The Slayer Studies by buffy.de Online

Cynthea Masson and Marni Stanley

Queer Eye of that Vampire Guy: Spike and the Aesthetics of Camp

[1] "I hate it when people talk about Buffy as being campy…. I hate camp. I don't enjoy dumb TV."[1] So says Joss Whedon, equating *camp* with *dumb*. While a precise definition of camp is elusive, stupidity is decisively not camp. Fan response to Whedon's remark varies, as postings to the *Whedonesque* Web site attest. The March 29, 2005 postings range from "*Buffy* the Series simply isn't camp" (Caroline) to "There are plenty of other definitions of camp that are broad enough to include *Buffy* without denigrating it" (Biff Turkle).[2] A thoughtful post by Chris inVirgina points readers to Susan Sontag's foundational "Notes on 'Camp,'" but several fans take a less critical approach, following in the virtual footsteps of charisma who writes, "I don't know what camp means but if Joss says it's not then I believe him." Well, we don't. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, though *smart* TV, can indeed be considered to have clear elements of camp—especially since camp is as much about the sensibility of the beholder as it is about the intention of the creator. Let's face it, either you find the series' basic premise—that a mini-skirt-clad, teenaged girl named Buffy fights vampires—camp or you don't. But Buffy herself is not our current concern since Blondie Bear, aka Spike, is the character around whom the elements of camp sensibility are most explicitly enacted.

[2] First, let's review. Other *Buffy* scholars have already ventured into the camp. Patricia Pender, for example, effectively outlines the politics of *Buffy* "under a rubric of feminist camp" (39). Though interesting, especially in terms of its analysis of gender performance, Pender's work focuses primarily on Xander. William Donaruma notably states that *Buffy* "moves past the clichés of camp" (5); Janet Halfyard discusses Sweet (from "Once More, with Feeling") as someone who plays "with ideas of camp in his performance" (par. 40); and Frances H. Early refers to *Buffy* as a "witty, wildly dark camp action and adventure series" (13). As far as we can determine, however, the only person who even mentions Spike as camp is Milly Williamson in her book *The Lure of the Vampire*: "He looks and dresses like Billy Idol, and affects the same self-conscious irony of camp. He even speaks like Billy Idol in a put-on mock cockney accent, or 'mockney', that plays up to American perceptions of the English bad-boy. This image was deliberately cultivated by the series" (72). Affectation, self-conscious irony, playing up perceptions, deliberately cultivating an image—are these not sites in the camp ground?

[3] According to several theorists on camp, they are indeed.[3] Thus, although Jonathan Dollimore highlights an inherent problem with navigating the camp ground—that "[t]he definition of camp is as elusive as the sensibility itself"—he also acknowledges a reason for the elusiveness: "there are different kinds of camp" (224). For the purposes of this paper, then, we follow Susan Sontag's primary definition of camp as "a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization" (1).[4] Our arguments on Spike will focus on his place in the stylization of *Buffy*—on his role as both self-conscious performer of and spectator on the aesthetics of the Buffyverse. In "Normal Again" (6017), when Spike calls Buffy "self-centred," Xander responds, "Spike, we need muscle, not color commentary." Yet the "color commentary" is exactly what is needed to balance the "muscle" of *Buffy*. Spike's character and pointed commentary, moreover, arguably comprise what Jack Babuscio describes as the four features basic to camp: "irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humour" (119).[5] Notably, of all the regular characters in *Buffy*, Spike most clearly demonstrates these qualities.[6]

[4] Spike, through his actions and appearance, ironizes and undermines the seriousness of the subject matter. As everyone else runs around trying to prevent various apocalypses and other threats to humanity from coming to fruition, Spike spends a large part of the series trying to get something or someone to take the chip out of his head. His quest (to get his bad back) parodies everyone else's quest to defeat evil. Similarly, in the aesthetics of the Buffyverse, Spike's styling also serves to parody through contrast. The carefully constructed mise en scène renders commonplace spaces—homes, dorm rooms, workplaces, classrooms—in precise detail to heighten the contrast with the dark lairs of demons and monsters. But Spike's carefully decorated crypt parodies the lovingly rendered domestic spaces of the humans. In terms of personal styling, the other characters—especially the women—constantly change on the surface, while Spike remains the same: the iconic bad-ass vampire in black. Except, ironically, he isn't very bad ass and under the surface his character has arguably the greatest arc of change of any in the series. Buffy, Giles and the other Scoobies, the Initiative, and the various Big Bads are all serious about their goals. Through it all, Spike sucks in his cheeks, pouts, and swirls his leather greatcoat, playing the camp vamp. But it is precisely his camp distractions that "[allow] us to witness 'serious' issues with temporary detachment, so that only later, after the event, are we struck by the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed. The 'serious' is, in fact, crucial to camp" (Babuscio 128). Camp decentres any attempt to be too serious or even sentimental about serious things, and it helps us see what might be overlooked at the centre of our attention. Because Spike distracts us from the spectacle of fights to save the world, he helps remind us that the series isn't about monsters; it's about honour and duty and sacrifice and

friendship and other big moral compass issues. By openly mocking and undermining many of these values throughout much of *Buffy*, Spike provides the camp detachment that helps remind us of their centrality and importance.

