intensity of themes. The series combines genres of horror and fantasy, gothic romance, teen dramas, soap operas, and epic adventure tales. It pastiches the perennial figures of the vampire, werewolf, witch and a panorama of traditional monsters, while adding some new ones. Mixing comedy and drama, BtVS offers social satire and profound insight embodied in a wide array of compelling characters, engaging narratives, and clever commentary on contemporary culture.

On the **realist level**, the show presents down-to-earth and revealing relations between teenagers, and between young people and parents, teachers and mentors, and a diverse range of authority figures. BtVS engagingly deals with social relationships, love, rejection, loss, and all the complexities of family, school, work, constructing identity and finding oneself, growing and evolving, or failing and regressing as a human being.

It is particularly realistic and boundary-breaking in its depiction of sexual relations with a considerable amount of gay and lesbian sexuality and quite frank and explicit depictions of a extensive variety of sexualities. The series abounds with steamy sex and mutating relations where hate turns to love and violence to erotic entanglement. Playing with S&M and taboo-breaking eroticism to a degree hitherto unseen on US television, BtVS sizzles and titillates with throbbing music, yearning looks, passionate kisses, and more.

On the realist level, the series depicts typical relationships and problems, such as teen and young adult angst, needs for love, acceptance, identity, community and a panorama of teen desires and fears. It engages painful and heavy problems like rejection and loneliness; drugs and addiction; violence, gangs, rape, destructive behavior, death and a range of other issues that concern young people and adults, although it often does this, as I argue below, in the mode of allegory, rather than movie-of-the-week style realism. It deals with the hell of high school with its group conformity, hierarchies and ostracisms, anti-intellectualism and oppressive authority figures and meaningless rules and regulations. Moreover, BtVS deals with existential crises like coping with parents' divorce, creating a relationship and life with one's single mother and then dealing with a parent's or loved one's death.

Families are presented as essentially dysfunctional in Buffy's world and the mothers depicted are largely ineffectual or perhaps destructive, while fathers are mostly absent and divorce appears to be a norm. Depicting ways to cope with the problems of contemporary life, the series shows how teenagers and young people often have to forge alternative families and in effect create friendships and communities as traditional families disintegrate. Clearly, Buffy's group the "Scooby gang offer its members a substitute family that it can count on in times of trouble, as well as a cadre of friends and

lovers with whom one can experience the agonies and ecstasies of growing up and becoming initiated into life's pleasures and disappointments.

One of the series most distinctive themes concerns how individuals with exceptional powers and abilities can develop these capacities and find and cultivate love, friendship, affirmation of difference, and identity. Its grappling with difference, otherness and marginality is a major theme of the show and puts on display its affinity with postmodern theory.<sup>2</sup> On one hand, it affirms certain types of difference and otherness, as it shows the main positive characters as outsiders who refuse to conform to the dominant teen subculture and cultivate their individual powers and abilities, while relating to others in respectable ways. Although the series also shows how certain types of otherness, embodied in the program's monsters, threaten school, community, and everyday life and must be stood up to and dealt with. The dialectic of otherness is complicated further, as I will note, by showing slippages between "good" and "bad" otherness, as, for example, when the vampires Angel and Spike exhibit abilities to do both significant good and evil and are forced to make important moral choices.

In addition, Buffy can be read, on the more traditional and realist narrative level, as a female Bildungsroman, that is a coming-to-age and growing up story, focused on a young women. It provides a fantasy of an empowered women able to control her environment and to hold off and defeat forces of evil. While the Bildungsroman is associated with Goethe, Thomas Mann and novels about young men coming-to-age,<sup>3</sup> Buffy is different and ground-breaking in having a female protagonist. Indeed, the series exhibits perhaps the most fully-developed female Bildungsroman narrative in history of popular television and earned a cult following and incredibly dedicated audience.

The theme of how to cultivate exceptional abilities and deal with monstrosity obviously takes us to the level of the series' **mythology** as Buffy is a vampire slayer and her antagonists are often demons and monsters of a certain pop cult genre type. I'm using "mythology" as Chris Carter did in relation to The X-Files and Joss Whedon does with Buffy as the particular mythical universe and narrative of the series, rather than in the traditional sense of mythology which I'll argue takes us more to the allegorical level which I'll come to shortly. The series' mythology comprises the particular supernatural powers that the characters possess, the demons they fight, and the conflicts they are involved in within particular story arcs and narrative sequences.

The specific BtVS mythology was introduced by series creator Joss Whedon in the 1992 film Buffy the Vampire Slayer on which Whedon is credited as writer and Fran Rubel Kuzui is credited as director (she would serve as long-time producer on the TV series). The film opens with the portentous narrative frame: "Since the dawn of man the vampires have walked among us, killing, feeding. The only one with the strength or skill to stop the heinous evil is the Slayer... Trained by the Watcher, one Slayer dies and another is chosen." A caption appears "Europe: The Dark Ages" showing the vampire slayer emerging and then after the titles, the picture cuts to a title "Southern California: the Lite Ages." Buffy and her friends are introduced as Valley Girls who are into cheerleading, shopping, boys, and the prom. But the Chosen One, Buffy (Christy

Swanson), has dreams of dark events in the past involving vampires and her Watcher Merrick (Donald Sutherland) tells her of her “birthright” and initiates her into the art of vampire slaying. First resisting her calling, as the vampires invade the student prom, Buffy displays her mythical powers and slays the Evil Ones.

The film sets up the Buffy mythology and displays its blend of humor, horror, and social satire, but the TV series that appeared on the fledging Warner Brothers WB channel in 1997 went much further into developing a complex mythology, set of characters, and plot lines that generated a genuine pop culture sensation. The WB channel was looking for programming that would appeal to a youth market and was willing to gamble on more offbeat and idiosyncratic programming that would give the fledging network buzz, publicity, and ratings in the competitive world of network television.<sup>4</sup> Although BtVS was never a major ratings hit, as was The X-Files for some years, it picked up enough viewers so that a new smaller network like the WB would be inclined to promote and renew it.

