

## Rob Cover

### "Bliss and Time: Death, Drugs, and Posthumanism in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

## 8.4 [32]

[1] Like many other horror and pseudo horror film and televisual texts that offer what Cynthia Freeland characterises as rich, varied and complex views on the nature of death, the limitations of the flesh and the forms of identity and subjectivity available to contemporary culture (2, 8, 128), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a powerful, multifaceted text offering an important critique of contemporary subjectivity. Concepts, metaphors and representation of both drugs and death figure prominently in *Buffy*, from the addiction-recovery motif of vampirism represented by Angel as the always-recovering monster with his many lapses to Riley's blood-extraction/sex addiction in the fifth season.<sup>[1]</sup> Drug use and addiction metaphors in *Buffy* are never represented through a simplistic cause and effect, nor within a liberal-humanist framework of risk and warning, nor as a dichotomy of appropriate and inappropriate use of drugs. At the same time, the representation of death is of course a significant aspect of this series: it is Buffy's role as a vampire slayer to kill demons and other mystical threats to contemporary society. More importantly it is her role as student (of the occult) to face the philosophical questions as to possible meanings around life, death and subjectivity in face of the immortality of the vampires whom she either slays or, under various circumstances, counts among her friends and lovers. Likewise, drugs are represented in the series across its seven year run, predominantly in seasons four through six, in which Buffy, Willow and the many of their friends have entered college, begun partying as adults, and ultimately questioned the meaning of normative identity and subjective existence. Most importantly, the sixth season has used the metaphor of witchcraft as addiction to spellcasting that draws links between drug use, subjectivity and death. However, what this season also attempts to narrate is not that drugs are bad with a notion of the natural body, nor that we should take a consumerist gratifications approach to tell us that drugs are and should be used in the maximisation of human pleasure. Rather, it takes drugs as a set of cultural codes—a node in the cultural formation of the contemporary—and points to the ways in which they are formed as an *interruption* of being in order to facilitate a re-figuration of subjectivity that shifts from the unified enlightenment subject of life-to-death towards a postmodern and posthuman subjectivity.

[2] What I want to discuss here are the ways in which reading concepts of death, drugs and addiction together in the sixth season of *Buffy* can produce a compelling means by which to think through performative self-identity in ways which demonstrate subjectivity as *process* aligned with *temporality* and bodily and psychic *coherence*. As Thomas Hibbs has pointed out, this season witnesses the near shattering of Buffy's identity (57), and it is in the shattering and restoration that an understanding of performative identity as a process of (drug) *recovery* operates. What is at stake for Buffy characterised through drug recovery is the question of the *I*, the performative self, and it is a question that leads towards thinking about contemporary subjectivity as (potentially) *posthuman* subjecthood. Firstly, I will address the question as to how the character Buffy can be seen as posthuman in the sixth season after her resurrection from death, and I will ask this alongside the notion that contemporary human(ist) subjectivity remains overtly constituted in a being-towards-death in line with Martin Heidegger's articulation of being and temporality. I am arguing that having been displaced from the temporal and linear *process* of birth-life-death and having defied death as an embodied finality, her identity becomes post-subjective—at first destabilised and later re-constituted through an anarchic and feminist ethics; within this framework *Buffy's* Season One death is thereby not understood as a resurrection but a resuscitation of the everyday life-saving kind. Secondly, I want to make the case that Buffy's posthumanity can be read not as the result of a blurring of the bounds of life/death alone, but through her experiences of death, resurrection and recovery as they *approximate* or *translate*

into the rhetoric of drug use, addiction and recovery. In other words, I am suggesting that while the sixth season ostensibly linked the sidekick character Willow's identity problems with drugs, this acted as a lightning rod obscuring the more complex but more interesting reading of Buffy's experience as drug use (Cover, "Not to be Toyed With"). Finally, I want to show how questions of drug-induced bliss—a representation of *jouissance*—occurring neither in a primary and originary pre-subjectivity or in the post-subjectivity of death but in drug use as a subjective interruption can be understood as a key feature in drawing out concepts of posthuman subjectivity in contemporary culture.

## **SUBJECTIVITY, DEATH AND THE POSTHUMAN**

[3] Death is the unthinkable. The trace of death—the corpse—is unthinkable in Buffy, or at the very least so intensely abject as to show up the fragility of subjecthood. The significance of death for stable subjectivity is made clear in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in the episode "The Body" (5.16). For a series which has represented the final death of vampires, demons and other creatures slain by the hero, this episode marked the difference of *human* death for both audience and characters: as an episode without music, "[t]here is no score to tell the audience how to feel; in the same way, Buffy and her friends struggle to understand" (Dechert 220). When *Buffy* witnessed the corpse of her mother, she moved through stages of panic, attempted-rescue and then vomiting before she was able to compose herself and continue her responsibilities. This is the temporary shattering of stable self-identity in the face of death as trace—the reminder of one's own impending end. Likewise, when the gang had made careful preparation for the resurrection of Buffy, they had foolishly neglected to exhume Buffy's corpse, thereby leaving her to dig herself out of her own grave. The corpse of the known subject Buffy was that which they could not witness; it represents the trace of death as *beyond* subjecthood, the physical remainder/reminder that was unthinkable to see and unthinkable to witness in the spell of resurrection. This is not, however, a refusal of death but a denial (not in a psychotherapeutic sense) of death as affect: they can witness the ceasing of life, they have been around corpses and decapitated potential vampires soon after death, doing "morgue time in the Scooby gang" as Xander once put it ("The Body", 5.16). In fact, death is central to their particular experience of everyday-ness and thereby to their self-identities, figuring in the ways in which the gang of characters forge their belonging. But what is denied is the affect by which death, in all its banality, destroys the corpse: the rotting and decomposition of the body, its fallibility, its dispersal, its decay like food and filth, like anything that is not indicative of intelligible, coherent and recognisable subjecthood. That is, it is a reminder that the coherence of subjectivity in a linear temporality from birth-to-death is in its finality neither coherent nor intelligible.

