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Driving Stakes, Driving Cars:

Californian Car Culture, Sex, and Identity in *BtVS*

1. Introduction: Sex, Cars, and California

"Why am I even listening to you to begin with – *you are a virgin who can't drive*!"

[1] With this damning verdict, Tai finally forces Cher to face up to the true extent of her cluelessness. If there is anything Cher, Alicia Silverstone's character in the 1995 movie *Clueless*, has no clue about, it's boys and cars. She fails to read not one but two straight guys who want her, or a gay guy who doesn't – small wonder that she has been so successful in preserving her virginity. Equipped with a learner's permit, she also has a hard time keeping her father's jeep on the road. Car scenes unfailingly land her in trouble while at the same time nudging her towards Mr. Right. A traffic ticket forces her to engage the services of her 'ex-stepbrother' Josh to accompany her on her next outing. When the wrong guy *du jour* comes on to her in his car, she leaps out at a lonely gas station in the middle of the night, only to be abandoned by her date and subsequently robbed by a pathetic crook; it is up to Josh to pick her up and drive her back to safety. A later date with a gay guy (in his flashy yellow convertible) ends with him ignoring her and Josh driving her home once again. When her best friend Dionne accidentally hits the highway and freaks out in heavy traffic, Dionne's boyfriend Murray calms her down and saves the day; Dionne's virginity does not survive the following night. This display of how a good driver makes a good boyfriend and lover makes Cher admit to herself for the first time that she too wants a guy for herself. Yet it still takes a disastrous driving test and Tai's vitriol for her to realize that Josh is in fact the one. Clueless and innocent, Cher has to negotiate a gauntlet of sexual and vehicular near-collisions before she is finally united with a dependable driver.

[2] One might be driven to conclude that Cher's cluelessness about boys and cars is an unnecessary and unmotivated conflation of human and machine, a clever manipulation of symbols and themes by writer/director Amy Heckerling in order to explore teenagers living on the cusp of romantic and vehicular maturity. Heckerling, however, taps into a much broader cultural phenomenon. In American culture (among others), cars repeatedly come to serve as emblems of and surrogates for romantic relationships, individual potency, or sexual intercourse.[1] In some cases, the automobile works to enhance and epitomize the driver's sexual

potency, often making boys look more virile and casting biker chicks as sexually voracious. Moreover, there are repeated instances when the automobile becomes a sexualized object, acting as the object of a driver's desires and affections, supplanting an actual human being. Even French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, upon breaking up with her long-time lover Nelson Algren, is said to have decided to devote her energy to a new "love" – her new car – blurring the line between man and machine as one's beloved.[2] An extreme version of this same conflation of sex and lover might be Stephen King's *Christine* (1983), a twisted parody of the way high school males lavish attention upon their cars; in the story, Christine (a 1958 Plymouth Fury) not only becomes the object of 'her' owner Arnie's affection, but in turn 'she' becomes jealous of Arnie's girlfriend Leigh and tries to bump Leigh off. While Cher's ongoing cluelessness about boys and cars might be a unique and very Californian treatment of licensed driving and virginity, it is clear that one doesn't have to be a flaxen-haired, stylish Californian teen to find sex and cars an appropriate pairing.

[3] No less flaxen-haired and stylish than Cher, Buffy Summers appears as another contender for the role of prototypical Californian teenager. A true product of the Californian lifestyle, Buffy hangs out at the beach with swimmers, shops 'til she drops, and drinks down lattés at the open-air coffee shop in downtown Sunnydale. Buffy, however, also repeatedly runs into problems with driving. To some extent, Buffy's failure to drive is even stranger than Cher's; her duties as the "Chosen One," her run-ins with the undead, and her motorcade of vampiric romances are somehow not inhibited by her inability to drive, and in fact remain more commonplace activities in her life.[3] The slaying lifestyle does less damage to Buffy's credibility as a real Californian teen than her failure to drive does – especially given that she not only does not drive, but also does not drive throughout the entire seven-season run of *BtVS*, with one exception (in "Band Candy" [3.06], in the midst of adults mentally incapacitated by "chocolate-y goodness").[4] Anyone who has ever lived in the concrete jungle of Southern California knows the vital role that automobiles play,[5] and it's hard to figure out how Buffy manages to reach age twenty-three and still gets everywhere she needs to go. Moreover, anyone who has been a teenager understands what an important rite of passage driving constitutes, how highly prized is that singular plastic rectangle of liberation, the driver's license. Yet, when she makes her final exit from Sunnydale, Buffy remains *sans* license. As Buffy herself admits to Riley, "Cars and Buffy are, like, unmixy things" (4.09). But why?

[4] We can rule out location as a factor as cars are far from absent from life in Sunnydale. In fact, not only does Sunnydale really look like a real Californian town – complete with cars, traffic, and suburban sprawl – but the show's location is a subtle yet continuous reminder that Buffy should be driving.[6] Moreover, car scenes serve as bookends – or bumpers – for the whole series. Buffy steps onto the Hellmouth for the first time when her mother drops her off at school (1.01), within sixty seconds of her first appearance. As the Hellmouth collapses in the show's finale, the slayer leaves Sunnydale for the last time riding on top of a school bus (7.22). In between, she may have saved the world a lot, but in the end Buffy still remains a passenger.

2. "Actually, no-wheeling is more my specialty:" Why Buffy doesn't drive

2.1. "In the car, now!" Cars as sites of adult power and the contestation of responsibility

[5] Two separate issues are at stake. In Buffy's case, throughout the first three seasons, cars feature as the – literal as well as metaphorical – site of power and responsibility, and the contestation of a teenager's maturity by an adult. Maturity comes in two flavors, general and sexual. In the one episode where Buffy does get to drive (3.06), Joyce initially refuses to let her use the car, ostensibly because her daughter 'doesn't test well,' and more tellingly because she does not want her to be able to 'just take off.' Buffy's retort that she can 'just take the bus' falls flat, at any rate until Joyce, high on candy, is happy to hand Buffy her car keys. When Willow asks her why her mother gave her the keys, she replies: "I told my mom I wanted to be treated like a grown-up and, voila, driviness." Driving is seen as a symbol of maturity; the irony is that only a mother out of her mind surrenders this responsibility to her daughter. Compos mentis, Joyce uses her car as a stage of her adult responsibility (and responsibilities): right at the beginning, when Joyce drops off her daughter, she reminds her warily, "Try not get kicked out?" (1.01). After their unpleasant meeting with Principal Snyder in 2.03, she asserts her authority with the curt order "In the car, *now*!" while in 2.12, she grounds Buffy in the car.

