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"Over-identify much?": Passion, "Passion," and the Author-Audience Feedback Loop in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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> In my experience, people worried about reading in, or over-interpretation, or going too far, are typically afraid of getting started, of reading as such, as if afraid that texts—like people, like times and places—mean things and moreover mean more than you know. This may be a healthy fear, that is a fear of something fearful. Still, my experience is that most texts, like most lives, are under-read, not over-read. . . . This is suggestive of a pervasive conflict suffered by Americans about their own artistic achievements, a conflict that might be described elsewhere as America's over-praising and undervaluing of those of its accomplishments that it does not ignore.
>
> Stanley Cavell (35, 39)

> Willow: "Angel stopped by? Wow. Was there... Well, I mean, was it having to do with kissing?"
> Buffy: "Willow, grow up. Not everything is about kissing."
> Xander: (to Willow) "Yeah. Some stuff's about groping." (to Buffy) "It wasn't about groping?"
> Buffy: "Okay, hormones on parade here?"
>
> — "When She Was Bad" (2001)

[1] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* created a process in which the authors, the text, and the audience informed and influenced one another in an especially important manner. Umberto Eco, in writing about the rights of texts and interpreters of texts, provides an apt summary of the feedback loop observed here:

> Since the intention of the text is basically to produce a model reader able to make conjectures about it, the initiative of the model reader consists in figuring out a model author that is not the empirical one and that, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text. Thus, more than a parameter to use in order to validate the interpretation, the text is an object that the interpretation builds up in the course of the circular effort of validating itself on the basis of what it makes up as its result. (Collini 64)

Authors and audiences imagine and construct models of one another by means of the text. The text is built by interpretation but also provides limits for valid interpretation of it. Critical readers make initial judgments about the model audience. They make these judgments largely from their experience of the text while experiencing it, rather than from observing the author or others in the audience. Critical readers then confirm or reevaluate that hypothesis in light of later developments in the text. If a sufficiently negative hypothesis is confirmed, critical readers may then choose to opt out of experiencing the narrative further.

[2] In serial narratives, however, empirical authors (the person or persons creating the text to be shared) create additional texts informed by their imagined model of the audience. Empirical audiences (the persons with whom the empirical authors' work is shared) then change their imagined model of the author in light of the new evidence provided by the evolving serial text. The result, for Eco, is not a direct communication between empirical authors and interpreters. It is an indirect dialogue between empirical authors and their imagined models of their text's interpreters on the one hand and between empirical audiences and their imagined models of the authors implied by the text on the other. This conversation can be repetitive, requiring little alteration in either's model of the other. Aaron Spelling's *Charmed* serves as a useful example of the repetitive author-text-audience paradigm, in which dozens of episodes seem to have been inspired by the costume changes that they would require. Or, an empirical author may create an innovative serial work that challenges empirical critical readers of it to live up to the empirical author's especially demanding model of the audience. Those empirical critical readers, potentially, could then challenge that empirical author to live up to their model of an especially innovative author. Serial narratives that are consistently innovative are created out of an indirect dialogue between authors and audiences in which each encourages the other to strive to embody an ever-shifting ideal.

[3] So which conversation do we have with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: repetitive or challenging? As someone who teaches a course on the series, it's a heated conversation that occurs early in the semester and is returned to frequently. There's something about teaching *BtVS* that elicits hostility and derision. Typically, it begins with the title. As one female former student put it in a posting to my class web site, "This discussion should drop considering we are discussing a show whose lead character is named well . . . BUFFY. For Christ's sakes, need I say more?"[1] Then, the discussion moves towards a suspicion about the general project of taking entertainment seriously. This kind of overt suspicion along the lines also was presented by Adam Buckman, writing in part about David Lavery's media course on *BtVS* in *The New York Post*: "Apparently, some professors think TV shows are as legitimate as books" (Buckman 3). I teach in a media program, so students express this sentiment more subtly. They never bat an eye at material from "serious" material like *Roots* or *Oz* or *Twin Peaks*. But when some students perceive the material to be entertaining, they get suspicious and defensive. One male former student was forthright in his objections along these lines, writing:

> "I feel as though by putting that much thought into viewing a show, you can't really appreciate it for its true purpose—entertainment—or admire its

> technical achievements or lack thereof. Can't we enjoy these works of art for what they are, while still taking in . . . [those] meanings [that] exist? We don't need to go searching for them. . . . does everything have to be analyzed? Can't we sit back and enjoy the show?"

If it's not sad, or boring, or foreign, or at least something high-minded and difficult, students begin to worry about "over-interpretation," as one student put it. Since discussing such fears and insecurities is one central purpose for the serious study of popular culture, *BtVS* serves as a useful catalyst for investigating the possible meanings of entertainment.

[4] But the reaction to the series would be unremarkable if it weren't for a second line of objection: Namely, that *BtVS* is too sexy, and thus too juvenile, to be taken seriously. As another female former student sarcastically objected,

> "In the handful (read: 2) episodes of *Buffy* I've ever seen, I found them both boring and juvenile—and no, I don't think watching a couple more episodes will change my opinion. The methods in which Buffy Summers poses herself as a gender role model seemed tired: not only is Buffy (played by Sarah Michelle Gellar) super hot, but she kicks ass! She's sexually attracted to her nemesis, and they do it! - thus, creating more tension within the plotline. Oh, and did I mention there are VAMPIRES!?!"

Her perception of the horror genre led her to have a very particular audience in mind for *BtVS*: male, adolescent, and leering. Essentially, her imagined audience is composed of people who act like Xander did in the first season, when "seeing scantily clad girls in revealing postures was a spiritual experience" for him, as Willow puts it in "The Witch" (1003). This perception of the audience was central to her critique of even the possibility of taking the series seriously.