[4] Concepts of death, however, are figurative in conceiving of a posthuman subjectivity. Posthuman is an unusual term to use here, mostly because it has become so strongly identified with the notion of the organic-machinic hybrid cyborg, although very recent attempts have been made to rescue the posthuman concept from its fifteen-year association with just this one form and to articulate the concept as a diverse one that cannot be clearly categorised against the human. There is no clear understanding or unified articulation of what it is that actually constitutes the posthuman: the notion of the cyborg has been articulated in film/literature and in theory via Donna Haraway's work, as well as in questions of artificial intelligence represented in popular culture by the robot, the android and the thinking computer in a tradition of human-as-creator that extends back to Mary Shelley's 1818 gothic novel, *Frankenstein*. However, the concept of the posthuman is an extension of an array of postmodern thinking applied to the human subject, seeking to fragment the unitary, fixed or reasonable idea of humanity as a response to contemporary technological conditions (virtual reality, cloning, evolutionary biology, quantum science) and contemporary cultural conditions (feminist, queer and postcolonial critiques of the subject). Following Butler ("Gender Trouble", "Bodies That Matter"), *human* subjectivity as selfhood is performative: it is the citation of the culturally-given signifier or array of signifiers of the category human, performed as a reiterative process, congealing in the articulation of the self *I* and expressed in order to fulfil a western cultural imperative of coherence, intelligibility and recognisability (Cover, "From Butler to Buffy"). Part of contemporary human subjectivity, then, is the requirement to perform in a linear temporal process—drawing into rational coherence an identity that remains *integral* from birth, through life and an array of experiences and always inevitably *towards* death.

[5] Death, for Heidegger, is about being, but not an end to being, rather a *being-for-the-end*, a

constant process towards death and an acknowledgment that as soon as one comes to life one is already in a position to die. It is the anticipation of death that provides subjectivity with a sense of temporality and linearity. For Heidegger, temporality is the horizon for all understanding of Being, and it is central to any conception of natural processes of subjecthood (39). In a Heideggerian framework we can say, then, that subjectivity is about being in the world which is about the constitution of subjectivity in a temporal process that has an end:

Anxiety in the face of death must not be confused with fear in the face of one's demise. This anxiety is not an accidental or random mood of 'weakness' in some individual' but, as a basic state-of-mind of Dasein, it amounts to the disclosedness of the fact that Dasein exists as thrown Being *towards* its end. Thus the existential concept of 'dying' is made clear as thrown Being towards its ownmost potentiality-for-Being, which is non-relational and not be to outstripped. (295)

That is, to make sense of the human subject we require a notion of the end, even if disavowed and despite any concepts of a spiritual afterlife. Even in a more culturalist or poststructuralist tone in which we would want to argue that subjectivity is the effect of discourse and that concepts of being and dying are culturally-generated, the node which makes that discourse effective is at the conjunction between a culturally-given concept of *linear time* and a culturally-given concept of subjectivity as always involving death at a point in time which cannot be reversed, defied, defeated. We might well say that contemporary subjectivity in all its diversity and fragmentation coheres around the *I* as a subject that is driven towards its own death, that is beset by the worry of death. If we think about this alongside Butler's notion of subjectivity as performative, then it becomes clear that the *process* of performance is one constituted within a discourse that fixates on death, the possibility of non-being, of non-subjectivity, of not-being-human (regardless of any concept of afterlife). A human subject fulfils the cultural imperative of *coherence* and *intelligibility* by constructing a personal, self-narrative of the *I* across linear time with an end that is, on the one hand, always in sight and, on the other, persistently disavowed or hidden.

[6] To defy death, to be immortal or resurrected or to be truly without a knowledge of impending death is therefore to be *posthuman*. In that sense, the vampire is posthuman in its immortality, and the resurrected is posthuman and postsubjective in the defeat of linear temporality—the defeat of death as core to human enlightenment notions of subjectivity. Any resurrection is an attempt to restore human subjectivity, and that in itself defeats subjectivity by the defeat of death. Buffy, who literally died at the end of the fifth season by sacrificing her life to save her sister and the world, was resurrected through witchcraft at the beginning of the sixth and is thus also posthuman. It is through the play on the concept of the gift that Buffy's sacrificial death is to be understood as *for* human subjectivity and by which her subsequent resurrection is a perversion of that human normative subjecthood. The economy of the gift, in which gift-giving always invokes—at a number of different levels and in many ways—the return or payment for the gift has been critiqued by Derrida, who points out that the only *genuine* gift is one in which all parties involved must forget in the instance of the gift-giving the fact it was ever given, in order to remove the debt or payment to the gift-giver ("Given Time"). Buffy's death works within the economy of the gift. In the aftermath of her mother's death (and before her own) she is sent a mystical guide who informs her that "death is your gift" ("Intervention" 5.18). There is a multiple play on the gift as the very signifier slides across an array of ideas and objections. Questioning at first "I'm getting a gift? Or, or do you mean that, that I have a gift to give to someone else?" she comes later to the conclusion that "death is your gift" is a damning reference to the ingrained talents of a slayer. As she later points out to Giles, "The spirit guide told me that death is my gift—guess that means a Slayer really is just a killer after all" ("The Gift", 5.22). But in the act of self-sacrifice to save her sister Dawn, in the act of throwing herself in to perform the responsibility to die in order to save the world, she *both* gives and receives a gift in the sense of the gratuity or the bequest. It is, as James Lawler suggests, a case in which she simultaneously realised her duty and was freed from it—her gift of sacrifice to Dawn (and the world) was in fact a gift also to herself in that she was rewarded with the honour of sacrifice and the bliss of a heavenly afterlife (112). But in several ways it is also more than that. Since the inception of the series, Buffy has been characterised as having a troubled subjectivity: indeed it is possible to say that the focus of the long narrative arc of the series has been about her attempt to perform a coherent selfhood that accounts for the fragmentation between an identity as schoolgirl (and later college freshman) and her identity as

vampire slayer, with all the attributes, abilities, darkness, power, responsibilities and often *lack* of opportunities that involves. The gift that she receives in this economy of gift-giving, then, is a *coherent* human subjectivity, and thereby demonstrating her being-towards-death in a linear temporality; she is able to die and thereby be properly human after all.<sup>2</sup>

