

Masquerade and Automation: The Unstable Female Body in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Alias*

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[1] The series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1996-2003) and *Alias* (2001-2006) both provide examples of the conflicted state of the powerful female body as a source of positive identification and revision of traditional femininity in contemporary American television. The two series represent part of a wider movement in late 20th and early 21st century American popular culture toward images of empowered girls across a range of media, from video games to comics, taking in such figures as Lara Croft, Ellen Ripley and Xena. However, the success of these characterizations is open to criticism for their dual impulse towards challenging stereotypical images of femininity and for conversely establishing a visual rhetoric emphasizing fantasy displacement. While Inness suggests that these figures challenge the "male monopoly on power and aggression" (2004: 5) through independent roles as heroic and sexually confident figures, it could also be argued that they signify a commercialized and superficial conversion of feminist arguments, reflecting the "highly exaggerated and entertaining product of an ingenious marketing exercise" (Costi para 1). As a result, "the modern action heroine has emerged as an extremely fruitful but difficult character to interpret" (Brown 47), embodying female power but also highlighting a continued uncertainty over its translation into literal identification.

[2] This conflict can be explored through a study of how the bodies of lead characters Buffy and Sydney in the two series are complicated in action sequences through their exaggerated stylization and detachment from emotional subjectivity. In *Alias* this is demonstrated by the use of masquerade and Sydney's performance of different identities on spy missions, creating parallel patterns of fetishized pleasure and identification with the power of manipulation and roleplay. By comparison, *Buffy* features a displacement of the Slayer body away from emotional reality through its dehumanized, ironic and metaphorical signification. This can be explored through an analysis of the use of a cybernetic Buffy in the series and its reflection of the commodified female body in culture, as well as the sense of automated detachment that her identity as the Slayer suggests.

[3] In *Alias* the unstable body is represented through a split between an authentic, or realist image of Sydney and the extensive masquerade she uses to transform her body into a space

mediating sexual power and gender performance. A negotiation therefore occurs between domestic, corporate and fantasy space, defined by the home, the government office and exotic spy missions, creating "a modern television hybrid of the spy drama and the glossy soap" (Lavoie 160). A visual split is made between these worlds to emphasize a multiple positioning of Sydney's identity and image. This is conveyed through pacing, in the sense that the missions are defined by a kinetic movement whereas domestic scenes in the home or office are more commonly driven by dialogue and emotion. In terms of appearance, when shown in the offices of SD-6 or the CIA, Sydney embodies traits of the independent and intelligent but also sexually confident woman, a culmination of the feminist movement in American society during the last century. Her sober outfits, tied back hair and restrained makeup suggest a professional attitude as well as a fantasy of the powerful corporate woman that has been employed in various films, including *Working Girl* (Nichols 1988) and *Disclosure*. (Levinson 1994).

[4] However, this presentation is used alongside a domestic image of vulnerability. Sydney's activity in the home often involves cooking, cleaning or some form of romantic or paternal embrace, as well as emotional stress, often signified through the use of an 'indie' soundtrack. Here Sydney's identity as transgressive female agent is softened through a focus on feminine emotion and distress over family and romantic issues. The juxtaposition of a corporate and a domestic style suggests Sydney as an embodiment of "the post-feminist girly" (Brunsdon 4), an equal figure in the workplace that also possesses an essential vulnerability, thereby making her sympathetic to audiences.

[5] These visualizations imply a narrative realism and authentic domestic life for Sydney, whereas the missions reflect a shift through exaggerated masquerade into the violent and dangerous world of the action heroine. The missions are conventionally structured by a clear goal, either to retrieve information or eliminate a target, and are supported by specific gadgets. Sydney and a support team then jet off to various foreign locations, where they execute the mission with different levels of success. The style of the missions is more in keeping with the conventions established through the spy genre in the *James Bond* and *Mission Impossible* series. Events often take place in glamorous parties, technologically exaggerated locations such as nuclear plants or space stations, or in modern dance clubs. The combination of rapid editing, handheld camerawork and a rock or techno soundtrack transform these sequences into moments of spectacle, with a focus on bursts of action over emotionally driven dialogue. At the heart of these sequences is Sydney's metamorphosis from the independent but also emotionally vulnerable modern American woman previously described into a chameleon like spy figure through the use of different disguises or aliases alongside technology and violence. Their importance to the series is reflected both in its title, as well as the title sequences of the fourth and fifth season, which employ a montage of her different personas.