[5] Yet, a male former student also objected to taking the series seriously because of his perception of the audience:

> "The show may appear to be feminist, which could be true, but I don't believe that was the writer's intent. I also believe that he just chose a female to play the main character because it would be different from the norm and more marketable. It may also help that girls would want to see a girl on the show too. It seems like this cheesy melodrama is marketed to young females. I do not think that this show is too "deep" because most pre-pubescent girls would not pick up on such things."

His perception of the melodrama genre led him to have a very particular audience in mind as well: female, adolescent, and shallow. His imagined audience is composed of dateless Willows, getting their "vicarious smoochies" from Buffy ("Hush" 4010). These two students would have agreed wholeheartedly with Whedon's characterization of *BtVS* as "a show by losers for losers" ("Wit and Wisdom of Joss Whedon"). The perceived nature of the audience of *BtVS* was as important to these writers at least as the content of the episodes themselves and influenced their understanding of authorial

intent as well. For example, not even a class discussion of the similarities between the rape myth and the vampire myth could budge them from their position. Each myth features a typically male monster, whose only weapon is his body, who most often catches an attractive woman alone and drains her vital fluids. . . and if he does it often enough, and the right way, the victim begins to actively participate in it. To these students, an interrogation of said subtext wasn't there, or wasn't relevant, because their imagined audience would never pick up on it.[2]

[6] Perhaps the most erudite voice for this kind of suspicion can be found in Michael P. Levine and Steven Jay Schneider's "Feeling for Buffy: The Girl Next Door" in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*. Levine and Schneider dismissed many of the arguments for the artistic and political merits of *BtVS*. Instead, like my students, the authors state that the appeal of the series is that it offers its viewers two "girls next door" upon which they can "project and direct their narcissistic (and other) fantasies . . ." (Levine and Schneider 296). Before advancing their own Freudian theory, the authors confront some of the many opposing scholarly understandings of the meanings produced by this narrative. They dismiss Stacey Abbott's discussion of how the series "dismantles and rebuilds" the vampire genre by asserting "the symbols in question are employed in *BtVS* superficially and willy-nilly" (297). No examples from the series are used to support this assertion, despite the prior criticism that other scholars present arguments whose supports "often consist of little more than the presentation of plot précis" (295). The authors then flatly state that Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery's "idea that *BtVS* somehow takes these problems seriously, where these other programs do not, is just false" (298). Again, they offer no evidence to support such an assertion. Like my students, they seem to feel that one needn't take a program like *BtVS* seriously even to prove that you shouldn't take it seriously. Instead, they suggest that these scholars (and, by implication, any writer who takes the series seriously) are "acting out their own fantasies in relation to the program" (299). A former student of mine was more direct in an online post to < *www.livejournal.com* >: "I got the impression that he was sort of a perv. He's obsessed with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" (posted 2005-05-29 05:06 pm UTC). This style of argumentation places *BtVS* scholars in an impossible bind, of course. To respond would only demonstrate a defensiveness that suggested that these barbs hit too close to home. It's a critical observation designed to shut down future critical investigation.

[7] Clearly, Levine and Schneider decided relatively early that the narrative was repetitive comfort food and no longer worth critical inquiry. What suggests such a decision is a very representative, very revealing, and quite false statement: ". . . there is no horror in *BtVS* at all" (Levine and Schneider 297). Here, the authors suggest that the series creators tend to activate the off-screen space in pursuit of the "startle effect" rather than produce "true chills, uncanniness, or horror –proper" (297). Again, no examples are offered from the series itself, which makes this point difficult to pin down. While the horror genre is tangential to that particular article's thesis, their declaration is significant because Schneider and, to a lesser extent, Levine, are experienced critics of the horror genre in contemporary cinema. Schneider wrote *Designing Fear: An Aesthetics of Cinematic Horror* and edited or co-edited four books that engage in the theory of that genre. Levine contributed "A Fun Night Out: Horror and Other Pleasures of the Cinema" to *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud's Worst Nightmare*, a book edited by Schneider. With such an academic background, a reader can take seriously

Schneider's jest that he "majored in slaying" (South 320).

[8] It's suggestive, then, that *BtVS* embodies many of the traits Schneider deemed essential to understanding the horror genre in his scholarship on the genre. When one applies his theories from "Murder as Art/The Art of Murder: Aestheticizing Violence in Modern Cinematic Horror," and "Monsters as (Uncanny) Metaphors: Freud, Lakoff, and the Representation of Monstrosity in Cinematic Horror," one finds that there are quite a few moments that induce chills, uncanniness and horror in *BtVS*. Just as for some of my incredulous students, the imagined nature of the (scholarly) audience of *BtVS* prevented Levine and Schneider from taking the series seriously, so much so that they fail to recognize a clear application of their theory of horror.

[9] In "Murder as Art/The Art of Murder," Schneider argues that classic era horror films equate monstrousness with flawed, degraded, or corrupt works of art. He cites James Whale's *Frankenstein* (Universal 1931), where Henry rejects his creation as a reminder of his inability to produce work of sufficient beauty. In *Phantom of the Opera* (Universal 1925/29), Lon Chaney's gruesome makeup and facial contortion make him a hideous thing when contrasted with ornate surroundings. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (MGM 1945) similarly plays with these themes as the portrait reflects the corruption of the protagonist. In German Expressionism, highly stylized set designs and deliberately exaggerated performances provide a reflection of psychological instability of the antagonist. This movement "makes apparent the internal workings of an anguished self" (Schneider 175). For Schneider, it still qualified as derivative version because the "audience's focus tends to be not so much on these creature's abnormal psychologies as on the remote manifestations of such perverse and dangerous minds" (176).

[10] These classic horror films defined monstrousness in primarily aesthetic terms, not moral, philosophical, or spiritual ones, writes Schneider. This connection is due not to "culturally enforced equation between inner and outer beauty and goodness, along with its converse" but instead to widespread cultural influence of artistic legitimacy as beauty rather than difficulty or incongruity, as with Marcel Duchamp, for example (Schneider 176).