Series creator Joss Whedon called his company Mutant Enemy and the corporate logo that appeared at the end of the show featured a squiggly animated character tearing across the screen and screeching Grrrr... Arrgh!<sup>5</sup> The logo codes the series as subversive and off beat and the show at its best has dissident and oppositional features, although it also, as I will show, reproduces dominant ideology and has its flaws and blemishes.

On the series mythology level, BtVS creates stories about vampires and the vampire slayer, monsters, various forms of evil and their defeat; the mythology follows story arcs, as does the realist narrative level of the series. From our retrospective position at the end of the series, we can see that the first three seasons dealt with high school and introduced the mythology; season four dealt with college life; and succeeding seasons five through seven dealt with work and college and post-college life and initiation into adulthood.

The two-part 1997 opening episodes “Welcome to the Hellmouth” and “The Harvest” introduce viewers Buffy and her friends who are positioned as outsiders and non-conformists who bond together in a close community. The episodes unfold the mythology of the Hellmouth over Sunnydale High where demonic forces enter the world and introduce a threatened aging vampire demon the Master who threatens apocalyptic destruction of the community, opening the Hellmouth to an invasion of demons.

Season one put on display a series of salient fears of contemporary youth and won a devoted audience by providing characters, situations, and narratives that embodied contemporary worries and anxieties.<sup>6</sup> It is remarkable that the series resists the assaults on youth and demonization of the young that is a major theme of many films, media representations, academic studies, and political discourse.<sup>7</sup> Instead BtVS presents images of youth who are intelligent, resourceful, virtuous, and able to choose between good and evil and positively transform themselves, while also capable of dealing with their anxieties and grappling with the problems of everyday life.

In season one, Episode 3 “Witch” dealt with fears of an overbearing and manipulative mother wreaking havoc on her daughter. Episode 4 (“Teacher’s Pet”) shows Xander falling in love with a beautiful substitute teacher who is actually a She-Mantis, displaying fears of being overpowered by a seductive and destructive sexuality. Several episodes deal with fears of dating (1005, “Never Kill a Boy on the First Date”) and episode 7 introduces the mysterious Angel, with whom Buffy falls in love and who reveals himself to be a vampire, exhibiting fear of falling for someone bizarre and potentially destructive.

“The Pack” (1006) portrayed fears of group conformity leading to teen brutality and violence, while episode 9 “The Puppet Show” and 11 (“Out of Sight, out of Mind”) portrayed alienated teens turning viciously on their schoolmates, as had happened in the Columbine and other well-publicized episodes of high-school violence. Episode 8 “I Robot...You Jane” exhibited fears of computers and the Internet while ultimately valorizing the technology as a powerful instrument for research and knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Episode 10 “Nightmares” exhibited fears of one’s worst anxieties materializing, while episode 12 “Prophecy Girl” unleashes a coterie of monsters wreaking havoc in the community, articulating fears of uncontrolled gang violence.

I’ll return to some of the specific mythologies of the series, but want to argue that Buffy also has an **allegorical level** that makes it more interesting than just a self-contained vampire-slayer narrative and Slayer mythology or conventional story of growing up teen in the contemporary US. The allegorical level builds on the previous levels I’ve mentioned and has its own complexities.

In general, a complex and multidimensional allegory like BtVS has a theological and religious dimension that copes with life and death; sin, guilt, and redemption; the choice between good and evil; and how to understand and deal with life and an afterlife.<sup>9</sup> There are also moral and philosophical allegories that present ethical lessons ranging from children’s stories to philosophical treatises like Kant, Hegel and Marx which convey specific ethical, or social and political ideals or lessons, as when the Brothers Grimm terrify their young audiences into accepting conservative German values or the Disney factory indoctrinates its audiences into proper white middle-class American small town morality. More sublime philosophical allegories would include Kant’s presenting Enlightenment as a mode of salvation, or Marx positing the proletariat and socialism as solutions to the damnation and evils of the present. As critics ranging from Georg Lukacs to Fredric Jameson tell us, literature can also be read as allegory about life in specific milieus in particular historical periods that conveys concrete socio-historical truths. And, finally, popular culture can be allegorical in a socio-political mode, it can tell stories about contemporary life in a symbolic and narrative structure, providing specific life lessons, as well as commentary and critique of contemporary life and specific events, institutions, and types of persons.

Although popular culture allegory can provide a vehicle for ideology, reproducing the values and prejudices of the dominant class, race, and gender, it can also resist and subvert the dominant ideology, valorizing outsiders, resistance to hegemonic norms, and

can present alternative ways of relating, living, and being, as I'll argue in the succeeding analysis. Thus reading complex texts like BtVS involves both critique of its ideologies and politics of representation, as well as presentation of its critical and subversive moments.

I might note here that I got this notion of the use of the category of allegory for interpreting media culture from Fredric Jameson's work that includes an article "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: Dog Day Afternoon as a Political Film" (2000 [1977]) that presents the film from the 1970s as an allegory about class, sexuality, the media, the police, the city, and other central aspects of contemporary American life. Unlike social realism, allegory uses symbolic representation to comment on, interpret, and provide a vision of a historical moment without the pretenses of realism that purports a one-on-one representation of the real. Allegory has multiple dimensions of meaning and there is no claim to capture the real in a clear and straightforward way, although allegory may better capture, Jameson suggests, the complexities and ambiguities of a contemporary situation than realism.

