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**I'm Not a Dead Body; I Just Play One  
on TV:**

**Slayage**  
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***Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the  
Performativity of the Corpse**

[1] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a series about the dead, what they do, and what is done to them. For my purposes here, I'm less interested in the fantastic deaths we see throughout the series—mostly vampires bursting into a puff of dust as they're staked—and more interested in the way the series depicts the more realistic deaths of its human characters. The show isn't afraid to kill off its favorite characters, and it's not afraid to let us see (e.g., Buffy in season 1, Jenny Calendar in season 2, Buffy's mom and Buffy again in season 5, Tara in season 6, and Anya in season 7). Death is taken seriously on the show, and when human characters die, they usually don't come back (and, when they do, there are disturbing consequences). Series creator Joss Whedon's "The Body" (5016), an episode that has gotten a good deal of praise from both fans and critics, offers one of the most significant and complicated of these deaths, turning the corpse into a Rorschach test for the many and varied responses we have to death. As depicted in this episode, death is shocking, pivotal to the narrative arc of the show, and permanent.

[2] *Buffy* is known for challenging the perceived boundaries of the television medium, and "The Body" is one of the most overtly challenging episodes of the series, both stylistically (with its long takes and lack of non-diegetic sound) and narratively. "The Body" almost entirely forgoes monster mayhem to center around the discovery of the body of Buffy's mother, Joyce Summers, freshly dead from a sudden brain aneurysm. "The Body" is about how we react to death; more importantly, it's about what our bodies (the dead ones and the live ones) *do* in the face of death. Over the course of the episode, Joyce's corpse is carefully unzipped and undressed, its performative registers stripped away to reveal the fundamentally abject nature of embodiment.

[3] "What are you doing?" Buffy asks casually upon coming across the body of her mother splayed out on the living room couch. What the body *does* is lie there, staring vacantly at (or, rather, toward) the ceiling. There is nothing haphazard, though, about how Joyce is positioned. Her head rests lightly upon the arm of the sofa, her neck long and twisted gently to one side. Her hair is unmussed and frames her face perfectly, and one arm hangs gracefully off the edge of the couch. This is not a position she just fell into. The only indication that she is dead is the paleness of her lips and a slight redness around her eyes. The rest of the frame is just as meticulously composed, with the couch cushions lined up perfectly, each at a 45-degree angle to the room, and a tower of pillows stacked in a tapering pinnacle behind her. As Buffy tentatively approaches her mother, the camera also moves closer in a POV shot, and Joyce doesn't look any more dead. She looks pensive, lost in thought, distressed maybe, but not dead. Her body is posed as though it were still living. Her death is signified by the expression that slowly comes across Buffy's face.

[4] "Mom . . ." The inquisitive cock of Buffy's head is just barely perceptible, and she blinks as though attempting to fully register what she sees. "Mom . . ." There is disbelief now and a stutter as her lips cringe slightly. She blinks her eyes a second time, punctuating each utterance. "Mommy . . ." Her eyes don't blink this time. The camera holds its unwavering gaze upon Buffy for another few seconds before a sudden and jolting cut to black. This time Buffy's

utterance is punctuated by the cut, suggesting that the blinking of our eyes has imitated or replaced hers. The fact that we register the death on Buffy's face rather than on the dead body itself alludes to the performative nature of death. Put simply, death needs an audience.

[5] Judith Butler's notions of performativity are useful for conceptualizing what I'm discussing here. Butler works (and works and works) to demonstrate the ways that identity is fundamentally incoherent. And it isn't just that Butler *perceives* identity as incoherent, she wants it incoherent--to the point of revelry. She writes (summarizing the main points of her argument in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution"),

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (270)

By "acts," Butler refers not to free actions but to performance (i.e., the actor who acts or performs a role). For Butler, there are no entirely free subjects—no unified subjectivities: "One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body É It is, however, clearly unfortunate grammar to claim that there is a 'we' or an 'I' that does its body, as if a disembodied agency preceded and directed an embodied exterior" (272). The agent is created in the process of performing itself—one's possibilities for embodiment are not "antecedent to the process of embodying itself" (272). Thus, identity is incoherent, because it is always transitive and always acted upon (as opposed to *acting* upon).