[7] In being resurrected by Willow and the gang, that gift is taken away from her, and so too then is her performativity as *human* subject. Not as a subject who cannot die, but as a subject who *did not die*, she is much less a coherent human subject than she was when she lived the first time. The loss of the gift of coherent subjectivity makes her less human, it forces her to come to terms with the possibility of being post-human. Indeed, as the vampire Spike—who by virtue of his cyborgian chip cannot harm humans—discovered, she has been resurrected as *not entirely human* and he is able to hurt her physically: “you came back wrong”. Her experience on her return to Earth is, as James Lawler points out, the opposite difficulty to the one she had when she first took on the responsibilities as Slayer—rather than being too attached to the ideal of a normal, everyday life that she saw as opposed diametrically against the duties of slayerhood, she is now detached from the everyday. For Lawler, the higher reality is seen as relative to the everyday, where now the “natural estrangement among bodies and vulnerability to darkness” is like a descent into hell (112). As a resurrected being and therefore impelled to articulate her selfhood outside the linear temporality of lifecycle and the being-towards-death code, she is posthuman. It is thus in her overcoming death as normative being that she finds identification with a vampire who as an immortal creature is likewise positioned as extra-subjective. For the early twentieth century vampire theorist Montague Summers, the vampire must be destroyed for seemingly blurring the connection between death and life—there is a fear that the deceased may return to claim some of those who are left (286). It is what he terms

a very marked dread of the return of the deceased. The power of the dead to inflict injury upon the living is not merely confined to any ghostly affrightment, but strikes something deeper. The dead may come back in their own bodies as malignant monsters eager to carry off the living to the shadowy realm where they have gone before. (288)

This concern can be said to be rooted in the idea that such a blurred form of subjectivity—a being that is beyond being-onto-death—might seductively draw in the living not into the final death that completes or affirms human *being*, but into a similarly blurred form of subjectivity—a view of vampirism as a form of disease, a virus that spreads from non-subject to stable, unitary, Enlightenment subject; risking the creation of more non-subjects. Buffy’s attraction to Spike can thus be understood as an attempt to ‘shore up’ or stabilise a new form of posthuman subjectivity: “Being with you . . . makes things . . . simpler” (“As You Were”, 6.15). Their sexuality can be read as an attempt for both to find reality, but can ultimately be read through the inauthenticity of the drugged who act for self-gratification (never achieved) rather than being towards one another. Her eventual departure from Spike and the differences between their politico-ethical stances on responsibility for others is perhaps a case of what Cynthia Freeland puts best when she says that “vampire immortality might be importantly distinct from human immortality” (290n39). Her identification with the vampire which powerfully goes against the grain of the slayer/vampire and good/evil dichotomies by which she is subjected to her role, does not slip into identity as vampire, because while they share experiences as extra-subjective (including clawing out of their own graves as well as their self-conscious sense of difference from others as human *beings*) they are very different forms of extra-subjectivity or posthumanism—perhaps the most obvious is Spike’s ongoing need for blood and his vampiric/demonic desire for chaos and self-interest whereas Buffy’s performance is marked by a (sometimes wavering) responsibility towards others, and a sense of distance from the everyday time that, during the early part of season six, marks the identities of her sister and her friends.

## DEATH AND DRUGS IN BUFFY

[8] The bliss Buffy claimed to have experienced in death can be thought of as the bliss of having after all achieved a coherent subjectivity in line with enlightenment humanist notions of unity and wholeness that remain powerful, appealing and often imperative even in an increasingly postmodern fragmentary culture. To read Buffy’s resurrection as bringing about a posthuman identity usefully demonstrates the fraught relationship between subjectivity and postmodern or posthuman becoming.

However, *Buffy* is a polysemic text—open to multiple meanings, often self-consciously created to represent such multiplicity and certainly one which has produced discourse among both academics and fans. In line with this point, I want now to present an alternative reading of Buffy's experience of death and resurrection as one which understands this experience through the rhetoric of drug use, addiction and drug recovery. Many of the events of *Buffy's* season six deal with drugs and drug addiction—mostly by juxtaposing the sidekick character Willow's compulsive use of witchcraft with addiction. What I want to suggest here is that rather than understanding Willow's experience as metaphorically representing drug addiction and recovery—a reading which is simplistic and deflects the possibility of looking at Willow through notions of bullying, empowerment-gone-wrong and the return of victim identity (Cover, "Not to be Toyed With")—this motif works as a lightning rod to distract from the more substantially philosophic concerns that connect the concept of drug with being and subjectivity as they are constituted by the cultural representation of death. That is, Buffy's experience of death can be understood as one which opens and reconfigures questions of drug addiction, drug come-down and drug pleasures with the questions of life, death, afterlife and immortality as they relate to contemporary subjectivity, and this reading is informed by a number of signifiatory nodal points in the visuals, dialogue and plot which draw together such connections.