Applying this model of allegory, I wrote an article in 1983 "Fear and Trembling in the Age of Reagan: Notes on Poltergeist" where I argued that the Poltergeist films, as well as The Amityville Horror and other horror/fantasy films of the era, depicted fears of losing your home, economic downwards mobility, the family falling apart and other fears of the era. These truly horrifying problems were too distressing and traumatizing for a realist aesthetic depiction, so horror and fantasy could represent these themes in ways that audiences could deal with the fears and dangers of class downward mobility, the breakup of the family or losing your house. Horror and fantasy films could also allegorize themes such as the corruption of capitalism or opposition to patriarchy more accessibly and less threateningly than more realist films.

BtVS can be read the same way as an allegory about contemporary life with its monsters as metaphors for societal difference and threats, and Buffy and her friend's special powers can be read as metaphors for how knowledge, skill, and courage can help solve problems and dispatch evil. Classically, monsters like vampires symbolize predatory sexuality; werewolves connote bodily energies and forces exploding out of control; witches signify traditional female powers, including sexuality, which threaten the rational patriarchal order; while a wide range of demons signify various sorts of deviance and threats to contemporary order and security. In the current situation, for instance, many of the demons on BtVS point to dangers of drug addiction and the gangs of monsters signify dangers of gang violence. Obviously, many of the monsters are figures for alienated teens who strike out at their classmates with violence and often murder.

The vampire as addict was clearly depicted in the figures of Spike (James Marsters) and Drusilla (Janet Landau) in the second season. In the episodes introducing her, Drusilla appeared zoned out on hard drugs like heroin and the show's creators attempt that the duo was modeled on Sid and Nancy, a popular film of the era based on Sid Vicious, the heroin-addicted punk rocker with the Sex Pistols and his girlfriend Nancy. Spike and Drusilla's need for blood is a clear metaphor for drug addiction and

their sexual nihilism and ambiguous ménage-a-trois with the vampire Angel suggests sexual degradation associated with addiction and amorality.

As Gregory Erikson suggests (2002), vampires have a historical specificity as well as more universal connotations. Early vampires in European folklore were peasants who emerged from the grave to avenge grievances while by the time of Bram Stoker's Dracula novel, it was aristocrats who embodied vampiric evil and would require elaborate rituals to destroy. In the representation of vampires in German expressionist horror films of the 1920s like Nosferatu, the vampire was disturbingly similar to representations of Jews, such as one saw in the anti-semitic Jude Suss. In contemporary US culture, vampires have been largely represented as anarchic individuals, who can emerge from any class, age, or social grouping.

The allegory of BtVS is that all of these teen monstrosities create a conflictual and dangerous situation for youth today that must be dealt with skillfully and successfully to defeat the monstrosities and evils of the contemporary era. Buffy's method of dispatching vampires is literally "dusting" the creatures with a stake or sharp weapon, turning them into dust and avoiding the blood squirting associated with more traditional vampire-slaying. The series provides positive characters and models who embody a creative otherness and difference and are able to overcome and destroy the more monstrous threats to community and security.

The term "allegorical" is in some ways honorific and suggests that Buffy is more than both a realist narrative about teen angst and growing up and a vampire slayer mythology that constructs its own world and system of meanings. Although it does both of these things, I would argue that the series is interesting and important because it also produces an allegorical system of meaning that connects it with traditional religion, philosophy, mythology, literature, and popular culture. Allegory, more than metaphor, points to a complex structure and polysemic depth of meaning in an artifact that demands levels of interpretation. It is allegory, then, that provides the structure and levels of meaning for the series as a whole, as well as holding together the various story arcs and narrative sequences. Yet the allegory of BtVS does not produce a seamless whole or convey an unified system of messages, as did Christian allegory, but rather provides a more fragmented and contradictory postmodern set of meanings.

As we will see, the characters and plot situations of BtVS are highly unstable and transformative, as seemingly bad characters show themselves to be good, good characters turn bad, and many flip from good to bad in a specific episode and thus display themselves to be highly ambiguous and mutable. Hence, while traditional allegory had stable and fixed meanings and provided a consistent and unified allegorical tale and system, concerning the Christian salvation narrative in Dante or Milton, for example, the postmodern allegory of BtVS is highly fragmented, insecure, complex, and subject to constant change and transformation. The characters of the series thus exhibit flexible and transformative postmodern selves valorized in some contemporary postmodern theory as opposed to the fixed, unified, and stable selves valorized in some forms of traditional culture.

Hence, the concept of allegory thus works to call attention to what BtVS does as a series and how it relates to the whole world of culture and contemporary society. I want to illustrate this notion of BtVS as allegory through a reading of Season Four which deals with Buffy and her friends leaving high school and entering college that I suggest provides an allegory of the trials and tribulations of college life, as well as a broad range of other issues.

### **Buffy Goes to College**

In season four, Buffy leaves her suburban home and high school to go the local University of California, Sunnydale, and to live in the college dorm. The Buffy in college allegory encompasses social realist commentary on contemporary college life and the story arc advances and complexifies the mythology of the series, but also uses allegory to dramatize certain problems or challenges of youth and provides a more general articulation of the trials and tribulations of growing up and surviving the rigors and challenges of college life. Moreover, a la The X-Files, the season's story arc articulates fears of biotechnology and genetic engineering; of the military and government; of technoscience; and of various monstrosities of the present moment.<sup>10</sup>

The first two episodes of season four "The Freshman" and "Living Conditions" (4001 and 4002) depict, among other things, the Roommate from Hell, who does everything to get on Buffy's nerves from loudly snoring at night to labeling all the food in the refrigerator and stridently clipping her toe-nails. Not surprisingly, it turns out she's a demon, setting up the thematic that college, like high school, is hell.