[6] While Butler talks specifically about gender, her work is more generally concerned with the construction of identity. Gender has been the focus of numerous analyses of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.<sup>[ii](#)</sup> The fact that Joyce's body is performing the role of woman is not lost on Whedon: the demure positioning of her legs, her perfectly-coifed hair, the way her clothes drape neatly across her body, and the smooth sheen of her stockinged feet in the foreground of the shot. Later in the scene, we see Buffy adjusting her mother's dress, pulling it down over her thighs, covering her up before the paramedics arrive. And, while dealing with gendered bodies in *Buffy* is certainly a worthwhile project, I use Butler here to address the performativity of the corpse, including but not limited to its gendered performativity.

[7] For Butler, we are agents not subjects, and our actions are culturally-scripted not self-determined: "The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again" (277). This raises a bit of a question (or paradox), because it seems that gender both prohibits individual subjectivity ("going on before one arrived on the scene") and requires it ("requires individual actors"). Sadly, even if there are subjects of a sort in Butler's world, they don't speak their own scripts. Gender, for Butler, is always already scripted in advance by normative culture. (Rebellion and revolution might be deemed *anti*-norms, but they are nevertheless only possible in opposition to norms and thus also positions constructed by culture.) Butler's insistence upon incoherence and fluidity is refreshing, but the seemingly endless possibilities are closed down, when it is culture (and not the subject) behind the wheel, so to speak.

[8] My work looks toward a more dynamic self, a more dynamic body—a self that knows itself to be a self—a body that is constructed and capable of constructing. While Buffy may be

exactly this kind of self, the dead body of her mother is decidedly not individuated and self-actualized. Rather, Joyce's body is a cultural totem, a stand-in for the social conventions that demand a specific narrative of our deaths. Throughout "The Body," characters fumble about in their attempts to deal with death in the "right way," and the audience is forced into a similar predicament; we often watch television in groups, on airplanes, in break rooms, at bars, not exactly the ideal places for the very visceral reactions (laughter, tears, disgust) this particular episode elicits. I didn't watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* for the first time until it was released on DVD, so I've always been a little unsettled by the idea of this episode appearing on broadcast TV, exactly because this would strip it of a certain artfulness and situate it more directly within the realm of the socially normative.

[9] As noted by numerous reviewers and critics, the episode lacks non-diegetic sound, something that distinguishes it from most other television shows, which attempt to assault us with sound.<sup>[ii]</sup> In this episode, we hear only the sounds of the world in which Buffy lives: sirens, traffic noise, children playing, the tick of a clock, etc. In *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Rhonda Wilcox writes that this episode "is as scoreless as most of life, denied the usual emotional cues of music" (188). However, as Wilcox also observes, it is not true that there is no non-diegetic sound whatsoever. Immediately after the jarring cut to black I described earlier, we see the show's title sequence, including its raucous and often thematically incongruous theme song and a flash of rapidly intercut moments from various seasons. (The wild action and heroism of these flashes is also incongruous with the themes of this episode.) Whenever I watch "The Body" on my own or screen it for a classroom of students, I find myself diving for the remote to skip past the title sequence. It lets the viewer off the hook by allowing a moment of escape from the quiet horror of Buffy's reaction to her mother's death, a reminder that however real the look and feel of this particular episode, it is still just a story set within a fantastic world.

[10] During its original broadcast, the episode also included commercials, something I find difficult to imagine (or stomach). Whedon, though, proves acutely aware of the artifice of his medium, using the commercials as punctuation, having them work *for* not *against* the emotional impact of the episode. The second, third, and fourth commercial breaks are each followed immediately by a close-up of Joyce's increasingly dead body. It's a very savvy and brutal move on Whedon's part: cut from "don't squeeze the Charmin" to the corpse being zipped up into a body bag, from "Mentos the freshmaker" to the torso slowly undressed by gloved hands, from Mervyns and "open, open, open" to Joyce's blood-splattered face following her autopsy. The body is a commodity, and Whedon's episode is crafted for both artistic *and* economic viability; however, just as we find ourselves glazing over before the parade of consumer goods in the commercials, the show returns, and Whedon knocks us over the head rather impolitely. Live flesh is polite flesh; dead flesh is tactless. The rude incongruity between the commercials and the image's of Joyce's dead flesh is obligatory (for the network bean counters) but also artistically warranted (for Whedon).

[11] Following the first commercial break, we see Joyce being zipped into a body bag after failed attempts by Buffy and the paramedics to revive her. Joyce's body lies horizontally in the frame, staring toward (not *at* but *through*) the camera. Her form disappears into the darkness inside the bag as it is zipped closed from left to right. We see only the hands of the coroners, the crumpled black fabric of the bag filling the rest of the frame. The shot evokes the closing of a curtain, framing death as a theatrical event. We continue to see close-ups of Joyce even after the closing of this curtain, which suggests that the fact of the body remains even after the bulk of its performance is over.

