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"[B]reakaway pop hit or . . . book number?": "Once More, with Feeling" and Genre

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> A soundtrack. Of My Musical. It took a year . . . to get it out, but now I have a real soundtrack album of my musical. With endless, pompous liner notes, just like the real thing. This makes it real. It makes it forever.
>
> (Joss Whedon, liner notes, "Once More, with Feeling" soundtrack)

(1) The Buffyverse, the world in which the characters of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* live, is clearly not our world; yet it exists in close connection to it, and this creative tension between reality and fantasy, between truth and artifice, enhances our interest in the series. To be sure, the fantastic elements of *BtVS* have much the same appeal to us as other examples from the fantasy and science fiction genres. We derive pleasure from what is not real; yet, as J. R. R. Tolkien observed in his landmark essay, "On Fairy Stories" in 1947, we can only truly be satisfied by our sojourn into imaginary worlds if such worlds possess "the inner consistency of reality" (Tolkien 47). For us to be able to suspend our disbelief, according to the framework articulated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (*Biographia Literaria*, ch. 14), we must be able to transcend our awareness that the world of a drama, or a poem, or a novel is only a representation of reality. The ancient Greeks realized this; hence their emphasis on the dramatic unities of time (all action within a single day), place (all action in one geographic location), and action (no plot digressions). The unities facilitated the escape. We are in a theater watching a play, or a film, or in our easy chair reading a novel, and yet we are able to immerse ourselves within the secondary worlds of literary representation, if they are well crafted.

(2) While suspension of disbelief is required in order for us to fully appreciate a fictional work, the genres of fantasy and science fiction depend on a creative tension between the real and the unreal worlds; the unreality is part of our fascination. Tolkien notes that we enjoy the "arresting strangeness" of fantasy (47-48). Similarly, Darko Suvin accounts for the appeal of science fiction by positing the "interaction of estrangement and cognition" (7-8), the perception of difference between our primary world and the secondary world of the fictional text. The fictional world is not our world; yet it operates in a way that seems logical, despite the presence of a "'*novum*' (novelty, innovation)" (Suvin 63)—an element of strangeness, such as time travel, alien contact, or an alternate universe. *BtVS*, however, is perhaps unique (at least among television series) in its creative and often explicit exploitation of this tension between the real and the unreal, a tension nowhere more brilliantly depicted than in the musical episode from Season Six, "Once More, with Feeling" (episode 6007). This paper will explore the episode's deployment of the stylized genre of the musical, the way its own dialectic of fantasy and reality represents an analogy to the dialectic between the Buffyverse and our own world and contributes to the Season Six story arc.

(3) The Buffyverse partakes of many elements of our world. Sunnydale, California looks and feels as we would expect a real California town to look and feel. It has a mall, a high school, and a branch campus of the University of California. But Sunnydale is located over a "hellmouth," a kind of gateway between dimensions, and a host of vampires, demons, and assorted "Big Bads" come and go between the netherworldly dimensions and Sunnydale. Despite this one significant departure from the reality we know, and the existence of a Slayer—a young woman who has been

called to stand against these dark figures, and who, though mortal, is endowed with superhuman strength and healing abilities—the Buffyverse functions more or less as would our world if it included vampires and slayers. (In Darko Suvin's terminology, these supernatural elements constitute the *novum* of the series). In addition to the Buffyverse's appropriation of much of our real world, it also makes use of many of our myths and legends. For example, vampires are burned by sunlight, fear crosses and holy water, and can be killed by being staked through the heart, beheaded, or burned.

(4) The Buffyverse's fantastic elements are juxtaposed against moments of realism. Despite her high calling, Buffy yearns to live a normal life, and during the first few seasons of the series, while Buffy is a high school student, her encounters with the minions of the demonic world take place amid the social and academic rituals of high school life. Critics such as Tracy Little have even interpreted her supernatural encounters as metaphoric representations of the high school experience.[1] In fact, series creator Joss Whedon's stated goal was "to create a fantasy that was emotionally completely realistic" (*Fresh Air* interview). In later seasons, Buffy briefly attends college, experiences the loss of her mother from a brain tumor, works in a fast food franchise, and deals with various domestic issues, including plumbing, trash collection, bill paying, and functioning as a surrogate parent to her younger sister, Dawn.

