

Traveling Between Mediums: *Buffy's* Ascent into Television

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"I think of Buffy as life and I don't like to think about the end of that. Life doesn't stop until it does completely. That's the whole point of the show, that we're always changing and growing." (Joss Whedon quoted in Kaveney cover)

[1] Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is smart, fun, and challenging television that boasts a popularity which extends above and beyond any select demographic. Though, strangely enough, it is adapted from a film that carries none of this critical weight or cult status. How could two "Buffyverses" be so different? The answer is found in comparing how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*) is presented via its two different mediums. In comparing the two, one is given the opportunity to understand just how these separate mediums affect Joss Whedon's original concept. Ultimately, when studied in detail, adapting *BtVS* from a 97-minute film to a hybridized television series appears to give the original concept room to broaden. It changes from a comedy that parodies its generic influences to a self-reflexive horror /comedy that embraces a narrative of change and feminist discourse. This essay will use select examples to demonstrate this shift, while also illustrating how this shift is made possible due to the extended serial narrative that the television medium embraces. This will demonstrate that the differences between the two versions of *BtVS* exist predominately as a result of the separate mediums used to paint Joss Whedon's universe.

[2] Each version's portrayal of the horror genre (or lack of) and, subsequently, in the tone that each chooses to adopt is one of the most striking differences between the two versions of *BtVS*. This is nowhere more apparent than in the opening scenes of each version. The

film begins with a close-up of Buffy's arm, her hand sporting a colourful pompom. Focusing the opening shot on Buffy's cheerleading, instead of the darker opening that the series opts to take, instantly lays the film's focus at the comic end of the spectrum. This can be asserted since, to an audience discursively competent with the discourses of Western film culture and its codes, cheerleading is usually associated semiotically with shallow popularity and a general vacancy of thought (Butler 7; Fiske 95). Buffy's character is also introduced in the context of a high school basketball game - one brightly lit with an up-beat soundtrack; qualities which will end up in direct contrast to the opening scene of the series, and that are in direct contrast to the usual openings of horror films. This again leads us to assume that the comedy genre is being deliberately emphasized over the horror one, though both are entwined in the original *BtVS* concept (Jacobs 20-21). Furthermore, the first close-up of Buffy's face captures her shooting a flirtatious smile at her boyfriend, whose numbered jersey combined with the basketball he is holding and his position in the center of the frame are representational conventions used to indicate that he is a member of the basketball team. Thus, Buffy's cheerleading costume, the up-beat music that accompanies her introduction, and the use of continuity editing to link Buffy to her basketball-playing boyfriend are all technical codes which, combined, represent a "send-up of the era's reigning teen film genres" (Moss 2). The opening scene of the film version, then, wraps itself in a parodying tone, drawing on the audience's assumed familiarity with the teen genre to plant Buffy and her eventual skirmish with the horror genre at the center of this filmic parody.

[3] The opening scene of the television series premiere (1001), on the other hand, instantly sets up a different tone to its predecessor. Most noticeably, the series is darker -it opens by panning across a high school at night, and then fades into the school's dark interior, tracking the hallways to establish that the school is empty. The iconography of horror films often includes dark, abandoned settings, thus, by using such iconography, the television series instantly separates itself from the parodic nature of the film, which draws on teen-

genre conventions for its opening. On top of this, the unsteady camera movement employed in this scene, which directly contrasts with the clean camera movement employed in the film, works to draw the audience into the scene by imitating a sense of movement. Moreover, that the episode opens with an empty building, not a character, creates the impression that the camera is conveying the audience's point of view, further drawing us into the scene. The eerie music is then used to enhance the sense of danger that these elements combine to create. The anticipation is rewarded when the camera zooms into a close-up of the window as it is smashed open, the volume of the diegetic sound overpowering the music - a "fright" technique often used in horror films (Grant 6). Audiences familiar with the horror genre will also be familiar with these techniques, and it can therefore be assumed that Joss Whedon is deliberately employing them to keep his viewers wary of what is about to happen so that by the end of the opening scene, or teaser as it were, he can reverse those expectations. Of course, as a small production for a small television network whose products tend to be niche-marketed, the first season of *BtVS* had a considerably lower budget than the film, thus not allowing it the same freedom to utilise large crowds, expensive venues, the rights to popular songs and time-consuming lighting arrangements, which may have ultimately led to the decision to film this opening in the quiet, sparse manner that it is. This is an important point to consider when one realizes that as the series progresses and its popularity increases, so too does its budget and with it an emphasis on clearer pictures and steadier camera movement. But, whatever the reason behind the techniques this first episode employs, the teaser consequently sets up the intertextual tone that the series chooses to adopt in its bid to question accepted modes of representation in Western film culture.

