

## Going Through the Motions: Robots in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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[1] Throughout the seven seasons of *Buffy*, supernatural monsters have become commonplace, and the supernatural explanation for particular events has come to be expected. Technological monsters have been less common. We have seen a few examples of robot or cyborg villains: the computer-dwelling demon Moloch in “I Robot You Jane” (1008), and the robot Ted (2011). Of course we had the cyborg Adam for much of Season 4, and, arguably, Spike, once he was “chipped” by the Initiative (Season 4 onwards). In this paper I am going to focus on the female robots of seasons 5 and 6.

[2] These artificial bodies disrupt notions that embodiment is somehow “natural” and unconstructed. Just as robots and cyborgs are read as constructed surfaces, as bodies overwritten by technology, so bodies also become “texts” which expose the constructions of gender and embodiment. Donna Haraway describes the cyborg as “a creature of social reality as well as science fiction” which is made up of “both imagination and material reality”(191), and these descriptions also apply to readings of the robotic body. Reading the artificial body -- cyborg or robot – challenges, disrupts and deconstructs binary oppositions, in particular those of male/female, culture/nature, technology/body, and virtual/real. These readings question the positioning of some bodies as “unconstructed” or “natural” or as somehow representations of “reality” – which are all subject to forms of construction.

[3] In his essay “The Uncanny” Freud noted that the feeling of the uncanny is present in instances of the “doubling, dividing, and interchanging of the self” – we can note that he was discussing E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman”, with its deceptive doll-woman, as an example of the uncanny double (Standard Edition 17:219-56). The robot as double is an integration of the monstrous with the machine, and the female robot is often a complex construction of both female-as-Other and female-as-Ideal. We might think here of the two Marias, angel and devil, in Fritz Lang’s film *Metropolis* (1926). The female robot, then, can also be seen as a construction of female perfection, the fulfillment of a fantasy image.

[4] In his *Simulacra and Simulations*, Jean Baudrillard considers the “question of

substituting signs of the real for the real itself”, and formulates the idea of the “simulation”, a copy without an original. For the rest of this paper I am going to use Baudrillard’s categories of simulacra as a loose framework through which to examine the robots April and the Buffybot, and also Buffy herself. The two robots embody masculinist fantasies of perfection, and we can also see the Buffybot as a transgressive replacement for Buffy. Also relevant here are some questions about “programming” which apply equally to Buffy, April, and the Buffybot.

[5] Baudrillard’s “successive phases of the image”:

Phase 1: It is the reflection of a basic reality.

Phase 2: It masks and perverts a basic reality.

Phase 3: It masks the absence of a basic reality.

Phase 4: It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

### **1. It is the reflection of a basic reality**

[6] In “I Was Made to Love You” (5015) Warren Meers constructs a robot girlfriend called “April” who we can see as an example of the “first phase” of Baudrillard’s simulacra, “the reflection of a basic reality”. With her repeated questions to all and sundry about the whereabouts of “Warren”, her mechanical ear to ear grin and her pretty pink outfit, April seems unthreatening until her monstrous physical strength is revealed when she comes into conflict with Spike and Buffy. April’s creator clearly believes that he has made a thoroughly convincing illusion, since when Buffy goes to see Warren, he confides the great secret of April’s manufacture to her, believing that this is information she “couldn’t possibly know”. However, Warren’s belief in his creation is undercut by the Scoobies’ assessment of April: within a very short time the group are unanimous that she is “a robot” (and further, “a sexbot”). April’s performance is simply seen through – and I use the word “performance” deliberately, to invoke Judith Butler’s theories of performative gender, which again question assumptions that embodiment is always “natural”.

[7] Warren also insists that April is not a “toy” but “a girlfriend”. As Warren says, “I made her to love me” and this indeed is April’s *raison d’être*: she says, “I’m only

supposed to love him. If I can't love him what am I for? What do I exist for?" The view of April as a supremely compliant girlfriend, who believes that tears are "blackmail", and who exists to "please", overturns Warren's insistence that she is "not a toy". She is the personification of Warren's notion of an ideal femininity, one without selfhood, completely without agency; in Lorna Jowett's description she is "the ultimate dependent female" ("Good Girls" 4). Her existential crisis, provoked by Warren's rejection, is never really solved, for as her batteries run down and she nears "death", April returns to her programming, saying, "He's going to take me home and things will be all right again". However her deactivation does appear to provide Buffy with the agency and autonomy to reject the idea of refashioning herself in order to appeal to men. Buffy's refusal of "reconstruction" follows the pattern of feminist ethics that, as Jessica Prata Miller puts it, "requires rejecting the feminine stereotype of the selfless giver" (40).

