



Matthew Pateman

Introduction

[1] This special edition of *Slayage* is an important moment, not only in *Buffy* studies, but in television studies more generally. It is important, not because it heralds a new approach to the subject, but because it demonstrates the extent to which the consideration of aesthetics is inherent in and central to nearly all serious assessment of television drama. Sarah Cardwell's recent essay 'Television aesthetics' in *Critical Studies in Television*, makes the claim that aesthetics is 'a relatively recent innovation in the broader field of television studies' (72). And, indeed, with very notable exceptions, explicit engagement with the aesthetic dimension of television drama has been limited in critical works. There are a number of reasons for this, but one of the most important is television studies' growth from Film studies and Literary studies where aesthetics as a critical tool was rejected as either ahistorical or elitist or both. It has taken a long time for what Eagleton has called the 'ideology of the aesthetic'^[1] to allow its re-introduction in various guises back into cultural criticism more generally.

[2] However, from its inception, *Buffy* studies has involved itself with questions of aesthetics. Two of the three first essays published on *Buffy* were explicit in their aesthetic concerns. Rhonda Wilcox's seminal essay "'There will never be a very special *Buffy*": *Buffy* and the monsters of teen life'^[2] seriously considered the use of symbolism as a technique of social engagement. And Michael Adams's 'Slayer-Slang' made language use (and therefore script writing) the central concern of his argument.^[3] From that point, aesthetics has been a recurring theme in *Buffy* scholarship. A brief sample of some of the work would include the following: "'They always mistake me for the character I play!": Transformation, identity and role-playing in the Buffyverse (and a defence of fine acting)' by Ian Shuttleworth^[4]; S. Renee Dechert's "'My boyfriend's in the band!" *Buffy* and the rhetoric of music'^[5]; 'A reflection on ugliness' by Charlaine Harris^[6]; Robert A. Davis's magisterial '*Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer and the pedagogy of fear^[7] Janet Halfyard's equally splendid 'Love, death, curses and reverses (in F major): Music, gender and identity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*'^[8]; and Sue Turnbull's keynote address and subsequent article, "'Not just another *Buffy* paper": Towards an aesthetics of television'^[9] There have also been the recent monographs, *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* by Rhonda Wilcox^[10], and my own *The Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*^[11]

[3] This small selection, and there are scores more essays and papers that could have been highlighted, demonstrates that *Buffy* as a programme has fostered an appreciation of its aesthetic dimension. Clearly, this has been aligned with a whole range of thematic concerns. And this is where the contribution of *Buffy* studies to television scholarship more widely will come to be seen as so important. Scholars working on *Buffy* (as well as *Angel* and *Firefly*) have taken seriously the efforts of Joss Whedon and his team to provide intelligent, thoughtful and good-looking television. While the look and sound of the show can be thought of as ancillary to the story (although the story as narrative is still, of course, a part of the aesthetics), this is to miss the fundamental connection between those production values and the emotional strength of the shows—an emotional sincerity that is at the heart of most of Whedon's endeavours.

[4] So *Buffy* scholarship insists on the artistry of the show as a key aspect of any critical investigation. By foregrounding this part of the experience of *Buffy*, television studies gains a valuable tool. Aesthetics becomes the cornerstone of criticism. The enormous range of methodological applications of aesthetics ensures that it is not some monolithic burden, but rather a wonderfully flexible, and theoretically and thematically sensitive approach that augments arguments seemingly distant its concerns.

[5] The essays here illustrate the diversity of aesthetically-oriented criticism, as well as providing for the beginnings of a typology of *Buffy* criticism, contributing as they do, to the emerging themes and traditions of this young area of research.

[6] Leigh Clemons's essay 'Real vampires don't wear shorts: The aesthetics of fashion in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*' provides an analysis of the ways in which the characters' involvement with fashion impacts upon their different meanings in the show. By relating current research into the field of fashion and fashion theory to the culturally polyvalent readings of the characters, Clemons draws the aesthetics of dress into the reading of a television show via the tripartite interaction of costume design, characterisation and plot development. By focussing on fashion as a specific subset of dress more generally, Clemons's essay also alerts us to the ways in which *Buffy* is able to offer commentary upon fashion internally, as well as being itself a site of historical analysis. So we see in her essay the ways in which fashion enables part of the actors' performance of their characters, and the characters' performances of themselves. The relation between fashion and performativity, characterisation and the aesthetics of appearance locates Clemons's essay in a group of *Buffy* scholars whose interests vary widely, but who nevertheless regard the aesthetic aspect of characterisation as vital. Patricia Biezsck's assessment of vampire dress and style in 'Vampire hip: Style as subcultural expression in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'^[12] is an excellent essay that locates style and fashion in the context of subcultural introjections into dominant modes of behaviour in a manner similar to that undertaken by Clemons's

essay. The aforementioned 'A reflection on ugliness' by Charmaine Harris is concerned about the (surprising) morally simplistic equation of ugliness with evil in *Buffy*, an argument I continue in chapter four of *The Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Clemons, then, presents a timely and engaged discussion of fashion, and in so doing proffers an explicitly aesthetic method for analysis which itself extends related arguments that may not have had such an explicit relationship with the aesthetic before.