[4] This shift in tone is most apparent in the way each version confronts questions of gender representation, especially in regards to Buffy herself. Gabrielle Moss, in her essay "From the Valley to the Hellmouth", articulates this difference when she writes that in the film, Buffy "sticks to an obvious and physical gender logic" (2). This is a fitting description

if we consider, as Moss has pointed out, that the first appearance of Buffy's supernatural capability is revealed in her ability to detect vampires via menstrual cramps. The connection between Buffy's cramps and her role as a slayer is made apparent by the director's choice to place Buffy at the edge of the frame in a long shot as she experiences the menstrual pain. Since a long shot is usually used to allow the background setting to dominate the shot, it can be deduced that this shot is prodding the audience to connect Kristy Swanston's performance (doubling over in pain as she clutches her stomach in a representation of her cramps) with the graveyard setting (the many gravestones littering the scene leave no question as to where they are). From this, one can make the deduction that vampires haunt graveyards, and thus Buffy's alert system is ringing. When Merrick asks Buffy if she has cramps - the actor placing a knowing intonation into his voice that conveys he's aware of it being linked to her slayer status - Buffy replies: "None of your business, god!". The immature reply coupled with the word "god" - a word that when said with the right inflection represents "Valley Girl" slang (McDonald 63) - gives the impression that Buffy's flakiness isn't allowing her to grasp the magnitude of the situation. This limiting of Buffy's abilities - or more accurately, of her *character* if we consider her introduction: as a cheerleader proud to be placed at the center of her boyfriend's "male gaze" (Mulvey 1975) - to gender performative stereotypes works to create a "Valley girl" caricature (McDonald 63). The film version of Buffy is presented as such presumably to garner laughs at her expense - at the absurdity of this "vacant" girl, as many critics have described this Buffy, having a supernatural calling to defend mankind. This representation reinforces the notion that the film version of *BtVS* is a parody of the horror and teen genre, and, as Joss Whedon himself once said: "When you wink at the audience and say nothing matters, you can't have peril; you can't take issues seriously" (Jacobs 20).

[5] This connection between Buffy's cramps and the vampires also, perhaps symptomatically, draws to mind the connection often found by gender theorists between the female body and the abject. According to Kristeva, one way in which the abject - that

which disturbs "identity, system order"(4) and must be "radically excluded" (2) - is experienced is through our relationship with biological bodily functions. Such 'abominations' are expelled from the body (and, by extension, society) to preserve the "safeguards"(2) between these 'abominations' and our sense of civilization; abominations such as bodily wastes and, if taking into account religious notions of abjection, the feminine body. The vampire, then, is the ultimate form of abjection because it is a corpse - a body whose soul has been replaced by waste and decay (Creed 35). Thus when Buffy experiences menstrual pain she is being called upon to rid the world of these abject creatures who threaten the borders of what is deemed clean and civilized. Moreover, this scene can be said to perpetuate, even unintentionally, the popular myth of the "toothed vagina" (Campbell 73); the female who has the symbolic ability to invoke anxieties about the threat of castration and of sexual difference - the fear of the 'other', the "locus of disorder" (Creed 11) within patriarchal ideology. Thus, using Buffy's menstrual cramps as an 'alert' system can be viewed as a signifying practice of patriarchal ideology to reduce Buffy to merely her body. Thus, Merrick, as Buffy's watcher and mentor, can be seen to represent patriarchy's attempt to contain and control the threat of the feminine other - of Buffy's phallic power as bearer of the stake and of the sole ability to rid the world of these vampiric abominations - and weaken her agency considering, as Reineke writes, "women's bodies are associated most closely with life and death processes, [and thus] authorities over their bodies is power asserted over the very forces of creation" (Reineke 108).

[6] Television's version of *BtVS*, however, is more conscious of the issues surrounding gender representation and is able to avoid relying on gender stereotypes and consequently on a patriarchal representation of women. For example, gone are the menstrual cramps, a character development which means, as Gabrielle Moss writes, "Buffy is no longer victim to her fate but master of it" (12). Moreover, Buffy quits the Watchers Council when it tries to dictate how she ought to feel and act (3021); she lacks a male equal in terms of strength, both physical and mental; is regularly subverting her watcher's authority; and, perhaps

