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Buffy the Vampire Disciplinarian:

Institutional Excess and the New Economy of Power

(1) *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*), the hit television series featuring a teen-age girl with super-human powers who fights vampires and other forces of evil, has inspired increasing critical attention over the last few years. This attention is largely focused on three propositions: Buffy represents a liberatory feminist figure (Wilcox; Harts); the show's vampires and demons represent the failure of reason, science, and technology to solve contemporary social problems (Owen); and the show offers a moderately Marxist critique of culture (McMillan and Owen). Implicit in each of these propositions is the notion that, in her struggle against vampires and demons, Buffy subverts concrete and often callous political, social, economic, and educational institutions, such as the high school, the mystical Watcher's Council, and the military-industrial complex called The Initiative. This apparently subversive project seems to have been extended in the spin-off series *Angel* and the title character's struggle with the law firm Wolfram and Hart. However, more recent critics, such as Kent Ono, have begun to perform resistant readings which suggest the show is not as subversive as it appears. While Ono focuses on the show's representations of race, this essay argues that the show's representations of institutional power are also less transgressive than they seem. Rather than simply exposing the evils of institutions, a project which might seem in line with Foucault's study of punitive systems in *Discipline and Punish*, both *BtVS* and *Angel* actually offer an alternative system of power and control which is, as Foucault describes the modern penal system, "more regular, more effective, more constant and more detailed in its effects" (80). Therefore, these apparent subversions of institutional power merely signal a resistance to the excessive use of power, to outdated institutional models rather than to institutional power in general. In other words, while these programs may be read as supporting Marxist or feminist subversions of institutional constructions, they ultimately reaffirm the role of institutions in maintaining social order.

(2) From the very first episode of *BtVS*, "Welcome to the Hellmouth," the series establishes a pattern in which institutions are shown to be inefficient, inadequate, and misguided in their efforts to maintain order. The premise of the episode is that Buffy Summers has moved to a new high school in Sunnydale, California, after setting fire to her old school in L.A. due to a vampire infestation which only she was able to recognize. Buffy is eager to put her slaying days behind her, but unfortunately her new school turns out to be located over a "Hellmouth," a portal which a vampire known as "The Master" is attempting to open in order to destroy the world. Buffy is forced to accept her identity as a slayer and save the world from certain destruction, while at the same time negotiating obstacles placed before her by the educational institution. For example, by attempting to stop Buffy from leaving campus, the school's principal not only misjudges her character but also inadvertently puts the world in mortal jeopardy, and only by "rebelling" against the system and its preconceptions can Buffy succeed in resolving the crisis. This pattern becomes even more pronounced in later episodes, such as "Graduation Day, Part One," in which the Watcher's Council, an institution ostensibly created to help Buffy slay vampires and demons, becomes an obstacle that Buffy has to overcome in averting a catastrophe at Sunnydale's graduation ceremony. In the fourth season, the latest season aired when this essay was written, the military institution called The Initiative becomes the very crisis Buffy has to resolve during her first year of college: its experiments in biological warfare result in the creation of a cyborg demon named "Adam" who threatens to annihilate the entire human race. Buffy's resistance to institutional authority thus becomes almost indistinguishable from her role as the vampire slayer.

(3) *BtVS* also seems to depict these institutions as Foucaultian models of discipline and punishment, emphasizing surveillance, categorization, and regulation of behavior. For example, the high school principal repeatedly warns Buffy and her friends, "I have my eye on you," and the Council's mechanism of control takes the form of the "Watcher," an individual whose sole purpose is to monitor the activities of the Slayer. The use of surveillance is most obvious in The Initiative, which has hidden video cameras throughout the campus of the University of California Sunnydale. The Initiative also employs an elaborate system of ordering and classifying demons according to their behavior and anatomy. This is similar to the Watcher's Council, which possesses extensive knowledge of vampires and demons, and the principal performs a similar procedure by dividing students into discrete categories of troublemakers. (Buffy and her friends seem to occupy their own particular sub-category.) These institutions regulate the behavior of their subjects through the use of routines and restrictions, such as those employed by the high school, and the Watcher's Council similarly attempts to control Buffy by discouraging her from dating, training her, and ultimately putting her through a series of brutal tests. The scientists who run The Initiative control the demons they capture by

keeping them in holding cells, and they use drugs and computer implants to regulate their behavior as well as the behavior of their own soldiers. These similarities seem to support Foucault's equation of all institutions of power, such as "factories, schools, barracks, [and] hospitals," with prisons (228), and *BtVS* thus seems to suggest a resistance to these institutions.