[12] The next time we see Joyce's body, immediately following the third commercial, she is being undressed on a shiny, silver surgical table, laid bare so to speak. Her blouse is unbuttoned, and again we see only the hands doing the unbuttoning. Another set of hands, wielding a very large scissors, cuts through her camisole, the sound of the cuts exaggerated to the point of seeming almost deafening. (The cuts are not, in fact, all that loud, but in the absence of other sound, they feel as though they are.) In the DVD director's commentary, Whedon speaks of his desire to depict an "almost obscene physicality—a little more physicality than we necessarily want or are used to . . . . Because death is a physical thing. There *is* a body. And apart from the sense of loss that you inevitably feel, there is the fact of the body . . . ." Belying Butler's notion of performativity, there is, in fact, a subject (or at least substance) beneath our acts.

[13] And yet, there's still something overdetermined about how Whedon depicts the physical reality of the dead body in this and other scenes. Joyce's body is indeed physical, but it is laid out like a piece of fruit at a fruit stand. Whedon works so hard to make it *look* real that it fails to *be* real, like putting tons of styling gunk into our hair to appear as though we've just rolled out of bed. Joyce's body is staged, a simulacrum, a sterile version of death that both epitomizes our fears and distracts us from them. The corpse is indeed obscene, as Whedon observes, but also somewhat quaint. Death never looks *this* real. I don't think the hyperreal quality of these moments is lost on Whedon.<sup>[iii]</sup> So much of the episode is about dressing and undressing, the clothes we wear, the clothes we don't wear, our inability to clothe ourselves appropriately, the removal of clothes from the dead, etc. Whedon understands that death is a costume.

[14] The shot of the clothes being cut off Joyce's body is followed by a long scene in which Willow agonizes over what outfit she should wear to lend support to Buffy at the hospital.<sup>[iv]</sup>

But the clothing becomes just a metaphor for how mourners should (or should not) behave, a question which is raised explicitly by Anya's reaction to Joyce's death in this same scene. Anya asks, "Am I supposed to be changing my clothes a lot? Is that the helpful thing to do? . . . I don't understand how this all happens—how we go through this." Anya is mystified by death, as these lines of dialogue illustrate, but she's even more mystified by the various reactions from the people around her and the reactions that are expected (or not expected) from her. Our culture has a script for how we deal with death, a (mostly) unspoken agreement about how to act and the lines we ought to speak, a script the ex-demon Anya lacks full access to.

[15] After the last commercial break, we see another image of Joyce's body. This time her clothes have been removed entirely, and she is covered by a soft white sheet (in stark contrast to the hard black plastic of the body bag we see her zipped into earlier). A spattering of blood on the left side of her face and a pair of hands removing bloodied latex gloves clue us in to the fact that the body has been autopsied, none of which is depicted on screen. Again, she is positioned horizontally, laid out always from left to right with her head staring upward at frame right. These are meticulously composed, artful shots. This isn't death as we would see it in life. Whedon is framing death, not just depicting it. Joyce looks paler and paler, deader and deader, each time we see her, but her eyes remain open (still *looking* even if they don't *see*), reminding us of our own spectatorship. The shot is spot-lit, continuing the suggestion of performance and theatricality, reminding us that we're watching a television show, and the actress is just *playing* dead. We aren't let off the hook, though, as we are by the title sequence I mentioned earlier, just reminded that death isn't recognizable unless it's scripted and televised (and thereby familiar)--death doesn't feel real unless it's hyperreal.

[16] We're also reminded that death is much more comfortable when the fourth wall of the screen is firmly intact—and when we are seated at a safe distance from it. The episode

threatens to disturb the fourth wall in shots like the many close-ups of Joyce's body, where she looms just a little too large in the frame, forcing proximity and demanding an uncomfortable intimacy. These are open frames (with the cropped body allowing the eye to drift off the edge of the screen), suggesting a world beyond the frame that might leak out like the various fluids of the body. We prefer our dead bodies in closed frames (contained entirely by the screen) at middle distance and, even better, embalmed in coffins (a literal enclosure as safeguard for the figurative one).