[11] Schneider then suggests that modern horror films depict the Monster as a corrupt or degraded artist. These films represent murder as an art form and murderers as artists. They showcase murder as an artistic product or as artistic performance. These movies reflect the modern notion that art need not command admiration, as horror paralleled a shift in the meaning of art towards shock, transgression, and offensiveness.

[12] The slasher genre is typically more interested in murder as artistic performance. According to Schneider, the pleasure is in appreciating the surprisingly resourceful killer who dispatches victims in increasingly creative ways. The appeal for audiences lies in displays of ingenuity and showmanship, inviting a complex and partially aesthetic response. Schneider asks us to think of Freddy Krueger as a fictional performance artist whose specialty is the destruction of existing artworks rather than the creation of new ones.

[13] The "Murder as Artistic Product" strand of this theory placed an emphasis on scene of crime and/or remains of victims, rather than the motive, methods or presence of the murderer. One subgenre has dead bodies literally reused for practical purposes, most notably as food or as paint. Hannibal Lecter's prison cell escape in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Orion Pictures 1991) elicited more than shock for Schneider. It rose to the level of appalled appreciation of ingenuity. Schneider asked us to consider *Se7en*'s

(New Line Cinema 1995) use of dead bodies, carefully arranged to make comprehensive statements on sin, in this light as well. Great emphasis was placed on control in the composition of mise-en-scène. Under this approach, the creative authority shifts from the director to the murderer, who functions as a set designer within the narrative space. Authorship inside and outside of the narrative collapses. The monster becomes the sublimated alter ego of the director, in whose hands the audience finds themselves.

[14] Clearly, there are several “Big Bads” in *BtVS* who might easily be described as corrupt or degraded artists. As an incorporeal being, the First Evil, season seven’s chief villain, can only take on the appearance of the dead. It might be thought of as an impersonator and storyteller. After Willow discovers its ruse of claiming to be a conduit to Tara in the afterlife in “Conversations with Dead People” (7007), it solicits a critique of its performance and narrative construction, asking, “Suicide thing was too far, huh? Hmm. You seemed so ripe... I stand by my opinion. The world would be a better place if you took a razorblade to your wrist. . . I can see it now. Candlelight, the Indigo Girls playing, picture of your dead girlfriend on your bloody lap.” Given the still-simmering eruption of fan outrage over Tara’s death, this impersonation has a particular horror for fans of the series. (For a fine overview of the Tara/Willow controversy at the end of season six, see Julie Tabron’s article in *Slayage*.) Jenny Calendar returns twice as a temptress figure, for Giles in “Becoming, Part Two” (2022) by means of Drusilla’s hypnotic powers and for Angel in “Amends” (3010) via The First Evil. Jenny’s return signaled the power of the audience’s memory of her. Her death and life gave her character the power to make this visitation even more of an upsetting violation. The horror is the result of more than just the temptation of Angel and Giles. It’s who’s doing it as well. And in season seven, Tara as a character had such power and the fandom’s emotions were so raw, that the scene of a purported message from her is deeply upsetting without even seeing her. The trauma of a character’s death is in precise relation to the amount of emotion invested by the audience. Yet it is important to note that The First Evil does not impersonate Tara, but only claims to be speaking for her. It seems that Tara cannot be represented, visually or in voice. The fact that Tara is one of the few deceased major characters not represented directly by The First Evil indicates not only the character’s lingering power but also the creators’ judgment of just how horrifying such a scene was likely to be to their fan base.[3]

[15] There are other examples of villains as corrupt or degraded artists in *BtVS*. Glory, from season five, is obviously presented as a diva, with her entourage of incompetent sycophants, her love of bubble baths, her racks of designer clothes, and most especially her temper tantrums. Of course, Glory demonstrates none of the creativity of the diva. Nor does she show much of The First Evil’s interest in creative or theatrical cruelty, with the possible exception of taking the time to precisely explain the torment that she will inflict upon Tara:

> “It doesn't kill you. What it does ... is make you feel like you're in a noisy little dark room ... naked and ashamed ... and there are things in the dark that need to hurt you because you're bad ... little pinching things that go in your ears ... and crawl on the inside of your skull. And you know ... that if the noise and the crawling would stop ... that you could remember how to get out. But you never, ever will.” –“Tough Love” (5019)

The lack of consistently creative performance of evil may make describing her as a diva problematic or it may simply indicate that this figure now connotes epic self-involvement rather than any particular kind of creative expression.

[16] Further, the Trio present a compelling picture of wanna-be artists. Their insipid squabbles over plot points in comic books and the merits of the actors who played the role of James Bond indicate the depth of their knowledge of popular culture. Even the most ordinary of Andrew's lines features incessant quotation of dialogue from popular film and television. A typical example can be found in "Two to Go" (6021), when Andrew starts to panic over Willow's incipient arrival: "You saw her! She's a truck-driving Magic Mama! And we've got maybe seconds before Darth Rosenberg grinds everybody into Jawa-burgers, and not one of you bunch has the midichlorians to stop her." That's three *Star Wars* references jammed into one sentence. Andrew seems to hoard this knowledge to help him perform under pressure, as when he coolly references the traditional parting shot of B-movie villains just before activating his jet pack in "Seeing Red" (6019), saying, "Well played, Slayer. . . . This round to you. But the game is far from over." The black magic dealer, Rack, even guesses that The Trio was the name of a failed rock band in "Villains" (6020). That episode twice shows Warren incredulous at their anonymity as villains. The imagined presence of an admiring audience seems to be as important to him as the pleasures of getting away with the crimes themselves. These three nerds clearly want to become star performers in genre entertainment. And since Jonathan already failed in writing himself into a narrative as the hero in "Superstar" (4017), they'll just have to play the part of the villains. Finally, Andrew, after The First Evil convinces him to murder Jonathan to begin season seven, copes with his loss and guilt by constructing ever more elaborate fictions to rewrite reality to make him a tragic or heroic figure (or even simply an all-knowing narrator) in "Storyteller" (7017). By this point, this tendency has become so apparent that Buffy loses patience with him, saying, "Shut up. You always do this. You make everything into a story so no one's responsible for anything because they're just following a script." The villains of seasons five, six, and seven all fit Schneider's notion of the modern monster as corrupt or degraded artists—as, of course, does Angelus.