"The Freshman" presents Buffy as lonely and insecure with all the new students and the show begins with Buffy and Willow deciding what courses to take, with Willow choosing a literature course, recommending to Buffy a popular culture course that turns out to be a trauma for Buffy who is chastised by the nasty and pretentious professor for talking during the first class and is forced to leave. The pop culture professor is shown as a superior-type intellectual who patronizingly dissects popular culture and gratuitously attacks Buffy.

Both Buffy and Willow take a psychology course which provides the matrix for the story arc of the season concerning the mysterious "Initiative," one that is very X-Files in the depiction of government conspiracies, genetic engineering, and biotechnology. On the whole, Buffy is confused and beset by the demands of college life. She waited too late to choose her courses, she has the roommate from hell, she's thrown out of her first class, and must reconnect with old friends while making new ones and attempting to adjust to college life. A subplot of "The Freshman" suggests that college is too much for some, presenting a student who seemingly is overwhelmed with college and disappears, leaving behind a note stating that college life was too much for him, although it turns out that he has taken over by monsters. The young student Eddie, who Buffy has met and then disappears, has been vampirized, and college vampires appear more vicious and



predatory than high school ones. The tale provides a cautionary warning not to get in with wrong crowd, that there are deadly monsters in college, who can seduce and destroy you.

The episode points to a general philosophical vision that runs through BtVS, providing an allegory of radical finitude. Destructive events happen frequently in the series, characters and actions are fraught with ambiguity and contingency and the universe as a whole is highly insecure. Shit frequently happens in Buffy's world, death happens, relations break up and turn ugly, and happiness can rapidly dissolve. In the second season, computer teacher and Giles' love interest Jenny Calendar is killed and there is much mourning and grief as the characters come to terms with their loss. In later seasons, the death of Willow's lover Tara and Buffy's mother also dramatizes the pain and intensity of loss.

Probably no show in history of television has so consistently articulated chance and contingency in life and confronted finitude: that relations end, that stages of life [i.e. youth] come to an end, and that life can end anytime and in any place. Probably no popular TV show has so exemplified this existential ontology, found in thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, that provides a philosophical bite and vision rare in American television.

There is also a heavy amount of ambiguity in the Buffyverse, the characters and the viewer cannot always tell who is good and bad, and Buffy and her friends often do not really know what to do or if their actions will turn out to have negative consequences. Angel and Spike in particular mutate back and forth from bad to good to ambiguous selves and even Willow is portrayed as having a wide range of selves and potentials. Hence, the series advances a postmodern conception of multiple selves and the existential need to constantly choose one's better self and to overcome one's more destructive and amoral proclivities.

BtVS thus interrogates the boundaries between life and death, good and evil, the human and the non-human, and rationality and irrationality. The categories and behaviors they describe keep sliding back and forth into each other, deconstructing an-all-too-binary division between them. On the whole, demons and monsters on the show represent destructive forces that must be battled and overcome, and BtVS as a series provides allegories about evil, violence, death, and how to deal with the major challenges and negativities of life. As suggested, the monsters in Buffy can be read as symbols of various forms of contemporary evil and monstrosity: the vampires can be read as figures of predatory sexuality, which is the traditional form of vampire, and are also coded as figures of addiction; demons can be interpreted as forms of contemporary monsters ranging from criminal gangs to drug addicts to rapists to whatever form you might imagine. One character, Oz (Seth Green), discovers that he is a werewolf, thus providing an allegorical figure of losing control over one's aggressive and bodily desires.

There are also more mysterious forms of evil and monsters like the First and a panorama of various monsters that cumulatively symbolize the presence and prevalence of evil in the world, in all places and at all times, and particularly in the contemporary

era. In season four of *Buffy*, the demons are more advanced and threatening, just as, for the most part, they are in the spin-off series *Angel* that has run from 1999 through the present. Season Four also deals intensely with Buffy and her friends trying to establish new relationships and with the difficulty and fragility of sexual relations. The series has dealt in various seasons with the traumas of losing their virginity of the major characters (and with not having lost it!). Willow's relation with the werewolf Oz comes to an end and Willow will explore alternative sexualities in her college year (to the great delight of lesbian audiences). Buffy's fateful relation with the vampire Angel who has left for Los Angeles and his own series seems to be at a hiatus and entering college she is ready for a new relationship. In an episode "The Harsh Light of Day" (4003), Buffy has a sexual encounter with a sleazy and insincere seducer Parker Abrams, who beds Buffy and then unceremoniously dumps her. Her second relation is with a teaching assistant in her psychology class, Riley Finn, who appears to be Iowa-Middle West Joe Normal, but who turns out to be not at all what he seems.

Indeed, in the mythology of Season Four, there is a new story arc with new demons to battle and a new government conspiracy with overtones of *The X-Files*. Riley is involved with the Initiative, a secretive government project devising ways to better eliminate demons but also involved with creating superkillers. Riley and others in his group are being genetically engineered and are taking part in a project to creating super soldiers. It is curious that this theme was a motif of both *The X-Files* and *Dark Angel*, at roughly the same period. All three shows dealt with genetic engineering and biotech experiments for the military to create super soldiers. Obviously, there was a publicly generally unarticulated fear of militarism among some segments of U.S. society, as well as fears of genetic engineering and posthumanism, fears that came out in the debate, intense at the time, over stem cell research and human cloning.

A subplot of the theme of biotechnology also dealt with the creation of a superhuman being, appropriately named Adam, who would constitute a new posthuman being. Of course, Buffy and her friends had to defeat these threats to life as it had previously been and simultaneously all of the monsters of everyday life and college. How, then, does *BtVS* do its allegorical work and what are the series contributions and limitations in engaging the situation of contemporary youth?