[6] But it is more than parental authority that is at stake. When on her seventeenth birthday, Buffy raises the issue of getting her driver's license (2.13), Joyce's concern – "Do you really think you are ready, Buffy?" – while ostensibly directed at her ability to drive, simultaneously foreshadows the climax of the episode, Buffy's imminent loss of her virginity to Angel, with disastrous results. Buffy's lack of preparation to handle sexual relationships compares poorly with that of the more seasoned Cordelia: at the beginning of 1.12, Buffy is shown doing "the usual," i.e., fighting a vampire, interspersed with scenes of Cordelia making out with a boy in a car – cars and boys are better left to those who have at least some idea how to handle them.

2.2. "Unmixy things:" Cars, superpowers, and relationships

[7] For Buffy, driving is no picnic. She makes this perfectly clear in her picnic scene with Riley (4.09).

Buffy: Driving?
Riley: Yeah.
Buffy: You seriously drive for fun?
Riley: Well, not four-wheeling or anything, but yeah. Don't you?
Buffy: Actually, no-wheeling is more my specialty. I'm an avid pedestrian.
Riley: You're kidding, right? I mean, you know how to drive?
Buffy: Well, I took the class. Cars and Buffy are, like, unmixy things.
Riley: It's just because you haven't had a good experience yet. You can have the best time in a car. It's not about getting somewhere. You have to take your time. Forget about everything. Just relax. Let it wash over you. The air, the motion. Just let it roll.

Buffy: We are talking about driving, right?

[8] For both of them, driving features as a metaphor for sex – recreational for Riley, portentous for Buffy. Their exchange is also about control – surrendering it in his case, struggling to maintain it in hers. On the face of it, bad luck might be to blame for Buffy's understandable reluctance – Riley thinks he has figured this out when he reminds her "It's just because you haven't had a good experience yet." Although this is true, more potent forces impede Buffy's success in driving/relationships. In this episode, Buffy's concern with maintaining control is juxtaposed with Willow's failure to control her magicks in the wake of her breakup with Oz. More generally, throughout the show driving is portrayed as inherently fraught with perils for the most supernaturally gifted female characters. For these heroines, special powers and cars (and their metaphorical equivalent of sexual relationships) do not mesh – they are the true "unmixy things."

[9] Supernaturally endowed females do well to steer clear of cars and driving. On the one occasion Buffy gets to drive, she does so poorly; she leaves the parking brake on and peels out of the parking lot of the Bronze so as to prompt 'teen' Snyder's geeky exclamation "Whoa, Summers, you drive like a spazz!" (3.06). Other slayers never drive at all. When Kendra needs to get from Sunnydale High School to the airport, she takes a cab (2.10). Faith not only emulates Buffy in relying mostly on her slayer-strength legs and the occasional lift (most recently on her return to Sunnydale in 7.18), but repeatedly has bad experiences with vehicles, finding herself bundled up in the back of vans or most spectacularly falling onto the bed of a passing truck after being stabbed by Buffy – "Shoulda been there, B. It was quite a ride." (3.21).

[10] The nexus between cars, magic and relationships is brought into sharp focus in Willow's case. All of her accidents involving cars and magic in Season 6 stem from her failure to control her relationship with Tara (either because of her magic addiction or Tara's death), and serve as foil for her lack of control over sexual relationships. The incident in "Wrecked" (6.10) where Willow and Dawn flee from a demon and Willow, high on black magic, seizes a car, commands it to "drive!" only to crash it into a wall, is a classic example of the incompatibility of female supernatural powers and driving. After Tara's death, as Willow, Xander and Buffy chase Warren's bus in Xander's car, Willow uses magic to seize control from Xander, make it drive "Faster!" and subsequently stops Warren's bus with magic too (6.20). Here, as also in 6.21, where Willow controls a huge truck by floating above it and makes it ram a stolen police car carrying her targets Andrew and Jonathan, human-style driving is out of the question. Magical steering, death and destruction go hand in hand. In fact, Willow is only able to drive 'normally' when she doesn't practice magicks, or has her powers (as well as her love life) firmly under control. This may account for the one time she is seen driving, chauffeuring Faith back to Sunnydale in 7.18: she has abstained from magicks for some time, and things are going fine with her new flame Kennedy.

[11] The ex-demon Anya belongs in the same category of car-challenged female characters with a supernatural background. When, in the dream sequence in "Restless" (4.22), she volunteers to take over the ice cream truck from Xander (to allow him to make out with Willow and Tara in the back of the truck – a scene that can be read to suggest lack of control over her emergent relationship with Xander) once she has figured out how to "steer by gesturing emphatically." Even when awake, she can hardly drive without magic. When the unwitting release of the troll Olaf in the Magic Shop compels her to chase him in Giles' BMW convertible, she drives very poorly – as she explains to Willow, it is because she has never tried it before (5.11).[7] As shown by the

title of episode, "Triangle," this incident fits our template very well: the accidental release of Olaf (her ex-boyfriend from over 1,000 years ago, turned into a troll because of his putative cheating on her [cf. 7.05]) threatens to destabilize her relationship with her current partner Xander. In this context, poor driving is an apt symbol of this temporary loss of control over her relationships past and present. We may suspect that Willow doesn't attempt to take over from her not just because a better show of driving from her would (within the logic of the show) be hard to reconcile with her Wicca status,[8] but also because the troubles are Anya's and it is therefore her turn to prove the driving/relationship trouble nexus.