most significantly, she refuses to be an object of the male gaze. For example, as Ann Daugherty has noted, Xander's first conversation with Buffy ends in tangled dialogue which clearly demonstrates that Buffy is in control. In fact, that particular scene ends with Xander cluelessly holding Buffy's stake - a phallic symbol, which in its association with killing vampires, represents power (Daugherty 150). Furthermore, when we first encounter Angel he's following Buffy - as represented by the camera as it uses a dolly shot to trail her - in what Daugherty describes as a scene "reminiscent of the voyeuristic experience that Mulvey articulates in her articles" (151). But, Buffy negates this gaze by recognizing Angel's presence and attacking him. Thus, in her ability to diffuse these gazes, which entails a degree of astute awareness, the television version of Buffy is presented as a far more complex individual than her predecessor, actively refusing to be objectified by patriarchal ideology. [7] However, it is arguable that such changes in Buffy's character can be recognized across the medium because these developments are made more accessible by the shift in medium. For example, in the first episode of the series Buffy is determined to shun her slayer duty for the fear that it will interfere with her making friends. This complacency is further exemplified when Giles begins a speech reminding Buffy, and presumably informing the audience, about the magnitude of her role only to have Buffy unexpectedly and dismissively cut him off. In this scene Anthony Head slows down his dialogue to separate it from his prior nagging, and the nondiegetic music swells to accentuate the drama of his revelation, while the camera moves into a close-up of his face. These cues have long been recognised by audiences as moments of important revelation, and are thus usually interpreted as such (Da Ross 31). When Buffy interrupts, finishing Giles' revelation with blasé speech, the cues instantly retract - the music dies down and the camera slightly withdraws from its close-ups. This reversal of cues, and thus expectation, can probably be interpreted as a method used to portray Buffy as someone who won't conform to expectations and who won't let Giles, a figure of patriarchy given his authoritative position, determine her sense of importance.

[8] Of course, in light of this scene, one also can't be blamed for interpreting Buffy as irreverent towards her responsibilities, though this sense of apathy towards her calling is portrayed through self-reflexive adjustments to film technique rather than the overt incongruity set up in the film between Buffy's flaky character and the tasks set upon her to garner laughs. Yet one of the results of spinning off *BtVS* into a television series is that the extended season-by-season structure allows a complexity of narrative that was absent from the 97-minute film, and that offers the audience a chance to re-interpret (or re-read) that scene and Buffy's character in conjunction with later plot developments. Moreover, filmic techniques unique to television are employed throughout the series' seven-year run to underscore the notion that Buffy accepts her role and responsibility as a slayer by her own agency and not that of a patriarchal figure telling her how she must think and behave. For example, when by the finale of season two (2022) Buffy learns to face her responsibilities, the magnitude of her sacrifices is underscored by each one occurring in a separate segment, usually just before the act break. Breaking up these "timed units", as Raymond Williams calls them (89), with clear intervals that revolve around Buffy's sacrifices works to underscore the drama of her choices. That the emotion is being emphasized is obvious - for example, in these scenes the frame is often seen as a very tight close-up of Buffy's face as she is forced to choose her responsibilities over her desires, with Sarah Michelle Gellar revealing pain in her features. According to Bernard Timberg in his work "The Rhetoric of the Camera in Television Soap Opera", this is consistent "with a narrative that centers on intense, concentrated forms of emotion" (175), and thus requires an intimate camera style. These segments are also most likely timed as such to emotionally engage the audience to remain loyal over the length of the commercial break, considering that after this display the act ends and the break commences, leaving the viewer in a state of suspense due to this "dramatic movement of suspended crisis" (Timberg 174). This emotional engagement leaves the audience with the distinct impression that Buffy's character and sense of responsibility has developed almost immeasurably since the first season - a growth made possible by the extended narrative of the television series structure. A 97-minute cannot

boast this luxury.

[9] It is thus clear that the main differences between the two versions seem to lie in the restrictions that the medium of film imposes on its story's portrayal. While the serial structure of *BtVS* allows it to embrace a hybridized form of narrative that involves the exploration of complex narrative and tonal threads, the film version revolves around a classical narrative that ultimately results in a closed text with minimal room to explore its concept or characters. Even given the fact that film is open to multiple readings and interpretations over time and with the intertextual knowledge brought to bear on it by different audiences, that it is probably the most efficient way to convey a story in a 97-minute timeframe, by employing the structural devices inherent to classical Hollywood narrative - the initial equilibrium (high-school life), the disruption to the equilibrium (the arrival of a group of vampires), the crisis (Buffy confronts the Master) and the production of a new state of equilibrium (Buffy and her new boyfriend ride off into the sunrise) - the film version renders itself less open to active interpretation than what the television series puts forth (Turnbull and Stranieri 9; Turnbull 67). Moreover, in alignment with Ann Kuhn's summary that one of the major features of classic narrative realism is the "linearity of cause and effect within an overall trajectory of enigma resolution" (216), the film controls the flow of information presented to achieve a sense of closure by its end.

