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Previously on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* . . .[1]

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> The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.
>
> Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*

(1) Anyone proposing to essay an academic treatment of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* would do well to bear in mind the 1999 season premiere episode, in which Buffy, an incoming freshman at UC Sunnydale, is all but driven out of the classroom by an imperious Professor of Popular Culture. The incident takes place towards the beginning of the episode, where it helps to mark Buffy's estrangement from her new milieu, while the episode itself marks a big-time reterritorialization of The Buffysphere. Not only are we no longer in high school, if we stick around for another hour, two of our erstwhile companions will be starting new careers on another series predicated upon a rather different generic conceit (but then *Buffy* has always been "about" the queering of generic conceits). Given the momentousness of this moment, and bearing in mind that *Buffy* is so well-schooled in popular culture," it's worth noting that Buffy is not allowed to stay in the class long enough to find out what it could possibly be about (not to mention that her departure soon finds her in a certain psychology course with a certain hunky teaching assistant . . .). It strikes us that there is a sense in which *Buffy* itself is also expelled from class—does not, in other words, lend itself to any "academic treatment," strictly so defined.

(2) In our minds at all times is the question: How is it possible to write well about television, and particularly about a series currently in production? The interpretive and rhetorical tricks of literary and film criticism, though useful, are ultimately not adequate to the task, because they tend to be calibrated to the level of "the work," even in the case of criticism that speaks of "intertextuality." Whereas, with TV in general and *Buffy* in particular, the basic "unit" of discussion is not "the work," but the series itself. Sure, particular episodes stick out, but these are more like songs by your favorite bands, while the series itself is something like a mixed tape. To write about *Buffy* is to write about a relationship, a certain investment across a serialized duration, as well as the cognitive relations that are elaborated at all levels of the

series, from the season right down to a single shot. From this perspective Giles's opening tagline, "Previously on *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* . . . ", can refer to any number of previous episodes, but also to an action that's happened just seconds ago, as well as to decades of cinematic and televisual history.

(3) The difference between "the work" and what we're calling serialized duration can be illustrated by thinking back briefly to the *Buffy* movie. Its form was that of standard narrative cinema, and the entire film hinged upon the incongruity of the terms "Buffy" and "Vampire Slayer." The film was, in effect, an extended Dumb Blond Joke (and when we say "dumb" we refer to the joke). *Buffy* the series, by contrast, although it partakes of elements of narrative, does not amount to a narration. Season by season, and even episode by episode, the series accumulates a multiple past, elements of oftentimes incongruous combinations. Moreover, the series seizes upon the clichés "Buffy" and "Vampire Slayer" and posits them as axioms, as simultaneous conditions that nonetheless retain their incommensurability (this is, after all Buffy's existential crisis!).

Jonathan Uber Alles

(4) On the evening of April 4, 2000, we each of us independently watched an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that totally freaked us out. It begins innocuously enough with Giles's voice intoning "Previously on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer . . .*", the introduction at the beginning of every episode, during which the viewer is presented with a variety of sequences (both recent and archival) with which to contextualize the action to follow.

(5) One of the primary antecedents of this episode was a show entitled "Earshot" (3018), which was scheduled to air—and was suppressed—in the Spring of 1999. In and of itself the episode was not particularly memorable. Through an inadvertent act of magic, Buffy attains the ability to hear the thoughts of others (Cf. the opening sequence of Wim Wenders' *Wings Of Desire*), including an anonymous plot to commit mass homicide of the students of Sunnydale High. Suspicion—erroneously it turns out—falls upon a short, dumpy loser named Jonathan, whose parodic re-enactment of the Charles Whitman University of Texas sharp-shooting scenario actually turns out to have been a spectacular suicide attempt, which Buffy thwarts before thwarting the real villain. All in all a forgettable episode—had it not originally been scheduled to air immediately in the wake of the atrocities at Columbine High. In reaction to said atrocities—a reaction perfectly illustrative of the mode of non-thinking that Gramsci, citing Vico, calls common sense ("judgment without reflection")—"Earshot" was postponed for several months. And it is the subsequent anti-climax of the episode's eventual screening that, inadvertently or not, lends "Superstar" (4017) its peculiar flavor and funky historical charge.