### **The Buffy Allegory Machine**

In this section, I want to suggest how *BtVS* does its allegorical work through the mechanics of a TV spectacle that combines clever commentary, fully developed characters and social relations, complex mythology and narrative arcs, metacommentary on the series as a whole, and extravagant action adventure sequences. In describing the virtues of the series, one might note the highly impressive mis-en-scene, with original and eye-catching design and production values, a strong soundtrack, and tightly edited narrative structures. Rarely has a relatively low-budget TV series had such cool sets and design, such excellent cinematography, sound, and editing conveyed in witty dialogue, an amazing array of characters, and over the top plots combining an aesthetic of excess and polysemic complexity with camp and social satire.

In particular, BtVS contains extremely knowing observations on popular culture and astute social commentary and critique. Yet, given my allegorical emphasis on its more serious themes, I should stress that much of the pleasure of viewing BtVS flows from its highly satirical, comic and tongue in cheek camping and vamping; hence, the Initiative arc in season four that I just discussed, for instance, obviously goes into The X-Files territory and could be read as satirical commentary on the hyperbolic and intense government conspiracies, existential psychodramas, and hyperbolic anxieties about mushrooming technologies of the The X-Files (see Kellner 2003a). Yet the spectacular allegory of BtVS is that it goes both ways; it provides serious commentary and drama and comic satire and humor at the same time.

Moreover, BtVS contains an incredible amount of metacommentary on the series itself. One of the treats to Buffy fandom are the metacommentary remarks on the series itself as previous characters and events are referred to or brought back (even from the dead). There is also a lot of intercultural metacommentary on literature, mythology, philosophy, and art, as well as references to previous television and film programs and other, sometimes arcane, cultural references.

In addition, the images and spectacle in the series display transmutation of characters from monsters to humans, sometimes reverting back from one to the other, as well as metamorphoses from animals to humans or vice versa. One episode “Halloween” (2006) shows the characters becoming their costume figure (i.e. fantasy) when a magic spell is cast on Sunnydale during the all-hallowed night. Children become the monsters they are dressed as, while Xander becomes a macho soldier, Willow a ghost, and Buffy an 18<sup>th</sup> century ultrafeminine bell, unable to fight monsters.

The sudden switch in identities exemplify postmodern identity construction which in the Age of Makeover calls for major reinventions and representations of the self. The most spectacular metamorphous in the series, of course, involved the dramatic transformation of Angel into Angelus. Angel is introduced as the vampire with the soul that Buffy falls deeply in love with; a gypsy curse hundreds of years ago gave him a soul so he could contemplate the suffering and evil he brought forth, but prescribed that if he ever found a moment of perfect happiness in love he would lose his soul and become a completely predatory vampire.

Angel is presented as a brooding, Byronic romantic figure, yet he becomes a version of the vampire self when angered or threatened and his eyes narrow, his forehead furrows, and fangs appear on a monster visage as he assumes his superhuman vampire powers. The metamorphoses are arguably allegorical, providing metaphors of the radical transformation of identities. Willow does this on a sexual level, transforming herself into becoming a lesbian, and then as a violent avenger when her lover Tara is killed, while Angel and Spike do it more on the level of the series mythology in transforming themselves from evil to good vampires (with much backsliding and intense conflict between their opposed selves). The frequent metamorphosis and existential transformations show the potential in changing oneself from bad to good, or backsliding,

as so often happens on Buffy, and the possibility of dramatically changing one's identity and creating new and better selves.

This thematic emphasizes the possibility and importance of radical self-transformation but warns of the perpetual possibility of regression and backsliding. At the same time, the series provides allegories about reconstituting relationships and friendships in changed existential conditions, highlighting the theme of the fragility of identity and friendships. Identity is presented in BtVS as mutable, unstable, and always able to be transformed, sometimes dramatically. One striking episode in season four, "Fear Itself" (4004), deals with fears that one can lose one's identity. The title refers to FDR's slogan that "you have nothing to fear except fear itself." The episode probes specific fears and phobias the characters have which they must overcome: Buffy's fear of being rejected and of losing her authority as slayer; Oz's fear of losing bodily control and collapsing into his animal self, thus being deprived of human identity; Willow's fear of losing her magical powers and thus potency; and Xander's fear of rejection and that he will never become a respected and responsible person.

Yet perhaps one of the dominant narrative mechanisms of BtVS contain spectacles and allegories of violence in which evil is dispatched. One of the major iconic images of Buffy as vampire slayer and empowered woman, spectacularized in the opening credits and montage of character images punctuated by the theme song, are those of Buffy killing vampires and fighting and defeating monsters of various sorts. These representations provide a kinetic rush accompanied by pulsating music and establish the basis of Buffy as Woman Warrior and Empowered Woman.

Yet the violence is extremely hyperbolic and excessive and became more so as the series went on. This is partly because television, film, and societal violence were increasing, because the mythology and aesthetic of the show demanded it, and obviously audiences seemed to merrily consume it.<sup>11</sup> Yet the extremity of violence on the series, between men and women, as well as women against women, has the potential danger that BtVS promotes violence or privileges violence as the solution to conflict. Rhonda Wilcox (2002) points out some of the ways that BtVS breaks with the patterns of patriarchal allegories of violence such as Buffy's vulnerability that would never be allowed in male vehicles of patriarchal violence; her immersion in community opposed to the loner hero, her involvement in sexuality and relationships, and the questioning of violence and her own slayer role. Yet Wilcox concedes and I think this is a good cautionary warning: "Nonetheless, the constant quick killing can be seen as desensitizing" and since I would argue the violence intensifies as the series proceeds I think that this is something to worry about.

