

## **Carpe Diem or "Fish of the Day?": Time as Leitmotif in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

### **Introduction: Understanding Time in BtVS**

Anyenka, a vengeance demon, has had her powers suddenly removed when her spell to cause mayhem was thwarted and Giles the watcher smashed her magic talisman. As her vengeance wish is removed, and the usual Sunnydale reality is returned, she suddenly finds herself to be Anya, a teenage girl stuck in human time. In the episode *Doppelgangland*, she poignantly (and humorously for the viewer) laments the realisation of her loss:

For a thousand years I wielded the power of the wish. I brought ruin upon the heads of unfaithful men, I offered destruction and chaos for the pleasure of the lower beings. I was feared and worshiped across the globe and now I am stuck at Sunnydale high! A mortal! A child! And I am flunking math.  
(*Doppelgangland*)

Anya's dilemma serves as a good spring board to discuss the ways in which the concept of time, in all its complexity, underpins the myriad aspects of the *Buffyverse* – the themes, the characterisation, the narrative and even the aesthetics. This paper is but a brief overview of this concept as a recurring motif in a television program already so rich with its intertextuality, references to film and television history, to its own history and memories. It explores how the series shakes up our preconceptions about time, reminding us of its malleable and arbitrary nature.

It is important firstly to realise that we often tend to assume that time **is natural not social – that it is just *there***. Since the 1980s there have been several developments in social theory, the social sciences and the humanities more generally which emphasised the importance of space and spatiality. Still other concerns within academia have turned to issues of time and temporality across a similar range of disciplines, including sociology; anthropology and human geography (see Gell 1992; Urry 1999; Soja 1996). A central theme, particularly in the later arguments has been to recognise that to draw a distinction between space and time is unhelpful and that rather we have to understand that 'space and time are inextricably interwoven'

(Massey 1994: 260-1),<sup>1</sup> and that our experience of social time is varied, multiple and heterogeneous (May and Thrift 2001).<sup>2</sup>

In order to make sense of the how it is represented in such a complex text as the *Buffyverse*, it is useful to recognise that there are several different forms of social practice that are specifically related to the ways we think about temporality, all of which are also simultaneously constituted through space. Jon May and Nigel Thrift have condensed these into four identifiable aspects of social practice which are:

1. firstly, our understanding of time is shaped by our interrelationship with the natural world - the cycles of our bodies, the moon, the seasons. In *BtVS*, the examples are numerous such as the biological milestones from teenager to adult which we have seen most of the Scoobie gang go through. Of course, in *Buffy* this is complicated by several characters who do not conform to the usual human body/ time paradigm; such as vampires and demons being several hundred years older and still seemingly alive or other characters like Oz who change their bodily form according to the moon. Our knowledge and often the humour of the series rely on our shared cultural knowledge of what is normal and unusual biological human development and draw on that to make sense and suspend our disbelief. As Willow explain to Oz:

- **SLIDE 4 & 5**

Willow: Well, I like you. You're nice and you're funny. And you don't smoke. Yeah, okay, werewolf, but that's not all the time. I mean, three days out of the month I'm not much fun to be around either.

Oz: You are quite the human. (Phases)

Or Xander's response to Cordellia's question about why looking at guns should make him feel sexy:

Xander: I am seventeen. Looking at linoleum makes me want to have sex (Innocence)

And the urge of passion proves to be the catalyst for many of the situations that unfold in *Buffy*, including the one with which I began this talk, as *Buffy* first accepts the intensity of her feelings for *Angel*:

Willow: Carpe diem. You told me that once.

Buffy: Fish of the day?

Willow: Not carp. Carpe. It means seize the day.

Buffy: Oh. Right. (a long pause) I think we're going to... seize it, Will.

Sooner or later. Once you get to a certain point - seizing is sort of inevitable.

2. Secondly, time is shaped by and enacted through various forms of social and institutional discipline and these take place in particular settings – school, work, university, religious orders, home. Much of BtVs is set within school, the home, university or the Bronze where we see different types of time constraints, responsibilities and expectations. Buffy's constant frustration of having to patrol and slay demons when all she wants to do is go on a date is just one example of the pressures of the time demands of this particular domain and the conflicts that arise between different domains that inevitably coexist. But here are more banal forms of discipline which are part of the discourse of parenting (Joyce to Buffy; Buffy to Dawn) – 'go do your homework', 'go eat with your mouth full' (ie go and have breakfast), 'don't stay up too late' – all connecting particular types of expected behaviour to certain times and places.