(5) Especially during Season Six, the series employs a network of ironies to manipulate our suspension of disbelief. Sometimes this strategy is obvious and dramatic, as in the episode "Normal Again" (6017), where Buffy hallucinates that she is in a mental institution hallucinating about vampires and her career as the Slayer. A more common (and more subtle) approach is the way that correspondences between

the Buffyverse and our world are hyperrealized, not by means of references to current events, but through a sharing of imaginary works between both worlds. This is particularly evident in the Evil Trio story arc. For Warren, Andrew, and Jonathan, the boundary between fantasy and reality is permeable and they seem motivated to make their lives imitate art, to live in the imaginary worlds that supply so much of their dialogue. For example, in “Life Serial” (6005), these adolescent, self-proclaimed “crime lords” argue endlessly about trivia from science fiction films (*Star Wars* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) and comics (*Superman* and *Spiderman*) and they have a lengthy discussion about which actor played the best James Bond. (This isn’t the first time such a phenomenon has occurred; for example, in “Helpless” (3012), Xander and Oz argue about the effects of various forms of kryptonite upon Superman before Buffy reminds them to concentrate on “reality.”) These details correspond to our knowledge of our own world—or at least our own world’s fictional representations. The result is that, even though the Buffyverse is imaginary, it stands in the same relation to its own imaginary worlds as our reality does to those *very same* imaginary worlds. These imaginative texts are part of what Tanya Krzywinska terms “cultural vocabulary” (193), and the result of sharing them is the “illusion that the viewer is living in the same cultural space and time as the Scooby Gang” (190). That the Buffyverse has its own fictions gives it depth and complexity, part of the “inner consistency of reality” that Tolkien described. That these fictions are also *our* fictions reinforces our sense that the world of Buffy—despite its supernatural elements—could almost be our own.[2]

(6) Besides its juxtaposition of the fantastic and the realistic, *BtVS* is also a generic hybrid. Joss Whedon wanted the series to be a “cull-from-every-genre-all-the-

time thing" (*The Onion AV Club* interview). The series gleefully employs conventions from horror Gothic (vampires and demons) and science fiction (such as humanoid robots—Ted in Season Two, April and the Buffy-bot in Season Five, the Trio's freeze and invisibility rays, cerebral dampener, and quantum devices to manipulate Buffy's experience of time in Season Six),[3] blending these fictive elements with the speech patterns and alternative rock music of our world's popular culture. *BtVS* also blends the comic and the dramatic, so that light and dark elements and story arcs often coexist, even amid some of the bleakest moments of the series. The Evil Trio's exploits are an excellent example. Their adolescent obsessions with science fiction and their desire to be crime lords and rule Sunnydale are comic, but they soon spiral out of control, resulting in an attempt at an electronic version of date rape, and then murder. But even after Warren's murder of Katrina, and his attempt to kill Buffy, which results in her being seriously wounded and Tara's being killed, we can't help but be amused by some of their juvenile antics—at least those of Jonathan and Andrew, such as when the pair find themselves in prison in "Two to Go" (6021). And, when Giles returns from England in order to prevent Willow from destroying the world ("Grave," 6022), and Buffy fills him in on what he has missed, he manages to laugh at the absurdity of Buffy's having slept with Spike, a revelation that shocked and horrified most of the Scoobies. *BtVS* rejoices in its postmodern refusal to be pinned down to a single generic formula.

(7) In the context of *Buffy*'s generic hybridity, then, a musical episode seems almost logical, as it affords Joss Whedon a perfect opportunity to play with generic conventions on a more ambitious scale. What is characteristically *Buffy*-like is the way Whedon joyfully and self-consciously manipulates the genre to his own ends.

(8) “Once More, with Feeling,” which originally aired on 6 November 2001, begins conventionally enough with a “previously on Buffy” teaser[4] followed immediately by opening credits and music that are reminiscent of a 1950s musical. The teaser thus serves as a transition device from the style of the series as we have come to know it to this point, to the retro style of the musical. The sharply different look of the opening credits signals an abrupt shift in genre, accentuating its hybridity.[5] Uniquely, this generic shift is actually experienced by the inhabitants of the Buffyverse as well as by the audience.