[12] Given her supernatural origins as The Key, Dawn might be expected to fit the same profile. However, her lack of driving should perhaps more prosaically be explained as a function of her age. When she finally gets to drive a car (7.21), it is in an emergency (having taken control of Xander's car after being drugged by him to get her out of town), and only after her identity as a perfectly normal (if somewhat clichéd) human teenager – as well as her lack of slayer potential (7.12) – has been firmly established.[9]

[13] As shown in our preliminary matrix in Table 1, as far as women are concerned, supernatural powers and youth are the critical variables that determine vehicular success or failure. This matrix places mature and fully 'human' women at the opposite end of the spectrum. Joyce Summers is the best example – a member of the parental generation, and largely bereft of personal relationships, she drives frictionlessly. It is only when she is under a spell that she abdicates the adult responsibility of driving to her unprepared daughter (see above, on 3.06) and contrives to have sex – where else? – on the hood of a *police car*; just as the mature adult polices her daughter in her car, and polices her relationship with cars, the juvenilized Joyce picks the perfect spot to perform her new role – a source of horror for her daughter when she finally finds out (3.18).[10] Jenny Calendar, though younger, belongs in the same category; her involvement with the supernatural beyond techno-paganism (2.13-2.17), reportedly an afterthought of the writers,[11] is revealed too late to interfere with her driving abilities.

[14] Table 1: Driving and personal attributes in BtVS: Female characters

S(upernatural)	H(uman)
Y(oung)	A(dult)

SY	Buffy, Willow, Anya, Tara	can't (normally) drive
H**Y**	Cordelia, (Dawn)	drive (with difficulty)
HA	Joyce, Jenny	drive (safely)

[15] The logic of this matrix dictates that Cordelia occupies an intermediate position between super-charged and immature non-drivers on the one hand and ordinary and mature motorists on the other.[12] In the same age bracket as Buffy, Willow and Faith (or Anya's human persona)

but devoid of comparable superpowers, she is happy to drive (witness her vanity license plate "Queen C" in 2.05) – but usually poorly. Sometimes she runs into trouble on her own account, as when she smacks into a parked car on her way to the Delta Zeta Kappa party (2.05), or when she pesters cops with the plea, "Can you help me with a ticket? It was a one-way street. I was going one way" (2.08). Cars can cause her embarrassment, as in 2.02, when Cordelia, followed into the parking lot, drops her keys under her car and hides in a dumpster. In keeping with the standard pattern of female driving observed above, magical interference only makes matters worse: blinded by magic, Cordelia crashes the driver's ed car through a fence and into the road (1.03), and recklessly tears down the street from Buffy's house when she is attacked by Worm Man (2.10). Even her bravery in 1.12, when she crashes through Sunndydale High School to save Jenny and Willow, involves reckless driving.[13]

3. "Wheel Men:" Vehicular constructions of masculinity

[16] In contrast to the frustrated and disastrous driving episodes of Buffy, Willow, and company, we find a more complex series of roads taken with boys and cars on *BtVS*. Driving often is thought to offer an opportunity to enhance one's masculinity, to become a 'real man' who contributes to the battle against evil. On a few occasions, driving actually does allow a male character to construct an image of enhanced masculinity. However, in typical *Buffy*-fashion, the idea that 'cars make a man manlier' also gets turned on its head, leading to attacks on traditional notions of masculinity, leaving the boys with less than a full tank of confidence.[14]

3.1 "Is this a penis metaphor?" Xander Harris, borrowed cars, borrowed masculinity

[17] Xander – always at the nexus of the interesting problems on *BtVS* – exemplifies the various and contested roles cars play in the articulation of masculinity (or, perhaps better, masculinities). The first explicit reference to Xander driving occurs in "Inca Mummy Girl" (2.04), when he excitedly shares with the Scoobies the prospect of borrowing his mother's car to drive to the cultural exchange dance; in Xander's eyes, driving the gang to the dance will transform him into the pseudo-superheroic "Wheel Man." The appellation reveals two interesting points. First of all, the car shows Xander's desire to see himself as a "man," maturing from teenager to adult faster than a speeding bullet. Moreover, the superhero-style name in Xander's wisecracking hints that he sees the car as a kind of enhancement, giving him a superpower to contribute to the Scoobies. It may only be a coincidence that this episode also involves Xander's first real date – with the 500-year-old mummified princess Ampata – although the success of this date, like Xander's access to the car and "Wheel Man" status, is brief.[15]

[18] Xander's focus on the car as a superheroic Cialis appears again and more clearly in "The Zeppo" (3.13). During a brutal verbal attack after their break-up, Cordelia questions Xander's value as anything more than a liability to the Scoobies, striking all of Xander's deep-seated feelings of inadequacy:

Cordelia: It must be really hard when all your friends have, like, superpowers: slayer, werewolf, witches, vampires, and you're like this little nothing. You must feel like Jimmy Olsen.

Xander: I was just talking to… hey! Mind your own business!

Cordelia: Ooh, I struck a nerve. The boy that had no cool.

Xander: I happen to be an integral part of that group. I happen to have a lot to offer.

Cordelia: Oh, please.

Xander: I do!

Cordelia: Integral part of the group? Xander, you're the useless part of the group.

You're the Zeppo.