[7] Erin Hollis's essay chooses a very different way into the aesthetic in *Buffy*. As its title 'Gorgonzola sandwiches and yellow crayons: James Joyce, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the aesthetic of minutiae' suggests, this essay has a twin focus. Part of its interest lies in *Buffy's* use of 'minutiae', or the mundane, ordinary everydayness of things. The small, human-scale of things in the construction of the world of *Buffy* is vital. It finds its extreme expression, as Hollis's essay explains, in Xander's confrontation with Willow at the climax of season six. Here, the yellow crayon exerts a power that is both narrative (the saving of the world) and affective (two characters connect in deep mutual *mundane* memory). However, it is also supremely important in the establishment of the entire world we witness. To this extent, Hollis is part of a tradition of *Buffy* writing that asserts the importance of objects and spaces that are, simply, ordinary. David Lavery's sadly yet-to-be-published "Fatal environment': *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and American culture," presented at the Staking a Claim: Exploring the Global Reach of *Buffy* conference in Adelaide, Australia, July 2003, makes excellent observations about the ordinary objects that constitute the normalness of the show's aesthetic. In a similar vein, Boyd Tonkin's fabulous 'Entropy as demon: *Buffy* in Southern California'^[13] delights in demonstrating the topography of the show.

[8] Additionally, Hollis's essay reads *Buffy* alongside *Ulysses*. In so doing, the essay asserts a homological relation to literature. This places the essay in a different critical tradition, one which includes essays that make comparisons with previous vampire, gothic and horror literature, such as Michelle Callender's 'Bram Stoker: Traditional gothic and contemporary culture'^[14]. Other literary antecedents have also been observed, and these include T.S. Eliot in Rhonda Wilcox's groundbreaking 'T.S. Eliot comes to television: *Buffy's* "Restless"^[15]; Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in my book; fascinatingly, Virgil is central to C. W. Marshall's 'Aeneas the Vampire Slayer: A Roman model for why Giles kills Ben'^[16]; and David Fritts finds room for *Beowulf* in his 'Warrior heroes: *Buffy the vampire slayer* and *Beowulf*'^[17]. Hollis's essay, then, traverses a range of aesthetic possibilities and acts as a neat converging point for two distinct strands of enquiry.

[9] Further distinct areas of analysis are uncovered in David Kociemba's "'Actually, it explains a lot": Reading the opening title sequences of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'. This painstaking piece of work looks at one of the paratextual elements of *Buffy*, its opening titles. By providing such a detailed account of the different season's sequences, the relative amount of time devoted to different characters, the placing and timing of actors' names, the typography and other issues, Kociemba reminds us of the signal importance of one of the least studied aspects of television. The thematic and aesthetic mission statement which the titles present to the new and returning viewer is central to that viewer's understanding of the show's intent. Its attention to the paratextual places this essay in a tradition that includes Janet K Halfyard's 'Love, death, curses and reverses (in F minor): Music, gender and identity in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*', an essay that ranks as one of the most

impressive in the whole corpus of *Buffy* studies; and the equally fascinating and informative 'Previously on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*...' by Philip Mikosz and Dana Och^[18]. My own work in *The Aesthetics of Culture* is also heavily involved with paratextual elements.

[10] Cynthea Masson and Marni Stanley's 'Queer Eye for that vampire guy: Spike and the aesthetics of camp' is an exploration of the uses of camp in the show, especially as deployed in the creation of Spike. The study of Spike is one of the most popular in the field, but what Masson and Stanley add to the debate is a clear and informed promotion of camp as both a positive aesthetic in its own right (contra Joss Whedon, for example) and a specific aspect of Spike's characterisation. This pulls the essay into notions of performativity more generally, along with Clemons's essay, while retaining its specific and significant contribution to the area.

[11] These four essays, then, demonstrate the extent to which aesthetics is a central tool in television criticism. Much more than a mere blunt formalism, aesthetic criticism offers new insights into established areas of analysis, and allows for a range of approaches to be gathered together. Television studies in general can only benefit from the contributions made by these and other *Buffy* scholars who have all promoted the aesthetic.

[1]

Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford, Blackwell: 1990.

[2]

Journal of Popular Film and Television 27:2, 1999, 16-23.

[3]

Verbatim: The Language Quarterly 24:3, 1999, 1-7.

[4]

Reading the Vampire Slayer: An unofficial companion to Buffy and Angel ed. Roz Kaveney, Tauris park paperbacks, 2001, 211 - 36.

[5]

Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, eds. Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002, 218 - 26.

[6]

Seven Seasons of Buffy ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Benbella Books, 116-20.

[7]

Slayage: The online international journal of Buffy Studies 1.3, June 2001: <http://slayage.tv>

[8]

Slayage: The online international journal of Buffy Studies 1.4 December 2001: <http://slayage.tv>

[9]

Slayage: The online international journal of Buffy Studies 4.1-2, October 2004: <http://slayage.tv>

[10]

Rhonda Wilcox, *Why Buffy matter: The Art of Buffy the vampire Slayer*, I.B Tauris, 2005.

[11]

Matthew Pateman, *The Aesthetics of Culture in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, McFarland Publishers, 2006.

[12]

<http://www.refractory.unimelb.edu.au/stateofplay/articles/PBieszk.html>

[13]

Reading the Vampire Slayer: An unofficial companion to Buffy and Angel ed. Roz Kaveney, Tauris park paperbacks, 2001, 37 - 52.

[14]

Slayage: The online international journal of Buffy Studies 1.3, June 2001: <http://slayage.tv>

[15]

Slayage: The online international journal of Buffy Studies 2.3, December 2003: <http://slayage.tv>

[16]

Slayage: The online international journal of Buffy Studies 3.1, August 2003:: <http://slayage.tv>

[17]

Slayage: The online international journal of Buffy Studies 5.1, June 2005:: <http://slayage.tv>

[18]

Slayage: The online international journal of Buffy Studies 2.1, May 2002: <http://slayage.tv>