(9) Unlike most musicals, the characters are aware of, and frequently discuss, the musical conceit. Characters in *West Side Story* or *Oklahoma* do not talk about the fact that they may suddenly break into song and dance; they operate as if it is normal for people to do so (to the accompaniment of a complete orchestra.) Some musicals do evince a partial awareness that song and dance are somewhat specialized forms of behavior; for example, *The Sound of Music* tells the story of the Trapp Family Singers, and many of the show’s numbers are performance pieces, or represent Maria singing songs to the children. But even here the characters do not remark that they are “inside” a musical, or seem to be singing against their will; singing is a natural part of the diegesis.

(10) In “Once More, with Feeling,” though, it is *not* normal behavior for characters to sing and dance, as the previous 106 episodes have demonstrated, and this is much discussed. The opening song sequence depicts Buffy in the graveyard slaying vampires and demons and rescuing citizens.[6] The next day, Buffy asks the other members of the Scooby gang if anyone else had “burst into song,” and all her friends look at her in

astonishment for a long moment before everyone begins to talk at once. They had all experienced this, but each believed she had experienced an isolated phenomenon[7]:

XANDER: Merciful Zeus!

WILLOW: We thought we were the only ones! It was bizarre!

GILES: Well, I sang but I have my guitar at the hotel and I often . . .

TARA: We were talking and then . . . It was like . . .

BUFFY: Like you were in a musical?

GILES: . . . of course, that would explain the huge backing orchestra I couldn't see and the synchronized dancing from the room service chaps . . .

ANYA: Xander and I were fighting about Monkey Trouble.

BUFFY: You have monkey trouble?

[. . . .]

ANYA: And we were arguing and, and then everything rhymed and there were harmonies and the dance with coconuts.

XANDER: It was very disturbing.

Note Giles's reference to the orchestra and dancing, although his words are nearly impossible to distinguish, in the rush of everyone talking at once. The song "I've Got a Theory" expresses the Scooby Gang's awareness that something unusual is going on and that people do not normally act as if they are in a musical. Willow theorizes that "Some kid is dreamin' / And we're all stuck inside his crazy Broadway nightmare," and Willow, Anya, Xander, and Tara even observe that "It's getting eerie," and wonder "What's this cheery singing all about?"

(11) Yet, despite the self-consciousness that this is not normal behavior, even in Sunnydale, there is an intriguing tension between the elaborately stylized and choreographed conventions of the musical, the sense that this is not real or normal, and the subjects of their songs.[8] Whedon even mocks the seriousness of the genre by including a few songs (sung by bystanders, who are played by David Fury and Marti Noxon, two of *BtVS*'s producers, who have thus entered its diegesis) about subjects that are entirely mundane: a man rejoicing that the dry cleaner has removed mustard from his shirt ("The Mustard"), a young woman arguing with a policeman about a parking ticket ("The Parking Ticket").[9] We soon realize that each of the characters sings what they feel, so the songs represent the real and the true, a truth that is at times painful for the others to hear. In Xander and Anya's duet, "I'll Never Tell," they pointedly do tell, revealing to each other their doubts and fears about their forthcoming marriage, as well as behaviors or physical characteristics that each finds annoying in the other. We see this painful truthfulness particularly in Buffy, who, in her opening song, reveals that she feels she is only "going through the motions / Walking through the part." This song actually provides a rare opportunity for a direct view of Buffy's inner feelings, as the series seems only rarely to have used the device of the interior monologue, and so we usually know what Buffy is feeling only when she discloses it to the other characters.[10]

(12) When Buffy first reveals to the other Scoobies that she had experienced this singing phenomenon, they ask what she sang about. She pauses, and then says, "I don't remember. But it seemed perfectly normal." Did she truly not remember, or is it more the case that she is embarrassed or wants to spare their feelings? (She is "going

through the motions" because she has been pulled, not from the "hell dimension" in which Willow was convinced she was trapped, but from what Buffy increasingly comes to regard as heaven). Near the end of the episode, of course, she reveals the disturbing truth in the song "Something to Sing About."