[19] Xander strikes back by finding a "thing that makes [him] cool;" he again borrows a car and becomes "Car Guy. Guy with the car." The car (this time on loan from Uncle Rory) is a 1957 Chevy Bel Air, a sleek convertible that brilliantly evokes American car culture and cinema in the late 1950's and early 1960's, an era when cult heroes like James Dean were making movies about tough teenage rebels and dangerous chicken fights of masculine bravado – as well as making headlines by dying in gruesome car wrecks.[16] In fact, imagery of the 1950's appears repeatedly in "the Zeppo," reinforcing the connection between the Chevy and a specific brand of rebellious American machismo. Xander's antagonist in the episode, Jack O'Toole, is a 50's-style bully, clad in white undershirt and dark jacket – the uniform of a true rebel without a cause. When Xander keeps O'Toole out of trouble with the law, O'Toole decides to make Xander his "wheel man" and brings him to meet his buddies, a gang of zombies, including Bob, who has been buried in his letterman's jacket and jeans – another bold icon of American machismo. If O'Toole and gang fail to convince as the reanimated cast of *Stand By Me*, the climax of the episode draws on another image familiar from American cinema of the 1950's. Xander and O'Toole face off in the ultimate display of machismo, a chicken fight as a time bomb interminably ticks away in the basement of Sunnydale High School; whoever flinches first loses. Despite the near omnipresence of the Chevy throughout "the Zeppo," the chicken fight is notably *sans* automobile (and, for the record, *sans* Xander's trademark

nervous repartee – as opposed to the verbal wit essential to Buffy's own "clever banter portion[s] of the fight").

[20] Against this backdrop of hot rod hypermasculinity, Xander finds himself undergoing a simultaneous sexual rite of passage, which is repeatedly tied to the borrowed car. When he initially shows off the Chevy to the Scoobies, Buffy deftly describes the situation: "Is this a penis metaphor?" The Chevy quickly leads to Xander picking up an anonymous blonde girl at the donut shop (in front of a bewildered Cordelia). When the blonde, an auto aficionado, asks Xander how the car handles, Xander replies "Like a dream about warm, sticky things," reifying the connection of car to his sexual libido, although suggesting that driving at this point is no more than masturbation. The relationship with the blonde, however, goes nowhere, and Xander moves on to another woman, saving Faith from a horde of female demons, the Sisterhood of Jhe; immediately afterwards, he loses his virginity in her motel room. Not only does the car facilitate Xander's ability to save Faith and have sex with her, but Faith too equates sex and driving; as she straddles the virgin Xander in bed, she assures him "Don't worry, I'll steer you around the curves." Xander's virility and automobile have become virtually interchangeable.

[21] Such a seemingly simple connection of driving and sexual maturation should arouse our suspicions, especially given that Xander's masculinity is far from traditional throughout *BtVS* and often tempered by a comic flaccidity (such as Xander's skateboard crash while scoping out new student Buffy in 1.01). Indeed, "the Zeppo" does not present the automobile as a totem that merely reinforces masculinity, but also as a continual threat of failed masculine performance. When "Car Guy" Xander asks how he can help to avert another apocalypse, Buffy and Willow use his driving power to fetch donuts (a skill Xander has already well-honed). When Xander boasts to the blonde that he's not "a klutz," he immediately rear-ends O'Toole's (stolen) car. Bumping O'Toole's backside precipitates a knife fight on the hood of the Chevy which Xander explains to an intervening police officer as just "two guys wrastlin' – but not in a gay way;"[17] his comment slyly suggests that the Chevy might also become a site for a homosexual masculinity.[18] When Xander and Faith have sex, it is Faith who acts as the aggressor, who does the seducing and the "steer[ing] around the curves." The superheroic Chevy, then, not only announces Xander's enhanced masculinity, but also threatens at every curve to undermine that sought-after masculinity.

3.2 "My Barbie dream car had nicer seats!" Cars and the failure of masculine performance

[22] Let us set "The Zeppo" aside for a moment to follow up this ambivalent role cars play in the contestation of stereotypically male prowess. In a large number of cases on *BtVS*, inadequacies of cars or driving are taken to reflect poorly on the male car-owner or driver. Cars and driving are a favorite arena for the inadequacy of male performance, and female criticism thereof. In a farcical way, this is already foreshadowed early in the opening episode when Xander is introduced to the show via the aforementioned skateboard crash (1.01).

[23] Inadequacy and failure manifest themselves in various forms. Car breakdowns provide the most straightforward metaphor. When Xander plans to spend the summer after graduation driving to all fifty states, his car's engine falls out in Oxnard, CA: unsuccessful as a male stripper, he ends up washing dishes (4.01). Thanks to his ramshackle equipment, the

fifty states remain impervious to Xander's attempted penetration; a summerly promise of promiscuity ends in dismal failure. This handicap is mirrored in Oz and Willow's final good-bye scene in Oz's van (4.19): when Willow compliments him on his vehicle ("This thing looks great."), Oz admits that "It broke down in Mexico." For all the spirit of (sexual) self-discovery heralded by his previous departure (4.06), the narrow limits of his quest become painfully apparent.

[24] Crappy cars diminish maleness: while Buffy challenges Giles' quasi-paternal authority by poking fun at his creaky vehicle ("One of these days you're going to get a grown-up car") (2.04),[19] Cordelia puts down a high school guy in a similar fashion ("So I told Devon: you call that leather interior? My Barbie dream car had nicer seats.") (2.06). Thanks to their performative aspect, male driving abilities are an even more rewarding target for diminution. The most telling scene involves Riley driving Buffy in Giles' BMW to confront the two split Xanders (5.03). This rare occasion of male chauffeuring of the Slayer unsurprisingly requires the immediate undercutting of Riley's assumption of a traditional male role. The opening shots between Buffy – "Can't you go faster? Ultimate driving machine, my ass" – and the defensive Riley – "We are going 70" (in an urban setting) – sets the scene for a lengthy exchange on whether Riley would prefer two split Buffys, or in other words just the fully human variant without the superpowers. Her insinuation that his conventional human male nature/sexuality may be insufficient – "not fast enough" – to keep up with a superhuman heroine may prompt an (unconvincing) rejoinder – that he loves everything about her – but in truth foreshadows his patent inability to cope with their asymmetrical qualities in subsequent episodes, as well as his inability to overcome this problem even with contrived 'bad-boy' behavior; even after Riley has sought out female vampires (5.06), Spike still tells him that he is simply "not dark enough" for Buffy (5.08). Incidentally, Riley and Buffy's roles seem briefly reversed when during his mission to Sunnydale in 6.15, a newly self-assured Riley drives Buffy in a black Hummer-like vehicle. Buffy's shy compliment – "Nice wheels" – now merely elicits a cool retort: "Came with the car." Just as the wheels are part of the car, Riley has always been the way he is now, only her perception of him – and his perception of his standing vis-a-vis hers – has changed. Yet now that his vehicular identity is finally good enough for a regretful Buffy, it is far too late to undo her earlier reservations about a putatively speed-challenged boyfriend.