3. The third sense of time emerges out of our relationship with particular devices and instruments that we use to measure and in some ways manipulate our perceptions of time and space such as clocks and calendars. In BtVS, clocks, bells, telephones, candles, beepers are constant symbols and motifs to remind us of the passage and duration of time. Night time is of course when vampires and the most deadly demons - like Doctor Death and The Gentlemen seem to strike. And the night, when it is dark, is clearly the time of our greatest childhood fears.

4. The fourth sense of time emerges in relation to the various kinds of texts that we use to understand and make sense of timespace itself. Within the *Buffyverse*, some examples of these are the dusty tomes that Giles refers to, to understand the supernatural and demonology through the ages, the computers that allow Willow to rapidly seek and collate knowledge from a range of places and times, the diegetic and non diegetic music and lyrics that underpin the program including the theme and character melodies to the band appearances at the Bronze and the references

from popular cultural texts from film, television and literature that pepper the Slayerspeak of the gang “so that’s why the time went all David Lynch” (*Dead Things*); “there’s ghosts and shaking and people going all Felicity with their hair” (*Where the wild things are*); However, at the same time, *outside* of the diegesis we might also consider the text of Buffy the Vampire Slayer itself as a way in which we learn to re-conceptualise time and space through our imaginations and through fantasy - and through the many cleverly placed intertextual references, through our memories of other film and televisual texts.

It is clear then that we understand and use the concept of timespace in a number of different ways. As Rackoff succinctly put it:

we can allocate time; we can coordinate activities in time ( either synchronising or sequencing); we can create rhythms through time; and we can create meaningful textures of time (Rakoff 2002: 7)

In this paper then I will focus upon how the concept of timespace is conceived and deployed throughout the Buffy series through all of these social practices. Elsewhere I have also considered how the concept of time is incorporated into the meta-narrative underpinning the creation of the television text for the purposes of scheduling, marketing and syndication and how the arbitrary nature of scheduling (as Annette Hill has shown in her work on the vagaries of Buffy scheduling in Britain) of course often is at odds with the fans readings and enjoyment of the text. Due to my own time limitations I will not discuss these in more detail here, other to briefly consider some of the issues of narrative time and the resulting collective memory.

### **Narrative and time:**

As is the case with all good television drama, the narrative time of *BtVs* within the text itself, works in several ways. The series has developed sustained themes and characters over the 7 seasons and simultaneously within each episode. That is, the large story arcs not only encompass each season but feed back into the collective memory of the series as a whole. In this way, the use of textual timespace is also self conscious and deliberately reflexive. Part of the intense pleasure and a great deal of the humor for regular viewers and fans is of course knowing, sharing and revisiting

that history. When *Sunnydale High School* is reopened in the first episode of series 7, Buffy warns her sister to:

stay away from hyena people, or any lizard-type athletes, you know, or if you see anyone that's invisible (Lessons. 7: 1),

referring of course to *The Pack* (1: 5 ); *Reptile Boy* ( 2: 5) and *Out of Mind, Out of Sight* (1: 11), specific episodes in the past history of the series. More subtly, the intense enjoyment of such complex episodes such as *Restless* (4: 22), *Tabula Rasa* (6: 8) or *Normal Again* (6: 17) rely on the regular viewer and fan recognizing the allusions to past episodes and on recognizing how an initiated viewer would perceive that knowledge.

In these ways Buffy shares the narrative strategies of both soaps, sit coms and more recently evolved complex comedy-dramas such as *The Sopranos* and *Sex in the City*. Most episodes are complete in themselves but each series has its own rhythm, story arc and climaxes. Fans and critics too regularly discuss the complex narrative structure and impact of *Buffy* in reviews and online, noting the relationship between the time rhythm of the series and the real life time that lies behind the creation of the text. For example, Will Shetterly, American reviewer for the *Greenman* writes of season 4:

Buffy seasons always start with Mopey Buffy: She's unhappy and wishes she were elsewhere, much like her writers who have just returned from vacation.<sup>3</sup>

As I have argued elsewhere, this interweaving, between the textual structures and between reality and fantasy, reflects the powerful mimetic relationship between the audience and the text, both in terms of the reflexive, intertextually-informed viewing experience itself, outlined above, and the structural relationship of the aesthetic elements within the series.