(6) The introductory "Previously . . ." montage karate-kicks in, comprised of (1) Buffy and Jonathan in the clock tower ("You all think I'm an idiot, a short idiot!" cries the would-be suicide); (2) the Faith/Buffy body switch; (3) the seduction of Riley ("I love you") by Faith-in-Buffy; (4) the switchback; (5) the accusation ("You slept with her") stemming from said betrayal; and (6) Adam: "I was created to kill." And the episode itself begins, as episodes of Buffy often do, in the middle of a fight scene in which Buffy, more or less unassisted, slays one or more vampires. This time, however, something seems off somehow. The difference is subtle but palpable. Buffy, for whom the slaying of several vamps is usually effortless by now, appears to be relying overmuch upon the assistance of her fellow Scooby Gangsters; the

outcome of the struggle actually appears to be in doubt; one of the vampires gets away! “Where did he go?” Buffy asks. Xander’s reply—“He scampered over there like a big bumpy bunny!”—is certainly in keeping with the series’ ongoing history of crafty banter (you see, not *everything* is out of whack). Yet the ensuing shot cuts rather too abruptly to a crypt in which five vampires are glutting themselves upon a hapless victim, which crypt Buffy and her Slayerettes enter with obvious trepidation, and exit without so much as a single staking:

> *WILLOW [huffily]:* I don’t care if it IS an orgy of death; there’s still such a thing as a napkin.
> *BUFFY:* A nest. No biggie. I bet I could do it.—I mean I know I could take at least two. . .
> *ANYA:* Yes. And then we can run for help while the other three suck your heart out through your neck.
> *BUFFY [sighing]:* You’re right. It’s too many for just us. You know who we need.

Another rather-too-abrupt cut takes us to the exterior of a palatial white mansion, illuminated in the darkness; which gives way to an overhead shot of the Sunnydalers walking through a well-appointed chamber; which gives way to a shot of the four of them, rather sheepishly and in awe, approaching the camera and Buffy, rather sheepishly and in awe, “Uh, hi, we have a problem,” which gives way to a mid-distance shot of a chair behind a well-appointed desk, its back to the camera. As the camera zooms in the chair pivots to face front and . . . who should be seated before us but Jonathan himself, looking rather rakishly suave in his signature (or is that Angel’s?!) black mock-turtle-neck sweater, smugly smiling and with folded hands. “Sounds like you can use my help,” says Jonathan, as a surf guitar and a horn flourish redolent of James Bond flicks flare in the background. (Cut to the opening credits, which is when things REALLY get weird, as we shall elaborate shortly.)

(7) In film studies, the diagesis is the fictional world/ milieu/ universe in which the story takes place; the story, meanwhile, is what the spectator constructs on the basis of the plot, i.e. material organization of shots, montage, mise-en-scene, etc. What’s so weird here is this. First, insofar as this particular show has a diagesis, it is clear that Jonathan, through his sorcery, has fundamentally altered it, and this episode shall elaborate upon the consequences of said alteration. And it’s as though the story actually occupies real time. Second, however, there might not even be a diagesis, which is to say that Jonathan (rather like the putative hero of *Dark City*) relates to the episode not only as a character, but actually as though he were a big-time fan of the series itself.

Is It Live Or Is It Audiovisual Circulation?

(8) Earlier we suggested that the principle “unit” for a discussion of a television show like *Buffy* (not that there have been many such shows!) should be the series itself. To explain this more lucidly it’ll be necessary to talk more about serialized art forms in general, placing them in a more general context of audio-visual circulation.

