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**"Is She Cold?": Telaesthetic  
Horror and Embodied Textuality  
in "The Body"**

**Slayage**  
The Journal  
of the Whedon Studies Association

[1] There it sits: cold, stiff and yet still overwhelmingly present--the dead body of Buffy Summers' mother, Joyce, the focal point of "The Body" (5.16). Slumped awkwardly across the couch, the corpse's outline comes into sharper focus as Buffy moves towards it, the silences between her quiet, increasingly frightened plea-- "mom? ... mom? ... mommy?"--casting the viewer adrift. Indeed, there you sit, in front of this event, as the viewer-listener, too--your body registering the shockwaves of the scene a before your interpretive schema kick into gear when the long-familiar theme songs starts up. What energizes the relationship between these two bodies, what connects them? What produces the "visceral reactions [...]" this particular episode elicits," as Stommel puts it? Furthermore, how might we account for the appearance of "The Body," judged an unusually realistic episode in the primarily supernatural tone of the series? Perhaps asking not only how "the body" of episode and character get there, but rather, what they *do*, is the necessary step. This consideration goes to heart of what might be called a "post-representational" textual analysis, one that paradoxically tries to reach beyond the textual itself and develop an engagement with the affective, sensory, and embodied dimensions of the viewing experience, as much as traditional questions of representation and ideology. In dealing with the body at both the thematic and narrative level, this episode is a particularly fruitful one for exploring this approach, one which can help us understand that strange affective membrane that short-circuits the mediated chasm between characters' and viewers' bodies.t

[2] In developing this embodied approach to textual analysis, genre becomes a useful problematic, one that itself must be reconsidered. In short, genre cannot be defined as an internal semiotic function of texts if we are to fully understand the multifaceted "generic networks" that constitute textuality. Genres are porous and networked, not only in terms of the hybrids they create amongst themselves, but also their exact location, which stretches across textual, industrial, and embodied domains. The concept of 'telaesthesia', developed below, is one way to make sense of the mediated, affective element of this network. Furthermore, the unsettled negotiation of dramatic realism and horror that plays out in "The Body" illustrates how genres interpenetrate and renew one another. The line between the natural and supernatural, real and horrifically unreal, is something that the episode itself toys with, making its thematic musings a pertinent opportunity for extending the boundaries of genre. And if we are to understand genre as an experience, this requires a sensitivity to the sensorial. In particular, we can 'listen for' the affective textures of this episode if we conceive of it as a "sonic event" (Lucy 72). Rather than reducing sound-as-text to pre-given forms of signification, we can focus here on the process or experience of the aural in the reception event. Reading genre in this regard highlights the significance of embodiment and affect in understanding televisual textuality, not just in the case of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but more generally.

[3] As Rhonda Wilcox points out, "The Body" is amongst those episodes of *Buffy* subject to highest critical acclaim (Wilcox 175). One

limitation of many popular and academics appraisals alike is that they are often built on the claim that the episode is one of the most 'realistic' in the *Buffy* series, owing primarily to the fact that, for once, a character's death is not attributed to supernatural causes and is treated with dramatic sensitivity, but also thanks to its formal achievements in its densely realized cinematography and absence of a non-diegetic soundtrack (Stommel; Millman). Though Wilcox's analysis of the episode's "emotional realism" also foregrounds the narrative's smooth, "realistic surface", she rightly points out that it remains a test case in "examining the confrontation of the realistic and the non-realistic" in critical discourses surrounding television (176). She notes that the one criticism reviewers who otherwise praised the episode make is of the appearance of the vampire in the final scene, which breaks the apparent spell of realism. In other words, this episode is generally well regarded precisely because it still fits into familiar generic taxonomies: Even if it disrupts the supernatural tone of the series itself, as an isolated text it largely fulfils the dictates of realism. Such appraisals remain based on a structuralist propensity for locking texts into formal strongholds according to their internal properties, rather than opening up their possibilities and pathways. "The Body", however, can be read otherwise, and below Wilcox's analysis of the tensions in this episode is extended by moving from the textual to the embodied. Indeed, this focus on understanding the corporeal effects of the episode, conceptualized as an active engine of the viewing experience, does not necessarily seek to undermine previous appraisals of the episode's themes but seeks instead to examine them in a different frame. It examines what literally "mobilizes" such themes and what happens in the viewing event before the familiar semiotic rituals begin; the phenomenologies that *connect* us to *Buffy*.<sup>1</sup> To do so means to read genre otherwise and to redefine its location, so that genre is no longer a criteria of belonging but rather an operative agent that can re-describe a text's force. Genres well over, they bleed, and realism and horror, especially as they are played out in "The Body", are particularly given to spillage. These two generic forms will now be taken up in turn.