[17] The earliest episode that most clearly demonstrates that *BtVS* created an innovative serial work that challenged both authors and audience to live up to each other's ideals is arguably "Passion" (2017), which makes the cool appreciative distance of the audience from the corrupt artist central. (It's also the earliest episode that clearly features a major monster as a corrupt or degraded artist.) Previously on *BtVS*, Buffy made love with her boyfriend, the ensouled vampire, Angel, an event momentous in her sex life (he is her first sexual partner) and his (in the afterglow of the act, he experiences a moment of true happiness which causes him to lose his soul, becoming the soulless vampire Angelus.) The episodes leading up "Passion" (2017) feature Angel going out of his way to torment Buffy and her loved ones, from trying to end the world to inflicting emotional trauma by telling Buffy's mother, Joyce, of his one-night stand with her daughter. His cruelest gambit is in "Innocence" (2014), before Buffy knows that anything is wrong with him. Unable to find Angel all day after waking up alone the morning after, she finally talks to him for the first time since their night together. Angelus makes use of every nightmare cliché of the callous man after a one-night-stand. He downplays the significance of their lovemaking, calling it "a good time." He plays on Buffy's insecurities about her inexperience, observing that "You got a lot to learn about men, kiddo. Although I guess you proved that last night." While pretending

to assuage those fears, he rubs salt in the wound by calling her “a pro” in bed. He ends by off-handedly saying he loves her, promising to call her as he ambles out the door. In “Passion” (2017), Angelus murders Jenny Calendar and leaves her body in Rupert Giles’ bed. As part of this stratagem, Angelus leaves sketches that provide clues as to his activities: a portrait of Buffy lets her know that he’s been in her bedroom, a second (of Joyce) left for Buffy in Willow’s bedroom suggests that he is with her mother, a third portrait (of the dead Jenny) goads the grief-stricken Giles into avenging his girlfriend’s death via a suicidal assault on the far more powerful vampire in his lair. One of my female students remarked that "Passion" (2017) was one of her favorite episodes, but that she disliked watching it. What she was alluding to was the connection of horror to the peculiar bittersweet pleasures of melodrama, crystallized in an appreciation of the skillful performances and fragile formal beauty in the episode’s most heart-wrenching scenes. It's this awful mix of implication and identification that is central to understanding the precise nature of the dynamic between author and audience in this series.

[18] The sense that the fan of *BtVS* is implicated by the crimes of Angelus is the result of his redefinition of the space of the series itself. Karen Sayer offered a productive notion that places are not just location or territory, but are inseparable from the consciousnesses of the people in them. This concept applies to the narrative space of the television series itself, perhaps even more so. As Sayer writes,

> “Places are fusions of human and natural orders and are significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world. They are defined less by unique locations, landscapes and communities than by the focusing of experiences and intentions onto particular settings. . . . Place, whether fictional or real, is always imagined.” (Sayer 101)

Places are products of discourse: multiple, contingent, and in peril, as Angelus revealed in the case of *BtVS* (Sayer, 101).

[19] The threat of Angelus is not solely that Angel might be slain and that we might be denied the pleasures of further romantic plotting. His threat is that he revealed that no place (and certainly not Sunnydale) has a single rooted identity. Angelus systematically rewrites the settings within the series, the rules of the series itself, and our relationship to the series. Angel’s invitation to the homes of Buffy, Willow, and Giles—an invitation offered by the characters but also by the audience’s own narrative and erotic desires—allows Angelus to seize those places. The despoilment of these sanctuaries elicits a perverse pleasure, providing the chills of horror, but not the screams.

[20] Angelus seizes the place constructed by artistic conventions of the series. For the first time, a villain has power of voiceover, enabling him to serve as the storyteller, the narrative guide. Angelus becomes the center to patterns of editing, rather than Buffy. It is his position that is adopted by the camera as viewers watch Buffy and Willow react to the death of Jenny Calendar. The (false) assumption that these rules are not subject to change perfectly indicates Sayer’s notion that those who deny the hybrid quality of space, “wish to see a place, especially a place called home, as providing stability, oneness and security. . . associate it with stasis, nostalgia, and enclosed security” (Sayer 101). This observation explains the seeming conflict between my student’s praise of the episode and her visceral dislike of it. This episode threatened

the comforting quality of the favored series for the fan.

[21] Revealed here are the fan's conflicting desires for change and for the kind of emotional security and communion offered by an evolving series marked by the devotion of a small band of fans.[4] The violation of narrative and extra-narrative place in this episode threatens the audience's access to these places and past experience of them. The trauma is to the viewers as well as to the characters. Recall Aristotle's description of pathos, "A sort of pain at an evident evil of a destructive or painful kind in the case of somebody who does not deserve it, the evil being one which we might imagine to happen to ourselves" (Singer 45). The trauma that the characters experience parallels our trauma. Angelus threatens to revise our experience of the series, not merely end the world. The meanings of serial narratives are never static in how they are understood. They are always being reconstructed with input from new episodes, especially with moments that reference prior elements and rewrite our memory of those scenes as significant, or telling, or foreshadowing. Audiences know this, consciously, semi-consciously or unconsciously. This episode threatens not simply the future of the narrative but our past experience of it. It presents the possibility of the total destruction of bittersweet, "rather poetic, in a maudlin sort of way" relationship between Buffy and Angel, as Giles put it in "Out of Mind, Out of Sight" (1011).

[22] Umberto Eco writes that the ordinary series promises a constant narrative that gives the illusion of change, within which "the secondary characters must give the impression that [their] new story is different from the preceding ones, while in fact the narrative scheme does not change" (Battis 2-3). Repetition gives the typical series an emotional currency with its audience, for such constancy "consoles us, because it rewards our ability to foresee: we are happy because we discover our own ability to guess what will happen" (3).