[25] Carlessness degrades male characters in the eyes of women or of male competitors, most notably when Cordelia complains about having to drive Xander: "What am I? Mass transportation?" (2.09), or when she responds to his query "What can I do?" with "You can go out into the parking lot and practice running like a man" (2.20). Jenny Calendar's offer to pick up Giles for a date at a football game (2.02) inverts conventional dating protocol. A whole line of cruel jokes about Spike's incapacitation in the later stages of Season 2 plays on the identification of the male driver with his vehicle. According to Angelus, the wheelchair-bound Spike is only useful for getting a good parking space (2.17). Reduced to "spinning his wheels" (2.17), Spike is made to endure Angelus' taunts of impotence and his brazen flirting with Drusilla.

[26] Appropriately, more comical versions of female attacks on the 'male driver' revolve around Xander. Driving Anya and Dawn, both get in his face about his poor performance, Anya in her usual literal way – "You drive like a snail. Or like a snail driving a car very slowly" –, with Dawn delivering the coup de grace – "I can drive faster and I can't drive."

(6.03). A more explicit linking of car and sexual inadequacy can be observed in 4.18, when Xander operates his ice cream truck (his job of the week) while Anya suspects erectile dysfunction behind the fact that they have not had sex for two consecutive nights. Infuriated by this challenge to his virility, Xander loudly offers her to have wild sex right there in the truck – to the consternation of a gaggle of small kids who had meanwhile lined up outside the vehicle – heaping new embarrassment on hapless Xander. Ice cream trucks are particularly good at reminding Xander of his sexual limitations: when the dream sequence in 4.22 likewise finds Xander and Anya riding in a (different) ice cream truck, he not only manages to get (somewhat futilely) aroused by the sight of the two lesbians Willow and Tara making out in the back of the truck but subsequently abandons his heterosexual real-life partner (with her casually granted permission) to join them (for what exactly?) only to end up in the familiar sex-less environment of his basement. It is unflatteringly clear that Anya has no reason to worry about letting him off the leash, although his willingness to leave her for a fantasy bodes ill for his ultimate commitment to their relationship (cf. 6.16). The engine doesn't always have to fall out for Xander's cars to showcase his inadequacy.[20]

3.3 "Oh, they haven't seen my new car!" Successful vehicular displays of masculinity

[27] Automobiles hold out the hope of attaining a kind of traditional masculinity for the males of the Buffyverse, yet simultaneously threaten to run the men off the road of achieving any traditional form of masculine prowess. Nevertheless, several instances can be found in *BtVS* when males successfully use cars to construct a form of masculinity by which they invigorate themselves.

[28] "The Zeppo" offers a rather innovative solution to the vehicular threat of traditional masculine prowess by ultimately removing the car altogether. In the donut shop scene early in the episode, Cordelia responds to Xander's newly-borrowed superpower by pointing out that a car does not change anything about Xander's character, does not make him any cooler or any more of a man. Cordelia is far more accurate than she could realize. Ironically, when Xander wins the chicken fight against Jack O'Toole and saves Sunnydale High, the Scoobies, and (by extension) the world, he does it without the use of the Chevy Bel Air, but by standing firmly on his own feet. Xander beats O'Toole because he no longer needs a car as a tool, as a borrowed enhancement, but because he has internalized the masculine, death-defying bravado that the car stereotypically represents but can never actually grant him. In essence, Xander doesn't need to be "car guy" to be "extraordinary" (to steal from his tear-jerking speech to Dawn in "Potential," 7.12), although the car certainly facilitates his journey of self-discovery. Where the rite of passage of driving fails for Buffy and Willow, Xander is able to take his first truly confident steps towards maturation.

[29] In other instances on *BtVS*, cars really do make the man. Cordelia's comments in the donut shop in "the Zeppo" are also ironic given that, throughout the first two seasons of the show, she repeatedly equates the possession of cars with male attractiveness. This principle is most clearly spelled out very early on in the second episode, when Cordelia muses "But senior boys – they have mystery. They have – what's the word I'm searching for? – Cars!" (1.02). Other examples focus specifically on the *quality* of the car: in 2.05, Cordelia has a crush on frat boy Richard, acknowledges his "nice car;" in 2.16, when Harmony reveals her

crush on Cody Weinberg, Cordelia identifies him as the guy who drives a 350 SLT.[21] It is not just that nice cars make guys attractive; or that cars appear nicer if driven by desirable guys – as in Buffy's comment on the returning Riley's "nice wheels" (6.15); it is rather that the identities of driver and vehicle are fully balanced by exhibiting the same qualities.[22] This is what lends extra venom to Harmony's sarcastic recommendation to Cordelia (right after her break-up with Xander) that she should go out with nerdy Jonathan, who, after all, has "got a kill mo-ped" (3.09).

[30] Supernatural characters experience a similarly unproblematic link between the quality of their driving and their personal qualities. Spike's experience is a case in point. In his first appearance on the show, he drives his car into the "Welcome to Sunnydale" sign, in a deliberate act that signals his determination to violate the town (2.03). This scene is parodied in the following season when, having lost Drusilla to an antlered chaos demon and bereft of all self-confidence, a drunken Spike accidentally fells the sign again, only to tumble out of his car and drop his liquor bottle (3.08). Conversely, at the end of the same episode, with his spirits restored, he vigorously drives out of town to get Drusilla back, listening to and singing Gary Oldman's version of Sid Vicious' classic rendition of "My Way." In view of this, it need not be coincidental that he regains a vehicle (a motorbike snatched from the biker demons in 6.02) after a long chip-induced slump in Seasons 4 and 5 shortly before he finally manages to strike up a sexual relationship with Buffy. In the series *Angel* (2.13), Lorne prefaces his doubts about Angel's continuing commitment to his mission – even to saving the world – with a disparaging comment about Angel's convertible ("So is there another gear after that #2 thingy?"). Cars and personal attributes become interchangeable: this may be the closest the show comes to re-iterating conventional tropes without immediately undermining them by some twist or irony.