[4] Putting aside the question of whether it actually does operate under realism, if we consider "The Body" as a realist text, it is immediately clear that the notion of a genre being 'inside' the text is problematic. For one, we can think of realism as a discursive construction, partially enabled by the industrial conditions of *Buffy*'s seriality, as well as writer and director Joss Whedon's conferred "auteur" status. Considering the former, the production demands of a hybrid continuous drama series such as *Buffy*, which combines episodic and ongoing narratives (Turnbull 67), mean that each episode is caught between originality and continuity, as the topical issues it explores must mesh with the ongoing narrative arcs of the series in the effort to sustain viewer interest. The numb, emotional aftermath of Joyce's death, which takes up the majority of the episode, arises out of this dynamic: it advances major narrative trajectories (such as Buffy's developing maturity) and is also novel, as individual characters must come to grips with a death for which, for once, there is no identifiable supernatural perpetrator. Ignorant of human social mores, Anya is nevertheless deeply affected, calling the death "mortal and stupid" but no less exasperated than Xander, who habitually looks for someone to blame, from old enemies to the doctors themselves. These various character responses to the ineffability of loss lend the episode narrative originality in the context of the series as well as realistic tone. Institutional contexts also arguably influence the appearance of the episode in the first place, insofar as the "creative

control" granted to Whedon, which allows him to direct episodes that clearly dip out of the series' general style, is a result of the industrial construction of auteurism. The demonstrated ratings success of *Buffy* in previous seasons, as well as a loyal fan community, willing to submit to Whedon's flights of fancy, legitimate his role as creative director and his apparently "unlikely" generic decisions, such as those in "The Body" but also episodes like "Once More, With Feeling" (6.17), performed as a musical. From these examples, it is already clear that 'genre' is muddled when thinking about "The Body," its "realism" emerging as much from the institutional contexts of the series as the text itself.

[5] The episode's 'generic network' expands further when we accept that its dramatic realism must also be at least partially located in a relationship *between* texts. This is most explicitly clear in that realism is not only a constitutive formal feature of the episode itself, but is as much generated through its difference to previous episodes of *Buffy*. To wit, "The Body" is only fully realistic because of what it is not: Joyce's death is all the more "natural" because "there's no demon involved, no supernatural powers at work" (Last). Similarly, the episode's soundtrack is perceptibly realistic insofar as it calls attention to the part of it which is missing. This is highlighted when the opening scene, the "teaser", cuts jarringly to the standard theme music, and the lack of the musical score that otherwise features in *Buffy* episodes is thrown into relief. As such, Last's argument that the episode's soundtrack is "closer to our reality" because it lacks a non-diegetic score is prefaced on a kind of "sonic literacy" of the intertextual string of episodes preceding "The Body", along with other comparable television shows that do use dramatic scoring.<sup>2</sup> Realism, be it acoustic or dramatic, is thus a far from natural category, but rather a generic convention constructed in opposition, an effect achieved as much through absence and recall as it is through presence. Having now detailed the industrial and intertextual factors implicated in the production of generic realism, I suggest that these facets are still reliant on an identity of the text itself, be it constituted by institutional practices or signified across intertextual relationships. Going further, it is possible to reinscribe these processes into an *affective* understanding of genre.

[6] Genre, that is, should not be seen as an object of purely industrial or textual construction, but rather as arising *between* these processes in an interpretive-affective network that treats "genre as a complex *situation*, a concatenated series of events" (Altman 84). As such, the television production's demands of seriality and the intertextual relations which ostensibly produce the episode's realism should be understood as negotiated through an affective dynamic of difference, thereby moving away from the text's identity to what it *does*, a process that might be labeled "telaesthesia": the peculiarly televisual experience of the "remote sensation" of events.<sup>3</sup> The clearest example of the telaesthetic experience on the "micro" level is the first few seconds of the episode, which is actually also the last few seconds of the previous episode, "I Was Made to Love You" (5.15). In them, Buffy comes home and finds that her mother does not answer her first few calls, with the camera refusing to resolve focus on Joyce's body on the couch. The sensation of experiencing this scene again fires connections between the episodes, contributing an affective dynamic to the production of seriality. As Wilcox notes, "there is life between the episodes" (178), and in this particular case, the membrane stretching that week in the viewer's time (or perhaps a few seconds for those that watch the episodes later as recordings) is thickened by the imperceptible figure of Joyce in the

connecting shot, which the viewer implicitly expects to be “revealed” come the next episode.