(9) A starting point could be “Interpreting Serials,” in which Umberto Eco establishes a typology of serialized aesthetics—e.g., the retake, the remake, and, most germane to our discussion, the series. “The series,” writes Eco, “works upon a fixed situation

and a restricted number of fixed pivotal characters, around whom the secondary and changing ones turn," which latter characters "must give the impression that the new story is different from the preceding ones while in fact the narrative scheme does not change" (*The Limits of Interpretation* 86). Of the viewer/consumer Eco writes that this "recurrence of a narrative scheme that remains constant . . . responds to the infantile need of always hearing the same story, of being consoled by the return of 'The Identical,' superficially disguised" (87). Prototypically, the series is characterized by mere repetition masked by the novelty of the latest individual installment.

(10) Now, we don't deny that many a series—televisual and otherwise—fits Eco's description. But, if it isn't already apparent from our preceding account of the opening moments of "Superstar," it strikes us that such a sweeping account of the series as such might not be entirely adequate to account for the fabulous phenomenon that is *Buffy*. (Indeed, we cannot but call to mind Buffy's Professor of Popular Culture—although a rather different avatar of Eco will appear below . . .) Do let's read a bit further. For Eco the Typologist, the series fundamentally abstracts from concrete, historical time: "Instead of having characters put up with new adventures (that would imply their inexorable march towards death), they are made continually to live their past . . . Characters have a little future but an enormous past, and in any case, nothing of their past will ever have to change the mythological present in which they have been presented to the reader from the beginning" (86).

(11) In a striking contradiction of this formula, "Superstar" posits a serialized world in which the past is neither fixed nor forever and yet which paradoxically partakes of previous events (fictional and factual) with properly *historical* precision. *Buffy* gives us a way of inhabiting and thinking about serialized duration that is historical, which is to say that it compels (or at least invites) what Gilles Deleuze, reading Bergson, might call attentive recognition (on which more anon, vis-à-vis the category of cliché). Seriality is precisely ubiquitous, and serialized and serializing aesthetics permeate all aspects of daily life, be they on the clock or off of it.

(12) Even beyond the level of generic and narrative conceits—inter-dimensional portals, the ubiquity of monsters and magic in suburbia, the persistence of the primal slayer, etc.—*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* screws with temporality. But *Buffy*'s past, i.e. what happened previously, is not fixed, is multiple, is subject to recombination and variation, a past which constantly inflects and alters that which is present. One way to think about this is that *Angel* is not a spin-off series. By its very nature, *Buffy* already contains, more or less implicitly, any number of spin-offs: every episode of Buffy is a potential spin-off. Keeping this in mind, the absolute materiality of the alternate universes that proliferate on *Buffy*, as well as the great mystery on entering Season Five, represent the magic as a surrogate for the technology, which is to say for the aesthetic potential of audiovisual circulation itself (like, you can have a world both with and/or without shrimp!).

(13) Writes Paul D. Miller, aka DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid, DJ, conceptual artiste, and cultural theoretician:

> In the electronic milieu that we all move in today, the DJ is a custodian of aural history. In the mix, creator and re-mixer are woven together in the syncretic space of samples and other sonic material to create a seamless fabric of sound that in a strange way mirrors the modern macrocosm of cyberspace where different voices and visions constantly collide and cross

> fertilize one another. The linkages of memory, time, and place, are all externalized and made accessible to the listener from the viewpoint of the DJ who makes the mix. Thus, the mix acts as a continuously moving still frame a camera lucida capturing moment-events. The mix, in this picture, allows the invocation of different languages, texts, and sounds to converge, meld, and create a new medium that transcends its original components. The sum created from this audio collage leaves its original elements far behind. (10)

Clearly, it would be a mistake to assimilate *Buffy* to Miller's formulation without a certain degree of modification. Most obviously, perhaps, a television series represents an investment and accumulation of capital circulation, over and against the much more "life-sized" level of the circulation of commodities: e.g., Miller's DJ is at liberty to mix and match and re-make found sounds regardless of their current currency, demographic orientation, etc. The point is that *Buffy* is acutely sensitized to the ongoing fluctuation and turnover of what Miller calls "moment-events," that this particular series wrests from the ephemeral an image of endurance.