Suspension of disbelief for the regular viewers and fans is also underpinned by the screening of specialized seasonal episodes such as Halloween (*Halloween; All the*

way (6: 6)), Christmas (*Amends*) and Thanksgiving (*Pangs*) that in the US at least, are screened to coincide with the real life public holidays.

Similarly, the hiatuses in-between the seasons, which falls in the summer break, is explained in the diegesis as the Scoobies going on summer vacation while any cross-over between BTVS and *Angel* is accounted for by reference to visits to and from LA. By season 6 of *Buffy* of course cross overs were not permitted because the two shows were on different networks, a fact that the creative writing team hinted at by suggesting in *Flooded* that *Buffy* and *Angel* would meet at a mutually convenient meeting place, somewhere out of town. A parallel moment of course occurs in *Angel*. The seasoned viewer recognizes that the place in the middle is at neither network, again a reference that moves beyond the diegesis.

*Buffy*'s birthdays are even more significant events for the fans because of the potential of her untimely death. The regular marking of this anniversary (*Innocence 2: 14*), *Helpless* (3: 12), *A New Man* (4: 12) *Blood Ties* (5: 13) and *Older and Far Away* (6: 14) serving again to ground the show in the extra textual reality of the fans' real lives as well as provide an opportunity for yet another disaster. The regularity of disasters falling on *Buffy*'s birthdays, lead to Spike, by the sixth season, asking *Buffy* wryly, 'So, you ever think about *not* celebrating a birthday? Just to try it, I mean' (*Older and far away*. 6: 14).

Importantly for this discussion, it is often the prolific fan fiction literature that emerges to fill the gaps in the time that the program itself omits, during the real time narrative holes, as for example in The *Buffy Giles* Fanfiction archive.<sup>4</sup>

### **Theme music of buffy**

Of course, the overarching theme of the story, its *raison d'être* is driven by prophecy and fate: the tyranny of a life too short. *Buffy*, as all slayers, has been selected by the Powers That Be – external to her world and time – to fight evil and protect the world. For this reason the most prevalent representation of time within the content and thematic discourse of the show, is represented as something that is about to burst. In fact, the theme tune of the series sums this up so well – the slow howl of a wolf and groan of the organ and then the sudden rush of the hard frenetic chords of the guitar.

(compare this signature tune with that of angel – where the protagonist is one who is destined to live for ever – well until the networks close the show anyway).

When death (as in series 5) or mutilation (as in series 7) occurs to humans in *Buffy*, there is no escaping the realisation of what Jacques Atalli (1985: 120-1) has termed one's 'mortal reality'. In capturing the raw emotion of the Buffy's reaction to her mother's untimely death from natural causes, the episode *The Body*, stood out for fans and critics alike as exceptional for its quiet intensity and 'truth'. I use the word 'quiet' advisedly for it is the only episode of the series where for the first third of the hour, no non-diegetic music and little dialogue occur. Indeed, above all, it is the silence which expresses Buffy's 'strange estrangement', her sudden awareness, through her mother's death, of her own 'mortal reality' – a moment when, for those left behind, time seems to stop.

- **EXTRACT FROM THE BODY**

Because of the urgency of life to be lived, the ordinary banal, 'fish of the day' kind of existence creates its own particular kind of frustration because ultimately life is seen as too short to waste.

**“Why can't I be a grown up?” (Willow in *The Body*)**

In the Buffyverse, growing up and growing older is difficult. The process just seems to take too long. Progress towards the milestones of what is understood to be an ideal and clearly an idealised adulthood, situated somewhere in the distant future – clear decision making, driving, employment, independence, sexual relationships – is irritatingly slow and frustrating. Time in this scenerio seems far more static than dynamic, usually experienced as ordinary, drawn out, controlled by others, punctuated by school bells, regulated by work and study schedules, duty and responsibility – a 'fish of the day' sort of time.

In slow tracking shots, where time seems to have slowed down, Buffy sees only the disembodied lips of the paramedic whose words do not seem to make much sense. In the powerful next scene she walks through her house, vomits as the reality hits her

and moves outside to hear the sound of other people's reality and time still on going. As she cleans up the vomit we see the moisture slowly seep through the paper towel, a remainder of her own physicality and mortality.