[9] There are, of course, several culturally-common links between the concepts death and drugs, both empirical and philosophic. Obviously, the popularly-claimed mortality rate of drug users through overdose and lack of care of the (bodily) self is the most widely-circulated link. Media horror stories about ecstasy-related deaths (Murji 72), have fostered such a linkage, and as with many other topical fields, it is with this media-saturation that the *Buffy* narrative engages from a critical, often feminist and anti-humanist stance. Secondly, experiments into providing and advocating (normally illicit) drugs for the dying occurred in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s (Grinspoon & Bakalar 191-192), and more recently we witness the medical provision of marijuana for people living with terminal illnesses. More importantly, however, drugs can be likened to death in that they both are understood as producing bliss and at the same time are both the unnatural—the *beyond* of a culturally-manufactured and persistent belief in the body and the *living* body as the real against the artificial. The concept of drugs as relative to death are part and parcel of a discourse of drug use and drug addiction, what Derrida refers to as a diction of drug addiction which holds together and makes familiar a broad set of perceptions and theories of drug use ("The Rhetoric of Drugs"). Ultimately, he indicates, drugs are foreign to subjectivity, to coherent selfhood, an invasion of the body and the self, a juxtaposition between real subjectivity and un-real chemical:

By the grace of the technical or artificial, and ever-*interiorizing* violence of an injection, inhalation, or ingestion, by taking into my self, inside myself a foreign body, or indeed a nutriment . . . this is what is condemned by a society based on work and on the subject answerable as subject. ("The Rhetoric of Drugs," 240-241)

[10] What I am doing here is thinking Buffy's experience of death as akin to drug use, and conceiving her post-resurrection experiences as those of a recovering addict. This is a radical reading of a particularly potent set of themes conveyed across the narrative arc of Buffy's return to normality in the aftermath of resurrection and in the announcement that she was not brought back from a hell dimension (as her friends initially believed), but from a blissful heaven. It is available to be read through the cultural diction of drug use and drug recovery, particularly in the terms of the experience of the *absence* of the drug as that which is foreign and yet familiar to the body, and as that which comes to define the post-drug body as one of lack. The World Health Organisation Expert Committee on Drug Dependence (1970) referred to drug dependence in the following terms:

a state psychic and sometimes physical resulting from the interaction between a living organism and a drug, characterised by behavioural and other responses that always include a *compulsion* to take the drug on a continuous or periodic basis in order to experience its psychic effects and sometimes to avoid the discomfort of its absence.  
(9)

[11] From the very time the audience have witnessed her resurrection, we encounter signifiers of drug-use, of Buffy having been on a very big (and very bad) trip—what Anya euphemistically points out is "jet-lag from hell" ("After Life", 6.3) and her compulsion to return to that trip in order to avoid the sheer discomfort of its absence. In "Bargaining, Part Two" (6.2), having risen out of her grave (her place

of rest) and viewing her own headstone, she wanders into town, dishevelled, dirty, and staggering. Her dishevelled appearance in the clothes in which she was buried code her as the figure returning from an all-night bender. She sees the burning buildings and cars, the chaos and senselessness of a town under attack from a gang of demon bikers. But it is the blinding lights and the pain from loud sounds to which she reacts most badly, much as we culturally share the experience of the hangover or the drug come-down. A homeowner wielding a shotgun threatens her when she leans on his car: "Get away from there! Do you hear me? I said get off my property!" This is the diametric opposition of bourgeois suburban homeownership and the figure of the junkie. In "Flooded" (6004) she is barely recovering, having been withdrawn and isolated, attempting to sleep and going through the motions of everyday activity with a zombie-like expression. Mesmerised by everyday images, she is distracted and finds everyday living repetitive and senseless. Indeed, on her first day back at university she represents the experiences of the drug come-down: severe loss of time. Later, it is sheer frustration attempting to work at the shop as banal moments in time become (literally) repetitive. Finally, she ends her day getting drunk with Spike in what is arguably the seediest bar encountered in the series ("Life Serial", 6.5). She is part of a drug-use underworld, that on which bourgeois society is built and which it tries to obscure: as Spike whispers to her as she watches her friends practice dancing for Xander and Anya's wedding, "[t]hat's not your world. You belong in the shadows . . . with me. Look at your friends . . . and tell me you don't love getting away with this right under their noses" ("Dead Things", 6.13). Indeed, she has shut down on the everyday, the commonplace, the ordinary and anything which evokes rational sociality or normality—such as familial responsibility or friendly relations. Yet when the vampire Angel—also representing the underworld—phones, she rushes off immediately to be part of that world ("Flooded", 6.4).

[12] If a set of connotations between Buffy's post-resurrection behaviour and drug withdrawal can be drawn, it is not so simple to distinguish what sort of illicit substance might be identified. Sleepy and sleeping a lot, her behaviour approximates that of crashing—the biochemical depression resulting from the body's process of recovery after amphetamine or methamphetamine use. Her inability to function in the everyday or to complete routine tasks might, however, be linked to the use of hallucinogens or psychedelic drugs, and her flashes to an alternative existence in which she believes she is in Los Angeles, incarcerated in a mental institution, and having never been a slayer or faced a vampire plays on this possibility. On the other hand, the fact that this delusion is brought on during an attack by a demon who stabs her with a syringe-like spike that emerges from his knuckle is available to be read as the use of an intravenous drug such as heroin. The various tricks played on her by the nerd trio in "Life Serial" (6.5) certainly indicate a variety of drug experiences including the loss of time at university for speed come-down and the alleged hallucinations at Xander's worksite for psychedelic substances. No matter which, her behaviour indicates any of the tell tale symptoms given across all sorts of popular cultural and parental help texts of drug use: difficulty concentrating, lack of motivation and energy, sleep disturbances, moodiness, nervousness, loss of interest in family and friends, secretive behaviour. "It's like she's completely without focus," the nerd Warren tells the others ("Life Serial", 6.5).

[13] While all of these point to the possibility of reading her experience through the rhetoric or diction of drugs, the one node which makes such a reading viable is that of bliss, as the term used to describe her post-death experience and as that which the everyday world of human subjectivity is not. Buffy's announcement that she was not in a hell dimension is indicated not long after her resurrection and her struggle to climb out of her own coffin in the same manner as the vampires she is pitted to destroy. Wandering through a chaotic and burning Sunnydale after the demon biker invasion, she comes to the tower from which she had plunged to her death, and reminisces on the clarity of her experience:

BUFFY: (with an anguished frown) Is this hell?

DAWN: No! Buffy, no! You're here . . . with me. Whatever happened to you, whatever you've been through, it's . . . it's over now. . . .

BUFFY: It was so clear . . . on this spot. I remember how shiny and clear everything was. (shakes her head) But . . . now . . . ("Bargaining Part Two", 6.2)

Later she discusses her whereabouts with Spike who, as the undead and *of* the underworld, is best positioned to make intelligible both death and drugs.