[8] In this episode there is also a tension between ideal April and flesh-and-blood Katrina, Warren's current girlfriend. April, created to be perfect, is as Warren discovers, "too easy and predictable...she got boring". However Warren is attracted to Katrina precisely because of her unpredictability. Incidentally, it takes Katrina about one second to realise, "that's a robot". Things appear to have been tidied up at the end of this episode, but of course there are repercussions. Katrina walks out on Warren, only to reappear in Season 6, to be enslaved by the "magic ball" in "Dead Things" (6008), forced to follow Warren's commands -- "made to love" him as though she were April -- and ultimately murdered. Unpredictable she may be, but clearly Warren prefers the malleable, obedient girlfriend.

## **2. It masks and perverts a basic reality**

[9] The Buffybot, Spike's "commission", comes to life three episodes after April's appearance, in "Intervention" (5018). Once again, this robot is the embodiment of an ideal -- though in Spike's case a fairly perverse one -- and it is also an improvement on the Buffy doll Spike has put together over several previous episodes. It can be seen as a version of the simulacrum that, in Baudrillard's terms, "masks and perverts a basic reality". This is the Buffy of Spike's fantasies; a Buffy who, though she fears him, nevertheless is helpless to resist her sexual feelings. The outward appearance of this

“Buffy” bears distinct similarities to April – she wears a pink skirt and high heels, her hair is loose and she exhibits April’s perma-grin. Of interest here – among many other things -- is the difference between the Scoobies’ instant appraisal of April-as-robot and their failure to do so where the Buffybot is concerned. While I could suggest that this is because Warren’s robot-building skills have improved since his creation of April, there seems to be more to the peculiar blindness that the Scoobies show towards the Buffybot’s various eccentricities. They are all convinced that this *is* Buffy, even when they are having conversations full of non-sequiturs. They are also very easily convinced that Buffy has “gone insane” and is having sex with Spike. This problem of recognition occurs, I argue, because they seize on the notion that Buffy is finally “acting out” after Joyce’s death, and the need to “intervene” and “save” Buffy from Spike gives them all the chance to act – here, at last, is something they can do. It is not until Buffy’s reappearance unmasks the Buffybot that they realise what has happened, and Buffy is understandably annoyed that, “you guys couldn’t tell me apart from a robot”.

[10] This incarnation of Baudrillard’s simulacrum 2, “mask[ing] and pervert[ing] a basic reality”, sets up tensions between the “real” and the “artificial”, between truth and desire. Spike accepts the Buffybot as “better than the real thing” even though at first he thinks “[s]he looks a little shiny”; he becomes caught up in the role play that he has designed and is horrified when the Buffybot asks if it should “repeat this programme” and thus destroys his illusion. For her part, Buffy denies any possible connection between herself and the Buffybot, even questioning their likeness (Buffy: “At least it’s not a very good copy. I mean, look at it”; Willow: “Uh...yeah” [disbelieving look at Tara] ). Yet Buffy also *impersonates* the Buffybot at the end of “Intervention” in order to get information out of Spike. In this scene, both Spike and we are led to believe that this *is* the Buffybot, and this is reinforced by Buffy’s facial expressions, particularly her wide-open, innocent eyes, and by her higher-pitched vocal register. When Buffy assumes her own identity, her expression changes, and her voice drops in pitch. In this scene, while we may suspect that this is not the Buffybot, neither we nor Spike are perfectly certain until after the kiss; the unmasking takes place as a result of physical contact. And it is also of note that their words return to the question of what is “real” and what is not, as Buffy makes the distinction between the artificial, “gross and obscene” Buffybot, and

the “real” sacrifice Spike has made to protect Buffy and Dawn.