[7] On the “macro” level, it is the telaesthetic experience of viewing the character across countless episodes and the subsequent affective investment made by viewers that makes the unique death of Joyce so gripping—as it does for any continuing television character. A character’s death marks a rupture in one of the strongest telaesthetic threads weaved across a show, the final recall, in which the character in whom they had invested is finally ripped away from the audience. There is a sonic dimension to telaesthesia too, best demonstrated when Xander punches his hand through a wall in dissipate frustration over Joyce’s death. This moment is not rendered visually, so the viewer is forced to adopt the mode of “causal listening” (Chion 25) in an effort to determine the origin of the loud crack.<sup>4</sup> This process is telaesthetic in that the listener-viewer recalls previous, similar sounds from the show, which were more often than not of ‘things that go bump,’ in an effort to locate the source before being given visual confirmation. The characters experience the same momentary confusion, before the shot of Xander’s hand in the wall confirms the “natural” cause of the sound – again an occurrence of negative realism, reinforced by what it is not. Xander’s outburst is precipitated by his perceived powerlessness when confronted with a death that is not attributable to an identifiable evil agent; rehearsing for the viewer the same shock of the unpredictable finality of Joyce’s premature passing. It widely accepted that characters act as means of identification, leading audiences through plot lines, but in “The Body” this relationship extends to the characters *embodying* the viewer’s own experience. Having now reframed the industrial and intertextual elements of seriality in terms of affect, I will begin to add the crucial dimension of horror into the episode’s affective generic network.

[8] *Buffy* as a series is characterized by the double coding of the fantastic and the quotidian, but it is “The Body” that most radically subverts distinctions between these two domains, if we understand them as correlating to the genres of horror and realism.<sup>5</sup> The episode does so via a set of affective strategies that engender an interpenetration of the emotional registers of either genre. As detailed below, studying this process can also allow us to access some of the vectors of the relationships between the various *bodies* involved in textuality. Here, genre is to be seen as an affective relation between bodies of texts and readers that “no longer function as discrete units, but as surfaces in contact, engaged in a constant activity of reciprocal re-alignment and inflection” (del Rio qtd. in Sobchack). This is a relation that ultimately questions the very distinctions between the textual and the corporeal, “[subverting] the very notion of *on-screen* and *off-screen* as mutually exclusive sites” (Sobchack). Thinking through horror in this regard is particularly plausible, as it is one of a handful of genres whose name is derived from its intended effect on the audience.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, horror “emphasizes body spectacle and movement and moves bodies of [...] readers to similar responses” (Badley 4). Horror, that is, is widely understood as a “body genre,” not only for its thematic and aesthetic focus on bodies and their abjection but for the way it is formed in the provocation of bodily response in the audience. In her theorization of body genres, Linda Williams notes that within them there is “the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation on the screen” (4). As McCrea writes, “horror’s ability to overwhelm us, its tangible and tactile power, is measured by our quickened heartbeat, the sweat on our skin

and our silent shout" (220). Horror is a genre driven by experience and is thus a particularly salient example of the affective force of genres, their status as an experiential mode rather than a stylistic property. Considered from this point of view, genres rush into texts via affective events. The ways in which the horrific penetrates an episode generally considered an example of realism demonstrates the inversion of the notion of horror as organizing affect, to understanding its organization *by* affect.