(13) The second part of Buffy's statement—"it seemed perfectly normal"—is intriguing. Singing and dancing through the graveyard as she slew seemed normal to her. Of course, in a further layering of the ironies, we must remember that Buffy was singing that "I always feel this strange estrangement / Nothing here is real, nothing here is right" ("Going Through the Motions"). Here again, Whedon is toying with the tension between the normal, and behavior that is decidedly not normal, unless you happen to be a theatrical performer. It goes almost without saying that this song erodes the barrier between the cast and the audience, and accentuates our awareness of them as a cast.[11] We seem to partake of some of Buffy's "strange estrangement," in a process reminiscent of Darko Suvin's "interaction of estrangement and cognition." Buffy complains in her song that she feels she is only playing a part. We can't help but be reminded that Sarah Michelle Gellar is also playing a part.

(14) The characters' varied responses to the effects of Sweet's spell depict this tension, or perhaps more accurately, slippage, between the real and the represented, as the musical genre strikes them differently. Buffy says that singing and dancing "seemed . . . normal"; Xander found the same phenomenon "disturbing. And not the natural order of things"; Willow and Tara are enchanted by the romanticism of it, and even Dawn is briefly caught up in the novelty of singing about math in school. And of course there is a layer of irony in the way Whedon has crafted the musical, assigning

the serious love theme to two lesbians (Anya and Xander's own love theme being in a mode that Anya terms "retro pastiche'"), but without the fanfare that seems to accompany situation comedies that call attention to their gay characters. There is also a dark side to all this fun: A man dances himself to death via spontaneous human combustion immediately after Dawn says, "Come on, songs, dancing around . . . what's gonna be wrong with that?" Clearly, what is wrong is too much of a good thing. Excessive truth can hurt the feelings of those we love; the excessive energy of our emotions can even kill. As Sweet will later sing, in "What You Feel":

> All these melodies
>
> They go on too long
>
> Then that energy
>
> Starts to come on way too strong
>
> All those hearts laid open—that must sting
>
> Plus, some customers just start combusting
>
> That's the penalty
>
> When life is but a song.

(15) As the episode progresses, more of the characters' innermost thoughts and emotions are revealed. Sweet's assertion to Dawn that "I know what you feel, girl / I'll make it real" is applied to everyone. Giles reveals to Buffy his anxieties about going away so that she can stand on her own (though she does not hear him, so this, too, functions as the equivalent of an interior monologue ["Standing"]); Spike, who notes that he has seen some "damn funny things" such as a "[s]ix hundred pound Chorago demon making like Yma Sumac," believes that he is immune to the spell, and then, surprising

himself, gives the lie to that assertion by revealing to Buffy the ambivalence of his love for her (“Rest in Peace”). Tara sings of her discovery that Willow had used magic to make her forget her fight with Willow about the latter’s too-casual use of magic (“Under Your Spell—Reprise”). Dawn wonders if anyone notices or cares, as she contemplates a necklace that she stole from The Magic Box (“Dawn’s Lament”).

(16) Perhaps the character most conscious of the musical conceit is Anya, who makes frequent comments about the various musical styles of the songs, lamenting to Giles that her duet with Xander “was clearly a retro pastiche that's never gonna be a breakaway pop hit." All her comments about the various songs frame her discussion of musical styles in the context of popularity, and depict an insider’s view of the discourse of musical theater,[12] an insider’s view that emphasizes her awareness of the relationship between theater and the marketplace. Anya’s zealous capitalism, which has been developing since “The Real Me” episode (5012)—during which her experience with a classic board game, The Game of Life, taught her that money was good—causes her to view popularity in economic terms.

(17) Later, when she learns that Spike has also sung a song, Anya asks if it was “a breakaway pop hit, or more of a book number." Anya seems to reflect the voice of Joss Whedon himself, when he described his exhilaration at the completion of the score for the musical: “My head was suddenly filled with visions of greatness. The music would be a phenomenon. ‘Under Your Spell’ would go straight to the top of the charts! Videos! Soundtrack album! Emmys Emmys Emmys!” (CD liner notes.) In her desire for the “breakaway pop hit,” Anya wishes to break away from the bounds of her supporting role (which she seems to be conscious of as a role), just as Whedon may have wished

to transcend the bounds of genre television. Anya demonstrates that in this musical, the characters pointedly do *not* suspend their disbelief.