[5] Historically camp has been associated with a gay sensibility (though there are a number of famous exceptions such as Mae West),[7] but it also can be read as a sensibility which queers the pitch in the more general sense of disrupting binaries. Vampires typically disrupt the binaries of alive/dead, human/animal, beauty/ugliness, and hero/villain but, unlike Angel, Spike also complicates the masculine/feminine and the heterosexual/homosexual binaries. Spike obsesses about styling (his own and everybody else's); décor (especially his crypt in Season Five); performance (as a neutered bad boy with a chip in his head, he's reduced to fighting on the wrong side); he plays with dolls (the Buffy mannequin and the Buffybot); and he competes with his own vamp grandfather, Angel, for prowess (both sexual and vampiric). He also flirts with flirtation in relation to Angel, as when he tells Willy he's taking Angel for "dinner and a movie" ("What's My Line, Part 2," 2010). Indeed, the rivalry between Spike and Angel plays out with enough sexual tension that it is noted by other characters: Buffy clearly sees the homoerotic potential of Spike's relationship with Angel when she tells Spike she's had enough "jealous vampire crap" and suggests they "rassle it out"; Spike assumes she means a fight, but she replies, "There could be oil of some kind involved" ("Chosen," 7022).[8] So although camp is normally associated with gay culture and Spike is not gay, he nonetheless exists at the nexus of camp and queer. Perhaps Whedon's resistance to those who see *Buffy* as camp derives from his resistance to seeing Spike's essential queerness. However, since Spike's obsession with the masculinity of other men is written into the dialogue and is not just an interpretive spin Marsters puts on the character, it's hard to see how this reading can be avoided.

[6] Before discussing the specific ways in which Spike *enacts* camp, we must first establish how he fits into the primary categories or features of camp. One such feature is what Jack Babuscio refers to within his discussion of irony:[9] "Camp is ironic insofar as an incongruous contrast can be drawn between an individual/thing and its context/association. The most common of incongruous contrasts is that of masculine/feminine" (119). As early as his first appearance in Sunnydale, Spike draws ironic attention to his masculinity: in "School Hard" (2003) about to do battle, Buffy asks, "Do we really need weapons for this?" and Spike responds, "I just like them. They make me feel all manly." He is simultaneously replicating and mocking conventions of masculinity: he enacts masculine power by demonstrating prowess with weapons, but saying he needs accessories to make him feel manly is not, in fact, manly—witness the almost cultish status given the dangerous sport of bare-knuckle fighting in *Fight Club* and in staged competitions. Certainly

numerous *Buffy* scholars have noted the muddling of this particular binary and others in association with Spike. Lorna Jowett argues, "Spike blurs boundaries between good and bad, 'masculine' and 'feminine,' hetero- and homosexual, man and monster, comic and tragic, villain and hero" (158). Likewise, Jes Battis refers to "ambivalent characters like Spike, who straddle the line between protagonist/antagonist in ways that continually disrupt the audience's perceptions" (29-30). Spike, positioned as straddling these incongruous binaries, is "queer" according to Dee Amy-Chinn:

> Both his gender and sexuality are fluid: neither is secure and both are based around excess. […] Indeed, it is the confidence that he gains from his excessive masculinity that opens up the space in which he can enact his femininity. […] Spike is an accomplished 'switch', able to take either the man's part or the woman's; he is comfortable being completely submissive or completely in control. Spike is both male *and* female, masculine *and* feminine, vanilla *and* erotically varied. (316)[10]

As these excerpts illustrate, the masculine/feminine binary is only one of several associated with Spike. This multiplicity of binaries also fits Babuscio's understanding of camp, as he too cites various incongruous pairs including youth/(old)age, sacred/profane, and spirit/flesh (119). Spike, as vampire, is all of these. But the whole point of binary thinking is that only one term of the pairing should apply. Because Spike embodies so many incongruous pairings and, thereby, disrupts binaries, he is perfectly positioned to critique others through a camp sensibility.[11]

[7] Spike, like most things camp, is positioned on the margins. People who are successful in mainstream ways have no need of the defensive strategy of camp. As Mark Booth argues, "All camp people are to be found in the margins of society, and the richest vein of camp is generally to be found in the margins of the margins" (34). As with Spike's queering of the masculine/feminine and other binaries, various *Buffy* scholars have commented on Spike's marginality. For example, in their introduction to the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*' special issue on Spike, Dee Amy-Chinn and Milly Williamson discuss marginality in *Buffy* arguing that "Spike's character progression […] comes to represent the show's key themes of angst and outsiderdom perhaps more fully than that of any other character" and that "it is Spike who expresses this marginality most completely, as even members of the Scooby Gang generally want nothing to do with him. He is, in effect, the outcast's outcast" (279-280).[12] Living on the margins, Spike is positioned as a spectator, able to comment on the inner circle—whether general society or

the Scoobies themselves—from an adequately critical distance. In doing so, Spike enacts another aspect of Babuscio's camp theory: "Camp is subversive of commonly received standards: it challenges the status quo. […] And while camp advocates the dissolution of hard and inflexible moral rules, it pleads, too, for a morality of sympathy" (120). Spike admits as much to Buffy when, in "Fool for Love" (5007), he describes his new-found freedom as a vampire:

> Buffy: So you traded up on the food chain. Then what?
>
> Spike: No, please! Don't make it sound like something you'd flip past on the Discovery Channel. Becoming a vampire is a profound and powerful experience. I could feel this new strength coursing through me. Getting killed made me feel alive for the very first time. I was through living by society's rules. Decided to make a few of my own.

Being undead, yet still a *being*, frees Spike, who was fearful and socially awkward as a living man, to be confident and assertive. The self-policing of class-bound morality is hardly going to seem relevant to a monster compelled to live off the blood of his erstwhile fellow human beings.