[23] Yet, with this episode, the series constructs a different kind of viewing audience, if those viewers can rise to the demands made on them by Joss Whedon and company. "There are serial works," Eco writes, "that establish an explicit agreement with the critical reader and thus . . . challenge him to acknowledge the innovative aspects of the text" (Battis 4). One is, of course, free not to participate in the double codes of foreshadowing and subtext. Commercially successful television is always multi-layered and accommodates those who do not wish to be challenged by their media. One can easily watch *The Simpsons* just for the pleasures provided by Homer's pratfalls or watch *BtVS* for "the draw of schoolgirl sex," as Levine and Schneider put it (307).

[24] In the second season of *BtVS*, Eco's challenge took the form of a betrayal. Viewers placed their faith and their trust in the pleasures of the romance genre, fully knowing that the series made use of the melodrama and horror genres too. Our betrayal mirrors Buffy's in important ways here. But it is Whedon, not Angelus, who is our monster.

[25] Whedon and Angelus together create our awful suspicion as Giles smiles and smoothes his hair upon seeing the bottle of champagne at his flat. Together, they suspend viewers in that dread as he steadily advances up the rose petal-strewn stair. In addition to serving as sketch artist in this episode, Angelus is the diegetic set designer, positioning Jenny's body just so in Giles' bed.[5] But it is also Whedon who is the director here, timing the cut to the close-up of the smashed wine glass as it crashes to the floor to mesh with the crescendo of the aria. Viewers share Giles' position as audience to tragedy here, which can only mean a commonality between Angelus and Whedon. (After all, Angelus even leaves stage directions for the other

characters, in the form of the sketches.)[6] The monster authors these moments as the distinction between the two figures begins to collapse.

[26] Yet, in several important ways, the viewer cannot claim to be different from these monstrous authors. As in all great horror films, the chills result from the recognition of oneself in the form of the awful Other. Like Angelus, viewers have sampled the pleasures of sadism. After all, is there not a visceral thrill when Buffy kicks Angelus in the groin during the final fight of “Innocence” (2014)? After his post-coital callousness, isn’t it even better that she steps into it, really letting her right leg fly out to full extension? Is there not a visceral thrill when Giles smashes Angel in the face with a baseball bat at the end of “Passion” (2017)? Is there not a cold joy at the grace with which he swings, lighting it on fire as he reaches back before letting his arm fly? As Schneider wrote, “consumers of these fictions are once again encouraged, occasionally forced, to acknowledge a side of themselves they normally keep hidden, even from themselves—a side that enjoys, appreciates, and admires the display of creative killings.” The action genre, after all, shares this common pleasure with the slasher subgenre. It is why Angelus laughs as he’s being beaten at the end of “Passion” (2017). Angelus sees himself in Buffy.

[27] Viewers can value the beauty of that scene in Giles’ flat, even as they recoil in horror. Even in the midst of Jenny’s death scene, viewers can appreciate Whedon’s decision to use shots that have moonlight show the audience flashes of Jenny’s face as she flees Angelus through the school corridors, rather than mundanely cutting to reaction shots. But later, the audience, like Buffy, shares enough of Angelus’ artistic sensibilities to decode the meaning of the murder scene. Viewers know that Xander is both right and wrong when he observes that Giles had a big night planned.[7] This connection between audience and monster is furthered when Angelus, as audience, peers in through the glass frame of a window to witness the sorrow of Buffy and Willow, as viewers have so many Tuesday nights in the past. Whedon forces an awareness of this connection by using Angelus to center a point of view sequence. Our perspective is Angelus’ perspective. The pleasures faithful viewers draw from the melodrama of the series bear an uncomfortable resemblance to Angelus’ pleasure at watching the emotional distress of Buffy as she slides to the floor and of Willow as she wails in the arms of Joyce. Both the audience and Angelus draw pleasure from pain. As Schneider observes about modern horror films generally, “. . . to the extent that we as viewers find ourselves interested [it is] to that extent we are implicated in the murders he commits to obtain them” (Schneider and Shaw 177). Whedon draws a connection between the appreciation of displays of emotional trauma by the audience of melodrama and the monstrous artist of the modern horror film, who uses violence to create such scenes for his private amusement.

[28] After this episode, the place of the series is no longer defined by its oneness. Conventions are not static but vulnerable. This episode presents the first moment that the series itself and the fan relationship to it were fair game. This intimate connection to it, perceptually and emotionally, can be violated. The series cannot be a virtual home because it cannot again offer security of static underlying structure. If Angelus can rewrite its conventions and seize the narrative center, others may, both inside and outside the narrative. Such malleability anticipates episodes that make the artistic conventions of the series their explicit subject, such as “The Wish” (3009), “Doppelgangland” (3016), “Superstar” (4017), and “Normal Again” (6017).[8]

[29] Most often, the contract between genre and audience indicates that the viewer’s

pleasure itself, the thing truly held dear, is not subject to the threat of critique. Horror's underlying structure provides that safety net. That rule is not subject to change without accusations of betrayal, of bad faith. Yet that foundational complacency is precisely what this series challenges here. In threatening the investment of the audience in the series, the series' creators make viewers conscious of their commitment to it so that they might reexamine how they express it. For the series to matter, for it to provide the best pleasure, it must threaten all that is held dear. If fans haven't been doing so already, the series' creators encourage the audience to do what Buffy and the others have done within the school library: make a home by reworking relationships, rather than by accepting what is given. Soliciting such awareness could encourage the production and consumption of fan fiction, rather than disavow it. Fostering such a critical perspective could be a prerequisite for the kind of subversive readings some fans demonstrated in their understanding of Faith's betrayal in season three (cf. Tjardes) and the fate of Tara and Willow in season six (cf. Tabron).