[10] For example, unlike the series, the film portrays Buffy's parents as superficial caricatures of the rich, entirely uninvolved in their daughter's life. This is achieved through parody - dressing the actors in lavish costumes, having them always appear just at the end of scenes where they're always on their way out somewhere, and with telling dialogue encased in humour. Buffy's parents are represented as such to de-emphasize their role and thus reduce their function to one simply symbolic of Buffy's spoilt upbringing - the audience isn't given enough information about them to expect their inclusion in Buffy's "new state of equilibrium" and hence we don't desire it, we are only paying attention to the

aspects of the film brought to exposure through their reoccurrence in all stages of the classical structure. Such as Buffy's relationship with Pike: it is established in the initial equilibrium stage, remains through the disruption and crisis, and is resolved in the production of the new state of equilibrium. Thus, the post-structuralist concept of identity that is illustrated by Spike in the above example doesn't have a place in the tightly organized, or "closed", narrative of the film (Lavery 34; Turnball 67). This again illustrates the effect the choice of medium has on Joss Whedon's concept.

[11] It is here that John Ellis' adaptation of William's concept of "flow" should be brought into the argument to further illustrate how the television version of *BtVS* has the room to extend itself beyond what the film has time for. Raymond Williams' analysis of television reveals how segmented television's flow is - that it is a continuous succession of images that doesn't follow the rules of cause and effect (90 - 93). Ellis took this analysis one step further by suggesting that the key unit of the television text is the "segment": the "small, sequential unities of images and sounds" (112) that constitutes television's flow (147-150). These segments are connected through a process more along the lines of association than logic - through a system of representation (Butler 6). This calls for a somewhat active viewer who will use her "television literacy" to fill in these syntagmatic gaps (Fiske 105). Given that *BtVS* lasted seven seasons, its many narrative and character developments are clearly made possible by its active reliance on its viewer's memory and ability to link segments beyond their "usually five minute" (Ellis 112) durations.

[12] For example, the episode *Restless* (4022) is constructed entirely out of dream sequences that offer insight into the character's emotional states, but that also, more importantly for this discussion, reveal strands of future storylines. Take Spike, a character who began the series as a villain, progressed to Buffy's lover and ended as a hero. In this episode, Joss Whedon uses the tools of representation and association to hint at Spike's eventual repentance. Giles, in a dream voyage, encounters Spike posing for a group of

photographers. In what seems like a self-reflexive acknowledgment of the segmentation that permeates television, the shots focused on Giles are in colour, while the ones focused on Spike are in black and white - an incongruity that isn't explained outside the fact that we're being shown a character's dream, so one is left to wonder if it indeed is another deliberate example of the show's awareness of its medium and, consequently, segmented structure. Spike strikes a number of vampire poses before ending on one of the crucifixion - his feet are together and his arms are stretched out in the shape of a cross, with his head bowed to the side (Stevenson 224 -226). This pose stands out from the others, not only because it is the last one struck, but because the crowd of photographers are placed at the side of the frame so that the camera is able to get a full-length shot of Spike, from feet to outstretched arms. The camera then cuts to a close-up of his face as the flashing lightbulbs illuminate his pose - light being a religious symbol of purity that a serial which deals with religious iconography is bound to be conscious of.

[13] This segment foreshadows Spike's redemption in season seven. This is especially apparent in the episode *Beneath You* (7002), where this segment from *Restless* is visually paralleled (Stevenson 224 -226). In the last scene of this episode, in a gesture of repentance, Spike wraps his arms around a giant cross and lets it burn him. The camera, having shot Spike from Buffy's point of view for most of the scene, switches to face Spike from an opposing angle as cast shadow lighting, made to imitate moonlight, illuminates part of his face just as the lightbulbs had in *Restless*. This segment is clearly linking itself back to the last pose struck in *Restless*, illustrating that a television segment's composition allows it to function through association, and consequently, through a reliance on and acknowledgment of the audience's television-literate memory (Waller 61). Thus, through an association only available in television, *BtVS* is able to extend itself and its characters beyond its original design.

[14] Thus, in conclusion it should be reiterated that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* shift in

mediums is the key to understanding the differences in each version's narrative and character representation. Spinning off *BtVS* into a hybridized television series meant embracing a structure that favors change (by virtue of its long-form), and the development of a self-reflexive nature that draws on audience's television literacy (and experience with segmentation) to undercut genre (and gender!) stereotypes and the static characterizations its predecessor employs. While the film's time restrictions means it has to rely on parody to garner laughs, and its classical narrative means that it is controlled by an eye towards closure, the series chooses to actively use its form to extend the original story's design and open the text up beyond the confines of its 45-minute episodes. *BtVS* is a narrative of change, and it is television that gives it that reputation.

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