[8] Spike has the power of his monstrousness, but he can also pass as human whenever he likes; this is yet another way in which he disrupts a binary. In *Angel*, when he loses his embodiment, he is upset because he loses his monstrous power and is reduced to "Casper" status ("Just Rewards," A5002). We see his reliance on his status as monster in an exchange with Buffy from "Fool for Love" (5007). When asked by Buffy whether he was "born this big a pain in the ass," Spike responds, "What can I tell you baby? I've always been bad." As the flashbacks in "Fool for Love" make clear, however, this is far from the truth. Spike began as the naïve, lovelorn, would-be poet William. *Buffy* scholars agree in their perception of Spike's earlier incarnation. William, in the words of Gregory Sakal, is "a sensitive but weak-willed romantic: inept, insecure, and clumsy" (243). William's poetry, moreover, is "bloody awful"; the rhymes incite laughter. He is inept as a poet, inept as a lover in his pursuit of Cecily, inept in carrying on acceptable conversation in his circle of upper-class acquaintances. When asked his opinion on the recent disappearances in town, Spike says, "I prefer not to think of such dark, ugly business at all. That's what the police are for. I prefer placing my energies into creating things of beauty." This sets the stage for the ridicule William endures immediately thereafter when his poetry is read aloud:

Man: It suits him! I'd rather have a railroad spike through my head than listen to that awful stuff!

[…]

Spike: I—I know I'm a bad poet, but I'm a good man. All I ask is that—is that you try to see me—

Cecily: I do see you. That's the problem. You're nothing to me, William. You're beneath me.

I'm a good man, says William, contradicting what Spike will later tell Buffy when compensating for the mockery and humiliation he had once endured. However, as Amy-Chinn argues, "the very grounds on which Spike is mocked are those from which he is able to draw his strength" (314).[13] We agree, and we would add that the grounds on which Spike, as William, had been mocked are the grounds from which Spike's camp sensibility grows. Philip Core discusses the necessity of vulnerability within camp: "Throughout history there has always been a significant minority whose unacceptable characteristics—talent, poverty, physical unconventionality, sexual anomaly—render them vulnerable to the world's brutal laughter. Hiding their mortification behind behaviour which is often as deviant as that which is concealed is the mainspring of camp" (9). Although Spike gains power after his transformation to a vampire, even as a monster he attracts mockery not just from his peers, such as Angel, but from mere mortals, such as the Scoobies, who should be his dinner.

[9] What must be remembered here is that Spike's underlying vulnerability never completely disappears. Thus, in contrast to Lorna Jowett who claims that "Spike is everything William was not" (158-59), we would argue that Spike remains essentially William—that he *performs* strength and violence in order to hide the mortification of his vulnerability. Even Jowett acknowledges that "Spike is sensitive not only in that he is easily hurt but also in the 'feminine' way of being attuned to situations, relationships, and underlying emotions, as his frequently perceptive comments demonstrate" (161) and, even more importantly in terms of our argument, that "Spike's body is also displayed in scenes of violence and torture, making him the feminized, passive victim as well as the erotic object of the gaze. Spike's body is vulnerable. […] Spike's body is displayed to be looked at" (164). Ironically, the vulnerability the audience sees is the very thing that draws our gaze to his performance. When vulnerable, he demands our sympathy and, as such, enacts yet another inherent quality of camp, a plea "for a morality of sympathy" (Babuscio 120). Moreover, as Philip Core maintains, one of the "two

things essential to camp" is "a secret within the personality which one ironically wishes to conceal and to exploit" (9). Spike's secret is that he has never been able to escape his sensitivity or vulnerability. "Fool for Love" shows this after Buffy, in a verbatim echo of Cecily's words, throws money to Spike saying, "You're beneath me." Spike, on the ground, sobs as he picks up the strewn bills. This moment so cuts him to the quick that his humour and irony desert him. No camp response is possible for a humiliation this deep. Moreover, in this same episode, Harmony says to Spike, "I knew you'd take this personally. You are so sensitive." Not until Season Seven's "Lies My Parents Told Me" (7017) do we learn that what Spike may fear is the truth: having sired his own mother, Spike explains to her, "Whatever I was, that's not who I am anymore" only to be told, "Darling, it's who you'll always be. A limp, sentimental fool."[14] His mother's choice of words is a pointed attack on Spike's masculinity—indeed, to a modern-day audience, "limp" invokes images of the stereotypical limp-wristed figure of gay camp.

[10] It is precisely because he knows he is sentimental and he knows how vulnerable that characteristic makes him that he generally performs the cynical, ironic, world-weary clown.[15] Indeed, Spike makes direct reference to his vulnerability through a type of humour that mocks the very things for which William once was mocked. Compare, for example, his penchant for rhyming. In "Fool for Love," William asks, "What's another word for 'gleaming'? It's a perfectly perfect word as many words go, but the bother is nothing rhymes, you see." The word he chooses, of course, is "effulgent" (a rhyme and descriptor for his heart, which has "grown a bulge in it"). Spike asks a similar question in "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" (2016):

> Spike: Why don't you rip her [Buffy's] lungs out? That might make an impression.
>
> Angelus: Lacks poetry.
>
> Spike: It doesn't have to. What rhymes with lungs?

His innocent (albeit affected) search for a rhyme as William in "Fool for Love" becomes a cynical, violent point of humour for Spike in "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered." Similarly, in "What's My Line, Part 2," Spike uses humour that plays on past vulnerability when he talks to Willy the bartender about Angel:

Spike: Talk and I'll have your guts for garters.

Willy: What are you gonna do with him anyway?

Spike: I'm thinking maybe dinner and a movie. I don't want to rush into anything. I've been hurt, you know.

The point here is that he *has* been hurt. But he has also learned a strategy to protect himself—he has learned to *perform*, to camp it up. By choosing to mock his own emotional vulnerabilities Spike can try to control the amount these same vulnerabilities can be used to hurt him.