This is an inheritance from gothic literature and Jacobean drama – a reminder of *the skull beneath the skin*. Faced with such hurdles, the only sensible tactic often seems to be to seize the moment and throw all caution to the winds. As Buffy explains to Willow:

- **SLIDE 15**

*Buffy:* Well, my philosophy, do you wanna hear my philosophy?

*Willow:* Yeah, I do!

*Buffy:* Life is short.

*Willow:* Life is short!

*Buffy:* Not original, I'll grant you, but it's true. You know? Why waste time being all shy and worrying about some guy, and if he's gonna laugh at you. Seize the moment, 'cause tomorrow you might be dead.

*Willow:* Oh, that's nice!

Escape or 'free time' can only occur in particular spaces within these locales – spaces which enable less regimented behaviour (spaces such as the cafeteria, the library, the locker areas, the Bronze and some times, parties). At other times freedom can only occur symbolically in the form of day-dreaming or fantasy. For example in the episode of the Body we twice see time moved backwards in Buffy's imagination. The first to an earlier Thanks giving dinner. The sequence occurs immediately after we, the viewers, like Buffy have been faced with enormity of Joyce's dead body. Like Buffy we don't want to face the truth of what we have just seen and Joss Whedon offers us a temporary sense of relief - okay did we miss understand that last segment? Was it a dream? But then we snap back into this reality, realising that was then and this is now and that Joyce probably is dead. Then there is the wonderful sequence immediately before this one, when Buffy imagines another possible outcome. In this version - she and the paramedics made it in time. Thank goodness you were there, Buffy! But then we are back to reality again.

Of course, reaching adulthood in actuality is never as good as the adolescents imagine it to be for the world of work is also shown to be fraught with restrictions, monotony and too much responsibility. While several episodes capture this repetitiveness, Buffy's search for her 'life plans' after her mother's death in both school and work settings, combined with the nerd trio's magic spells, offers an apt metaphor for the on-going banality of life:

- **EXTRACT FROM *LIFE SERIAL***

The aim of the Buffy's arch 'nemiseses' is of course to slow her down and expose her vulnerability. Unlike Anya, Buffy does not find retail a fast-paced profession at the best of times. In this recreated 'ground hog day' world, where she is compelled to repeat same action again and again until she can find a way to satisfy a customer and break free. While this scene is deliberately funny, we see parallel moments of boredom, 'fish of the day, marking time' days such as in school and college classes, in Double Meat Palace and even in the later episodes where Buffy does find a meaningful occupation outside of slaying as a counsellor in High School.

**RELEXIVITY: the knowing wink to the audience**

In a series such as Buffy where viewer and fan knowledge, memory and interaction are so much a part of the creative process it is inevitable that several episodes reward this overt reflexivity. In these particular episodes the role of time and the shared memories of creators, characters and audience in the series is particularly highlighted and acknowledged with a knowing wink to the audience. The episodes I am particularly thinking of, where the theatrical fourth wall is deliberately dissolved in an extended metaphor, are *Normal again*, *Once more with feeling*, *Tabula Rasa* and *Storyteller*. While the other episodes are funny, in *Normal Again* the audience is faced with the terrible knowledge that all we have emotionally invested in Buffy's world may simply be a figment of our collective imaginations.

**EXTRACT FROM *NORMAL AGAIN***

The particular irony of Normal Again is that at the end of the episode when Buffy returns to Sunnydale and leaves her alternative reality behind, we, the audience, have a privileged view of what she does not – that maybe the Institution was real. And like Buffy, perhaps we prefer to keep our alternative reality for our own sanities – it is clearly preferable to the real world.

But there is also another source of freedom – far more powerful than all of the above. In the *Buffyverse*, magic offers the greatest freedom, the opportunity to change the pressures of time – manipulating and challenging the physical world and all of its constraints. Here Time bends to the subjective will of the person, allowing the agents to ‘wield the power of the wish’ again.

Through out the seven years of the series magic is shown to be the strongest vehicle of power. In Buffy, the metaphor made literal, time and space turned on their head, is one of the most powerful ways in which magic is evoked eg: “ I wish Buffy Summer had never come to Sunnydale” and we see the alternative reality (the Wish); a girl in school who feels she is ignored and overlooked by her peers, quite literally can become invisible; a potential cheer-leader who is regarded as threateningly ‘hot’ by several of the other teenagers, catches on fire during an audition for a part in the team. a mother, who longs to relive her former glory at school, uses witchcraft to force her own daughter to literally swap bodies. As Amy, the daughter plaintively tells Buffy, ‘She said I was wasting my youth, so she took it’ (*The Witch*: 1.3).