[17] The final scene of the episode plays even more recklessly with the fourth wall, offering a televised world with a more than fleeting physicality. As Dawn sneaks away at the hospital in search of her mother's body, the *mise en scène* changes suddenly, from the sterile, overlit hospital waiting area to the very dark and sinister corridors leading to the morgue. Dawn steps from a world of impenetrable austerity (where grief is carefully controlled) to a world of gross, visceral horror. Earlier in the sequence we see that these two locations are in the same geographical space (i.e., on the same set), separated only by a long hallway, suggesting that our reactions to death and the brute fact of it are concomitant, consecutive. What death means can never be divorced from the reality of the corpse itself. No matter how many layers of symbolism we cake on, our flesh remains, somewhere deep beneath the overdetermined figurations. It's exactly this flesh that Dawn goes off in search of, wanting just a glimpse, however momentary, of the root physicality of death. What lies behind the facade our social customs erect? Or, more importantly for Dawn, is *she* (her mother) still in there?

[18] Once in the room with the body, Dawn leans in, reaching for the sheet covering her mother's face, but her hand hesitates, and she draws back. She closes her eyes, furrows her brow, and swallows, then looks again, her head cocked to one side, as though she's attempting to see *through* the sheet. Whedon remarks on the director's commentary, "this is something she needs to do, and other people I know have expressed this need. I need—I can't quite—but I need to know what it is. I need to see it." This is a moment of the abject, which, according to Julia Kristeva, "simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject" (5). For Kristeva, the abject is an "impetus," a "spasm," a "leap" that also "[condemns]" and "[repulses]" like a "boomerang" (1). It is a paradoxical movement both toward and away from some object or happening, instilling simultaneous disgust and awe. The abject is not contained within the thing, but in our very subjective reaction to it. Dawn reaches for the body because she can't not, and she pulls away for the exact same reason. The abject is meditative and inexorable, exactly not performative. Performativity is compulsory, creating a false self in lieu of a real one. The abject is autonomic, confirming the self even as its obliterated. <sup>[vi]</sup> Both performativity and the abject depend on the idea of a self, but while the performative self puts on airs, the abject self breathes and bleeds and dances. Dawn's desire to know (to feel) is coupled with an inability to contain a very physical aversion—her horror is not an act (and neither is ours). The abject is a hypnotic, nauseated, endless dance: propel, stutter, stop, retreat, repeat. We get the sense that Dawn would be caught in this room, permanently transfixed, if one of the bodies on a table behind her didn't rise up and try to eat her.

[19] The sudden appearance of a vampire in this scene has raised quite a bit of controversy among *Buffy* fans and critics alike, some arguing that this moment interrupts the narrative, as though a vampire just happened to walk on set to disturb an otherwise straightforward dramatic plot. I would argue, though, that the monster Buffy and Dawn struggle with in this scene is not really a vampire, at least not by any logic the show has established. He doesn't resemble any of the other vampires we see throughout the series, who are usually witty, well-dressed, and relatively healthy-looking. The vampire in "The Body" is a personification (or

merely an embodiment, since there's no *person* in there) of the gruesome physicality of death. He's *just* death, stripped of its fancy clothes, witty quips, and overdetermination. Wilcox, who calls the scene a "key moment of fractal resonance" (176), describes this particular vampire as "not dashing" but living in "mottled, dead flesh" (188). He is as naked as Joyce and doesn't speak as the other vampires in the series do. Buffy slays him, not with a stake, but by cutting off his head with a bone saw, likely the very same instrument used on Buffy's mother during her autopsy. It is one of the grosser vampire deaths in the series, abject in its drawing attention to the permeability of the body, and we feel a sense of relief when the vampire explodes into a cloud of dust, saving us the horror of seeing the messy aftermath of his death.<sup>[vii]</sup> I can't imagine that watching a saw cut through flesh and bone is all that exciting or pretty. For Buffy, it's certainly not as convenient as a routine staking.

[20] Joyce's body does not have the luxury of turning into a puff of dust, and since the sheet covering her has conveniently fallen away during the scuffle, Buffy and Dawn are forced to confront the gritty (not dusty) details of their mother's dead flesh. In the episode's penultimate shot, we see Joyce's face in the bottom left of the frame, still looking vacantly upward, *toward* but not quite *at* Dawn's face in the upper right. Buffy lies on the floor at frame left, slightly out of focus, looking as though she is being emitted from her mother's face (a compositional choice that foreshadows the role Buffy will soon take as surrogate mother to Dawn). Dawn stares, again perplexed by the fact of the body, somehow both solid *and* intangible. "Is she cold?" Dawn's eyes don't blink, not once during the minute-long shot. Neither do her mother's. "Where'd she go?" This time Dawn doesn't hesitate. She reaches out her hand and moves it slowly toward her mom's face, a gesture that feels all too familiar. We've all been in this particular place, reaching for something that's gone away, wondering about the stuff that remains, curious to see whether our hand will pass right through. The camera cuts to the final shot, a close-up, Dawn's now disembodied arm reaching, Joyce's eyes still unblinking. The fingers never touch, because they can't. This moment always fails to live up to our expectations of it, never follows the script exactly as it should. Death doesn't come with exposition that wraps it in a neat and tidy bow.