[11] Another technique Spike adopts as a form of protection is self-mocking sarcastic wit. Richard Dyer discusses the wit of camp as "a form of self-defence" (110). Spike, in mocking his own aesthetics, fends off the possibility of others mocking his aesthetic choices. In "Shadow" (5008) when Riley drags Spike out of Buffy's room, through the hall, and down the stairs, Spike warns him, "Hey! Watch it! Easy. You're bruising the leather." He's protective of the clothing that helps form his tough-boy image. In regard to having his chip removed in "Primeval" (4021), Spike asks Adam to "mind the hairline. I don't fancy fussing with a comb-over once I resume my killing ways." (No, a comb-over just wouldn't have the same threatening effect as his slick platinum coif.) In "Blood Ties" (5013) when Buffy pulls the lid of a stone coffin right out from under him, he holds up his hands, exposing his nails, and warns, "Careful, these are wet!" Even moments before his final sacrifice in "Chosen" (7022), Spike critiques his appearance while sporting a "fabulous accessory" and says, "I look like Elizabeth Taylor" (surely an icon of camp). Each of these sarcastic comments represents a moment of camp humour that works as self-defense. Spike has crafted an image for himself of the bad-ass vampire—complete with leather coat, platinum hair, and black nails. He enacts what Mark Booth calls "the camp preoccupation with toilette" (79). But his humour about these aspects of his image comes in the form of a concern that the image is fragile; it comprises a series of acquired surface characteristics, not essential character. If he draws attention to his own aesthetics, he circumvents others doing it for him or from noticing that these are only surface attributes. As Booth contends, "Camp people's knowledge of their own foibles forms a line of defence: others cannot call them anything which they have not called themselves" (95). As to the reference to Elizabeth Taylor, certainly the writers could have had Spike refer to the amulet as looking like a rap or hip hop star's bling, but this would not have the same camp appeal.

[12] Aware (and perhaps fearful) of his vulnerability, Spike obsessively attempts to hide behind a testosterone-charged masculinity, composed of swagger, black leather, and violence, but he cannot

camouflage his own nature even to himself. When the clichés turn off, he worries about whether fluorescent lights "make me look dead" ("Doublemeat Palace," 6012) and discusses the joys of onion blossoms with Andrew ("Empty Places," 7019). His threat to "bite" Andrew if the latter tells anyone about the conversation is highly ambiguous given how Andrew feels about Spike.[16] Even his name, "Spike," has ambiguous origins given its association with William ("I'd rather have a railroad spike through my head than listen to that awful stuff!" ["Fool for Love," 5007]) and with his vampiric self ("Earned his nickname by torturing his victims with railroad spikes" ["School Hard," 2003]). Of course, a further irony is always present in Spike's styling given that his signature black leather coat, key to his self-styled masculinity, is really a woman's coat (having belonged to the slayer Nikki Wood).[17] As Rhonda Wilcox has argued in regard to Spike, "Both the name and the coat are part of his performance of himself, and here, performance represents choice" (59). Spike chooses to remodel himself because he is more comfortable with a performance of masculinity than he is with his emotional and hurt self.

[13] Whereas William is unable to perform as either poet or lover, Spike is able to perform as theatrical even when not able to bite.[18] Camp, as Babuscio notes, "aims to transform the ordinary into something more spectacular. In terms of style, it signifies performance rather than existence" (122). Spike's awareness of performance is highlighted in two ways: his critique of performance and his own performance as performer, or *meta-performance*. Take Spike's conversation with Willow in "The Initiative" (4007) as an example. In this scene, having attempted and failed to bite Willow, Spike faces the vampire's version of impotency. Unable to 'perform,' he nonetheless tries to convince Willow that she's bitable by reminding her of an earlier interaction between them.

> Spike: You had on that fuzzy pink number with the lilac underneath.
>
> Willow: I never would have guessed. You played the blood-lust kinda cool.
>
> Spike: Mmm. I hate being obvious. All fang-y and "Rrrr!" Takes the mystery out.

Here, Spike acknowledges that he is aware of playing the vampire. He is proud that his performance (prior to his impotency) was more subtle than that of the average vampire—Spike has finesse and mystery where others are obvious.

[14] His self-awareness as performer is likewise evident in the meta-performances of "Restless" (4022) and "Storyteller" (7016). In "Restless," Giles dreams that Spike tells him, "I've hired myself out as an attraction." Spike then continues to strike a pose as onlookers gasp, and photographers capture his performed menacing image. Here he forgoes finesse and opts for transparent clichés for the public; this performance is for cash, not reputation. Giles' dream only reconfirms Spike's campiness by demonstrating that even within the show's closed world another character is aware of Spike's parodic, performative, vampire styling. In "Storyteller," Spike's initial anger at Andrew's incessant videography is misleading:

> Spike: I thought I told you to piss off with this bloody camera, yet here you are again with that thing in my face. Would you sod off before I rip your throat out and eat—
>
> Andrew: Okay, Spike. The light was kind of behind you.
>
> Spike: (He looks around.) Oh, right. Uh, what? Is this better then? I thought I told you to piss off with this bloody camera, yet here you are again with that thing in my face. Would you sod off—

As these scenes make clear, Spike is aware of both his performance and his audience. Notably, during his musical performance of "Rest in Peace" in "Once More, with Feeling" (6007), Spike is the only character to sing in front of a seated audience—the mourners at a funeral, seated in rows, are reminiscent of a theatre audience.[19] He literally chews up the scenery, knocking over chairs and frightening the mourners—definitely indulging in a Brechtian alienation effect. As spectators, we the audience see James Marsters performing Spike who, in turn, performs the menacing vampire. We are not so much being invited to suspend our disbelief as we are being encouraged to enjoy our disbelief—it's all fantasy and nonsense, but we're all in the game together. Pamela Robertson argues, "Like masquerade, the activity of producing camp can be located at both the level of performance and at the level of spectatorship—and the line between the two activities will not always be clear" (278). Spike notably references his own spectatorship in a conversation with Angel in "A Hole in the World" (A5015):

Spike: Hey, after we save Fred, we should hit the West End. Take in a show.

Angel: I've never seen *Les Mis*.

Spike: Trust me. Halfway through the first act, you'll be drinking humans again.

Spike understands that an audience won't tolerate being bored. He's willing to go from subtle vampire to scenery-chewing rocker to demonstrate his range and keep his audience of Scoobies happy. He is continually both performer and spectator, as his various self-conscious performances demonstrate.