[6] In terms of female power, the aliases reflects a manipulation or masquerade of femininity in

order to exploit stereotypes and gain an advantage in dangerous circumstances, blending into crowds through a masterful combination of signifiers such as wigs, costumes and languages. This performance crosses national and even ethnic boundaries, with Sydney having disguised herself as Indian (*Passage: Part One* 2008), Japanese (*Counteragent* 2007), and Cuban (*Tuesday* 4013). The aliases are also primarily marked by their performance of stereotypically sexualized and exaggeratedly feminine characters in revealing clothing, most typically call girls, waitresses and dancers. Although Sydney occasionally poses as a rocket scientist or a businesswoman, the vast majority of aliases feature a sexual focus, with Sydney as a glamorous and sexually aggressive figure. Scenes of Sydney in disguise often feature her having to seduce various men for information, with Adams Wright commenting that "feminine wiles are a favourite weapon in the *Alias* female spy's arsenal" (200).

[7] This use of femininity as disguise implies the power of the masquerade to achieve power through an ironic redirection of stereotype that undermines its mythical basis by using "theatrically produced effects" (Butler 723). Riviere theorizes that womanliness...could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it...the masquerade, a flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. (qtd. Erens 5).

[8] Sydney's ability to imitate convincing female types therefore echoes the argument that femininity is culturally constructed and represents a performance naturalizing sexual display. Moreover, the body becomes another gadget for Sydney, an instrument that she can adapt for each mission and detach from the subjectivity of her actions. In this context she can perform a sexual playfulness alien to her normative personality, enjoying "the erotics of putting on a different self" (Bordo 1102) but with the underlying legitimization of ironic and objective performance that can just as quickly switch into extreme violence, displaying a role-play alternating between passivity and aggression.

[9] However, it can be argued that a fine line exists between Sydney as performing stereotypical femininity to expose its artificiality and conversely coding its myths onto her body. Although the narrative assumes an alignment with Sydney's masquerade, the surface stylization of her body as sexual spectacle designed to blind enemies to her strength also signifies a physical authenticity. The body therefore becomes a fluid site of meaning, creating a parallel empowerment between narrative pleasure in the act of deception and Sydney as a simplified fetish object. This creates an alienating effect for audiences, wherein their perspective is fragmented between an image of the body as "simultaneously the spectacle, the performance space, the subject, and the object of pleasure and danger" (Kauffman 15).

[10] The visual style of the series also contributes to a desensitizing effect of Sydney's body as an empowered vehicle for female strength and a site of erotic pleasure. In the episode *Phase One* (2013), Sydney poses as a callgirl on a plane in order to retrieve information from a male client. The opening shot of the episode frames Sydney dressed in revealing red lingerie and cracking a whip. She approaches the man in accompaniment to energized rock music, and he asks her to change into the "black one." She returns, moves in for a seeming embrace, but then throttles him

and asks "why didn't you like the red one?" This scene reflects the uncertainty of Sydney's power in masquerade by placing her as a sexual object whose performance literalizes her artificial sexuality, supported by the extra-diegetic role of the soundtrack and the wide framing of the camera, reflecting Erens' theory that "the image of woman as an erotic spectacle stops the flow of the narrative" (4). Although the role reversal at the end of the scene assumes the breaking of the illusion and the emergence of Sydney's authentic identity as heroine, an uncertainty remains over whether her sexual masquerade can be detached from superficial erotic pleasure.

[11] Interestingly, parts of this scene are also used within a promotional clip for the second season DVD, identifying the visual pleasure of Sydney's aliases as a crucial part of the series' marketing strategy, reducing the empowered female body to a commodified space able to playfully exhibit different types of femininity while retaining a sense of alien artificiality. This effect also suggests that the spy persona Sydney performs as the major expression of her strength as a heroine is a stylish but ultimately hollow mask without a clear identity, demonstrating Bordo's description of the female body in popular entertainment as "cultural plastic" (1099) deprived of a stable meaning. This detachment of the body as being in visual flux is also echoed through plastic surgery in series like *Nip/Tuck* (2003-) and the embodiment of queer identity through appearance and costume in lesbian drama *The L Word* (2004-).