BUFFY: Wherever I . . . was . . . I was happy. At peace. I knew that everyone I cared about was all right. I knew it. Time . . . didn't mean anything . . . nothing had form . . . but I was still me, you know? And I was warm . . . and I was loved . . . and I was finished. Complete. I don't understand about theology or dimensions, or . . . any of it, really . . . but I think I was in heaven. And now I'm not. I was torn out of there. Pulled out . . . by my friends. Everything here is . . . hard, and bright, and violent. Everything I feel, everything I touch . . . this is Hell. Just getting through the next moment, and the one after that . . . knowing what I've lost. ("After Life", 6.3)

[14] Finally, in the musical episode "Once More With Feeling" (6.7) in which she reveals that she was by no means in a hell dimension but had experienced bliss in death, she sings: "There was no pain; no fear, no doubt, 'til they pulled me out of heaven". She was torn out of her blissful state, out of ecstasy by well-meaning people who did not understand either the drug come down or the pain and confusion and violence of drug withdrawal. Her revelations, then, are representative of the mourning of the loss; the absence of drugs where withdrawal for Buffy is both figurative and literal. The bliss and ecstasy of death are, indeed, more than just euphemistic metaphors for heaven, although that is where Buffy claims she has been. In his later years, Aldous Huxley experimented with mescaline and other substances (particularly hallucinogens) to inform his understanding of his own subjectivity and subjecthood in general. He found that taking mescaline opened a blissful inner world that was "self-evidently infinite and holy" (37). Most importantly, drug use breached his sense of self. As he put it: "It was odd, of course, to feel that 'I' was not the same as these arms and legs 'out there,' as this wholly objective trunk and neck and even head. It was odd; but one soon got used to it" (42-43). The fragmentation he experienced in his drug experiments was conditioned by a set of "blissful intermissions" that brought about a sort of "heavenly part of schizophrenia" (44).

[15] Comfort, care and being surrounded by well-meaning friends is not the answer to Buffy's readjustment to living again, rather she finds the ecstasy of violent sex with Spike to be the closest approximation to her drug experience. This attraction to the semi-restrained representation of the evil she is sworn to fight is coded not only as an attraction between the two who understand subjectivity outside or beyond the birth-death temporal lifecycle, but a compulsion for Buffy towards a sex that is beyond the middle-class safe, domestic, normative sex she has known with the "relaxing, reliable Riley" (Milavec & Kaye 178). Her connection with Spike as an underworld figure, then, comes to represent her longing to be part of a drug underground that she has lost. His recognition of her trauma (Sakal 248), and the cynicism with which he treats the liberal discourse by which the gang offer her their help to reintegrate into everyday life makes him the ideal figure in which to confide, and in which to experience the underground life that he inhabits—the drinking, the motorcycle, the demon bars, the gambling. The point here is that the *well-meaning* attempt to bring someone back from the edge is not always well-received. Taking that as a metaphor for the liberal salvation approach to drug use and drug recovery, it is Spike who points out that salvation and restoration do not work in the ways by which her patronising friends are inspired: "There are always consequences. Always!" ("After Life", 6.3). What he understands is that no one returns from drug use without changes, without transformation and without disrupted identity. With Spike, the weight of her duties and the banality of her everyday life not only come together but are surpassed in the ecstatic experience of sex with the dangerous undead—the act is the compulsive attempt to re-experience the *bliss* that was beyond time and beyond the contemporary experience of normative subjectivity.

[16] For Buffy, the absence of happiness is not an absence of a theological or mystical heaven, but the want and desire of bliss, of *jouissance*. As Greg Forster points out, Buffy's return to earth does not see her elated at the proof that virtue is rewarded in the afterlife, nor leads her to "embark on a life of piety and virtue in the hopes of ensuring that when she dies again, she will go back to heaven" (8). The mise-en-scene of her return is not unlike that of the post-drug come-down from the bliss of the binge, the depression of withdrawal, or the recovery from overdose. In "Once More With Feeling" (6.7), the emotions and hidden desires that are revealed compulsively in song force her to confess that she was in heaven and to point out that not much in her life has meaning or pleasure now: "So give me something to sing about!" What Buffy has lost or at least repressed in the come-down is that which the drug releases for others from the restraint of the soul: passion. As she sings here, "I touch the fire, and it freezes me." Her inability to feel, to be once more *with* feeling, is the result of a depression that the absence of drug-induced pleasure brings about, both physically and for the psyche. While her body

is confirmed by Giles to be as strong as it had been when she lived before, even the demons are aware that her slaying duties are performed without care or passion, that she is "going through the motions."

[17] In "Normal Again," (6.17), she desperately seeks to escape from a life that is filled with drudgery, pain and the absence of bliss/drugs by retreating into a fantasy life in which her parents are alive and together, she has never left Los Angeles, and she is in a clinic treated by a psychiatrist for severe delusions that involve her mythical creation of a narrative in which she is a super-hero, fights evil demons and vampires, and is surrounded by a gang of make-believe friends. There are a number of ironies in this episode that help both to frame and complexify the drug/death formation of subjectivity in *Buffy*: her boss at the Double Meat Palace implies her lack of engagement is due to drug use; the alternative reality is induced with a syringe-like injection of demonic poison; Buffy is treated with drugs in the clinic; the psychiatric environment is not significantly different from a drug rehab clinic. But the fantasy for which she is treated is one in which she would never really have experienced death and resurrection, and would thereby never know the bliss that she has lost. Indeed, her experience on Earth as one of distraction, depression and withdrawal is not unlike that of Giles several years earlier in which his own past orgiastic experience of the *jouissance* of drugs (at least through the metaphor of magic, in this case) has returned to haunt him: when he misses a rendezvous with Buffy, she finds him at his apartment, dishevelled, obviously drinking and suffering a memory lapse. As Cynthia Bowers points out, such behaviours as drinking alone, personality changes and a loss of interest in one's study, work or career are common symptoms of the abuse or over-use of drugs.