(18) The episode constantly maintains a tension between the real and the true (which is often hidden) and the fantastic, stylized, and artificial. Yet it's a complicated dialectic and is not always what it seems. As Patricia Pender has noted, "*Buffy* is a television series that delights in deliberately and self-consciously baffling the binary" (35). For example, the songs often contain an ironic subtext, even when the singers are trying to be open and honest, such as Tara's love song to Willow, which ends with her repeating the line, "You make me complete." Yet we know that her joy in her relationship with Willow is based on a notable *in*completeness: Willow's editing of Tara's memory. And even though Xander and Anya express their anxieties about their relationship, Nikki Stafford points out that the pair sing in harmony, which demonstrates that they are "meant to be together" (Stafford 332).

(19) Fittingly, the most complex emotions belong to Buffy, and her song, "Something to Sing About"—appropriately "full of syncopated beats and dissonant chords" (Stafford 332)—comes at the episode's climactic scene. This song negotiates the tension between emotional truth and the artifice that glues society together. "Life's a show," Buffy begins, "and we all play our parts / And when the music starts / We open up our hearts." Even those first few lines express an apparent contradiction, between playing parts in a show and opening our hearts, an opening that suggests emotional truth, not playacting. But her next few lines do nothing to resolve the contradiction:

> It's all right if some things come out wrong
>
> We'll sing a happy song

And you can sing along.

"Wrong" here is clearly ironic, for it is associated with truth, but represents a breach of social propriety that we must remedy by "sing[ing] a happy song." Buffy goes on to sing a series of clichés as she is punching out Sweet's minions, but a note of sarcasm is evident; notice also how her frustration at not being able to lead a normal life breaks through in the lyrics:

Where there's life there's hope

Every day's a gift

Wishes can come true

Whistle while you work

So hard

All day

To be like other girls.

To fit in in this glittering world.

Backed up by Tara and Anya, she proceeds to articulate her dilemma: "Don't give me songs / Give me something to sing about." Buffy needs to *be* happy, not just to *seem* happy, but she can't take any joy in family and friends because her life is so abnormal that she can't even *die* and not be brought back. And then comes the revelation of the most painful truth of all, what she had previously confided to Spike must never be revealed to her friends:

I live in hell

'Cause I was expelled from heaven

I think I was in heaven.

(20) Her friends, Willow in particular, are stricken with horror. Now Buffy dances faster and faster, and is about to combust, when Spike saves her, and she gets a lesson on living from the undead:

> Life's not a song
> Life isn't bliss
> Life is just this: It's living
> You'll get along
> The pain that you feel
> You only can heal by living
> You have to go on living
> So one of us is living.

Spike's prescription is for, not joy, but a continued existence that is reminiscent of the vampire's life. They do not age or die naturally, but simply continue. No wonder Angel was reading Sartre's *Nausea* during the "Lovers' Walk" episode (3008)!

(21) Continuing on this joyless note, Sweet goes on to exult in the hurt that the unvarnished truth has caused the Scoobies, observing that

> . . . there's not a one
> Who can say this ended well
> All those secrets you've been concealing
> Say you're happy now—
> Once more, with feeling. ("What You Feel—Reprise")

The episode's title, "Once More, with Feeling," refers to a rehearsal direction to a performer to repeat a song with more emotion, and is obviously meant ironically here.

Yet there is truth in Sweet's advice. These characters have certainly hurt each other by some of their revelations. This may be one of the reasons why, at the end, Buffy turns away from the logically true and embraces a different kind of truth, the emotionally true, when she sings "This isn't real / But I just want to feel" and begins an affair with Spike on somewhat false pretenses. (It can be argued that she is up front about her motives, and Spike goes into it with eyes open, seeming to echo her emotionally as well as musically, when he sings "I died / So many years ago / But you can make me feel" ["Coda"]). If Buffy can truly feel, she'll have something to sing about, after all. What the Scoobies need to do is . . . go on living, even if it means embracing the "life's a show" ethic to survive. In a way, what they must do is suspend their disbelief, to follow the advice of Alcoholics Anonymous and "fake it to make it."