[12] A similar detachment and conflict of power in the body exists in *Buffy*. However, unlike *Alias*, less of a visual and thematic split is made between the home and fantasy space, with an overlap occurring in various episodes that questions the legitimacy of stylized locations for violence, including *Dead Man's Party* (3002) and *Older and Far Away* (6014). This reflects *Buffy*'s focus on adolescence experience, wherein the boundaries between the social worlds of the school and the home are less fixed, while Sydney as an older and more professional woman is able to detach herself in the home and on missions.

[13] However, *Buffy*'s body in fight scenes parallels *Alias*' contentious signification through the use of fantasy and metaphor to displace subjective empowerment into spectacle. Outside her role as the Slayer, *Buffy* exhibits a conventional or even exaggerated visual femininity, demonstrated by her being "young, blond, slim and vigilantly fashion conscious" (Pender 36). In contrast, the fight scenes in the majority of episodes feature *Buffy* in battles against evil that rely on a choreographed style and superhuman strength, engaging her as the Slayer, a superheroic figure whose magical abilities allow her to supersede the boundaries of biology. Although *Buffy* is repeatedly struck and thrown through objects, the narrative establishment of her body as superhuman negates the physical consequences of the violence and transforms it into a metaphor for *Buffy*'s adolescence, symbolizing adolescent fears. These include the consequences of first time sex (*Innocence* 2014), the abusive stepfather (*Ted* 2011) and rape (*Reptile Boy* 2005), among many others. While this could be seen as symbolically positive, it is also possible to argue that in this context "women's bodies are misrepresented as super tough and indestructible" (Herbst 37) through stylistic displacement, therefore setting *Buffy* as the Slayer up as a complicated figure of identification.

[14] Although audiences might sympathize with her emotionally, the fantasy nature of *Buffy*'s body often removes the more visceral effects of violence and preserves a commercial image of femininity that denies victimization and maintains a fantasy detachment. When this is broken by

Buffy either losing her powers (*Helpless* 3012) or suffering a personal attack, demonstrated by the heightened pain of Spike's attempted rape in *Seeing Red* (6019), the fantasy is removed, albeit briefly, to re-identify her body as realistically vulnerable. However, in the majority of episodes a subjective identification with Buffy's superpowered action is negated by fantasy style. This is also demonstrated through the replacement of actress Sarah Michelle Gellar with a range of stunt doubles that constitute the physical embodiment of the violence and further distance the extremism of the battles from the realism of the authentic Buffy and her body as an expression of conventional femininity.

[15] Like Sydney's aliases, Buffy's body when performing Slayer violence is a complicated sign, juxtaposing the heightened femininity of her image against the alienating properties of fantasy violence. However, it can also be noted that Buffy's image remains more stable between domestic and fight scenes, in contrast to Sydney's disguises. This increases the incongruity between surface femininity and stylized violence, destabilizing the traditional gender role of the hero as a physical representation of strength, such as the heightened physique of a Superman or a Hercules. However, while this does play with naturalized images of gender power, it does so at the cost of limiting audience identification by infusing Buffy and Sydney's performances as heroines with "matters of consumer style" (A. Susan Owen 30 qtd. Pender 42), stylized and ironic moments of spectacle that present the female body as a detached object alien from the characters and alien from the everyday lives of its female audience.

[16] The idea of Buffy's body as an alienating object can also be explored through the use of the Buffybot in the series, a cyborg reproduction that renders the heroine as a mechanical double. The Buffybot is originally created in the series as a sexual toy for Spike during Season Five (*Intervention* 5018) before being reprogrammed as a fighter at the end of Season Five (*The Gift* 5022) and into Season Six to replace the temporarily dead Buffy, before being destroyed in battle (*Bargaining: Part Two* 6002). Halberstam suggests that the cyborg in culture "posits femininity as automation, a coded masquerade" (449) and in this way the Buffybot creates an ironic representation of Buffy's power as the Slayer as an artificial creation embodying male desire.