## DEATH, DRUGS AND POSTHUMAN SUBJECTIVITY

[18] Drugs can be understood as that which breach temporality, which take the user outside of the order functioning of everyday being, particularly an everyday that is thought through categories of work and leisure (Derrida "The Rhetoric of Drugs," 230; Connolly 84-85), as well as health and security —both features of subjective being related to longevity and codes of appropriate ability at different stages of life: hence, paediatrics or gerontology. The illicit substance of drugs is seen to affect the user in terms of health and productivity as they are coded within a birth-death lifecycle. Given the centrality of medical institutions, discourses and those authorised to administer medical knowledge to the coding of the lifecycle, the only permissible drug which is not seen to displace the life-temporality of the human subject is the pharmaceutical, discharged in doses deemed appropriate to the natural body, with prescriptions carefully filled and proper records kept (which incidentally outlive the patient as the trace of the status of health in a society obsessed with the archive and the longevity of data). Of course, as Derrida points out, once the diction of drugs is released from the constraints of a western medical set of discourses, the distinction between illicit drug and beneficial pharmaceutical, between poison and antidote, becomes indecidable and indefinite ("The Rhetoric of Drugs" 235). The prohibition against drugs is, as Foucault has discussed, part of a humanist project to maintain the discursive form of the coherent, intelligible, bourgeois subject (221-222, 226). Modern civilisation is dependent on the prohibition of drugs or the relegation of drugs to either an otherness or to the safe space of certain literary forms. For Derrida, we reject the drug addict because

he cuts himself off from the world, in exile from reality, far from objective reality and the real life of the city and the community; . . . drugs, it is said, make one lose any sense of true reality. In the end, it is always, I think, under this charge that the interdiction is declared. We do not object to the drug user's pleasure per se, but to a pleasure taken in an experience without truth. ("The Rhetoric of Drugs" 235-236)

[19] Despite the ways in which drug use emulates concepts of death and the afterlife as marking subjectivity, the drug and the drug addict are rejected because it is the drug which is seen to cut one off from the world, "in exile from reality, far from objective reality and the real life of the city and the community . . . he escapes into a world of simulacrum and fiction" ("The Rhetoric of Drugs" 235-236). It is an escape from the lifecycle that is a fiction, because drugs invoke a pleasure that is an "experience without truth" ("The Rhetoric of Drugs" 235). Such experience without truth is the experience of death: the unknowable, unthinkable, indescribable, extra-linguistic beyond.

[20] What I want to do now is work through the connections between death, subjectivity and drugs as they occur in Buffy's resurrection experiences in order to consider how drugs might be related

to concepts of posthuman identity. As drug use is seen to be 'without truth', it is no surprise that Buffy is unable to describe her experiences when asked, and at no stage offers a coherent analysis of the blissful, peaceful heaven from which she returned. It is also no surprise that the only character with whom she relates and initially confides is also the only character with a connection to atemporality and posthuman subjectivity: as a vampire Spike is immortal, existing in the unintelligible eternity of the undead. Just prior to her first attempt to sleep, Buffy sees the faces of her friends and herself in photographs on the wall age, bodies withering, in precisely the way that *her* body—or the bodies of vampires—did not ("After Life", 6.3). This works to distinguish her affected, foreign subjectivity from those who are expected to experience a normal lifecycle.

[21] Having thereby experienced the temporary atemporality of the drug trip, the attempt to forget that experience, to move past it and recover from it is that which plays the most significant role in the stabilisation of her subjectivity as the performative *I*. We cannot put down the experience of the drug/death to something which is merely one among many experiences defining and governing the life path of an individual *I*. Juridical law proclaims the *I* as natural, presocial and ahistorical, independent of any sociality or discursive constitution. It is this *I* that is presumed to be disrupted by the bodily invasion of the drug—invasive like death/resurrection—and by the removal from linear temporality that the compulsive act of taking the drug into the body of the user. However, as Butler points out, there is no "unmediated reference to the self that is prior to any and all references to the world and its objects" ("Self-Referentiality" 71). For Butler, no *I* is ever truly private or individual, for the citation of the *I* is social and located in the paradox that the very term to denote a singular subject is promiscuously and indifferently conferred on all other subjects—the "term thus betrays its function even as it performs it" ("Self-Referentiality" 72). However, in the case of Buffy in her return and recovery from the death metaphor for drug use, the atemporality and bodily invasion that she experienced is not within the realm of the prescriptive *I* that depends on temporality and a fixed idea of unity. Rather, having breached the law of birth-to-death temporality by rising from the dead, she is now an out-law, at least within the power/knowledge regime of the rules which govern definable and intelligible humanity. Outlaw as drug user, outlaw as living once again, outlaw as posthuman.

[22] In trying to draw the idea of drug recovery more closely to the notion of subjectivity as a process, it would be very tempting to turn to a purely Lacanian mode, and characterise the heavenly bliss of the drug as the *objet petit a* for which the subject must substitute the desire-as-lack for the *jouissance* of the pre-oedipal. Certainly the imagery in *Buffy* around the intensive use of magic depicts blissful *jouissance* and this is seen most clearly in Willow's use of dark magic in Season Six (pre-ethical, pre-coherent) and her final spell in the television series finale (blissful and pre-bodily). For Lacanian psychoanalysis, subjectivity is constituted in a desire for the bliss or *jouissance* of attachment to the mother that cannot be regained once one has entered into language and come under the law of the father (Lacan 214). This desire is always thwarted, such that desire must be displaced onto an object that stands in for this primary narcissistic *jouissance*—a lover, a career or some other identification or in this case perhaps a drug that resembles most the blissful-qualities of the womb. However, this would be to ignore the sociality through which we come to think about *jouissance*, and to place *jouissance* in the realm of the pre-discursive—something which Butler warns against when she suggests that *jouissance* and bliss might be nothing more than a "fantasy of lost and forbidden pleasure rather than a memory or actual stage of infantile development" ("Subjects of Desire" 203). In other words, this idea of bliss as it exists *prior* to subjectivity and to which we return *posthumously* might well be nothing other than a transferral of the drug-like experience to book end subjectivity in a linear before-and-after. What I want to show here is that the coherence of the subjective *I* is forged not in a lack and longing for *jouissance* as the womb or as heavenly posthumous bliss, but in a recovery *from it*. If *jouissance* is to be a founding myth of subjectivity, and if drugs and death are the synthetic replications that breach the temporality of subjective being, then it is in viewing the process and play of performativity as a recovery of something not yet lost that the subjective *I* can better be understood in relation to the metaphors around death and drugs and to the ideal of the lifecycle as one not book-ended by birth and death, but by a continuation from *jouissance* and away from it.