[15] As early as "Lie to Me" (2007), Spike's performance is set up against a more clichéd performance of vampire aesthetics and lore. In this episode a group of young people, led by Billy Fordham (aka Ford), hope to be turned into vampires. To them vampires, as Chantarelle calls them, are "the lonely ones" or "they who walk with the night," and the vampire wannabes are "true believers." But their efforts to be like their "exalted" heroes are performances of cliché. Wannabe "Marvin," who has changed his name to the more exotic "Diego,"[20] dresses in what appears to be a blue lamé magician's cape and ruffled white shirt. To him, this represents proper vampiric attire. At one point Ford mouths the words to Jack Palance's not-notable *Dracula* along with a clip from the film playing on a TV in the background. These wannabes are *playing* at being vampires. When Ford goes to Spike in order to offer him a trade (Buffy for siring), he expects, *demands* even, that Spike *be* the clichéd vampire:

Ford: I've got something to offer you. I-I'm pretty sure this is the part where you take out a watch and say I've got thirty seconds to convince you not to kill me? It's traditional.

Spike: Well, I don't go much for tradition.

[…]

Ford: Oh, c'mon! Say it! It's no fun if you don't say it.

Spike: What? Oh. [Spike rolls his eyes and bobs his head.] You've got thirty seconds to convince me not to kill you.

Ford: Yes! See, this is the best! I wanna be like you. A vampire.

But Spike's performance here is little more than mimicry—obviously fake, especially with the bobbing head and the drippingly bored voice. What Ford thinks of as "the best" is not threatening in any way whatsoever. When Buffy later confronts Ford and the wannabes, she refers to their establishment as the "all-you-can-eat moron bar." She makes reference to their performance and aesthetics in an exchange with Diego:

Diego: She's an unbeliever. She taints us.

Buffy: I am trying to save you! You are playing in some serious traffic here! Do you understand that? You're going to die! And the only hope you have of surviving this is to get out of this pit right now, and, my God, could you have a dorkier outfit?

Buffy can see the artifice and pretension in their aesthetics, where they cannot. The point is further underscored by the contrast between the vampire costume inspired by Las Vegas and the wannabe who arrives dressed as an Angel clone. Angel is visibly disconcerted to see his look interpreted as obvious undead attire. In this instance Angel's self-imposed dress code—an attempt to appear 'normal'—is revealed to be such a narrow aesthetic of self-presentation that it actually demonstrates the artifice and pretension of camp. As Pamela Robertson explains, "camp is a reading/viewing practice which, by definition, is not available to all readers; for there to be a genuinely camp spectator, there must be another hypothetical spectator who views the object 'normally'" (278). The wannabes view even the world they imitate as being normal; unlike Spike, they have no sense of irony, no style, no understanding of humour or artifice—in short, they've never been to camp.

[16] Spike's role as the spectator and performer who does have a camp sensibility is predominantly evident in the sarcastic humour he brings to his focus on the aesthetics of others. Spike's humour is often cruel—*biting* we could say—and this too is an inherent quality of camp: "A lot of camping is extremely hostile; it is almost always sarcastic. But its intent is humorous as well" (Newton 107). Similarly, according to Babuscio, the chief form of camp humour is "bitter-wit, which expresses an underlying hostility and fear" (126). In Spike's case, this type of hostile humour is often directed at enemies, perhaps as a defence

mechanism based both in anger and fear. A prime example of this is his response to Glory's "I am a god." "The god of what," Spike asks, "bad home perms?" ("Intervention," 5018). Glory is powerful—arguably the most powerful "big bad" yet—but Spike cuts her down with a comment on her big hair. Given Spike's concern for his own hair, it's not surprising that hair would be point of his contention and sarcasm on more than one occasion. In a conversation with Harmony, Spike describes what he dislikes about Buffy's aesthetics: "That nasty little face, that shampoo-commercial hair" ("Out of My Mind," 5004). He even has the Buffybot programmed to say, "Angel's lame. His hair grows straight up, and he's bloody stupid" ("Intervention," 5018). He mocks in others the very thing about which he himself has been (and could again be) mocked.[21] And who could forget his comedic mocking of Angel in "In the Dark" (A1003) when, on a rooftop looking down at Angel and a young woman (Rachel), Spike invents dialogue for the interaction he watches; pretending to speak for Angel, Spike pleads, "No, not the hair! Never the hair! […] Evil's still afoot! And I'm almost out of that nancy-boy hair-gel that I like so much. Quickly, to the Angel-mobile, away!" Angel becomes a clichéd superhero of the original *Batman* type in this camped-up impersonation. Gods, superheroes, and vampires should not be concerned with their hair—but in *Buffy* they are, and Spike is the one to point out the artifice of these aesthetic details while sporting the most artificial looking hair of all.

[17] Another aspect of Spike's biting humour in relation to his critique of aesthetics involves a mocking of masculinity in relation to style. As Newton points out, "camp is style. Importance tends to shift from what a thing *is* to how it *looks*, from *what* is done to *how* it is done" (104). Spike uses this technique of camp to distract his audience from his target's moral character or actions; focus shifts to the more trivial, and much easier to insult, *style* of his target. For example, Spike mocks Angel's masculinity by comparing him to an urban cowboy: "All hat and no cattle" ("I Only Have Eyes for You," 2019). Angel, according to Spike, "wears lifts" ("Chosen," 7022). He is not, in other words, as tall, (dark or handsome) as he appears.[22] Spike is always vulnerable in his own masculinity, thus his humour is most defensive in response to his male rivals. He particularly focuses his rivalry on the older and more powerful Angel, but he also verbally attacks Riley, his enemy and Buffy's lover, whom he also refers to as "cowboy" ("Buffy vs. Dracula," 5001) and whom he dismisses as "crew cut" ("As You Were," 6014). Giles, who is more educated than Spike, likewise becomes the butt of Spike's camp touch in "The I in Team" (4013):

Spike: Wipe your feet when you enter a person's home.