(4) *BtVS* also seems to critique institutions in its depiction of Buffy as a heroine who is independent of the justice system. Those within institutions view Buffy as a marginal element, a criminal operating outside the system, and she is repeatedly chastised by authority figures. For example, in "Becoming, Part Two," at the end of the second season, Buffy is expelled by Principal Snyder, who repeatedly states that she is a subversive element within the high school. In a similar way, when she refuses to obey the Council's orders in "Graduation Day, Part One," Wesley, the Council's representative, accuses her of "mutiny." Likewise, in the fourth season episode "The I in Team," Professor Walsh, the leader of The Initiative, tries to have Buffy murdered ostensibly because her behavior is unpredictable and endangering The Initiative's project. Colonel McNamara, who takes over the Initiative after Walsh's death, even labels her an "anarchist" ("New Moon Rising"). The idea of the hero operating outside accepted institutions is extended in *Angel*, in which Lindsay, the devious Wolfram and Hart lawyer, convinces a police detective that Angel is "a being . . . who feels he is above the law" ("Sanctuary"). Unlike "modern," flawed institutions, Buffy and Angel appear to be more efficient dispensers of justice by employing medieval methods of punishment. Buffy and Angel are also similar in that they both occupy mystical positions in which their duties are divinely sanctioned. They thereby operate as executioners who have been authorized by a sovereign power and have the right to decide who should die and who should live without need of lawyers, judges, or juries. With rare exceptions, they are efficient because their methods seem simple and straightforward.

(5) The notion that Buffy subverts modern institutions has also been fueled by claims that the show's vampires and demons represent social problems that contemporary institutions can neither recognize nor control. For example, A. Susan Owen argues that "each episode negotiates the claims of a rational world view in the context of social fragmentation and institutional failure" (27). Owen illustrates this point with the episode "Ted," in which Buffy is abused by her mother's boyfriend, who turns out to be a cyborg; the failure of social institutions to solve the very real problem of domestic abuse, Owen argues, is further represented by the once again misdirected efforts of the police. Owen concludes that "in Sunnydale the threat is inherent within the culture: reason, science and social order fail in the face of predation, because predation is part of the modern project. In this narrative, vampirism is the inverted human face of power and domination" (28).

(6) However, Owen fails to account for the ways in which vampires themselves are also subject to forces of power and domination. This domination can take the form of a gypsy curse, which can change a vampire into a force for good, or the excessive institutional power of The Initiative and its programs of behavior modification and experimentation. Although it is true that vampires are floating signifiers that can symbolize a number of social issues, such as alcohol abuse and premarital sex, they more frequently represent people who are subject to a variety of institutional pressures. As Ono points out, their supernatural nature is often coded as racial difference: "the marginalization of vampires on the show takes the place of racial marginalization in the world outside the show" (172). However, in various situations, their predatory behavior is also coded as criminal, and the fact that they exist outside normal systems of economic exchange and "feed off the living" often codes them as lower class citizens or even parasitical welfare recipients. Therefore, rather than simply representing abstract ideas, such as the failure of reason, science, social order, or as a problem that must be completely eliminated, vampires and demons—creatures without souls—represent figures who are truly marginalized by society and supposedly in need of discipline.

(7) This relationship between vampires and discipline is particularly appropriate given that, according to Foucault, the exercise of disciplinary power is directly linked to the notion of the soul. Foucault argues that the soul is produced in the act of punishment, and thus the history of the creation of the modern institutional apparatus is also a "history of the modern soul": "[The soul] is not born in sin and subject to punishment, but is born rather out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint" (29). In other words, the notion of a soul is inherently connected with forces of control, and rather than simply "slaying" the soulless, as her title suggests, Buffy's exercise of disciplinary power actually rehearses the process by which souls are produced and sustained. This connection between discipline and the soul is most explicit in the character of Angel. In an inversion of the traditional Faust myth, Angel is punished for his evil deeds by being given back a soul, which causes him to experience torment and guilt. His punishment and his soul are thus inseparable, and for as long as he retains his soul, he continues to be punished.

(8) Therefore, rather than critiquing Foucaultian institutions, *BtVS* actually demonstrates the uses of power which Foucault describes as essential to modern penal systems. For example, unlike the medieval torture scene Foucault describes in "The Spectacle of the Scaffold," Buffy and Angel's methods of punishment are not linked to economic and political status. They are not representatives of a monarchical or governmental power, but rather justice itself, otherwise known as the seemingly benevolent "Powers That Be" (PTB). The objective of this system of justice is, as Foucault argues for the modern penal system, "to make of the punishment and repression of illegalities a regular function, coextensive with society; not to punish less, but to punish better; to punish with an attenuated severity perhaps, but in order to punish with more universality and necessity; to insert the power to punish more deeply into the social body" (82). Rather than performing the function of the executioner, Buffy and Angel live within society, integrating their roles as punishers into their everyday lives.