[30] The true subject of this episode, like that of the horror film generally for Schneider, is "the struggle for validation of all that our civilization disavows or denies" (*The Horror Film Reader* 173). Seeing ourselves reflected in Angelus as sadistic voyeurs creates an experience of the uncanny such that to escape it we must rewrite our understanding of the series. That project begins, perhaps, with a sense of unease at the lessons Buffy professes to learn from this experience. She becomes similar to Angelus in important ways by the end of "Passion" (2017). Viewing the rose petals and the champagne left behind at Giles' flat, Buffy observes, "this is the wrapping for the gift." She's achieved the kind of emotional distance necessary to critique the scene, but which was also necessary to craft it. At the end of this episode, Buffy adopts the cold voice that had been so suited for the soulless vampire. The only comfort she can offer Giles at Jenny's graveside is that she is "sorry that I couldn't kill him for you." Such cool critical distance becomes disturbing precisely because it is so reminiscent of the dispassionate monologue that Angelus delivered near the end of the episode, in which he states, "If we could live without passion, maybe we'd know some kind of peace. But we would be hollow. Empty rooms, shuttered and dank. . . Without passion, we'd be truly dead." This emotional hollowness seems to be a necessary precondition for his monstrous behavior. The audience has to be able to step back from savage blood lust to understand Buffy's decision at the end of "Becoming, Part Two" (2022), in which Angelus seeks to end the world by creating a portal that will suck the world into a Hell dimension. What they must be prepared for is not why she kills Angel, re-ensouled by Willow's spell after he has created the vortex, but rather why she kisses him tenderly before doing so. The critical awareness of the horror genre here prepares the way.

[31] "Passion" (2017) demonstrates all of the essentials of Schneider's theory of the monster as corrupt artist. Angelus might plausibly be thought of as a depraved artist. The distinction between Angelus and Whedon collapses in "Passion" (2017), as they collaborate to achieve maximum impact in the reception of the crime scene. Buffy serves as the detective/viewer, gradually developing enough distance to share the aesthetic sensibility with Angelus necessary to foil him. Yet this subject position, while useful in this episode, is ultimately suspect in the season as a whole. In "I Only Have Eyes for You" (2019), Buffy's hatred for her former lover overtly impedes her investigation into the episode's murders, which are sparked by a ghost reliving a tragic love affair. Concerned, Giles speaks both to Buffy directly (and the viewing audience indirectly) when he gently chastises her thirst for vengeance by stating, "To forgive is

an act of compassion, Buffy. It's, it's not done because people deserve it. It's done because they need it." Buffy disagrees vehemently with this sentiment, saying, "No. James destroyed the one person he loved the most in a moment of blind passion. And that's not something you forgive. No matter why he did what he did. And no matter if he knows now that it was wrong and selfish and stupid, it is just something he's gonna have to live with." After she stalks off, Cordelia, ever the truth-teller, notes the connection Buffy drew between herself and James' murdered love, saying, "Over-identify much?" In "Becoming, Part One" (2021), Buffy's eagerness to confront Angelus is her undoing, leading to the death of Kendra, the capture of Giles, and serious injuries to Xander and Willow. Even Angelus notes the pattern, laughing, "And you fall for it every single time!" "Passion" (2017) begins the process of implicating the viewer in Buffy's position in a manner very similar to the unease generated by Schneider's modern horror film.

[32] A central technique of this season of *BtVS* is the chilling loss of equilibrium typical of the experience of the uncanny. Curtis Bowman, in "Heidegger, the Uncanny, and Jacque Tourneur's Horror Films," suggested that Heidegger's notion of the uncanny describes an experience in which "however briefly, we are no longer at home in the world, even if only in our imaginations" (Bowman 73). The parallel drawn by the voiceover narration in "Passion" (2017) begins a process of gently encouraging viewers to face their beliefs through the shaky metaphysical status of one vampire. Whedon guides his audience into two "conflicts of judgment," as Schneider described this aspect of Freud's theory of the uncanny. Whedon first exploits fan assumptions about Angel in "Innocence" (2014) by shifting Angel's past into a present alter ego. He then begins a process of creating a second conflict of judgment about that revised judgment in "Passion" (2017), which culminates in "Becoming, Part Two" (2022). In so doing, Whedon guides the audience by season's end to an investigation of their accustomed ways of thinking about identity and being, authenticity and duty, caring and vengeance.

[33] Such a conflict can only occur, however, when the audience believes that the events depicted could really happen (*The Horror Film Reader* 175). And, according to a much-quoted interview on "Fresh Air," Whedon believed that an important segment of his audience did feel that such trauma was authentic, saying,

> "That's why when we aired 'Innocence,' when Buffy slept with Angel and his curse went into effect and he became evil again, I went on the Internet and a girl typed in, `This is unbelievable. This exact thing happened to me,' and that's when I knew that we were doing the show right." (Lavery 7)

A female former student of mine also observed the relevance of these episodes of *BtVS* in her life, writing,

> "Watching the Buffy and Angel relationship again in season two, I realized how much my relationship in high school was similar. My parents didn't like the guy (among other problems with drugs and bad-boy attitude) and we

> had one of those, ‘I love you but I can't be with you" [relationships] for my entire high school career. Looking back, I wonder how much of the Angel/ Buffy relationship colored the way that I handled mine.”

Authors can challenge audiences to recognize the innovative character of their work and live up to the example of their imagined model audience, but with serial narratives in the digital era, audiences have the ability to challenge authors to live up to the example of their imagined author to a remarkable new degree. That challenge may take the form of informed praise or criticism on message boards, several of which were frequented by several members of the creative team behind *BtVS*.