(22) To be sure, there are some elements of this episode that make our own suspension of disbelief problematic. Sweet seems to concede too readily at the end, after all the mayhem he has caused, and the seriousness with which he had regarded his contest with Buffy and her friends. The episode seems conscious of this shortcoming; Giles notes in the song "Where Do We Go From Here?" that "we kinda won." (This somewhat unsatisfactory qualified victory might be regarded as a moment of realism, however, since it is more akin to the kinds of victories we experience). And the explanation for Sweet's summoning in the first place—not so much Dawn's stealing of the amulet, but Xander's confession that he "thought there were going to be dances and songs" is not very well developed.[13]

(23) But even these shortcomings can be forgiven in the context of the larger issues the episode raises. In addition to the dialectic between reality and fantasy, as

already discussed, the relationship of “Once More, with Feeling” to the series as a whole makes an interesting statement about genre. In *BtVS*, as noted by Philip Mikosz and Dana C. Och, the real “‘unit’ of discussion,” (thus the genre) is not the individual episode, but the series. This is true of all television serials, but Joss Whedon takes this a step further. Roz Kaveney points out that *BtVS*’s “use of foreshadowing and echo across seasons indicated a real commitment to, and respect for, the intelligence of its viewers” (2), later commenting on the “subtle[ty]” of some of the “continuity points” (36) that are sometimes separated by several seasons.[14] This reflects a great deal of planning on Joss Whedon’s part as he envisioned at least some of the major developments of the series several years ahead.

(24) “Once More, with Feeling” was a long time in the making. Whedon grew up with a love for the musical genre and was inspired by the idea of producing a musical episode of *BtVS* during the fall of Season Five when he had the cast and crew over to his house for one of his Sunday evening Shakespeare readings and discovered their musical talents during a sing-a-long around the piano. By the end of Season Five, he already had the first few episodes of Season Six planned and knew that the musical would be the sixth episode,[15] which he wrote over the summer. Whedon was adamant about two things: the episode must advance the “emotional arc” of the season, and the songs had to be married to the plot; he stated that he “get[s] very cranky about TV shows that do musical episodes that are basically variety shows where they play a scene and then they’ll sing an oldie that has something vaguely to do with the scene, but the scene is over already” (*The Script Book* 63-64).

(25) Whedon seeks a kind of continuity that is often missing when a generic experiment is employed for nothing more than the effect itself. He never loses sight of the fact that the series is the true genre, not the individual episode, and Whedon has stated that he always envisioned the series as being “like a novel” (*Fresh Air* interview). This makes M. M. Bakhtin’s theories of the novel especially relevant to our purposes. In “Discourse in the Novel” Bakhtin notes that:

> [t]he novel permits the incorporation of various genres, both artistic (inserted short stories, lyrical songs, poems, dramatic scenes, etc.) and extra-artistic (everyday, rhetorical, scholarly, religious genres and others) . . .
>
> Each of these genres possesses its own verbal and semantic forms for assimilating various aspects of reality. The novel, indeed, utilizes these genres precisely because of their capacity, as well-worked-out forms, to assimilate reality in words. (Bakhtin 320-21)

In the case of “Once More, with Feeling,” the musical genre is incorporated into the series and provides its own assimilation of reality. The episode transforms the reality of the series by transmitting the reality of the musical. It makes possible some plot developments that would be difficult to accomplish by other means. One example is the device by which Buffy overcomes her inability to tell anyone but Spike that the reason she is so depressed is because she feels her friends pulled her from heaven when they resurrected her. Another is the reinforcement of Spike’s conflicting feelings for Buffy, expressed so vividly in the song, “Rest in Peace” (and summed up even more succinctly, later, by the lines, “I hope she fries / I’m free if that bitch dies / I’d better help

her out" ["Walk Through the Fire"]). Such communications could have been accomplished without resorting to a musical, but not nearly so effectively or dramatically. Such revelations reverberate throughout the entire season. Also, getting Spike and Buffy together, but clearly in a way that suggests it is not true love (at least not on Buffy's side) is accomplished very efficiently through the musical shorthand of this episode. As Whedon has remarked, "[a] musical is a chance for people to express things they couldn't otherwise express" (Director's Commentary to "Once More, with Feeling").