Magic allows the individual to link with other, ancient power sources in the universe. The lone human (or slayer) does not have to act alone but can literally combine forces to challenge demonic powers.

Magic allows the usual physical laws of time and space to be overcome. In *Primeval*, four bodies can become one (a similar technique used in *Hush* between Tara and Willow and of course used most effectively at the end of series 7). Bullets can be stopped mid air; at the start of season 6, magic brings back Buffy from the grave. Magic, like any human involvement in ritual, allows the user to feel temporarily in control. Yet again, as I have argued elsewhere, magic, fantasy, ritual and its basis in serious play, like the carefully submerged iceberg of the everyday terrors of

existence, involve uncertainty, something that can be threatening and disturbing. This makes them very powerful vehicles indeed (Schechner 1993). They are 'subversive, able to can rock the foundations of a given phenomenal reality by making their presumptions uncertain and unpredictable' (Handelman 1990: 70).

### Dreams

Evil does not go away despite pointy sticks, crosses and holy water. Just as Buffy cannot totally destroy the First Evil, we cannot completely remove our fears and the darker sides of living either. Exposing the underbelly of Bakhtin's notion of carnival (1968), the terrifying issues such savagery, death, perverse sexuality and loss or lack of bodily control, become transformed and reemerge in our dreams albeit sometimes distanced through exaggeration and deprecating humour. This kind of exaggeration, or mimetic excess, as Schechner reminds us, is always hinted at the moments when 'contradictory realities coexist, each seemingly capable of cancelling the other out' (Schechner 1993: 36). Sometimes it becomes necessary to adopt an extreme ironic stance or the fear devolves into 'dark play' where no humour is possible (Stallybrass & White 1986). In the *Buffy* universe, this anxiety is expressed most powerfully through dreams. Marina Warner's description of the late grotesque through literary and screen narratives showed that 'the monsters are not strangers, after all, but the appalling potential of human evil. "The plague of fantasies" reflects the unbearable features of the real'.(2000: 261).

In the *Buffyverse*, despite all the attempts at humour and magic, the monsters within are always shown to be alive and well, their manifestation in dreams representing the struggle to come to terms with the darker reality of time and the simultaneous awareness of the fearful lack of certainty and control.

On "Buffy," stuff happens - things change, people change, people *die*, and sometimes, arming yourself with a big pointy stake just won't do you any good. (Millman 2001 *writing format in the original*)

Through the subconscious, the fear that time brings in its wake, returns. We never escape our personal histories, it seems. *Restless* is a particular poignant example of

this – the characters all experience the fear of having too little time, that opportunities that seem to come too late, that the self is tied to its beginnings which can never be escaped:

- **EXTRACT FROM *RESTLESS***

Xander's anxieties and fears about his lack of self esteem and direction (do you really know where you are going?), his still adolescent sexual obsessions – including his unresolved desire for Buffy herself (brother?) and his dysfunctional family are literally as well as metaphorically faced in this dream segment. Giles, the good father figure, who frequently seems to be irritated by Xander in this dream has preferred Spike as his adopted son, Xander's long standing rival for Buffy's affections too. His greatest strength and yet his greatest vulnerability, his heart is ripped out by his father. However hard he tries to escape Xander is brought back into his beginnings – the cellar of his childhood, back into the depths of his own history.

**SLIDE 20: The magic of the Buffy text itself:**

Art allows the ultimate sympathetic magic and playing with time and imagination. Within the mimetic power of the texts, through words and images metaphors become concrete. It is through Art that the text, be it literature, music, film or television, enables the playing with time and imagination. In these imagined worlds, the fear of reality, while expressed through the unconscious, is deflected through the ability to imagine and create other possibilities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Massey, D. 1994 *Space, Place and Gender* Cambridge : Polity Press.

<sup>2</sup> May, J. and Thrift N. 2001 *Timespace: geographies of temporality*. London: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.greenmanreview.com/film/film\\_buffy\\_season4.html](http://www.greenmanreview.com/film/film_buffy_season4.html), accessed on line 10. 04. 04.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.buffygiles.com/archive/>. This observation was pointed out to me by Michelle Wauchope.