(9) Buffy and Angel can also be distinguished from executioners by the fact that their punishments are more "humane." Unlike executioners, who perform a spectacle of torture in front of a crowd to deter future crimes, Buffy and Angel's tactics do not rely on terror, shock, and physical horror, but rather they are depicted as measured, merciful, and appropriate to the crime. In the chapter "The Gentle Way in Punishment," Foucault describes the efforts of reformers to suit the punishment very directly to the crime: "The ideal punishment would be transparent to the crime that it punishes; thus for him who contemplates it, it will be infallibly the sign of the crime that it punishes" (105). Despite her title, Buffy does not simply slay all vampires and demons; rather, she establishes a set of penalties for certain infringements that vary from the most extreme (death to vampires who feed on the living) to the relatively mild and necessary (werewolves must be locked up during a full moon). This is even more evident with Angel, who offers to help both humans and demons depending on who is being victimized by whom at any given time. For example, in the episode "She," Angel assists a woman fleeing oppression in another dimension even though she has already murdered at least one human; his aid is contingent on her refraining from any further killing: "I'm not saying you shouldn't fight. Just know I'll be there to stop you if you cross the line."

(10) Foucault also stresses the importance of categorization to the ideal penal system: "For penal semiotics to cover the whole field of illegalities that one wishes to eliminate, all offences must be defined; they must be classified and collected into species from which none of them can escape" (98). In contrast to the institutions of the Council and The Initiative, both of which fail to recognize the "individuality" of the creatures they confront, Buffy and Angel are able to differentiate between groups of vampires and demons, and they pay close attention to their various backgrounds and motives. For example, The Initiative trains its soldiers to refer to vampires and demons as "Hostile Subterrestrials," or simply "HSTs," and they are taught to view these beings as animals which all possess an equal degree of evil. This failure to differentiate becomes a major source of conflict in the episode "New Moon Rising" where Buffy and her boyfriend Riley, a member of The Initiative, argue about the justice of putting all demons into a single category:

> Buffy: You sounded like Mr. Initiative: demons bad, people good.
>
> Riley: Something wrong with that theorem?
>
> Buffy: There's different degrees of . . .
>
> Riley: Evil?
>
> Buffy: It's just different with different demons. There are creatures, vampires for example, who aren't evil at all.
>
> Riley: Name one.

Buffy's defense of Oz, a friend who is a werewolf, echoes Foucault's description of "the delinquent whose slow formation is shown in a biographical investigation" and who should be distinguished from the offender "in that he is not only the author of his acts . . . but is linked to his offense by a whole bundle of complex threads (instincts, drives, tendencies, character)" (252). Buffy similarly claims that "Oz is not dangerous" and that "something happened to him that wasn't his fault." Riley's refusal to consider biography when thinking of HSTs even prompts Buffy to call him a "bigot," but by the end of the episode Riley has learned his lesson: "I was in a total black-and-white space¾people vs. monsters—and it ain't like that, especially when it comes to love." This point is particularly relevant to Buffy's own past

romance with Angel, the vampire with a soul, and her ability to judge each individual creature according to his/her own personal history repeatedly puts her at odds with the institutions she encounters. For example, Buffy's decision to leave the Council is a direct result of their refusal to help Angel after he is poisoned by the rogue slayer Faith ("Graduation Day, Part One"); the Council's inability to consider Angel's unique history and its decision to condemn him outright as a vampire convinces Buffy that she would be more effective on her own.

(11) Because of his experiences, Angel is keenly aware of the impact of personal history and the importance of making distinctions between individuals. In the episode "Sanctuary," Angel is the only one to defend Faith when she is being hunted down by Buffy, the Council, the police, and the Wolfram and Hart law firm. Wesley, who has recently been brutally tortured by Faith, tries to convince Angel that she deserves to be punished for her actions, and he follows a logic similar to The Initiative's in overlooking her history and interpreting her motives as simply animalistic instinct:

> Wesley: There are far more humane ways to deal with a rabid animal.
>
> Angel: She's not an animal.
>
> Wesley: No?
>
> Angel: She's a person, and in case you've forgotten, we're not in the business of giving up on people.
>
> Wesley: I believe in helping people. I do not believe in coddling murderers . . . . There is evil in that girl . . . . If you set her free, she'll kill again.
>
> Angel: You can't just arbitrarily decide whose souls are worth saving and whose aren't.