The increased violence in BtVS, I believe, can be correlated between shifts in attitudes towards violence and militarism from the Clinton to the Bush years. Buffy's period (1997-2003) was one of unparalleled cynicism, skepticism, and irony in the late Clinton years and then unmatched political trauma, horror, and violent conflict in the Bush years. Early Buffy in the Clinton years tends to be light, satirical, and ironical, catching the wave of an intense postmodern moment circulating through US and global

culture. It was a time for apolitical cynicism, skepticism toward US political culture, escapism, and hedonism. BtVS fit into this moment: it made fun of patriarchy, militarism, and its monsters were by and large figures of threats to everyday life and societal normality.

But as the world became more dangerous, violent, and insecure after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the Bush administration ultramilitarism in their largely unilateral interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Buffy took a much darker, more violent, and pessimistic turn. Willow's transformation into a cruel avenger after the death of her lover Tara in season five presages the violent aggressive vengeance that informed the Bush administration response to 9/11, and the escalating violence between Buffy and Spike, and the increasing dark apocalyptic ethos informing the series, replicates the violent response of the Bush administration to terrorism and imagined threats from the "axis of evil," a phrase that would fit well into BtVS's universe.

Yet BtVS's constant undermining of distinctions between good and evil and refusal of Manicheanism puts the series at odds with a dominant ideology of the Bush administration (see Kellner 2003b). Ultimately, BtVS's boundary subversion, its showing that good and evil are often mixed and can slide from one pole to the other, and its showing that violence often is not a productive solution to problems puts it at odds with the crusading Manicheanism and simplistic national chauvinism of the Bush administration.

There is, however, a potential danger that BtVS promotes violence or privileges violence as empowerment and the solution of problems, and exaggerates the ease of radical self-transformation. While it is positive that a TV series shows that moral choice, existential authenticity, and radical self-transformation is possible and sometimes necessary, it is not useful to show radical change happening so fast and easily as it usually does in the show (although Willow's transformations are often a result of long study, practice, commitment, and hard work).

Moreover, while in terms of Buffy Summers as role-model or heroine, it's obviously positive to have a strong female figure of empowerment, I'm bothered that Buffy is often presented as exemplifying the Woman Warrior and is frequently anti-intellectual or demeaning of school and academic endeavor. Buffy followed a series of "kick ass" Women Warriors portrayed on television in the popular Xena, The Warrior Princess and by the Sigourney Weaver figure in Alien and the Sarah Connors character in The Terminator films who used martial arts and excessive violence to fight off villains.

While depicting empowered women is highly positive, it is less admirable to associate their power with the exercise of violence, emulating male action adventure heroes. There is also a disturbing tendency in the show to naturalize violence between the genders as well as to privilege and naturalize violence in general. Xander and Cordelia comically embody a love/hate relation in the second season while Buffy and Angel more violently shift from love to hate and back again, often with sadomasochistic overtones. While Spike's relation to Drucilla in season two is touchingly romantic, his

abusive relation with Glory in season four is disturbing. But the ultimate in sadomasochistic violence resides in the Spike/Buffy relation, especially in Season Seven when he attempts to rape her and yet continues to vacillate in a love/hate relation.

The violence between men and women in fight and sadomasochistic sex scenes, as well as the violence between women and women in the frequent catfights that have escalated as the years go on, thus naturalize gender violence and fail to articulate the pain and suffering caused by such violence. Violence between men and women is rarely thematized or problematized on the series and is for the most part neither discussed nor dealt with. Moreover, Buffy at best has an ambiguous relation to intellectuality: she is more visceral and action-oriented than intellectual herself; she is distanced and alienated from high school and drops out of college, and is a warrior who generally uses violence to solve problems rather than intellect, empathy, or social skills.

Yet here I need to qualify my critique as perhaps BtVS is one of the most intellectually friendly shows on TV in terms of ideas and positive valorization of the intellectual. I have mentioned the mentoring role of Giles, the valorization of books, libraries, the Internet, research, and importance of knowledge in the story arcs and specific narratives. There are copious references to literature, religion, philosophy, and other cultural phenomena and part of the fun of viewership is catching the sometimes esoteric cultural references. Furthermore, Willow is arguably one of the most fully-articulated positive representation of an intellectual in TV history; she's usually celebrated as a positive lesbian figure since she makes a turn on the series from heterosexuality to lesbianism, but from the beginning to the end of the series, Willow was a highly developed intellectual who was into science, technology, researching, finding solutions to problems, consciously transforming herself, and translating ideas into practice.

But Buffy herself is often anti-intellectual, and in the beginning of season four the producers made Giles something of a buffoon, showing him unemployed, in midlife crisis, and not knowing what to do with himself, although he's quickly redeemed and there are some poignant Giles episodes as he copes with growing old and redefining his relations with young people. Yet teachers in high school and professors in college are generally presented negatively. In the opening episode of season four a Pop culture prof is revealed as a monster who torments Buffy while Maggie Walsh, the psychology professor, who also runs the Initiative, is very sinister and there are not any positive representations of college teachers.<sup>12</sup>

The series missed the chance to interrogate college experience as thoroughly, originally, and critically as it did high school. Although exploration of the hellish aspects of college life began promisingly, the program turned away from academics to focus ever more intensely on the romantic relationships of the key characters and the battle with monsters. In terms of the politics of the Buffy monster-killing spectacle, I would also note that although allegory allows popular television creators to deal with heavy existential themes and do critical social commentary that they probably couldn't get away with in more realist forms, there is a problem that the allegory distracts from social

causes and origins of evil and puts a supernatural aura on contemporary life. The same problem exists with the The X-Files that is a contradictory matrix of rational social critique, concern with government conspiracy and misdeeds, and irrationalist projection of evil onto aliens and occult forces (Kellner 2003a).

Allegory also provides a front for ideology and much allegory serves to reproduce conventional notions. As I have suggested, the rather dark and critical vision of Buffy is for the most part counterideological and subversive of many dominant ideologies, but reflecting on the series politics of representation raises some of the show's limitations and problems.