### **3. It masks the absence of a basic reality**

[11] So we come to Baudrillard’s third phase of the image, which “masks the absence of a basic reality”. It is notable that the Buffybot is, generally, only present when Buffy is not – it fills the gap left by the Slayer. Remember that in “Intervention”, Buffy and Giles went into the desert to perform a ritual to find out more about Buffy’s future as Slayer. The Buffybot’s appearance and participation in patrolling with the gang took place while Buffy was elsewhere (and we can note that the Slayer’s fighting skills appear to have been included in the “specs” that Spike gave Warren). The Buffybot is not just masquerading as, but is actually “replacing” Buffy.

[12] A similar sharing of space occurs in “The Gift” (5022), when the Buffybot is reactivated and used in the climactic fight against Glory. In this short scene, both Glory and we are under the impression that this is Buffy: the Buffybot wears the same clothes we saw Buffy wearing in the previous scene, and it demonstrates Buffy’s skills in both wordplay and fighting -- that is until Glory knocks its head off. The “real” Buffy does not appear in this sequence until after the Buffybot has been destroyed. We can see from this scene that the Buffybot *can* successfully masquerade as Buffy, with a serious expression, ironic tone of voice, level stare, and effective fighting. And once again, the actions of the Buffybot prefigure Buffy’s own: both are killed in their confrontation with Glory and her spell.

[13] By Season 6, the Buffybot is playing Buffy in order to fool everyone. In the opening scene of “Bargaining” (6001-2), as the Scoobies race through the graveyard, the audience faces disorientation and confusion as we see Buffy when we did not expect to. The confusion here can perhaps best be seen in the opening credits of Season 6, where, for the first time, the final shot is *not* Buffy, but is the Buffybot masquerading in the fight with Glory. In the graveyard sequence, the camera provides us with snapshots: a fist, then a shot of leather-clad legs, and finally a view of “Buffy” in full Slaying mode. Yet after a short time, cracks appear in this performance. Even with the Buffybot’s participation it takes the entire gang (and Spike’s lighter) to slay just two vampires. And

while Buffy's wordplay seems to be there, it is also faulty and becomes a series of, as Spike puts it, "dadaisms" ("Put that in your pie plate, bingo").

[14] As well as taking her place as Slayer, the Buffybot is also required to stand in for Buffy in more everyday contexts, such as making an appearance at the parent-teacher day. Here, more clearly than ever, the Buffybot is filling the gap that Buffy has left – in Baudrillard's terms, "masking" her "absence". Keeping the robot running becomes a focus for the Scoobies, and for Willow in particular; while for Dawn the Buffybot is a focus of comfort, a parental replacement as well as a sibling one. We can see this in the scene where Dawn climbs into bed with the Buffybot; a scene in which the artificiality of the robot is foregrounded: its inner mechanism is exposed and it has red, flashing recharging devices plugged into its foot and stomach. For Dawn, however, the continued presence of the Buffybot creates a particular tension: for if, according to the illusion, Buffy is still alive, then there is no space for Dawn to grieve over her loss. This seems to be a problem for Giles too, as his attempts to teach the Buffybot about "chi" tell us that he is using it to continue the close emotional relationship he and Buffy have developed. In these cases, the Buffybot seems ever closer to April whose function is to love; here, the Buffybot is the focus of the love that Dawn and Giles, and the others, feel for Buffy; its function is to *be* loved, and to be compliant in fulfilling that function.

[15] The question of whether a simulacrum can in fact replace "the real" is, to a certain extent, answered in the interaction of various characters with the Buffybot. It seems clear that the Buffybot is never really a replacement for Buffy. Things are never quite right; although the *appearance* of the robot is identical, interacting with it is just not the same. Spike finds this in "Intervention", when despite the perfection of the Buffybot's appearance, it nevertheless falls short of the "real thing" and he has to insist, "No programs. Don't use that word" (See Milavec and Kaye, 176). The Buffybot's only real social success is with Anya, who seems genuinely delighted when it enquires after her money ("Intervention"); and with the adults at Sunnydale High's parent-teacher day who read additional meaning into the Buffybot's platitudes ("Bargaining"). The Buffybot's domestic behaviour is a display of "feminine" nurturing that is excessive, as in, for example, its sandwich making; once again, behaviour that is very close to April's. Finally, the Scoobies acknowledge that "The only really real Buffy is really Buffy"

(“Bargaining Part 1). So the Buffybot’s presence emphasises absence; it fills the space with a corporeal representation, but cannot fulfill the emotional demands made upon it; and it denies the death of the “only really real” Buffy.