(26) One reason that the musical format seems to work so well is that, despite its artificiality, we "assimilate [its] reality." We have certain expectations about the musical genre that we "buy into." One of these is the storybook romantic ending that we might not have accepted so readily in a nonmusical format. (We suspend our disbelief). We also accept as a matter of course that music operates in the affective realm and often conveys one's true, inner emotions.[16] That makes it a good fit for an episode in which several characters have secrets that are troubling them, but which they fear to disclose because such revelations would hurt others' feelings. (These range from the serious, that is, Buffy's true feelings about coming back to earth, to the more comic, Xander and Anya's fears about their impending marriage). And the very artificiality of the characters' experience—their awareness of being in a world that is one step removed from their own reality—is strikingly akin to our own vicarious experience of the Buffyverse.

(27) "Once More, with Feeling" accomplishes two goals. It makes possible an elaborate dialectic on fantasy and reality, through the plot device of Sweet's curse that the residents of Sunnydale must sing their true feelings, as well as through the

incorporated genre of the musical and its own particular way of assimilating reality. And, as Whedon intended, the episode unites several themes that had been established in the first few episodes of the season and moves the emotional arc of the season forward. As befits a series that so delights in transcending binary oppositions, “Once More, with Feeling” is at once *both* “breakaway pop hit” and “book number.” The episode has been enormously popular on its own, but, as Whedon noted, that was not his primary goal; he wanted to advance the story arc. *The Script Book*’s glossary of musical terms defines a book number as “a musical piece written largely to progress the plot, as opposed to a stand-alone number that can be understood separate from the larger work and released to the general public” (59). “Once More, with Feeling” facilitates plot developments such as Buffy’s revelation of her true feelings about coming back from the grave. In accomplishing both objectives—breakaway pop hit as well as book number—the episode transcends the limitations of its genre in a way that is unique and enormously pleasurable.

(28) For Whedon, the soundtrack album and its “endless, pompous liner notes” assimilate reality. For *Buffy* fans, the appeal of “Once More, with Feeling” is the same as that of the series. We love its fusion of emotional truth and “arresting strangeness.” This unique blend “makes it real.”[17]

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Notes

[1]See “High School is Hell: Metaphor Made Literal in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*” in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*.

[2]In addition to the cultural similarities between Sunnydale and our own world, Karen Sayer notes that *BtVS*’s use of commercial products, such as Willow’s Macintosh Powerbook, lends authenticity to the Buffyverse. See Sayer.

[3]Both the Trio and Willow blend knowledge of science with knowledge of magic. (Andrew Aberdein has discussed Willow as an adept in both science and magic [85]). In both cases, they begin with a strong grounding in technology, and eventually extend their toolsets to the use of magic. Willow sometimes net-surfs for information by interfacing telepathically, which is more efficient for her; and the Trio blend superscience and the supernatural, as when they use the the “musk gland of a Homja-Maleev demon” to “charge” their “cerebral dampener” (“Dead Things,” 6013).

[4]Whedon’s script maintains that this is not actually a teaser, but just a “previously.”

[5]The recently released DVD collection is consistent with DVDs from previous seasons. The American version omits the teasers, so some of the emphasis on generic hybridity is lost.

[6]The original broadcast ran about eight minutes long, and a few scenes were cut for subsequent broadcasts and syndication, including a few opening “wordless scenes” (*The Script Book*) while the overture played over the credits. In either version, “Going Through the Motions” is still the first song sung by a member of the cast.

[7]There are slight differences in dialogue between the published version of the script and the episode as it actually aired. (Even the DVD's sub-titles do not seem to include all the overlapping dialogue in this scene). In scenes such as this one, where the dialogue consists of several characters all speaking at once, it is very difficult to discern all the words with complete accuracy. Accordingly, I have chosen the published *Script Book* as the most authoritative source, since it is the officially licensed text. In order to be consistent, I have used the official script throughout this paper, unless dialogue differences between the broadcast and published versions are obvious and essential to the discussion. However, for song lyrics, I have used the CD insert as my authoritative source, since it corresponds more accurately to the songs as recorded than *The Script Book*.