(14) Such "fields" as "Film Studies," "Media Studies," and so on, tend to be myopic. Perhaps a better way to approach this is that film, television, literature, music . . . ought to be subsumed under the overall rubric of audiovisual circulation. Audiovisual circulation would be co-terminous both with the circulation of capital and of commodities, and this is to say that audiovisual circulation is precisely mundane and ubiquitous, which is to say that audiovisual circulation is precisely *historical*. Any number of moments in Buffy (or rather should that be all moments?) can be seen working within this sense of historicity: Jonathan as the Jordan poster, Giles's serialized romance across a span of Taster's Choice commercials, Buffy's former incarnation as the most heinous of heinous villains in *All My Children* history as Kendall [Cf. Urge Overkill: "Erika Kane, another Emmy's passed you by . . ."], Oz's (Seth Green's) presence in the *Austin Powers* movies. This sense of intra-textuality also allows for different sorts of relationships to be possible, e.g. the circulation of *American Pie* and *Cruel Intentions* as well as the presence in "Doppelgangland" (3016) of bisexual, vampire Willow ("I'm so evil and skanky. And I think I'm kinda gay") in relation to a more open sexuality.

(15) Intertextuality assumes that texts are already themselves singular, that they are not already part and parcel of audiovisual circulation; whereas intratextuality recognizes the interiority of any number of references, each with its own complicated history, in current circulation, e.g. Jonathan's coaching the US Women's Soccer Team, the similarities between The Bronze and The Peach Pit, or the recurrence of references to William S. Burroughs. So, what would it take to trace Spike's entrance into Sunnydale in "Lover's Walk" (3008)? The elusive Dru and Spike premiere in "School Hard" (2003), running down the Welcome to Sunnydale Sign? The blaring of "My Way" (Gary "I Too Have Played a Vampire" Oldham's *Sid and Nancy* version of Sid Vicious' version of Frank Sinatra's tune)? Audiovisual circulation is promiscuous, at the same time as it is historical.

JONATHAN PART 2: SHE'S A MAN, MAN

> The dominant fiction neutralizes the contradictions which organize the social formation by fostering collective identifications and desires, identifications and desires which have a range of effects, but which are first and foremost of *sexual difference*. Social formations consequently depend upon their dominant fictions for their sense of unity and identity. Social formations also rely for their continued survival upon the dominant fiction; both the symbolic order and the mode of production are able to protect themselves from interruption and potential change only so long as that ideological system commands collective belief—so long, that is, as it succeeds in defining the psychic reality of the prototypical subject.
>
> (Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 55; italics mine)

(16) With audiovisual circulation, culture is non-biodegradable and the ephemeral (e. g. a single song or episode of television) endures through and across a multiplicity of contexts. In a brilliant scene from *Fame Whore* (Jon Moritsugu, 1997) Jody George—recently become the # 1 tennis player in the world and very much in the closet—is flopped on the couch of his hotel room, watching television. The shot is framed so that we are watching Jody George watching and reacting to the TV set, the sounds of which we can hear (and it is quite difficult to say what exactly we are hearing—is that perhaps even Jonathan?) but the screen of which is invisible to us. Jody George, who refers to himself as "Jody George," is channel surfing. Each time that Jody George flips channels, Jody George comments, with escalating vulgarity, assertiveness, and discernment, to the effect: "Oh YEAH! Jody George could get some of THAT . . .", "that" being the portion or portions of the female anatomy requisite for the proverbial Money Shot. This goes on for some time (there are a lot of channels, what with the infinite sub-division of the bandwidth and all), immediately after which the screen cuts to a rapid montage of "glamour shots" of what, alluding to that song by Air, would have to be described as Sexy Boys, each of whom wears a t-shirt bearing the name of a portion of the female (but not just female) anatomy: "vulva," "aureole," etc.—The sequence is put together in such a way as to make it impossible to tell what Jody George was actually looking at; it may as well have been the glamour boys all along.