[31] In contrast to Xander's problematic borrowed masculinity in "The Zeppo," cars do on occasion enhance masculinity, although not without attempts at subversion. The best-developed instance is Giles' classic reaction to a mid-life crisis situation. Side-lined by the Scoobies and largely cooped up at home in a state of increasingly frequent inebriation during much of Season 4 and finally ready to throw in the towel in the opening episode of Season 5, Buffy's plea to be her Watcher again instantly reinvigorates Giles. Within days, he acquires a potent visual symbol of this event in the form of a cherry-red BMW convertible. The context is quite complex: the car is not obtained to cope with a mid-life crisis – i.e., in lieu of something better; rather, it is the manifestation of an antecedent re-enhancement of his traditional role of quasi-paternal Watcher. As so often in the series, irony and genuine appreciation are closely intertwined. First shown riding his new trophy car with Buffy and Dawn in 5.02, Giles proves inept at handling the automatic transmission, complaining:

Giles: (to Buffy) "I loathe just sitting here, not contributing." (to the car) "It's not working out."
Buffy: "Giles, are you breaking up with your car?"
Giles: "Well, it did seduce me, all red and sporty."
Buffy: "Little two-door tramp!"

[32] Giles goes on to explain that getting this car seemed appropriate once he had resumed his role as Watcher. Yet Buffy repeatedly undermines his newly restored authority not only by quipping about the 'tramp' but also by mock-innocently questioning his assumption

that she ought to show him more respect. The whole scene is further set in context by Dawn's noting Giles' old age in her diary. More subtle elements include the fact that (given that the BMW looks significantly older than a 2000 model) the car is not new but second-hand, just as Giles merely seeks to reprise an earlier role instead of attempting something new, and that the sportiness of his new vehicle is somewhat undermined by its automatic transmission, arguably not the most common feature of red mid-life crisis convertibles.[23] When Giles spots Willow and Tara, his childish pride in his new vehicle – "Oh, they haven't seen my new car!" – at first sight appears reciprocated when they show themselves to be appropriately impressed. Then again, coming from a pair of Lesbians, their compliments may not be entirely what Giles is really looking for.

[33] It is clear that for him, although he is aware of his underlying motivations, the car genuinely fulfills a role in making him feel better about himself – after all, as he echoes Xander's words in "The Zeppo", the new convertible "drives like a dream." At the same time, his all-female audience – from Buffy and Dawn to Tara and Willow – reacts with overt or implicit irony that undercuts much of this enhancement. However, the most direct assault on Giles' vehicular upgrade is reserved for a much later episode. When in the memory-erased environment of "Tabula Rasa," 'Randy' Spike suspects Giles to be his father and Anya to be his soon-to-be tarty step-mother, he responds to the group's suggestion to drive to a hospital with the acerbic comment "Dad can drive. He is bound to have some classic mid-life crisis transport – something red, shiny, shaped like a penis" (6.08). The real joke lies in the fact that while Giles had in fact precisely fulfilled this prediction, he had not done so in the stereotypical context of a mid-life crisis-driven by a sexual liaison with a much younger woman, but merely in an attempt to reclaim a sex-less paternal position. Giles' male identity appears to be defined primarily by loco parentis authority instead of sexual relationships.

[34] In its complexity, the Giles case stands out against a background of more straightforward examples of a positive relationship between driving and 'maleness.' While "The Zeppo" establishes that Xander doesn't need a car to perform like a 'man' and to be special in his own way, later seasons grant him a more conventional and generally unquestioned nexus between growing maturity and vehicular status. Thus, Xander first appears to own a car when he drives Anya to pick up Willow and Tara on their way to the hospital after Joyce's death (5.16). We are led to assume that he acquired it with the help of his income from his construction job soon after finally moving out of his parents' basement and renting a proper apartment for Anya and himself (5.03). Both acquisitions can be seen as convergent symbols of traditional male role-playing. The same trend is visible in 7.01, when Xander's promotion in the construction business has him sport a business suit as well as a shiny new car.

[35] Male vampires and other demons regularly drive. As Buffy observes as early as 1.02, "They [i.e., vampires] coulda just … fooom!" Xander: "They can fly?" Buffy: "They can drive." The Hellions – a motorcycle gang of demons from out of town – that attack Sunnydale and disrupt Buffy's resurrection ritual profess to be interested in sex with human women despite certain "anatomical incompatibilities" (6.02), upholding the common association of bikers and male sexual appetite. Teen vampire Justin tries to make out with Dawn in his car, and is afterwards joined by other teen vamps in their cars when Giles tries to free her. One of these cars gets demolished as Buffy fights a vamp,

smashing him into the car several times – in defense of her sister's virginity (6.06).

[36] In fact, the trope of vehicular-enhanced masculinity is so well established in the show that it also supports open travesty. Thus, the opening scene of 6.18 features the members of the Trio riding buggies in an attempt to chase down two vampires in the cemetery. Huge phallic pointy wooden stakes protrude from the handlebars of their vehicles – ostensibly to scare the vampires but likewise in a laughably crude display of surrogate male potency. Inevitably, the real-life shortcomings of the Trio invite pathetic failure: unable to control their well-endowed vehicles, they soon crash into each other and into a headstone. In this case, personal qualities and vehicular image do not match at all, inverting the conventional benefits of male driving.

[37] The material presented in this section reveals a fundamental divide between female and male characters in terms of how they relate to cars and driving. Whereas female driving ability is mediated by immaturity and supernatural powers, males of all ages and qualities tend to share the same feature: cars reflect their masculinity. Table 2 shows that the two variables that are of critical significance for women don't matter at all when it comes to men: male gender fully predetermines a character's relationship to cars.