[8]Among the many musical conventions, we observe that there are a variety of musical styles, that certain melodic themes, or leitmotifs, are associated with specific characters and recur, and that themes are sometimes reconfigured or interwoven with others in counterpoint. (Chris Neal has suggested that "Once More, with Feeling" does not really employ leitmofis so much as what he terms "leit*styles*," with certain musical styles associated with specific characters and races). The first two characteristics are self-evident. One of the first examples of counterpoint occurs in the Tara/Giles duet when they both reprise former solos, Tara singing “Under Your Spell” to Willow at the same time that Giles sings “Standing” to Buffy. Each of the two singers seems unaware of the other (the script direction says that they are “unheard by everyone, even each other” [*The Script Book*]); their songs are joined on the word “believe” (Tara’s “You made me believe” evolves into “Standing” when Giles sings “Believe me I don’t wanna go”) and

they harmonize for the rest of the song. There is considerably more counterpoint in the song "Walk Through the Fire," which brings together most of the characters and elements of many of the songs in the show. This technique whereby nearly all the characters are singing different lyrics at the same time is a common feature of musical theater, and is usually used to bring the action toward a climactic moment.

[9] Though mundane, Michael Adams has pointed out that the young woman's song expresses a universal plea when she sings "I think I've paid more than my share."

[10]One of the few examples of the interior monologue is Dawn’s voicing her thoughts as she writes in her journal in “The Real Me” (5002). Another example is Xander's talking to himself from time to time in “The Zeppo” (3013).

[11] The fact that the cast does not consist of professional singers enhances this effect. That is not to say that their singing is unpleasant, and in several cases (Anthony Stewart Head, James Marsters, Amber Benson, and Emma Caulfield), they show obvious talent, and Head and Marsters have sung at clubs. Except for Head and guest star Hinton Battle, however, they do not have professional musical theater experience (though, as rising actors, several of them may have appeared in musical productions). In any case, the combined effect is of a group of people for whom singing is not their usual milieu, and this nicely amplifies the unnaturalness of the musical conceit.

[12]And not just musical theater, as evidenced by her reference to the missing fourth wall of her apartment in scene 15, when they discuss their song with Giles. This is a reference to the convention whereby interior scenes in plays and films are staged as if the fourth wall of the room were missing. Anya also remarks that she felt as if they were being watched.

[13] This has always been the biggest flaw in the narrative logic for me. No possible explanation seems to satisfy. It's hard to believe that Xander could fail to see the connection between some conscious action on his part (a ritual of some kind? Simply acquiring the amulet in the first place? From where?) and the events that transpire. To suggest that he doesn't realize his part until he sees the amulet around Dawn's neck at the Bronze defies credibility. Yet if he did realize his action (which we never see) had brought about Sweet's advent, why did he allow the Scoobies to continue their research without a hint of a confession, especially when people began to die? Xander's own frustration with the phenomenon, in the scene after "I'll Never Tell," certainly seems genuine, so this is a conundrum. I suspect it's a narrative thread that Whedon did not have time to fully develop, which is not surprising, since the episode ran long as it was.

[14]A good example is the numerology in the dream imagery of several episodes that apparently foreshadowed Dawn's arrival two years before it took place. See Keller, and Wilcox.

[15] Whedon was counting "Bargaining," a double-length episode that aired 2 October 2001, as one.

[16]This association of music with emotional truth is a long-standing tradition. No less a cynic than Huckleberry Finn even proves subject to it. In the midst of a funeral sermon by that notorious con-man known as "the king," a speech "full of tears and flapdoodle," Huck contrasts the "rot and slush" of the king's lying words with music:

> And the minute the words was out of his mouth somebody over in the crowd struck up the doxolojer, and everybody joined in with all their might, and it just warmed you up and made you feel as good as church letting out. Music *is* a good thing, and after all that soul-butter and hogwash, I never see it freshen up things so, and sound so honest and bully (Twain 138).

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[17] At the *Slayage* Conference in Nashville, I closed my presentation of this paper with two verses in the mode of “Something to Sing About,” the first to the tune of Buffy’s part, and the second to Spike’s:

> It’s a show
> The soundtrack makes it real
> Its truth is what you feel
> And this will end my spiel.
>
> How does it fit?
> “Once More” is more
> Than a book number bit
> It’s a pop hit—
> A breakaway pop hit.