[16] In “Bargaining” the Buffybot and Buffy exchange places for the last time. Willow resurrects Buffy, while the Buffybot is captured by biker demons and torn apart. We come full circle back to April, who Warren described as “not a toy” as the leader scoffs at the Buffybot and calls it “nothing but a toy, a pretty toy”. The vicious subtext of “I Was Made to Love You” and “Intervention” is here made overt: there are clear allusions to rape in the abduction and dismemberment of the Buffybot. This dismemberment is almost contemporaneous with Buffy’s resurrection, during which we see the reconstruction of Buffy’s decaying physical body. And we see the Buffybot’s “death” through Buffy’s blurred vision, so that it becomes part of the “hell” in which Buffy now believes herself to be.

### **It is its own pure simulacrum**

[17] The last connection to be made here is between notions of an “ideal” slayer and the extent to which Buffy herself could be described as a kind of programmed, perfect embodiment. The Slayer is summed up in Mary Alice Money’s description as “an imperfect killing machine” (“Undemonization” 102); “built” or “constructed” to fulfill a specific purpose, and “called” to carry out her function, whether she wishes to do so or not. Zoe-Jane Playden similarly notes that Buffy is “a woman who is objectified as a function -- ‘The Slayer’ -- and controlled to serve ends which are not her own. She is a constructed woman, a kind of ‘cyborg’”(121). We return to the disruptive artificial bodies of cyborgs and robots, of monsters.

[18] Throughout Season 6, the notion of Buffy *as* construction is highlighted. Buffy does, in a sense, fulfill Baudrillard’s fourth phase of the image and becomes “[her] own pure simulacrum”. Buffy resurrected is and is not “Buffy”. Quite soon after her resurrection, she comes to recognise her own “programming” and the extent to which she is “going through the motions” of her own life -- her recognition, in fact, of the performance of slaying (“Once More with Feeling” [6007]). For a large part of Season 6, Buffy is also masquerading as herself: she fulfills the expectations of her friends by

acting the Buffy they expect; while her encounters with Spike reveal the gulf between Buffy before this death, and after. This crisis is not resolved until after her second resurrection at the end of Season 6, when she and Dawn climb out of a grave and walk through what appears to be a sunlit paradise garden (“Grave [6022]).

[19] Both April and the Buffybot are robot women created by men in order to fulfill specific purposes or fantasies. Buffy’s own “creation” by men has been explored throughout the series. In earlier seasons there was a tension between Buffy’s heritage as Slayer and her knowledge or understanding of that heritage, which is, in J. P. Williams’ terms, “filtered through her father figure Giles” (62). The presence of Giles and of the Watcher’s Council lurking in the background is a reminder of the patriarchal laws underpinning the existence of the Slayer. As Williams notes, “Buffy cannot rely on the ‘matrilineal tradition’ of slaying to guide her. Most of what she knows about that tradition is male dominated, and what she learns firsthand makes her view herself as unique” (63). After Season 4, she rejects the patriarchal authority of the Watchers’ Council, as discussed by Frances Early (*Slayage* 6, para 26). Season 5 sees Buffy searching for a meaning for her existence, and wanting to know more about her origins (her own personal Genesis story). In doing so she is drawn back to Sineya, the First Slayer (See “Restless”: “The first Slayer. I never really thought about it. It was intense.” For further discussion of Buffy as the latest of “a long line of Slayers”, see Larbalestier, “*Buffy’s* Mary Sue” 236-7).

[20] In Season 7 another masculinist creation is revealed, as Buffy is drawn back to her “heritage” through Nikki Wood’s “emergency kit” and another vision of the First Slayer, Sineya, in “Get it Done”. Buffy is confronted with her patriarchal programming when she passes through a mystical doorway and comes face to face with the “shadow men” who created the first Slayer. Here is enacted another monstrous construction as they reveal that the Slayer came into being after Sineya was possessed, or raped, by a demon. Thus, Buffy’s “perfection” as Slayer, her skills at fighting and killing and her supernatural powers stem from this ancient coupling of woman and demon which has, in a sense, “given birth” to the Slayer (Buffy’s reference to being “knocked up” by a demon does seem accurate here). This revelation undoes Buffy’s insistence (throughout Season



6) that she is not a demon, for according to the shadow men, she's been one all along. Finally, Buffy is shown to have more in common with April and the Buffybot than anyone might have expected.

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