Giles: Ah, yes, careless of me. Tracking mud all over your, uh…mud.

Spike: I'll admit it's a bit of a fixer-upper. Needs a woman's touch. Care to have a crack at it?

The handsome vampire, the rugged government operative, the book-smart yet sensitive librarian—their artifice, their cliché, is highlighted by Spike's camp commentary. In pointing up the artifice of these characters, Spike points up the fictionality of the show and, thereby, enacts yet another aspect of camp: "Camp, by drawing attention to the artifices employed by artists, can constantly remind us that what we are seeing is only a view of life. This doesn't stop us enjoying it, but it does stop us believing what we are shown too readily" (Dyer 115). The revelatory effect of Spike's camp remarks can be seen as an advantage for a show that represents a level of violence most people have no desire to *believe* in.

[18] "Tabula Rasa" (6008) demonstrates that Spike is hardwired to critique masculinity and, in doing so, to point up performance or artifice; that is, even as "Randy"—dressed in a Sherlock Holmes-style hat and suit, unaware of his vampire status—he insults Giles' "nancy boy accent" (only to be reminded by Giles that he too is a member of the "nancy tribe"). Transformed when sired by Dru, Spike reinvents his masculinity, changing his name, his accent, his style—but he continually needs to reaffirm this masculinity to others. Thus in a "Fool for Love" (5007) flashback when Angelus complains about Spike's attention grabbing violence and insists on the need for finesse, Spike replies, "Bollocks! That's stuff for the frilly cuffs and collars crowd. I'll take a good brawl any day." He must make a claim for brawls and masculinity, but his femininity and (albeit metaphorical) frilly cuffs never vanish. Indeed, as he increasingly fetishizes his own vamp style (the coat, the hair, the verbal wit), he becomes less and less masculine because he is so obviously trying too hard. He overcompensates through his rivalry and verbal sparring with Angel and the other men; however, the more he critiques masculine performance in others, the more the audience is aware of Spike's own performance of masculinity.

[19] Spike also acts as camp critic on *Buffy* through his remarks on the aesthetics of interior design and the etiquette of hospitality. Spike's interest in these subjects is camp because he parodies domesticity and middle class aspirations. Thus, when Angel, Spike, and Dru are nest-hunting,[23] Angel's choice garners this response from Spike: "It's paradise. Big windows, lovely gardens. It'll be perfect when we want the sunlight to kill us" ("I Only Have Eyes for You," 2019). Until the last phrase, his response is that of the happy suburban home buyer talking to his real estate agent or partner. Spike's expressions here are funny precisely because we have almost heard them before. In "Checkpoint" (5012) when Buffy asks Spike to look after Dawn and Joyce in his crypt, he plays the perfect hostess, saying, "Ladies, come on in. There's plenty

of blood in the fridge." Again, the clichéd expression of hospitality is subverted, in this case by the substitution of an unexpected offering. These subversions are further examples of the "incongruous juxtapositions" on which, according to Esther Newton, camp depends (103). Spike takes on (and simultaneously subverts) the stereotypical female role of the overly house-proud woman when he argues that Angelus shouldn't kill Giles in the nest: "I don't fancy spending the next month getting librarian out of the carpet" ("Becoming, Part 2," 2022). Even Martha Stewart wouldn't be able to help him with that stain.

[20] Susan Sontag cites "all elements of visual décor" as associated with camp taste (5), and Spike certainly pays attention to his crypt's décor throughout the series. In Seasons Five and Six, where Spike has his own crypt, he takes pride in his "sweet little set-up" and "decent digs" ("Crush," 5014) and, long after said digs have been destroyed, he looks back on them as possibly "posh" ("Potential," 7012). He brags to Harmony about getting "a brand-new telly in my crypt" ("Real Me," 5002) and, since he hasn't cash for shopping, he takes a cart around the dump to scavenge home décor along with parts for his Buffy mannequin ("The Replacement," 5003). The décor of Spike's crypt is largely composed of the memorial artifacts one might expect: statues and wall reliefs of puto, urns, stone benches and coffins, and a partially draped statue of a woman. But Spike has added an armchair (which appears nearly new), a leather ottoman, a side table, his television, and multiple trios and sestets of matching candles (surely unnecessary if he has electricity for his television and fridge). He has sex with the Buffybot on a fabulous duvet that complements his cream, gold, brown, and grey colour scheme ("Intervention," 5018). For comparison, we have the vamp nest in "Crush" (5014), which Buffy treats as fairly typical, and which is full of broken junk—the sofa has stuffing coming out everywhere and the vamps appear to be cooking Jiffy Pop in the middle of the room. The vamp nest in "Into the Woods" (5010) is similarly decrepit with garbage all over the floor, an unusable bathtub (we can surmise this since the hot water tank is parked in it), and torn furniture and window coverings. Spike is definitely house proud in relation to the other vampires we see in their home environments.

[21] Spike also feels some obligation to rise above his class; as he tells the Potentials, "As a group we're not known for our tasteful décor" ("Potential," 7012). Similarly, he finds Xander's basement beneath him; when Anya asks what he's looking for in a home, he replies, "I don't know. Maybe a crypt. Some place, you know, dark and dank, but not as dark and dank as this" ("New Man," 4012). When questioned by Riley, Spike even mocks Dracula's aesthetic pretensions: "But you're not gonna catch him napping in a crypt. No, the count has to have his luxury estate and his bug-eaters and his special dirt, doesn't he" ("Buffy vs. Dracula," 5001). The humour of Spike's comments on decorating and dwellings is entertaining, but his remarks also highlight the essential

inconsequentiality of worrying about whether your crypt is up to the neighbourhood standards. As Dyer points out, camp "is a way of prising the form of something away from its content, of revelling in the style while dismissing the content as trivial" (113). Spike has no money and few ways to get any. He is a stylish man, without the means to express that style as he might wish. For Spike, camp can also conceal vulnerabilities of class and status because it allows for the replacement of the authority of taste as style with the bravado of salvage as style. Spike's concerns with décor highlight the artifice of consumption, never more so than when he tells Buffy, in response to a compliment on his place, "Well, I ate a decorator once. Maybe something stuck" ("Dead Things," 6013).

