



“Bring Your Own Subtext”: Social life, human experience and the works of Joss Whedon, University of Huddersfield 29 June– 1 July 2005

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**A Conference Report by
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- (1) Summer 2005, the University of Huddersfield (UK) hosted an event which, although tactically avoiding the 'B word', focused largely on the media academic's favorite vampire slayer. The three-day conference was organized around two parallel streams, each presentation followed by five minutes' dedicated discussion time. With papers still fresh in delegates' minds, this facilitated lively and focused debate, while rigorous timekeeping allowed listeners to hop between streams with minimum disruption. A similar mix and match approach characterized this multi-disciplinary conference itself, papers drawing upon feminist theory, psychology, linguistics, mythology, philosophy and pedagogy to explore *Buffy*, its associated culture, and other manifestations of the 'Whedonverse', namely *Angel* and *Firefly*.
- (2) The opening keynote paper by Tanya Kryzwinska (Brunel University) exploring player positions within *Buffy* videogames indicated the conference's broad remit. In drawing connections between female warriors Xena, Lara Croft, and Buffy, Kryzwinska highlighted the Slayer's location within wider cultural trends; she focused on the fact that *BtVS* translations onto Game Boy Advance, X Box and Playstation 2 emphasized the television show's penetration of other cultural forms. Using gaming footage to illustrate her argument, Kryzwinska discussed the ways videogames challenge traditional approaches to representation and spectatorship. Criticism surrounding the felicitation of women for heterosexual male pleasure, and the association between fighting and agency are complicated by the empowering potential videogame player/avatar relationships provide for gamers to play at being Buffy. Kryzwinska's account of the complex intersection between Buffy as character, show, figure of female empowerment, and videogame avatar proved extremely challenging and insightful.
- (3) In an equally thought provoking paper, Professor Don Adams (Central Connecticut State University) and Dr Christine Jarvis (University of Huddersfield) outlined Buffy's relationship to classic and feminist concepts of leadership, focusing on costumes. Clothing in *Buffy* is highly coded, both using and subverting traditional meanings associated with women's clothes. Buffy's dress defies masculine conventions of combat ("I've patrolled in this halter many times." "The I in Team' [4013]), while variously defining her relationship to Faith, the Slayerettes and other regular characters. Observing Buffy's rejection of antisocial punk and gothic teen dress codes, associated with the show's villains, Adams and Jarvis acknowledged the series' adoption of mainstream fashion tastes, but argued against a straightforward correspondence with gender stereotypes and consumer capitalist ideologies. A detailed analysis of Buffy's dungarees in 'Helpless' (3012) illustrated the semiotic complications and contradictions of costume within the show. A similarly astute deconstruction of masculinity and clothing was evident in Catherine Bradley's (University of Huddersfield) detailed reading of *Angel* episode 'Guise Will Be Guise' (2006).
- (4) Several presenters focused on Whedon's use of language. In the first of two papers, entitled 'The

Infiltration of Buffy into the Real World', Bill McDaniel (Abode Systems) examined the dissemination of 'Buffy-speak'. Buffy-isms, such as the 'Uber' prefix of Uber-vamp, or 'age' suffix of 'painage', were observed in discursive spaces from popular television, to non-Buffy websites, to corporate documents. Dr Susan Mandala (University of Sunderland) provided a social linguistic interpretation of the Scoobies' unusual use of the 'y' suffix (eg 'crayon breaky', 'Heart of Darknessy') throughout *BtVS*. Analyzing three seasons' worth of dialogue using social network theory, Mandala presented statistical evidence of the linguistic quirk's function in marking group allegiance. Giles and Anya employ few awkward-sounding 'y' suffixes, registering their comparative distance from the core gang, while Tara's eventual use of the Scoobies' verbal eccentricity ('surfacey', 'Dead Things' [6013]) ironically prefigures her imminent departure from the series. Mandala's paper testified to both the sociolinguistic complexity of Buffy's dialogue and the insight afforded by rigorous textual scrutiny.

(5) A philosophical strand was evident in many papers. Dr Deborah Thomas (University of Sutherland) illustrated the confusion between 'persons and things' in *BtVS*: frequent instances of humans losing their humanity, vampires and robots acquiring human qualities, and 'personhood-testing scenarios'. Insofar as Spike and Anya's personal journeys question the nature of humanity, Thomas aligned *BtVS* with the existential perspective that humanity is not an inborn essence, but something acquired through an individual's actions and choices. Similarly Bryan Townsend (independent scholar) illustrated how both characters' transformations illustrate Aristotelian ethics. For Aristotle, virtue was not innate but a quality developed through performing initially-involuntarily good deeds (due, for example, to a behavior-modifying chip in the skull) which eventually become second nature and a source of pleasure. Employing personal construct theory, Dr Nigel King (University of Huddersfield) applied the psychological tendency towards bipolar world views to the manifestation of good and evil in *Buffy*. While evil within the show remains unambiguous, demons are destructive and take pleasure in their destruction, good is characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty--evidence, King argued, of a humanist and existentialist morality in the work of Joss Whedon.