[38] Table 2: Driving and personal attributes in BtVS: female and male characters

S(upernatural)	H(uman)
Y(oung)	A(dult)
F(emale)	**M**(ale)

SYF	Buffy, Willow, Anya	can't (normally) drive
H**YF**	Cordelia, (Dawn)	drive (with difficulty)
HA**F**	Joyce, Jenny	drive (safely)
SY**M**	Oz, (Spike, Angel)	can drive; vehicle ~ persona ~ sex
SA**M**	N/A, unless Spike, Angel	can drive; vehicle ~ persona ~ sex
HY**M**	Xander, Riley, Trio	can drive; vehicle ~ persona ~ sex
HA**M**	Giles	can drive; vehicle ~ persona ~ sex

[39] This inflexible linkage of cars, sex, and male identity is further complemented by several logical corollaries. Hence, cars per se can be used to symbolize sex and relationships. When Willow discovers Oz and Veruca in the nude locked together in a cage, she wanders off in a daze, only to be almost run over by a speeding silver-metallic sports car that metaphorically replicates her encounter with out-of-control, 'animalistic' sexual energy that can wreck romantic relationships (4.06). In "Hush," Buffy passes a car that crashed into a fire hydrant that now ejects a geyser of water, before she runs into Riley and their first-ever passionate kiss (4.10). (A comparable fluid squirting motif – this time sans car – is less subtly employed in 4.03 when Anya takes off her clothes in Xander's basement.) Faith's reference to Willow's not "driving stick anymore" falls in the same category (4.16).

[40] In a further intensification of this linkage, cars themselves can be defined as female. We have already discussed Giles and Buffy's exchange about the "little two-door tramp," "all red and sporty," that "did seduce" Giles and might face an early break-up (5.02). Later on, the Trio's van is likewise identified as female when Warren announces that "she is ready" (6.05). It is hardly a coincidence that Warren, apparently the only Trio member who has had a girlfriend, is also the only one who ever gets to drive this van. This is also consistent with the fact that vans are regularly portrayed as locus of male power and control. Assorted villains from Kane (2.05) and the Slayerfest bounty hunters (3.05) to the Trio of Season 6 use vans as roving headquarters. The sinister operatives of the Watcher's Council crash their van into the ambulance transporting Buffy (in Faith's body) to seize her (4.16). Caleb (7.18) also uses a larger vehicle, a pick-up truck, to enter Sunnydale and stab his first onscreen female victim – another (potential) Slayer with car problems. Yet the use of large vehicles to exert control over others is not limited to villains alone; when for the first time in 98 episodes Buffy finally despairs of confronting the current 'Big Bad' (5.20), Spike and subsequently Giles immediately assert control by evacuating the Scoobies in a Winnebago. Only men drive; the tinfoil-covered windows of the vehicle enable Spike to reprise Jesse's role in Kathryn Bigelow's 1987 iconic vampire movie "Near Dark" by boldly steering a car in broad daylight. The Slayer's uncharacteristic loss of nerve equally uncharacteristically compels the female members of the group to rely on male chauffeurs to save the day. By contrast, Oz's van – apart from representing a conventional attribute of his membership in a band – serves as a site of male *self*-control (rather than attempts to control others): when Willow propositions him to make out with her while they are waiting in his van (2.14), he refuses (unlike in 3.22, when the time is right); he also uses the van after making the hard choice to leave Sunnydale not just once but twice (4.06, 4.19).

[41] These various strands allow us to sketch out a tentative typology of cars. While Joyce's "geek machine" (3.06) embodies adult maturity and parental authority, vans support men's drive to be in control (as in Oz's van) or, more typically, to control others. By contrast, convertibles and other sports cars as well as motorbikes are primarily employed as props for conventional masculine performance. Thoughtfully contested and subverted in a few key scenes (3.13 and 5.02), the latter motif occurs more often in a fairly straightforward topical fashion.

4. Conclusion

[42] To sum up, we derive four main points from this motorcade of evidence:

1. The automobile is used in *BtVS* to thematize the issue of female maturity and responsibility. The theme of motor vehicular responsibility is additionally tied to sexual maturity, such as Buffy's ability to deal with sex (and its aftermath) with Angel.

2. The automobile works throughout *BtVS* to demarcate magical and supernatural females from males (of all kinds). It works to limit Buffy and Willow's abilities – to make them heroines who are not omnipotent, but have real areas of weakness – but it also reminds the audience that they are different from normal females. This is not necessarily a negative attribute; Buffy and Willow are incredibly powerful – they just move differently.

3. The automobile also poses a threat to masculinity. Since cars can act as a sexual surrogate, although they offer the opportunity to affirm a male's masculine potency, they also represent the threat of a (sexual) relationship gone awry, of males losing control.

4. On the other hand, unlike the case of the females of *BtVS*, automobiles enable males to attain 'peak performance'. In Xander's case, he loses his virginity, saves the world, and most importantly, finds a more secure role for himself with the Scoobies. In Giles' case, the car helps him on his road to renewed virility, coinciding with his resumption of official (albeit, unpaid) Watcher duties. Similarly, Spike's regained confidence is encapsulated in his return to the Sid Vicious aesthetic.

(43) In essence, *BtVS* takes a rather obvious trope vrooming around in American culture – boys and their cars – and destabilizes it; and yet, to some extent, the show redeploys it (somewhat intact) as a means for the male characters to find their own roles in the heroics of the Buffyverse. Are the makers of *BtVS* truly manipulating the motifs of American mechanical machismo, or are they merely trapped by the trope of the two-door tramp?

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[1] E.g., Heining 1988, on cars and masculinity in pop music; Zurbrugg 1988:16-17, on auto-eroticism in pop literature.

[2] Ross 1995:65.

[3] Nor has this inability gone unobserved by other *BtVS* critics, such as Justine Larbalestier 2002:233 ("There is, of course, a good deal Buffy cannot do, like driving") and Rhonda Wilcox, who noted the problem in an advertisement for an academic conference on the role of vehicles in popular culture in 2002.