[21] "Just before the fingers can touch," Wilcox writes, "the picture cuts to black; the episode is over. That unmitigated cut to black—sharp, sudden, silent—is itself a representation of death. We do not cross the threshold; the final blackness plunges us into mystery" (189). We blink one last time (the cut to black once again imitating the action of our own eyes), but this time our eyes don't open. The screen stays black. The final cut stands in for our own death, our own annihilation. This act of reaching and then the sudden cut to black alludes to Kristeva's notion of the abject, which "beseeches" and "pulverizes." Kristeva writes, "It is the human corpse that occasions the greatest concentration of abjection and fascination" (149). The body confirms us, our existence, our solidity, and yet it is a reminder that we too die. There's no person in there, and not even the semblance of a person. The body is just a shell, a casing, a pod, and it doesn't rise. It just lies there. But, in this, there is something honest, something intensely real, about the corpse. Many of us shuffle about as though we're solid when, in fact, there's very little or nothing inside. The corpse doesn't have to do nearly as much shuffling to prove it's solid. It just is. And what's inside is exactly what's on the outside, not a person, just flesh.

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<sup>[i]</sup>For example, Christina Kover argues in a paper presented at the 2005 "Bring Your Own Subtext" conference at the University of Huddersfield, "In performing a role that is culturally considered masculine with a body that is considered both biologically female and feminine, Buffy's performance is more than just a mere reinscription of dominant norms of masculinity and femininity. At the same time that it repeats existing norms of gender, it also recontextualizes them in a parodistic manner and can thus be considered a subversive repetition of these norms."

Also, Susan A. Owen writes in "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: Vampires, Postmodernity, and Postfeminism," "The Series reconfigures some of the relations of power in the body rhetorics of horror and action by relocating narrative agency from masculine to feminine" (30).

<sup>[ii]</sup>According to Mary Ann Doane in "The Voice in the Cinema: the Articulation of Body and Space," the diegesis is "a virtual space constructed by the film" (367). So, non-diegetic sound would be any sound that occurs outside of this space, including voice-over, musical score, etc. The lack of non-diegetic sound, then, suggests a closed world, a world that happens entirely on film, and yet the audience is brought into that world, nevertheless, by the very universal themes that the episode explores. Doane continues, "The body reconstituted by technology and practices of the cinema is a *phantasmatic* body . . . The addition of sound to the cinema introduces the possibility of representing a fuller (and organically unified) body" (363-364). The lack of non-diegetic sound ultimately draws attention to the sounds of the body itself, as when we hear Joyce's ribs break as Buffy attempts to administer CPR. The absence of music allows Whedon to focus even more attention on the very authentic diegetic sounds we hear throughout the episode, something that brings a stark physicality to an otherwise "phantasmatic" (2-dimensional, transparent, filmic) body.

<sup>[iii]</sup>For Jean Baudrillard, the hyperreal is "when simulation feels more real than reality itself" (343).

<sup>[iv]</sup>Virginia Woolf writes in *Orlando*, "Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us . . . It is the clothes that wear us and not we them" (187-189). Woolf's thoughts are

quite similar to Judith Butler's notions of performativity, where identity becomes a costume put on and taken off like articles of clothing.

[v] Rob Cover discusses how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* treats performative and abject selves in "(Re)Cognising the Body: Performativity, Embodiment and Abject Selves in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*": "What the series *Buffy* demonstrates, then, is an attitude towards the body and embodiment that actively seeks the gaps in the production of normativity. By showing how figures of the abject are assumed into the performance of bodily coherence, the series seeks to find new ways in which corporeal integrity can be represented" (81). While what Cover argues here is slightly different from my own argument, he also recognizes the power of the abject to muddy the shiny veneer of the performative self.

[vi] Susan A. Owen writes, "When the vampires are staked by Buffy and her assistants, they desiccate into powder, leaving no messy residue or unpleasant trace of death and decay" (27).

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