[17] As a sexual toy it represents the ultimate reproduction of Buffy's commodity status as fetish object, combining sexual authority and power alongside an appearance of delicacy. Spike attempts to treat it as the embodiment of the real, but is distracted by reminders of its artificiality. Following sex, the Buffybot reverts to its programming:

Buffybot: Should I start this program over?

Spike: Sshh, no programs, don't use that word. Just be Buffy. (*Intervention*)

[18] The attempt to create an authentic double of Buffy is therefore flawed by its translation of her superficial feminine image without the underlying self-awareness and irony of her role and its relationship to power. The Buffybot exhibits an emotional simplicity and a highly feminized appearance that offers a humorous parallel to Buffy's own conventional femininity, while its use as a fetish and violent object comments on the commodification of the body within popular culture as a dehumanized conductor of sexual and violent action. By being programmed to imitate Buffy, the robot further emphasizes the artificiality of her Slayer violence and its fantasy spectacle. Although it can be argued that gender, "like computer intelligence, is a learned, imitative behaviour that can be processed so well that it comes to look natural" (Halberstam

443), the Buffybot is always an incomplete simulation of Buffy's role that suggests surface realism without depth, demonstrating the disparity between the mythic power of the Slayer and the reality of the character. However, the Buffybot remains a satirical device because it can fool observers, frustrating Buffy through the realization that her friends were unable to differentiate between her and the Buffybot: "No. She's a robot. She acts just like that girlfriend-bot that Warren guy made. You guys couldn't tell me apart from a robot?" (*Intervention*)

[19] The Slayer body as stylistic automaton can also be seen through other examples of Buffy's mechanical and repetitious behaviour. In the musical episode *Once More with Feeling* (6007), the musical genre is used to allow characters to express hidden emotions. In the opening scene, Buffy walks through a graveyard, and sings that
"...I've been making shows of (punch) trading blows/Just hoping no one knows/That I've been going through the motions/Walking through the part/Nothing seems to penetrate my heart...."

[20] This implies the artificial routine that her life has become, while also forming part of the context of the opening arc of Season Six, wherein Buffy struggles to come to terms with her unwanted resurrection from death by her friends. The tight choreography and puppet-like machinations of Buffy in the episode reflect both her loss of connection to the world and the revision of her actions as the Slayer and a person as routine and empty, mirroring the musical genre's translation of emotional complexities into spectacle. The theme of repetition recurs throughout Season Six, reflected in Buffy working in fast food and its accompanying rhythms (*Doublemeat Palace* 6012), as well as *Life Serial* (6005) where a spell causes her to repeat the same business transaction over and over again. By stressing the Slayer body as mechanical in its performance of power, the series could be seen to comment on the nature of the long running television serial, where plots and behaviour do begin to repeat themselves over time and assume style before realism, although in the case of Season Six this is shown as part of a wider emotional dislocation and a sense of her identity as a Slayer and a normal girl as both being part of a painful routine.

[21] Within *Buffy* and *Alias*, the detachment of the body as a stylized object suggests a mechanical reproduction of superficial power without an inner connection to emotional reality. The literalizing process of masquerade and automated repetition that establishes a fantasy space for violence and play also translates the subversive energy of female power into detached forms that maintain a distance from the normative female identity demonstrated elsewhere in the series. While Buffy and Sydney do break with the "understanding of female bodily comportment as one of limited movement and passive engagement" (Celeste Kearney 293), the simultaneous inability to legitimize the action body as authentic undermines its role as a source of female identification.

[22] This problem can be seen as part of a wider resistance in television and popular culture to assuming a radical position on female violence and power, instead preferring to maintain a thread of displacement that preserves fantasy and roleplaying as the key method of constructing female difference. Other examples of this tendency might include *Dark Angel's* Max as a genetically modified girl or the technological conditioning of other spy figures such as Nikita, wherein their bodies are never granted a true feminine legitimacy, but always exist as alien objects of power.

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