### **Buffy and the Politics of Representation**

A critical cultural studies interrogates the politics of representation, as well as the allegorical meanings and cultural resonances and effects of a media culture spectacle (Kellner 1995 and 2003a). Most of the ideological focus on BtVS has been on its representations of gender and sexuality, in which its powerful images of strong women and alternative sexualities have been positively valorized. Indeed, the series provides a systematic critique of patriarchy showing how its structures permeate schooling, politics, the military, and other social institutions. Curiously, though, patriarchy in the family on the series is glossed over, as fathers are usually extremely weak or in most cases absent, although the opening mythology of the Master and his minions arguably contains a satirical critique of patriarchy. The minor demons treat the Master with obsequious obedience and a young child, the Anointed One, arguably constitutes a parody of patriarchal succession, an ideological trope subverted on the series by having a female slayer.

Further, patriarchal conservatism is shown as ascendant and negatively portrayed in schooling in the representations of high school principles Flutie and Snyder (the latter in particular is presented as an authoritarian conservative, not really concerned with students or learning, while the former is merely ineffectual and quickly dispatched with). The swim team coach who exposes his swimmers to steroids is an example of the destructive nature of patriarchy in school sports, and Buffy and Giles both rebel against the patriarchal structure of the Watcher Council. In season three, the presentation of the mayor and his political associates as monsters constitute a tongue-in-cheek attack on patriarchy in the sociopolitical system, as does season four's assault on the patriarchal military that I engaged above.

Yet, although BtVS's gender politics are extremely progressive in many ways, the ideal women are almost invariably thin and beautiful. The images of high school and college women depicted in the series are largely white, middle classed, and conventional. More punkish or countercultural types of women are usually associated with monsters in the series and working class women are shown as largely unattractive. As noted, mothers are usually ineffectual, absent, or malicious. Hence, while the images of Buffy, Willow, and some of the other women are unusually strong and women's relations and solidarities are at the heart of BtVS, the series is at best Feminism Lite, soft-pedaling feminist ideas

in images and narratives rather than discourses or more progressive representations and narratives.

Hence, traditionally feminine ideals of beauty and desirability are upheld although patriarchy is under assault. Likewise, its representations of class are problematic. The main characters are identifiably white and middle class and many monsters appear to be rough, threatening working class types and people of color. Faith is the most identifiably working class character of the major figures in the series and she is introduced and often presented as an unruly, undisciplined, amoral, and potentially destructive person, although eventually she is more or less integrated into the community, a figure of working class mobility and assimilation. At the start of season three, Buffy is presented as a waitress while in season four, she is shown working in a burger joint and Xander is presented in a series of menial working class jobs, all portrayed as dead end loser scenes, to be overcome and transcended by proper(ly middle class) individuals.

The series is also extremely limited and seriously problematical with its representation of race. In the first seasons, there were few black characters and those presented were often either killed or were vampires. There was little interaction among Buffy's Scooby gang with people of color and while the final season displayed a variety of young women from varied ethnicities as potential slayers, few exhibited any individuality and the attempt at multiculturalism was largely cosmetic and visual, putting on display a diversity of rainbow colored bodies, rather than racially interactive groups and social relations.

Whiteness and middle class ideals are privileged throughout as Buffy is the model balanced Slayer while the Afro Jamaican Kendra is shown as too compulsive and fanatical, while working class Faith is too erratic and unbalanced. Moreover, throughout the series, threats to the middle class community come from outside, not only from Hell, but from non-Western cultures. "Inca Mummy Girl" (4004) features a vampirish Inca princess from an ancient Peruvian culture who comes to life and causes Xander much pain as he falls in love with her and then discovers her monstrosity. The subtext of the story is a foreign exchange program and the episode implies that members of other cultures can be seductive and dangerous. "Half-breeds" and "non-humans" also come from Egypt, Pakistan, the Middle East, or other countries once labeled Third World, so the cultural ethos is rather parochially southern California white and middle-class.

While BtVS is sometimes presented as critical of religion, there is a privileging of Christianity in iconographies of the cross, holy water, and other images as well as themes such as salvation and redemption. Willow is "kinda Jewish," but Jewish or themes of other world religions do not centrally appear in the series' episodes, thus there is a theological privileging of Western Christianity, although, admittedly, the demonology undermines strict Christian theology and there are some episodes which depict monstrous demonic rites taking place before Christian iconography (as in the episode "Innocence" [4014]), thus presenting contradictory relations to Christianity and bringing fundamentalist Christian attacks upon the series.<sup>13</sup>



On the level of the politics of representation, then, BtVS, like most television, reproduces much dominant ideology. A popular medium that must attract mass audiences and that does not want to catch flack from conservatives or traditionalists of various sorts must be careful to be subtle and sly in its subversion. The “Mutant Enemy” production team of BtVS has in many ways, as I’ve argued in this study, provided significant satire and subversion of many dominant societal and social codes, as well as rather consistently attacked patriarchy. Moreover, it has engaged the situation of contemporary youth with engaged critical awareness, often brilliant social satire and commentary, and narrative arcs that together constitutes one of the classics of contemporary television and an important artifact of youth culture that deserves serious critical attention.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction and overview of the Buffy phenomenon see the book edited by David Lavery and Rhonda Wilcox, *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2002); the website [www.slayage.tv](http://www.slayage.tv); and the introductory book *Bite Me* by Sue Turnbull and Vyvyan Stranieri (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Parenthetically, I'd argue, although this would require a separate paper, Joss Whedon and his gang have produced on one hand a modernist text with a very specific vision and systemic structure while on the other hand engaging in postmodern pastiche, irony, metacommentary and hipness. On different notions of modern and postmodern culture, see Best and Kellner 1991, 1997, and 2001.