[9] Perhaps the most significant way "The Body" initiates the affective dimension of genre is how it decodes the horrific into the realistic. The paradox of sound in the episode demonstrates this, as the absence of non-diegetic sound actually draws attention toward the *irreality*, indeed the horror, of seemingly natural sounds, offering a new "white noise" that acts as a flat line for "natural" sounds to announce themselves with varying degrees of affect. Throughout, the episode highlights the viciousness of common sounds, such as the sound of a plate crashing to the floor in Buffy's recollection sequence, which occurs just as the narrative *snaps* back to the lifeless body of Joyce. This heightened, frightening connection between recollection and primary narrative, which also grafts a sinister edge onto everyday objects, is largely enabled due to the lack of the common "transitional" cues of soundtracking (such as the flutter of harps that normally announce a flashback scene), consciously absent as they are in this episode. Similarly, when Buffy attempts to resuscitate Joyce, her ribs cracks with what Joss Whedon himself describes as an "almost obscene physicality" (qtd. in Wilcox 186). This is a sound that fissures previous cracks at the same site caused by Buffy when she dusts vampires with this one, a *telaesthetically* horrific recall that forces the viewer to confront both the insistent difference and possible blurring of vampiric and human bodies. In both the cracking plate and ribs, "The Body" emphasizes the perverse, violent, and even monstrous aspects of the everyday. In doing so, it finds itself in strange accord with surrealist cinema. Buñuel and Dali's *Un Chien Andalou* and "The Body" alike enact what Martin calls the "bleak politics of surrealist transgression—a tearing open of bodies" (25) that calls into question the line between the normal and the monstrous body. Whilst horror is well known for disrupting the category of the "natural" human body through various forms of supernatural invasion and mutation, the body of Joyce is palpably unaffected by such forces, making its death all the more horrific. Horror, it seems, bristles at the edges of even the most "realistic" of texts or "normal" of experiences. This paradoxical rendering of horrific realism operates visually in "The Body," too, such as when the startle reflexes and shock edits common to horror actually concentrate on just a lifeless body rather than a dismembered corpse or monster. However, the episode seems to principally use sound, not to try to "understand" death (the characters themselves grapple with its inexplicability) but rather to produce the horror it elicits through affect, to *work through* it.

[10] A further manifestation of this episode's construction of realism through horrific lines can be understood through its engagement with the interplay of 'affect' and emotion that Hills argues is characteristic of horror. Hills understands affects as "feelings that are not aimed at, or experienced in response to, a readily identifiable object" and emotions as "feelings that have a cognitive knowledge component and a discriminable object" (13). "The Body" can be seen as horrific for the way in which it oscillates between a diffuse affect and object-oriented emotion by, as Dawn's teacher instructs, "drawing the negative space around the object" of the episode's title: the body of Joyce, the horrific core of the episode itself. Mapping this flow chart of Hills' specified notions of "affect" and

emotion would begin with the horror registered by Buffy at the sight of her mother's dead body, which then carries over into a diffuse mood of anxiety and grief that endures across the rest of the episode, at certain points spiked into objectified fear or horror once again. The very body of Joyce here, operates as something like a lost sounding board, as its effects leave the body and dissipate across the episode. This is clearly demonstrated in the way in which the sounds of scissors and gloves from the scenes depicting Joyce's cadaver in the morgue *bleed* into subsequent shots. In this oscillation of affect and emotion, the final scene represents a highly pressurized transfer from objectless anxiety (Dawn's ongoing experience throughout of not seeing Joyce's body) to identified horror (seeing her mother's corpse) and then back to a diffuse affect as the text disallows the crucial touch, causing a lingering sensation after the experiential moment of viewing that leaves the viewer in an uneasy mood, to say the least. Indeed, this highly charged final scene in the morgue best culminates the affective dimensions of "The Body".

[11] As a somatic mode, horror must ultimately always return to the body, and "The Body" is no different. Csicsery-Ronay writes:

The horror genre has always played with the violation of the body, since it adopts as its particular 'object' *fear* – the violent disruption of a sense of security, which, precisely because it is a sense, works from within the body, the house of the senses. Hence, in horror, the house/body's integrity is generally threatened from within, using analogues of disease and unconscious psychosomatic pathology, or by evil entities that hate the flesh and wish not only to destroy it, but to torture and degrade it (188).

Yet what this episode confronts is a kind of fear that whilst tied to the body, is uniquely based not on the *violation of one's own body* but the *sight and presence of the dead body* itself, in its natural, even if deceased state.<sup>7</sup> We are not in the normal horrific realm of teratology, of the malformed or infected body, and thus whilst fear is certainly an operative force here, it cannot be understood via the violation of the victim's body, but must rather be located in the experience of the witness. Going further, we could say that this challenges the commonsense notion that emotions are produced from within individuals and then move outside them; as Ahmed argues, affects do not so much inhere within bodies, as glue them to one another. Nowhere is this clearer than in the final scene, where fear is precisely that force that links the bodies of Dawn and her mother, and, we can add, the viewer.