[23] What a drug-rhetorical reading of *Buffy* tells us is that the idea of the drug is the interruption of coherent, linear subjectivity pointing—for good or bad—to some aspect of the posthuman. By its very un-reality, it is outside subjective identity and *beyond* the *I*: in contemporary cultural terms it is an un-real that object-like penetrates the body and subject. In Derrida's rhetoric,

drugs are culturally-viewed as a foreign substance that violently penetrates the body and the subject, interiorised and drawing the subject into an un-reality. However, this penetration can be understood not merely as the penetration of a misrepresentedly fixed body (skin as the border between an inner/outer self) or as the mark of abjection but as the penetration of the *temporality* of selfhood. In experiencing *now* the prohibited *jouissance* that supposedly can be felt only in the pre-subjective womb or post-subjective death, drugs take one out of time—the experience of drug use is thereby an interruption of selfhood that is not merely the loss of a segment of time but a loss of time as the linear lifecycle of birth-to-death or being-towards-death that makes the human subject coherent. Drugs as the little death, then, indicate a being-beyond-death as much as towards it. In that sense, drug use—or more rightly the presence or knowledge of drugs in contemporary culture—brings about a sense of something *other* than human subjectivity. Neither a reminder of a primary *jouissance* that conditions the psyche nor a foreknowledge of some sort of bliss of death, but a forewarning of subjectivity that is *not* coherent subjectivity, and of the blurredness between subjectivity and post-subjectivity.

[24] It is this drug-and-death constituted post-subjectivity that I am characterising here as posthuman. For Hayles:

The posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that faction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice. What is lethal is not the posthuman as such but the grafting of posthuman onto a liberal humanist view of the self. (286)

In light of this point, I do not want to suggest that posthuman subjectivity is indeed a post-subjectivity *per se*. That would on the one hand to presume an erasure of subjectivity in culture altogether (which has not occurred despite the occasional celebration or bemoaning of a postmodern fragmentation of identity), and on the other to suggest a dichotomy between subject and post-subject. Rather, this is a *transformed* subjectivity, one which does not fragment or disperse subjectivity altogether but shows up any liberal-humanist or enlightenment claim to the subject's *authenticity*. Through her death and resurrection (a.k.a. drug trip) Buffy loses the *authenticity* of life, that is the Heideggerian authentic life that is lived in the conscious presence of death. Buffy's post-drug posthuman experience is thus not a wholesale post-identity, but a reconfigured subjecthood. Spike has learned that he can hurt her physically whereas he cannot harm any human being. "Don't you get it? Don't you see?" he asks. "You came back wrong . . . Came back a little less human than you were." ("Smashed", 6.9). Four episodes later she asks the witch Tara to find information on the resurrection spell, claiming to "feel different" and possibly "wrong" ("Dead Things", 6.13). Tara learns that Buffy is not *less* human than she was, nor inhuman:

TARA: Well, I said that there was nothing wrong with you, but ... you *are* different. Shifting you out of from where you were—funnelling your essence back into your body—it altered you on a basic molecular level. Probably just enough to confuse the sensors or whatever in Spike's chip. But it's all just surface-y physical stuff. It wouldn't have any more effect than a bad sunburn.

Buffy looks close to tears as she contemplates this.

BUFFY: I didn't come back wrong?

TARA: No, you're the same Buffy. With a deep tropical cellular tan. . . . I promise, there's nothing wrong with you.

As a metaphysical subject, she is no longer Buffy, and enters fully for the first time the postmodern *reconfiguration* of subjectivity—a posthuman subject but a subject nevertheless. In that sense, we can say that the blissful and atemporal experience of the drug is neither an end to subjectivity nor a fragmentation of identity, but as always a (potential) reconfiguration of the subject as posthuman and as beyond the myth of a subjectivity conditioned within linear time.

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[1] Editors' note: Dale K. Koontz's keynote address at the 4<sup>th</sup> *Slayage* biennial conference ("Twelve Steps Forward, One Step Back: Redemption Through Recovery in the Works of Joss Whedon") focused on addiction in Whedon from a different perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Frank Kermode's term, David Lavery writes that only two episodes "can justifiably be called closure (at the level of expectation), resolving major, multiple plot entanglements" (par. 36). The first is "The Gift" (5022) that puts "an end simultaneously to Buffy herself, Season Five, and *BtVS*'s tenure on the WB" and the second is "Chosen"(7022) that ends the war with The First, Buffy's role as the solitary Slayer, and "seven years of narrative" (par. 36).

<sup>2</sup> In "Bargaining, Part I" (6001) Tara says, "The only really real Buffy is really Buffy," indicating the falsity of the bot's performance.

<sup>3</sup> Lacan is careful to distinguish the Real as that which is before the Imaginary and Symbolic, the impossible and unknowable, from reality.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Adams examines how "Buffy is the original -age and -y suffixer, the one who establishes those tendencies within slayer slang" and he argues that, although she "sets the example" for the others, "Buffy's Slayer style is more persistently individual in other types of slayer slang" (42).

<sup>5</sup> Yet this function of language is not relegated to the Slayer but Buffy as Slayer. In contrast to the Buffy, Kendra is "deferential, formal, and clearly uncomfortable" (Overbey and Preston-Matto 83).