(17) "When all the archetypes burst out shamelessly," writes Umberto Eco (in "good professor" role), "we plumb Homeric profundity. Two clichés make us laugh but a hundred clichés move us because we sense dimly that the archetypes are talking among themselves, celebrating a reunion" (*Travels in Hyper-reality* 209). At what point does *Buffy* become a cliché on *Buffy*? A hint at this ability to play with the cliché was already hilariously suggested in "The Zeppo" (3013), but the celebration of the hundred clichés peaks with "Superstar." Despite the momentary lapse of reason in the overt feminization of Buffy in season 3 (just how many times could she cry that season while Faith took over all the badass-ness?), Jonathan obviously felt that Buffy of season 3 was still too much of a man for his liking, resulting in—taa daa—the regular old gal Betty ("I'm the Slayer, the Slayer, isn't that supposed to mean something?"), who is a fluffy battle kitten rather than the owner of the umbrella or star of the opening credits. Instead, we have the Jonathanization of the credits: Here is Jonathan upstaging all of the usual suspects: shooting a crossbow; disarming a bomb; smiling back at Xander (Oh Xander you dawg!); some smarmy dude in a tux; secret agent-like in a tux with a gun; doing a kung-fu move; and, finally, walking in

grim- reverse-Angelesque-slow-mo towards the camera, trench coat and all.

(18) Part of what "Superstar"—like *Fame Who*re—does is precisely to dramatize, i.e. externalize and render palpable, the processes of cliché (whereas many serialized texts, as per Eco's description, tend to do the opposite), of the production of use-value, of the reiteration of what we already knew and yet are discovering again, yet once more, for the very first time. Thus, the juxtaposition of Jody George—who is a fag in drag as a straight stud—against the montage of the glamour boys is almost directly analogous to what we're looking at and listening to when the assembled cast of *Buffy*—and most especially Xander and Giles—are totally erotically fascinated with this Jonathan character. Yay verily, their commitment to and investment in the apparently natural and timeless reign of Jonathan Uber Alles (and especially poor, poor Xander) heighten and intensify the sense of incongruity on the part of even the casual viewer. Jonathan has become *the* cliché. He is one cliché, yet he—rather, his *image* (for he is nothing but an image: Adam recognizes this instantly, Buffy actually intuits it from the opening scenes) has proliferated to the degree that it has acquired a monopoly over all of the other images. This is why he can simultaneously be Michael Jordan, a swimsuit model, the inventor of the internet, the author of the book *Oh, Jonathan!*, Hugh Hefner, Frank Sinatra, Angel, James Bond, a hard-boiled detective type, a witty roué, friend and advisor to the traumatized and the lovelorn and the downtrodden, military tactical analyst, and so on, and so on. Jonathan literally becomes all things and everything to all people. He is not a superstar, he is THE super-duper-star.

(19) Flat out, one of the things that we see happening in "Superstar" is the exposure of cliché in terms of *Buffy*—transgender action is not usually a cliché across the board but within the series it has become exactly that that is habitually recognized. So, in this spirit, Buffy is *the* example of transgender action, with a healthy dose of teenage angst (sole topic of otherworldly scary teenage shows like *My So-Called Life*, etc.) thrown in for good measure. The category of transgender action derives in part from Judith Butler's theorization of gender in *Gender Trouble*. As a tenet on which to base this thinking, we should keep in mind that "when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one" (6). If gender is seen as the necessary subjugation of the sexed body under cultural law, what we then have in *Buffy* is a jamming of sensory motor schemata usually associated with a set of common sense givens about society. Television, out of the various media, leaving far behind here Eco's work on typologies and repetition, can more effectively work to challenge or subvert codes and clichés (for Deleuze, cliché is principally a function of automatic or habitual recognition—as in common sense) exactly because of its serialized form, e.g. *Twin Peaks* and *Buffy*, in that the continued presentation of difference, a promiscuous contamination, can be presented weekly or, with syndication (at the end of the fifth season), potentially indefinitely.