[34] Indeed, the ill-fated *Firefly* series provided a telling example of how important fan feedback was in pushing the authors of that program onward to greater efforts. (Many important figures in the *BtVS* and *Angel* series’ creative teams also worked on *Firefly*, including writers Jane Espenson, Tim Minear, Ben Edlund, and Drew Z. Greenberg.) To support the struggling show, the fan base sent postcards to the Fox network and bought a full page ad to thank the network and its sponsors (*Firefly*). Joss Whedon described the daily impact of fans on the creative team in this way:

> “To know that the fans were becoming as obsessive about the show as we were, that quickly, was really just gratifying. You know, it’s easy to discount something like that, but in our situation, it wasn’t, because if we had gone on the boards and found a lackluster response or even just ‘Oh, that’s very nice,’ at some point we would have given up. We would have stopped fighting.” (*Firefly*)

This interview represents an author acknowledging the importance of the audience of an innovative text for their role in supporting the creation of future texts. Indeed, he would later remark that, “The people who are seeing this understand it. And, you know, there’s nothing more important. There’s only one reason to make art and that’s it” (*Firefly*).

[35] This challenge by the audience to the author to live up to the example of their model author can also take the form of the appropriations, alterations, affectionate kidding and critiques implicit in fan fiction. Jane Espenson, co-executive producer and writer on *BtVS*, highlighted how much her work was informed by fan fiction, when she wrote in *Slayer Slang*: “With so many of us laboring over so many years and with so many fans writing about the show, and indulging in creative fanfic, together we have extended the language of the Buffyverse” (Blasingame 1). In her case, at least, fans and authors used the series to play with language together.

[36] This challenge can also be in the form of direct, face-to-face meetings with fans. In an interview with *The Onion AV Club*, the interviewer asked Whedon how he dealt with the emotional intensity expressed by his fans at a comics convention, in which “many of the people who got up to ask questions were nearly in tears over the chance to get to talk to you. Some of them could barely speak, and others couldn't stop gushing about you, and about Buffy”(*Tenacity of the Cockroach*). His response? “Once the critics, after the first season, really got the show, we all sort of looked at each other and said, ‘Ohhh-kay...’ We thought we were going to fly under the radar, and nobody was going to notice the show. And then we had this responsibility, and we got kind of nervous. You don't want to let them down." Indeed, as early as the addition of Oz as a love interest for Willow in season two, the sense of increased responsibility

manifested itself in increased commitment by the author to the text. Whedon wrote a scene (in which Oz tactfully suggests that Willow may be hitting on him to work out her anger at Xander) specifically designed to persuade those viewers "angry" at the writers for shifting Willow's affections away from Xander. Whedon's standard was that he needed to make this recalcitrant audience ". . . not just accept a plot twist or a character, but making you need them, making you feel about a character the way your character is supposed to. It's the most difficult and important thing" ("Innocence"). For Whedon, letting the audience down meant having lowered standards for them, not just disappointing them.

[37] Of course, this feedback loop of authors, audiences and their models of one another—models that shift in response to the evolving serial narrative and to intermittent contact between the two via message boards, fan fiction, and direct conversation—gets still more complex once one admits the possibility of additional authors into the dynamic. One such addition would be the text itself as an author. In one interview, Whedon remarked that both *Angel* and *BtVS* have ". . . shown me things that I haven't expected. A work of art takes on a life beyond its creator, and when that happens, it's the most gratifying thing in the world. It's like raising a child who becomes a grownup and is suddenly talking to you. *Angel* has started to do that; *Angel* is talking to me now" (Lavery). Built by interpretation, the serial text defines the limits of the valid interpretation of it but also inspires the creation of new texts. In addition, this dynamic becomes much more complex when some parts of the audience believe that interests of one creator within the collaborative text of a television show runs counter to other creators, or even the dominant creator. Eliza Dushku has said that she received "probably twenty [hand-written letters] that say, 'I was being abused by a teacher, a stepfather, a brother, a neighbor. And the first day that Faith made it to my TV box, I started standing up for myself. If Faith has the power to stand up for herself, so can I.' That stuff trips me out. You can't ask for any better or greater kind of verification than that" (Reiss 164-5). They read her character against the grain, at least partially. In a very real sense, they followed Faith's advice to Buffy in her dream in "Graduation Day, Part Two" (3022) to "take what you need." These letters provided more than personal testimony. They expressed support for and solidarity with Dushku's efforts as an author and not Joss Whedon's, or Marti Noxon's, or Jane Espenson's. (After all, it was Dushku they confided in, not them.) They saw Dushku as needing the support that Faith had offered them. Faith, after all, was supposed to be an important villain in season three, even though she was their heroine.

[38] Fan and critical investment, it seems, sparked a greater authorial commitment to the series. These experiences led to an imagined audience marked by their emotional investment, which in turn led to episodes of formal adventurousness and emotional sincerity that depended on such an audience for its impact. Serial narratives that are consistently innovative are created out of an indirect dialogue between authors and audiences in which each encourages the other to strive to embody an ever-shifting ideal. The difficulty of living up to that shifting ideal is suggested by Whedon's nervousness, Espenson's use of the term "labor," and the fact the hand-written letters not only touched Dushku, they "tripped her out."

[39] Whedon and company's imagined audience, based on real experiences with critics and fans, led to a feedback loop of ever-greater commitment on the part of both audience and authors. As a result, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* does produce "true chills, uncanniness, or horror–proper" (Levine and Schneider 297). It provides such

experiences so that it can subvert the pleasures of sadistic voyeurism and blood lust so central to the genre. But this series can only shift the audience in that manner if the audience can hold up its end of Eco's bargain and "acknowledge the innovative aspects of the text." For some incredulous critics and viewers, however, the imagined nature of the (scholarly) audience of *BtVS* is more important than the content of the episodes themselves.

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All students gave permission for their comments to be published in this format, except for those comments that were posted in a public non-academic forum like livejournal.

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[1] Joss Whedon is intimately aware of this student's objection, saying, "The thing, though, about the show that I think holds it back is the wacky title. You know, people don't like the wacky title. It's not serious drama if you have a wacky title." (Lavery 4)
[2] Which student is right? Well, it's difficult enough for Nielsen Media Research to pin down precisely who is watching any given program. It's even more difficult to be precise about how audiences, generally or individually, actually understand and use the media that they consume. A definitive statement about the appeal of the series to actual audiences is premature.