(6) Mutual appreciation of the depth, quality and richness of Whedon's work informed the conference. James Wells' (Northeastern University) paper celebrated *Buffy's* skilful balance between verisimilitude and supernatural fantasy, between the familiar and the unexpected. Focusing on 'Hush' (4010) and 'The Body' (5016), Wells argued the show's employment of stock generic characters initially familiar to audiences, but developed across the seasons, was central to sustaining episodes containing little dialogue or supernatural elements. Louie Stowell (independent scholar) explored *Firefly's* Jane and the *Angel* television satire 'Smile Time', alongside the comic contributions of Anya, Andrew and Oz, illustrating tensions between humor and emotional depth. Dr Janet Halfyard (Birmingham Conservatoire) delivered a fascinating analysis of vocal performances in *Buffy* and *Angel*. The voice as mark of individuality, as site of power and agency, and as index of character relations and hierarchies was related to Buffy's high pitched voice, Drusilla's sing-song delivery, and the digital sound manipulation used to express Willow's transformation into Dark Willow. In 'Polysemy and the Quest for Female Agency', Christina Köver (University of Luneburg) criticized the dualist critical logic which constructs Buffy either as transgressive feminist heroine or affirmation of patriarchal stereotypes. Köver convincingly argued *Buffy* offers multiple meanings, both subversive and conformist, and called for a reconfiguration of the critical frameworks within which *Buffy's* strategic feminist potential is evaluated. A necessarily critical perspective was evident in Dr Chris Richards' (London Metropolitan University) consideration of racial whiteness. Observing the absence of urban youth culture, the prominent rhetoric of Christianity, and themes of insecurity and sterility, Richards argued the show betrayed white anxieties, particularly concerning sexuality. In highlighting the entirely white social world of *BtVS*, Richards questioned the universality of 'human experience' represented within the Jossverse.

(7) Accepting the conference invitation to 'bring your own subtext', many papers displayed originality in both focus and perspective. Caroline Ruddell (Brunel University), in considering the division between Willow Rosenberg, vampire Willow and Dark Willow, introduced the issue of split personalities and identities, a theme recurring throughout the conference. Observing *Buffy's* popularity amongst teachers, the strong pedagogic strand at Slayage 2004, and the comparably large amounts of schoolroom footage within the series, Michele Paule (Oxford Brookes University) explored the show's representation of education. Marcie's disappearance through lack of pedagogic attention in 'Out of Mind, Out of Sight' (1011), the praise Buffy receives upon regurgitating her teacher's analysis of *Othello* in 'Earshot' (3018), the Buffybot's success at parent-teacher meetings, Paule argued, all resonate with contemporary

concerns surrounding teaching, theories of pedagogy and teacher's experiences. Body modification and identity fragmentation was considered in Tuna Erdem's (Istanbul Bilgi University) paper 'Tattoo Renaissance comes to Sunnydale'. Discussing the bodily adornments of Faith, Angel and Giles, Erdem argued the Mark of Igon in 'The Dark Age' (2008) reflects the watcher's split identity, its appearance signaling the return of the repressed Ripper. How, asked Erdem, does Angel see his tattoo? And if vampires have no reflection, are they also, in a Lacanian sense, denied a mirror phase? Romantic relationships in *BtVS* were discussed from a critical feminist psychology perspective by Dr Angie Burns (Staffordshire University). Emphasizing the show's contradictory messages concerning love, the possibility of lasting romance, relations between the sexes, and what constitutes an abusive relationship, Burns located particular confusion in moments when male characters (The Trio, Spike) fail to recognize the sexual violence they have considered or perpetrated. Exploring this darker side of sexuality, Deborah Finding (London School of Economics) identified contradictions in Whedon's representation of prostitution. Riley's use of 'vampire whores', Darla's pre-vampire profession, and the sex/drugs-coded exchange between Willow and Rack were explored as reinforcing or refuting myths surrounding sex workers.

(8) Zoë-Jane Playdon (University of London), the final keynote speaker, closed the conference in fine style. Discussing Buffy's relationship to lunar hero traditions, Playdon related her successive deaths and resurrections to the waning and renewal of the moon. Combining a scholarly knowledge of classic texts, insightful familiarity with the seven-season series, and a stylish playfulness in bringing the two together, Playdon presented a lunar reading of the enigmatic cheese man in 'Restless' (4022), while arguing Anya's fear of bunnies related to the hare-image in the moon, itself representative of the passage of time and her own newly-acquired mortality.

(9) Our hosts did a sterling job of orchestrating the panels, providing necessary technical and personal support, and refreshments. Suitably scheduled coffee breaks, buffet lunches and wine receptions encouraged a friendly and supportive atmosphere for participants joined as much in their knowledge and appreciation of Whedon's work as by their academic vocation. A closely-fought pub quiz extended discussions beyond the comfortable conference rooms of The Centre for Construction and Identity into the nearby pub; winning contestants were presented with Huddersfield's equivalent of a Mr Pointy. The sing-along following a conference dinner rivalled anything witnessed in Nashville the previous year.

(10) Testimony to the fertility of Whedon's work, the variety of theoretical perspectives the Jossverse can sustain, and the imagination and the enthusiasm shows like *BtVS*, *Angel* and *Firefly* can generate, the 'Bring Your Own Subtext' conference was a friendly and fascinating event, representing the academic study of popular culture at its most lively and insightful.