[12] By utilizing the (human) body as the ultimate site of horror, "The Body" would, on first blush, seem to violate the cultural category of horror itself by placing it as the one thing that shouldn't be its monstrous object. However, there is a sense in which by doing so, the episode actually pinpoints the ultimate subject of horror through a "realistic" frame: death. As Badley notes, "the real horror is 'deadness,' or death's aftermath in decomposition, absence, grief" (7). Through focusing on the body of Joyce, who dies from natural circumstances, "The Body" deconstructs the hierarchical relation between horror and realism through affective resonance. The appearance of the vampire in the last scene fruitfully demonstrates this, creating, as it does, "a key moment of *fractal resonance*" (Wilcox 176, emphasis added) that recalibrates the orientations of horror and realism. Dawn's conventionally eerie journey into the morgue area of the hospital (complete with a creep down a corridor and the creak of a locked door) initiates the aforementioned objectless suspense central to horror. Strangely, this building suspense is

*blocked* by the appearance of what would usually focus and objectify this affect into emotion, the monster itself. As the somehow parenthetical contest between Buffy and this vampire plays out *sans* action soundtrack, the episode continues on its path to the real horror. As Buffy “dusts” the vampire, the camera pans back from this moment to focus on the actual line of attention, concentrating on Dawn, who rises to meet the body of her dead mother. In the last shot, there is a protracted silence, before Dawn asks, “Is she cold?” “That’s not her; she’s gone,” replies Buffy. “Where’d she go?” asks Dawn, as her hand moves toward the body’s face and the episode cuts to black just before she touches what has become the ultimate horror of the episode, the focal point of the affective resonance that has suffused throughout. If true horror, as filmmaker David Cronenberg argues, is the “genre of confrontation” (qtd. in Rodley 59), being at once attractive and repellent, then in this final shot, “The Body” brings the horrific into the heart of the real. What it produces is a highly charged moment in terms of affect for the viewer, and, following Sobchack, it is almost as if the viewer’s body “knows” death for those last few seconds, *feeling* the cold, lifeless skin of Joyce without seeing or hearing it. As Stephen King writes, “all our fears add up to one great fear, [that] of the body under the sheet. It’s our body” (qtd. in Badley 6, Wilcox 188). It is at this threshold of the horrific unknown that “The Body” summarizes its play with genre and its connections of body and text that radically interpenetrate one another in an oscillating and ambivalent experience that not only comes before, but often surpasses the threshold of intelligibility.

[13] In working towards an understanding of genre’s operation in “The Body”, this discussion has submerged industrial and intertextual processes into more ambivalent relationships of affect to arrive at the implosive/explosive point that is corporeal textuality itself: “the text as a body and the body as a text” (Badley 12). Through doing so, the very location of genre has been complicated, seen as thrust between experiences of interrelating bodies of texts, discourses and readers. The play of forces that constitute the network of generic textuality must thus be seen as significantly corporeal, as always enfolded by an affective dimension. This is one of the most important implications of a post-representational approach to texts that is focused not so much on what they mean but rather what they *do*. The body of Joyce, then, is “The Body” of textuality itself, that nodal point that connects and extends the processes of feeling and knowing in highly dynamic ways.

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard especially, the approach here clearly differs from Kociemba's reading of the feedback loops between author, text and



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audience in *Buffy*, which for him is mediated by textual meaning. The argument here is that the connections between these entities are often far less reflective than this formula would suppose.

<sup>2</sup> See also Bloustien's discussion of the "the recurring motif of silence" (93) in *Buffy*, which signifies different levels of characters' distress. This is another sonic pattern that dedicated *Buffy* fans would bring to their viewing of "The Body".

<sup>3</sup> This term is repurposed from Verdon (2000), who uses it in a distinct context to refer to the optical event of television viewing, one that relies on the 're-presentation' of images from elsewhere on the screen and their watching by the viewer.

<sup>4</sup> The distinctiveness of the visual aesthetic of the episode is also arguably a product of telaesthesia – the stark, bright quality of its film stock contrasts sharply with the often darkened, gritty quality of previous episodes experienced by viewers. This distinction is deployed as an emotional device in underscoring the pain and shock of the episode; see Wilcox 30-45 for an extended discussion of how light works as a signifier of pain in the series.

<sup>5</sup> In a sense, this generic confusion is played out by the characters themselves, who, as mentioned above, struggle throughout the episode to come to grips with a death promulgated by "natural", rather than supernatural, forces.

<sup>6</sup> Other examples include the sentimental novel and the film thriller.

<sup>7</sup> The common phrase, "s/he died from natural causes" demonstrates that certain lifeless bodies are not to be feared, under normal circumstances.