Who watches *BtVS*? Early on, teens made up roughly two thirds of its audience, with more teen girls than boys watching during the first season. By seasons five and six, however, the series had a fairly even split between teens and adults 18-34 and between males and females. During the first season, teenage girls made up the largest segment of the audience, although teenage boys and adults together made up approximately the other half of the audience. During the May, 1997 sweeps period, the series drew a 3.4 rating with teen girls, a 2.0 rating with teen boys, and a 1.4 rating with adults ages 18 to 34 (Dempsey, 10). "Halloween" (2006) got a 3.7 rating with 6 percent share of households watching television (3.7/6). The episode garnered a 2.3/5 in adult viewers 18-49 years old and a 5.1/15 in teens (*Media Week*, 18). In season five, the series averaged a 2.7 rating with an 8 share of 12-34 year-old viewers (2.7/8) (Schlosser, 46). The premiere for that season nabbed third place among 18-34 year-old viewers, with a 3.5/11. The premiere was "second in its time period for its core demographic of females 12-34 (3.9/13) and women 18-34 (3.9/12)" (*Media Week*, 50). The finale, in which Buffy dies for the second time, pulled in a modest 2.6 rating among adults 18-49 (*Broadcasting & Cable*, 28). During season six from September 24 to December 16, *BtVS* got a 10 percent share of teens, a 9 share among both men and women audiences ages 18-34 and a 5 share of adults ages 35-49 (*Variety*, 15).

Why does the audience watch *BtVS*? What do they make of and with the series episodes? That's a question that's just beginning to be answered. For more information, see: Kirby Diaz, Zweerink and Gatson, Saxey, Tabron, Tjardes, Ryan, Stengel, Blasingame, Porter, Heinecken, Rosenfeld and Wynns, and Burr, among others.
[3] Here's a partial list of the characters that The First Evil impersonates: The Master, Drusilla, Mayor Wilkins, Adam, Glory, Warren, Caleb, Jonathan, Jenny Calendar, the potential slayer Eve, Spike, Cassie, Buffy, former slayer Nikki Wood, and possibly Joyce. The deceased major characters whose forms The First Evil did not assume include: Angel, Forrest, Maggie Walsh, Tara, and possibly Joyce. Editors' note: Amber Benson declined to reprise her role as Tara in this scene.
[4] The Nielsen ratings tell the tale. Each ratings point is intended to represent one percent of households in the U.S. The most watched episodes for each season,

according to figures provided by < *www.buffyguide.com* >, were: “Welcome to the Hellmouth/The Harvest” (1001, 1002), with 3.4 ratings points; “Innocence” (2014) with a 5.2, which placed it in a tie for 85th of 118 programs; “Anne” (3001) with a 4.7, which placed it in a tie for 80th of 114 programs; “The Freshman” (4001) with a 4.4, which placed it in a tie for 87th of 135 programs; and “No Place Like Home” (5005) with a 4.1, which placed it 88th of 139 programs. An important difference needs to be noted, however. The first season of the series was shown on Monday nights at 9 p.m. Starting with the second season, the series was moved to the more prominent Tuesday night slot at 8 p.m. The most competitive episode through season five was, believe it or not, “Real Me” (5002), the episode which featured Dawn for the first time after teasing her in the final shots of “Buffy vs. Dracula” (5001). It placed 62nd of 111 programs, with a 3.9 rating.

To open season six, the series got its second largest audience ever with 7.65 million viewers for the two episodes (*Variety*, 4). According to Heather M. Porter, the top ratings for the last two seasons of the series went to: “Bargaining (Part One)” (6001) and “Bargaining (Part Two)” (6002), with a 4.3 and 4.4, respectively. Four episodes in season seven pulled in a 3.1 Nielsen rating: “Lessons” (7001), “Beneath You” (7002), “Selfless” (7005), and “Conversations with Dead People” (7007).

[5] Angelus is most interested in the reception of his crime scene, which parallels how Schneider reads John Doe’s interests in **Se7en**. The chase, or “working up an appetite,” is what matters for Angelus. For all his taunting of Jenny in the classroom, his actual killing here is a contemptuous snapping of her neck. Flashbacks to Angelus during his time with Darla show him to be a bit more concerned with the creative killing in the mode of the slasher genre. In “Somnambulist” (A 1011), he even critiques the derivative quality of the recent killings of his former protégé, Ben.

[6] I’m indebted to my former student, Nicki Snodgrass, for pointing out how important those sketches are from this perspective.

[7] We’ve seen the return of Jenny’s gentle kidding of Giles, reminiscent of the early stages of their relationship, just a few scenes prior to her death. Giles stutters as he invites her to his home, half-laughs, looks away, then glances back again with a wide smile as he leaves Jenny in her darkened classroom. These little glances away and back again suggest that, despite his endearing shyness, he can’t take his eyes off her. This little dance of body language, expression, and verbal hesitations communicates that they are back together as clearly as the lines do. But Giles’ long pause at finding the red rose at his door and questioning call upon opening it indicate that it was his hopes that were big, not his plans.

[8] As the series progressed, it became clear that episodes 13-17 of each season were episodes in which the audience could expect an unusual amount of formal experimentation. In addition to these episodes, others aired during this period just before or just after the March hiatus include: “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered” (2016), which is the first time that another character is featured in the primary storyline when Xander’s love spell goes awry; “The Zeppo” (3013), which parodies the series’ typical apocalypse plot line; “This Year’s Girl” and “Who Are You?” (4015, 4016), in which Faith and Buffy switch bodies, producing an experimentation in performing style that features Sarah Michelle Gellar playing Faith performing her interpretation of Buffy’s character; and “The Body” (5016) which foregrounds sound and space through the use of silence and vacuums in the composition.


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