[22] In Season Five of *Angel*, Spike certainly maintains his sarcastic wit and verbal sparring with Angel, but he does not enact camp to the same extent as he does on *Buffy*. Occasionally he critiques décor, such as his comment to Angel in "Just Rewards" (A5002), "I can see why heroes like you get rewarded with shiny new glass and chrome." Similarly, in "Soul Purpose" (A5010), having removed a Selminth parasite from Angel's chest and thrown it against the wall, Spike says, "Well, that'll be a bitch of a cleanup." He refers to Illyria's outfit as "spiffy new threads" and calls her "the leather queen" ("Shells," A5016). But these comments—those that seem flashbacks to his camp sensibility on *Buffy*—are fewer and farther between. He has already earned his hero status and perhaps does not need to mock himself or others as much as was once required. Spike's final performance in the last episode of *Angel* comes in the form of a poetry reading—an act that arguably heals the vulnerability left from his days as William. He reads aloud to a tough audience his poem to Cecily: "…My heart expands, / 'tis grown a bulge in it, / inspired by your beauty / effulgent." The audience applauds, and one member even gives him a standing ovation. By the end of *Angel*, Spike's past and his present are finally reconciled.

[23] Camp need not be feared or viewed as reductive. It is precisely the quality of camp in the series that creates the ironic sensibility that allows *Buffy* to be simultaneously comic, tragic, romantic, and cynical. Camp helps make the relentless violence of the show palatable for many viewers who would not find it tolerable without the layers of irony, artifice, theatricality, and wit. We can extrapolate from much of the writing (both academic and fan) about *Buffy* that the show has many admirers who have no interest in the straight-up violence of horror, vampire, or monster movies. The fact that *Buffy* plays so thought-provokingly with all those binaries our culture holds dear makes the series amusing and fun, not shocking and nightmare-inducing. No one who survived high school is surprised to hear of one situated directly on a hell mouth (aren't they all?) or that dating outside your species might be a good idea (or even inevitable). The series is more fun than fearful, and

Spike's camp queer eye, which continuously subverts our expectations, is part of what makes *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* smart television.[24]

Works Cited

Amy-Chinn, Dee. "Queering the Bitch: Spike, Transgression and Erotic Empowerment." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 8.3 (2005): 313-28.

Amy-Chinn, Dee and Milly Williamson. "The Vampire Spike in Text and Fandom: Unsettling Oppositions in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 8.3 (2005): 275-88.

Babuscio, Jack. "The Cinema of Camp (*aka* Camp and the Gay Sensibility)." *Gay Sunshine Journal* 35 (1978). Rpt. in Cleto 117-135.

Battis, Jes. *Blood Relations: Chosen Families in* Buffy the Vampire Slayer *and* Angel. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2005.

Booth, Mark. *Camp*. London: Quartet, 1983.

Boyette, Michele. "The Comic Anti-hero in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or Silly Villain: Spike is for Kicks." *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* 4 (2001): 18 pars. <http://slayageonline.com/essays/slayage4/boyette.htm>.

Cleto, Fabio, ed. *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan Press, 2002.

Core, Philip. *Camp: The Lie that Tells the Truth*. London: Plexus, 1984.

Dollimore, Jonathan. "Post/Modern: On the Gay Sensibility, or the Pervert's Revenge on Authenticity." *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1991. Rpt. in Cleto 221-236.

Donaruma, William. "'Once More, With Feeling': The Hellmouth in Postmodern Heaven." Paper given at the *Slayage* Conference on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Nashville, TN, May 28-30, 2004.

Dyer, Richard. "It's Being So Camp as Keeps Us Going." *Playguy*. 1976. Rpt. in Cleto 110-116.

Early, Frances H. "Staking Her Claim: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as Transgressive Woman Warrior." *Journal of Popular Culture* 35.3 (2001): 11-27.

Halfyard, Janet K. "Singing Their Hearts Out: The Problem of Performance in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*." *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* 17 (2005): 45 pars. <http://slayageonline.com/essays/slayage17/Halfyard.htm>.

Jowett, Lorna. *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2005.

Newton, Esther. "Role Models." *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1972. Rpt. in Cleto 96-109.

Pender, Patricia. "'I'm Buffy and You're…History': The Postmodern Politics of Buffy." *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Ed. Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002. 35-44.

Robertson, Pamela. "What Makes the Feminist Camp?" *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996. Rpt. in Cleto 266-282.

Sakal, Gregory J. "No Big Win: Themes of Sacrifice, Salvation, and Redemption." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunndydale.* Ed. James B. South. Chicago: Open Court, 2003. 239-253.

Sontag, Susan. "Notes on 'Camp.'" 1964. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967.

Spicer, Arwen. "'Love's Bitch but Man Enough to Admit it': Spike's Hybridized Gender." *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* 7 (2002): 24 pars. <http://slayageonline.com/essays/slayage7/Spicer.htm>.

Whedonesque. Online Postings. March 29, 2005. <http://whedonesque.com/comments/6402>.

Wilcox, Rhonda. *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2005.

Williamson, Milly. "Spike, Sex and Subtext: Intertextual Portrayals of the Sympathetic Vampire Cult on Television." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 8.3 (2005): 289-311.