(20) As you may well have surmised, it is not that transgender action is a category cornered by *Buffy*: it certainly already has a history of its own (*Wonder Woman*, *Charlie's Angels*, Thelma on *Scooby Doo*). But *Buffy* offers a more elaborated example of transgender action than previously watched, in that transgender action encompasses multiple characters—yes Buffy is still special but this notion of fluid gender construction is not individualized to just her and her special status. The serialization is one of an elaborated plot, with the supernatural and the everyday intimately connected, versus, say, the lack of attention to mundane development in

other transgender shows. Buffy's physical prowess is unmatched by any human character or (at this point) inhuman as Spike has become the harmless fangboy. This traditionally *male* attribute (physical power) is then combined with Buffy's overwhelmingly banal *feminine* appearance, an appearance which is intensified by her consistently overtly feminine and—dare we say—sexy attire. So, while opening a can of whupass on any number of demons (human or not), Buffy is often wont to wear short skirts and heels in battle (seldom bruising or messing up her hair, or for that matter, making the cheerleader squad or becoming prom queen)—visually reinforcing the anachronistic use of gender in relation to her character. Buffy's fluid gender construction is furthermore highlighted through the pairing of Buffy and Riley "The Only Reason I Have Physical Strength Is Because They Shot Me Up With Steroids" Finn, aka "Cowboy Guy" ("Restless," 4022), the stereotypical, hyper-male hero with his military connections (*A-Team*), machismo, and six-pack abs.

(21) Earlier we briefly mentioned how *Buffy* implicitly contains any number of spin-off series. This is the whole point of the "Previously." The incidental detail—the relatively lame episode ("Earshot")—can suddenly attain monumental proportions vis-à-vis the ongoing recombinant accumulation of the series across a duration that is simultaneously fictitious and historical, fantasy and reality (after all, there was a movie called *The Matrix*—whose thematic relevance to this episode should be clear enough; after all, the US women's soccer team really did win a stunning world title, and it's probably safe to imagine that Jonathan had something to do with the manufacture of the new-and-improved Nike sports bra that Brandy Chastain revealed precisely at the moment of Triumph).

Next time on Buffy . . .

(22) On Tuesday, July 25, 2000, we each of us independently read an article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* that again shocked us—this being some two-odd months after the Season Finale and some three- or four-odd months after we started to try to work out our ideas on the series. (Yet again, how do you write on a series currently in production?) We found out in this extra bit of audiovisual circulation that "Hush" was up for an Emmy. Stunned—"No Jonathan?" Yet . . .

(23) But Buffy is still an only child. Or is she? (David) Fury (supervising producer of *Buffy*) said Dawn will be introduced at the end of the season premiere. For the first five episodes of the season, everyone will remember Dawn as part of Buffy's life. (Rob Owens D-6)

We have talked extensively about how *Buffy*'s history is endlessly open to recombination, a recombination that changes the present and the way we view past history. While many a series has pulled a loop at the end (or middle), such as *St. Elsewhere* or *Dallas* or any number of conflicting governmental administrations (Bautista, Peron, Reagan, Clinton, Hussein), *Buffy* has been known to, and obviously will be known to, self-referentially play with that which we think we know constantly and consistently.

(24) In our discussion of these episodes, we have been making reference to a number of theoretical texts. However, we think that it would be a mistake to assimilate *Buffy* to these texts, as though the series were merely an example of various theoretical abstractions. To the contrary, if "theory" gives us ways of talking about *Buffy*, *Buffy* (which is itself a theoretical text) gives us ways of thinking about

"theory." Thus, our attempt to write about television also represents an attempt to re-imagine the relationships between "popular" and "academic" knowledge.

[1] Editors' note: As the reader will no doubt realize, the present essay was written at the end of the fourth season of *BtVS.*

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