<sup>6</sup> For Adams, "slang and style, though not the same thing, are two sides of the same coin and, at every toss, each has an even chance of turning up. One could view this as a paradox, but it isn't really, because slang does originate in a sense of style, someone's decision to dissent from convention at a certain moment in a certain way, only to discover that, sometimes, individuating style is the source of a new convention; the more conventional a style of speech becomes, the less useful it is as slang" (41). Here, and throughout this essay, I, following Adams's lead, link slang and style and argue that Buffy is at the source of both, in the creation of a type of Buffyspeak that the others (both the other slayers and

the “other Buffy”) are unable to successfully imitate.

<sup>7</sup>After Buffy discovers her mother’s dead body, she calls Giles and tells him, “You have to come.” After Giles attempts to identify her, saying, “Buffy?,” she replies, “She’s at the house,” failing to identify what has occurred, or even who the “she” is.

<sup>8</sup> Jesse James Stommel writes, “The show isn’t afraid to kill off its favorite characters, and it’s not afraid to let us see” (par. 1), citing the deaths of Buffy, Jenny Calendar, Buffy’s mother, Tara, and Anya. Stommel’s analysis of the treatment of “the body” links ideas about performance, spectatorship, and the loss of language that I argue are embodied in Season Five.

<sup>9</sup>After Spike learns about his robotic creation April, Spike forces Warren to create the Buffybot.

<sup>10</sup>J. P. Williams writes, “The Spirit, who has no language of her own, is indeed vanquished by Buffy’s pointed language—language specifically mocking the Spirit’s appearance” (63).

<sup>11</sup>Ian Shuttleworth states that, as “characters own and /or disown various aspects of their personalities, seek to create and /or destroy identities for themselves, to resolve and /or accommodate contradictions within their composition,” we see that “each transformation, literal or figurative, makes matters ever more complex” in relation to this “integral flux of character, role and identity” (236).

<sup>12</sup>While many critics have argued that the Scoobies take part in slayer slang, and even create it, I locate Buffy at the source. Without her presence, her style and performance, slayer slang falls apart. For example, while Overbey and Preston-Matto argue that Buffy is “neither a solitary Speaker nor a solitary Slayer,” a reality that “makes Buffy-combat, and Buffy-speak, efficacious” (76), their argument that “Buffy *is* the speech act,” the “utterance that communicates meaning, drawing on the linguistic capabilities of her companions: invention, playfulness, contextualization, archival knowledge, compilation, and translation” (83) is more in line with my argument here. Buffy does not only draw on the linguistic capabilities of these others; she encourages them to engage in a slayer speak that translates into their own discourse communities (i.e., Willow’s computer language and Wiccan groups, as well as Giles’s bibliophilic discourse). Rather than reading the structure of the relationships on the basis that “Buffy is able to access this language only with the help of her friends” (Overbey and Preston-Matto 84), I argue that Buffy translates this discourse to her friends, enabling their usage, as Buffy (as character and series) encourages the viewers to incorporate slayer slang, imitate slayer style, in their own worlds.

<sup>13</sup>Calvert argues that both April and the Buffybot represent Buffy’s role in Season Six. As simulations, they reflect Buffy’s fear that she is just “going through the motions.”

<sup>14</sup>This notion of poor imitation, bad acting, could be read in relation to “The Puppet Show” (1009), in which Buffy, Xander, and Willow are engaged in a pained performance of *Oedipus Rex*. Janet K. Halfyard links the performances in “The Puppet Show” to those in “Once More, with Feeling” (6007) to argue that “the positioning of singing and the games that are played with musical diegesis serve to reinforce the credibility of the Buffyverse” (par. 43).

<sup>15</sup>And yet, in “Bargaining, Part I” (6.1), the bot successfully performs as Buffy at Dawn’s school (although Dawn calls her “wacky Buffy”). At Sunnydale High School, the teachers and parents fill in the gaps in the bot’s discourse, as the Scoobies had done in “Intervention” (5.18). For example, when the bot says, “I helped make lunch today,” another parent replies, “Tell me about it. My kid’s been brown-bagging it even though I pay for the lunch program” (“Bargaining, Part I”).

<sup>16</sup>Lacan’s reference to the formation of the I as symbolized in dreams by a fortress or a stadium (5) can be read in relation to this scene, as the gang surrounds the Buffybot as if they were at a stadium, cheering. Buffy, as a witness/participant to this scene, sees the dismemberment of the bot in terms of this ritualized performance.

[17](#) Again, Lacan's notion of the Law of the Father in relation to the symbolic order is a fitting model for reading Buffy's return. Following her mother's death (and a loss of connection), the father (Giles) leaves. Order (and Buffy's language) is restored upon Giles's return to Sunnydale. When Giles takes over the role as parent to Buffy, Buffy even compares him to her mother. In Lacanian terms, where the father displaces the connection to the mother, here, in Buffy's case, Giles performs a dual role to re-connect Buffy to language and reintroduce her to her role as Slayer.

[18](#) In "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious," Lacan asks, "Is what thinks in my place then another I?" (82). In this essay, Lacan's question of "Then who is this other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since, at the heart of my assent to my own identity it is still he who wags me?" (83) reads like the Buffybot's attempts at sorting through who the "really real" Buffy is, in contrast to its own role in the verse. Similarly (and yet conversely), Buffy's imitations of the bot signify a questioning of her role—as simulated, artificial.

[19](#) Consider Alice Jenkins and Susan Stuart's argument in "Extending Your Mind" that "Hush" demonstrates the translation of speech acts into writing. They write, "Throughout its silent portion, 'Hush' pits the authority of writing against the immediacy of speech, questioning the value of the associations the characters and audience make with each kind of interaction" (Jenkins and Stuart 2). As Jenkins and Stuart examine how writing performs a non-standard perlocutionary function, they offer a model for reading how the Buffybot's language deconstructs these relations, how it stalls the translation of speech into action. As the Buffybot's language straddles the divide between locutionary and perlocutionary functions, it performs at the site where slayer slang falls apart.