Williamson, Milly. *The Lure of the Vampire: Gender, Fiction and Fandom from Bram Stoker to Buffy*. London: Wallflower Press, 2005.

"The Wit and Wisdom of Joss Whedon" PDF Link at *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies*. <http://www.slayage.tv/pages/Wit_Wisdom_Joss_Whedon.pdf>.

---

[1] See "The Wit and Wisdom of Joss Whedon" at http://www.slayage.tv/pages/Wit_Wisdom_Joss_Whedon.pdf.

[2] See the *Whedonesque* Web site page http://whedonesque.com/comments/6402 (March 29-31, 2005). For another *Whedonesque* discussion of camp, see http://whedonesque.com/comments/5569 (December 14-15, 2004).

[3] We will discuss several theorists throughout the paper, but we point the reader in particular to Fabio Cleto's anthology of camp theory. *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002.

[4] References to Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" are cited by "Note" number.

[5] Esther Newton similarly argues, "It is possible to discern strong themes in any particular campy thing or event. The three that seemed most recurrent and characteristic to me were *incongruity, theatricality,* and *humor*. All three are intimately related to the homosexual situation and strategy. Incongruity is the subject matter of camp, theatricality its style, and humor its strategy" (Newton 103).

[6] Babuscio's four features of camp ("irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humour") are also strong features of the series as a whole. The series itself demonstrates a camp sensibility in addition to the one embodied by the particular character of Spike.

[7] See various essays in Fabio Cleto's *Camp* anthology, especially Jonathan Dollimore's "Post/Modern: On the Gay Sensibility, or the Pervert's Revenge on Authenticity" (221-236) and Pamela Robertson's "Mae West's Maids: Race, 'Authenticity', and the Discourse of Camp" (393-408).

[8] "Spangel" fan fic also draws on the sexual tension evident between Spike and Angel.

[9] Esther Newton refers to a similar phenomenon within a discussion of "incongruity."

[10] See also Arwen Spicer: "Though Spike initially appears as a strongly masculine character, I argue that he crosses the boundaries of conventional gender identifications, enacting a hybridized identity that is simultaneously coded masculine and feminine" (par. 1). Dee Amy-Chinn

and Milly Williamson note, "Spike joins *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in Season 2 with a swagger and a vulnerability which alludes to the many oppositions that he will come to unsettle" (275). This point is also notable in relation to our argument on vulnerability later in the paper.

[11] Dee Amy-Chinn and Milly Williamson make a similar point about Spike and the disruption of binaries: "[T]he key to the appeal of the 'Buffyverse' is the way in which it invites the notion that binary ways of thinking are redundant. The possibilities offered by challenging binary constructions of gender are articulated most completely through the body of Spike" (281).

[12] Milly Williamson likewise notes "Spike is a permanent and central character in *BtVS*, but one who is portrayed in terms of extreme marginality" ("Spike, Sex and Subtext" 292).

[13] Rhonda Wilcox makes a similar statement: "Literally strangled by his sire's sire Angelus, he chokes out, 'It's Spike now. You'd do well to remember it, mate.' Spike is the name of his own choosing: it is phallic, it is violent, and it is clearly embedded in response to the mockery of the shy young poet" (59). Gregory Sakal, likewise, argues, "When Drusilla makes him a vampire, he renames himself 'Spike,' and becomes a reckless adventurer whose violence seems less informed by sheer malice and revenge (as in the case of Angelus), than by a need to rebel against his weak and foppish human counterpart" (243).

[14] Likewise, in the *Angel* flashback episode "Darla" (A2007), Dru contemplates siring "the wisest and bravest knight in all the land." But when, immediately thereafter, William bumps into the group, Darla says, "Or you could just take the first drooling idiot that comes along."

[15] Michele Boyette refers to Spike as having "comic buffoon status" and argues that his "only weapon is his mouth" (par. 12).

[16] See, for example, "Entropy" (6018) where Andrew sees Spike having sex with Anya: "He is so cool… And, I mean, the girl's hot too."

[17] The series' fetishizing of the coat helps mask the violence of its acquisition, thus demonstrating a useful aspect of camp sensibility. That is, the coat is seen primarily as a key component of Spike's style, not as a trophy from a kill.

[18] Milly Williamson relates Spike's inability to bite to his marginal status: "Not good enough to be loved by Buffy and, because of his chip, not bad enough to act vampirically, Spike inhabits an excruciatingly liminal self" ("Spike, Sex and Subtext" 292).

[19]Although we do not see the mourners seated (given that we see them only at the moment of Spike's disruption), they would nonetheless represent an audience from Spike's point of view. In regard to audience, Anya makes reference to feeling "like we were being watched, like a wall was missing from our apartment…"; however, the viewer does not *see* the audience (or potential audience) during her song with Xander.

[20] This hardly elicits the same effect as the change from “William” to “Spike.”

[21] Several characters mock Spike’s hair through synecdoche—Xander calls him “bleach boy” (“Crush,” 5014), and “Captain Peroxide” (“Smashed,” 6009). Buffy refers to him as “peroxided pest” (“Out of My Mind,” 5004). Angel also calls him “Captain Peroxide” (“Chosen,” 7022) and refers to his hair colour as “radioactive” (“Hell Bound,” A5004). When Glory first sees Spike she asks, “What the hell is that, and why is his hair that color?” (“Intervention,” 5018). Harmony affectionately mocks his hair colour by referring to Spike as “Blondie Bear” and “my platinum baby” (“The Harsh Light of Day,” 4003). Even Illyria calls him “the white-haired one” (“Timebomb,” A5019).

[22] Spike calls Angel “tall, dark and forehead” in “Chosen” (7022).

[23] The menage à trois is, of course, another binary disruptor.

[24] We would like to thank Kathryn Barnwell and Nancy Bjerring for their generosity in taking time to read and respond to an earlier version of this paper.