[4] Miles, Pearson and Dickson 2003:193 claim that Buffy drives a car in 5.09 when she takes her mother and Dawn home from the hospital before her brain surgery. However, the actual scene is ambiguous at best – no driving is shown; Buffy merely enters the home and (off-camera) drops what sounds like keys on a table next to the door. Even allowing for the fact that Joyce was probably unfit to drive that night, there is no way of telling whether these are car keys or house keys. Since it is generally left open how any of the Scoobies manage to get to the hospital, there is no reason to attribute particular significance to this scene.

[5] Cf. Bottles 1987 for an academic perspective.

[6] Contrast Tonkin 2001:37-52, who discusses how Sunnydale's location in Southern California ("somewhere close to Santa Barbara") is both essential to the kinds of monsters and cataclysmic events that take place and is necessary for the successful admixture of cinematic genres used on the show.

[7] Miles, Pearson and Dickson 2003:198, ever eager to improve the driving record of our heroines, point out that Anya's claim contradicts 3.21. However, that episode merely features a scene in which she tells Xander that she has a car waiting outside (to flee Sunnydale before the Ascension of the Mayor) but as the vehicle is never seen, the veracity of this claim, as well as her ability to drive it herself (instead of having Xander do it), remain very much in doubt.

[8] It is unclear when Willow learns to drive (cf. above, on her driving in 7.18). In her high school days, she appears to have used a bicycle to get around, shown once in 3.21. In "Tabula Rasa" (6.08), she seems to carry only a student ID, as does Tara, who is never seen driving either.

[9] Despite her ongoing crush on Xander she is also free of intimate relationships. It is not clear when she would have learned how to drive – perhaps in the summer after 6.22? For cars as bad news even for her in the context of boys/sex, see below, on 6.06.

[10] Buffy, hearing Joyce's thoughts in "Earshot:" "You had sex with Giles? On the hood of a police car?? Twice???"

[11] Miles, Pearson and Dickson 2003:64.

[12] In terms of age and actual access to supernatural powers, Dawn belongs in the same rubric. However, as observed above, her meager driving record of one event and the fact that unlike Cordelia, she does not normally get involved in relationships at all, spares her comparable vehicular mishaps.

[13] It is only in the vamp-dominated parallel universe of "The Wish" (3.09) that Cordelia and her peers at SHS are not allowed to drive at all, a premise that highlights the contrapuntal character of that version of Sunnydale.

[14] It is not our intention to work out a specific or totalizing definition of masculinity; scholars of gender in *BtVS* have already pointed out that, in the Buffyverse, there is no such thing as 'masculinity,' i.e. a singular masculinity, but there are several notions of masculinity or masculinities that are constantly in play and that are being negotiated and renegotiated; see, for example, Pender 2002:35-44. On the other hand, there are certain tropes which inevitably bring along with them their own set of gendered stereotypes. We have previously discussed some of the ways in which the relationship between sex and automobiles has been explored in American culture, and, as we will argue specifically in our discussion of "the Zeppo" (3.13) in section 3.1, it is not unreasonable to say that a lingering "boys and their cars" motif has persisted since the 1950's and 1960's; whether we agree with or approve of this gendered take on the figure of the automobile, we must remain cognizant of this connection (one that stretches from James Dean to *Grease* to Dale Earnhardt, Jr.), although we can and must interrogate and re-examine the form of masculinity (or masculinities) that seem to appear at each of these twists in the road.

[15] Miles, Pearson, and Dickson 2003:43 point out another famous automobile-related first in this episode: "We also see Giles drive his car full-throttle for the first time. It's not very fast." For more on Giles and comic driving, see below.

[16] Ross 1995:46 offers some discussion on James Dean and the impact of the "mutinous but self-reliant teenager" on American, French, and Japanese culture.

[17] The homosexual undertones of this scene are actually somewhat muddled by the curious fact that O'Toole has named his knife "Katie." Is O'Toole (whose name is already suggestive) attempting to penetrate another man with his phallic female implement?

[18] In a paper delivered in May 2004 at Stanford University, Judith Halberstam argued that the classic buddy film *Dude, Where's My Car?* (2000) similarly works to use the automobile as a space for heterosexual boys to engage in homosexual relations. In the scene, dudes Jesse & Chester (deftly played by Ashton Kutcher and Seann William Scott) pull up to a stop light, only to see male model and romance novelist Fabio sitting with his girlfriend in a car in the next lane. Fabio wraps an arm around his girlfriend, Jesse wraps his around Chester; Fabio makes out with his girlfriend, Jesse and Chester engage in a long, intense French kiss, disgusting Fabio and his special ladyfriend while Jesse and Chester celebrate their victory. Halberstam reads the scene in a positive light, claiming that the car (traditionally a locus of heterosexual masculinity) has been transformed in *Dude* into a space that allows for new paradigms of masculinity that are not necessarily staunchly heterosexual but nevertheless acceptable to young, white, heterosexual males. There is a fundamental difference between the scene in *Dude* and "the Zeppo" in that Jesse and Chester's heterosexuality is otherwise never called into question in the film (after all, they do have rather hot girlfriends), while the scene in "the Zeppo" offers the possibility that Xander is not as heterosexually masculine as he has spent the first three seasons of *BtVS* trying to prove.

[19] Giles himself is aware of this deficiency: when he loses his car keys in 3.02 and has to hotwire his car, he complains that it is "Like riding a bloody bicycle."

[20] It is also striking that in 7.21, Xander quips about having to re-take his driving test after losing an eye not long before the weakest female character, Dawn, overpowers him and drives their car back to Sunnydale. Physical and metaphorical diminution go hand in hand.

[21] Cf. also Sheila in 2.03, to biker guys: "You guys weren't lying about having a Cadillac, were you?"

[22] When Angel is shown in a flashback down and out, his condition is aptly symbolized by his crappy car with painted windows (2.21).

[23] The fact that he can't handle it most likely refers to his British background, as automatic transmissions are rare in Europe, and thus belongs in the long line of jokes about his foreignness.