<sup>3</sup> On the bildungsroman, see Herbert Marcuse's study of the German artist novel (1978 [1922]) and the commentary in Kellner 1984.

<sup>4</sup> At a 1998 seminar at the Museum of Broadcasting, Whedon and other cast members and producers stress the importance of working with the then new WB Network in terms of producing for a younger and hungrier network that needed to take chances to gain hits and was prepared to work more closely in largely supportive and unoppressive ways in comparison to traditional networks who are often heavy-handed in their treatment of programs and do not allow more experimental and off-beat material. The marriage with the WB did not last, however, as the network refused in 2001 to meet *Mutant Enemy*'s financial demands and so the series went over to the rival UPN network with Joss Whedon commenting: "I've been dumped by my fat old ex and Prince Charming has come and swept me off my feet. I'm mostly very excited because I now have a network that cares about my show as opposed to one that insults it."

<sup>5</sup> Whedon is a third-generation TV creator. As David Lavery points out (2002): "[After working in radio,] Whedon's grandfather went on to contribute to *Donna Reed*, *Mayberry RFD*, *Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Room 222*. His father wrote for *Captain Kangaroo*, *The Dick Cavett Show*, *The Electric Company*, *Alice*, *Benson*, *Golden Girls*, and *It's a Living*."

<sup>6</sup> Seasons 1 through 5 are available on DVD and the final two seasons are being prepared for DVD format, making the series accessible for in-depth study. In referring to specific episodes, following recent BtVS scholarship, I will cite season and episode number with the year and episode as, for instance, 1007, for season 1, episode 7. I might also signal the growing connection between critical television research and DVDs and the Internet. When I began doing television research in the 1970s, you had to go to archives to find most classical TV material. But with, first, video-recorders and VHS tapes of popular series, and now DVDs, it is possible to do serious in-depth research on television programming. There are also incredibly rich resources on-line: in addition to the [www.slayage.tv](http://www.slayage.tv) and a profusion of Buffyverse Web-sites, there are many other articles and resources online, including archives of scripts, laboriously typed out by fans. Kaaza has archives of BtVS episodes, there are chatrooms, media commentary, and much material on the series production and reception of a degree not available earlier.

<sup>7</sup> On the war against youth in contemporary US culture, see see Giroux 1996, 2002, 2003a and 2003b; Males 1996; and Best and Kellner, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, the Watcher and librarian Giles, a tweedy middle-aged and somewhat pedantic Englishman, is shown as technophobic and a firmer believer that only books are a source of certifiable knowledge and wisdom. Willow, a sweet and lovable young

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science and technology buff, is presented as an Internet whiz who can quickly come up with important information, as is the computer lab teacher Jenny Calendar, who becomes Gilles' love interest. Thus ultimately the series overcomes sterile dichotomies between technophobia and technophilia, or between arguments between bookophiles and technophiles, and valorizes both books and the Internet as important sources of knowledge. Indeed, few television series have ever placed such importance on proper information and knowledge as the basis of action, valorized intellectual skills, and placed such emphasis on book and Internet research. On the dichotomies between technophobia and philia that the series overcomes and on the battles within education over the relative importance of book and computer literacy, see Kellner 2000.

<sup>9</sup> In presenting interpretation of Buffy as allegory at a couple of Buffy conferences, I received skepticism from some prominent Buffy scholars who seemed to equate allegory as a theological type of Christian structure, or rigid type of literary structure. While it is true that allegory developed in biblical traditions and had a full-blown development with The Pilgrim's Progress, Dante and Milton's poetic epics, and other Christian allegorical texts, as Walter Benjamin already in the early modern period noted (1977), another, more secular allegorical tradition emerged and as I will argue something like a postmodern allegory is apparent in the contemporary era ranging from forms of literature to media culture.

<sup>10</sup> Season Four of BtVS has a surprising overlap with major themes of The X-Files of the era, as I note; see my study of the latter in Kellner 2003a.

<sup>11</sup> It's not clear why audiences would enjoy seeing members of the opposite sex fighting each other and violently dispatched, but there appears to be growing hostility between the sexes in the contemporary era beginning early in teen years perhaps because of growing pressures to have sexual relations, the growth of sexually transmitted diseases, and the possibility of rejection or frustration in a highly sexualized society. On how the popularity of stalk and slash films in the 1980s pointed to growing teen hostilities see Kellner and Ryan 1988.

<sup>12</sup> David Lavery (2002) notes that Joss Whedon was positively influenced by Richard Slotkin at Wesleyan College, while my colleague at UCLA Vivian Sobchak says that writer Marti Noxon was her student, so members of the BtVS creative team are a college educated and relatively culturally sophisticated group, so it is strange and disappointing that during the Buffy Goes to College year there were no positive images of professors or University education, although one can applaud the constant stress on alternative knowledges and research to solve vital problems that runs through the series. Probably, the creators of the show and their audiences are conflicted on intellectuality with negative feelings about certain types of intellectuals and perhaps college that come out in the series. I should also acknowledge that a popular TV show probably could not have intellectuals or professors as main figures because we are so marginal in U.S. society and there is probably in general more anti-intellectualism than a pro-intellectuals attitude in the U.S. and elsewhere (although it is comforting that there were enough of those positive to intellectuals in the BtVS audiences to support positive intellectual figures like Gilles and Willow).

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of how various Christian groups perceived BtVS see Todd Hertz, "Don't Let Your Kids Watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," at

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<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/136/31.0.html>. The article is generally positive toward the series although it has links to evangelical Christian groups who demonized BtVS. Series creator Joss Whedon consistently insisted that he is an atheist and not privileging any religious tradition, although he admits that Christianity and Judaism are the ones he is most familiar with; see the interview with Laura Miller, “The man behind the Slayer,” Salon (may 20, 2003).