Angel's defense of Faith is clearly based on the idea that one must use knowledge of the individual criminal's background in order to devise a sentence appropriate to the crime. While this episode seems to mimic the dialogue between Buffy and Riley, a similarity heightened by the fact that both episodes originally aired on the same night, it is ironic that Buffy makes a special appearance in this episode of *Angel* in which she also condemns Faith as a monster who cannot be reformed. Faced with the excessive assault of the Council's hit squad, however, Buffy reconsiders her personal vendetta against Faith and helps in her rescue, a decision which is ultimately affirmed by Faith's confession to the police and which emphasizes yet again the importance of employing a measured punishment that considers the offender's background.

(12) Such intimate knowledge of the differences between individual vampires and demons allows Buffy to employ certain demons for her own ends. In his discussion of the delinquent, Foucault adds that "prison, and no doubt punishment in general, is not intended to eliminate offenses, but rather to distinguish them, to distribute them, to use them; that it is not so much that they render docile those who transgress the law, but that they tend to assimilate the transgression of the laws in a general tactics of subjection" (272). This is illustrated in several episodes of *BtVS*, such as "Enemies," in which Buffy is able to use Angel and his known status as a delinquent in order to gain Faith's confidence and learn the mayor's evil plans; Buffy is able to incorporate Angel's past transgressions into a "general tactics of subjection" by asking him to masquerade in the guise of his formerly evil self. Buffy is also aware of a local bar frequented by vampires and demons, but rather than killing them she allows the bar to stay open and often uses it to get information on demon activity. Perhaps the clearest example of Buffy's strategic use of delinquents is her relationship with Spike, a vampire who was formerly her archenemy. Near the end of the second season, Spike begins an association with Buffy and her friends in which their interests frequently coincide; for example, in that season's finale, "Becoming, Part Two," Spike even helps them save the world. In the fourth season, Spike falls prey to The Initiative, who install a chip in his brain that prevents him from physically harming humans and makes him even more useful as an ally. While The Initiative wants to keep Spike incarcerated, Buffy allows him his liberty for as long as he proves useful in gaining their objectives. Spike does not become good; rather, the gang's knowledge of both his powerlessness and his greed allows them to use him in productive ways. For example, Giles pays Spike to help him during the episode "A New Man," in which he is transformed into a demon and hunted by The Initiative. Similarly, in "Doomed," Spike helps Buffy defeat three demons seeking to reopen the Hellmouth under the high school. The employment of Spike in these moments represents a much more efficient use of disciplinary power than that of The Initiative or the Council, who would simply kill or incarcerate him.

(13) Foucault's chapter on Bentham's Panopticon is often cited as the most crucial part of his study of disciplinary models, and the similarities between Bentham's model and the methods employed by Buffy and her allies are striking. As we have already pointed out, The Initiative and the Council appear to fulfill Bentham's dream of a disciplinary regime grounded in the principle of surveillance. For example, the architectural design of The Initiative's underground complex, which holds demons in individual cells with transparent walls facing a central hallway, seems to replicate Bentham's Panopticon: "Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions" (200). Likewise, the use of video cameras in the demons' holding cells ensures that each prisoner is "seen, but he does not see" (200). This surveillance is extended throughout the university through frequent camouflaged patrols and monitoring devices concealed within each building. However, a closer reading of the show's juxtaposition of Buffy's methods of tracking and subduing vampires and demons with the methods used by The Initiative reveals that Buffy and her friends employ a system of surveillance which more closely resembles the panoptic gaze elaborated by Foucault. Like The Initiative, Buffy and her friends employ patrols; however, their patrols are even more invisible than the almost comically camouflaged, gun-toting Initiative. Buffy's use of surveillance is also more efficient than The Initiative's because of its disassociation from architectural structures. Buffy's system actually illustrates "the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power so to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (201). In other words, Buffy's power is not restricted to the prison environment but rather diffused throughout society; demons are aware that the Slayer exists and thus, like the panoptic tower, the Slayer represents an observer who may or may not be watching but whose position nevertheless continually exerts influence. The Initiative, on the other hand, is a secret institution that depends on the actual performance of punishment to exert its influence; thus, unlike Bentham's model, it fails to overcome its architectural and material constraints. According to Foucault, Bentham was even "surprised that panoptic institutions could be so light: there were no more bars, no more chains, no more heavy locks" (202). By embodying the ever-present potential of surveillance and punishment, Buffy offers a far more accurate representation of the lightness of this disciplinary model.

(14) The Watcher's Council seems to provide another model of this kind of disembodied surveillance. As its title suggests, the Council is designed primarily to watch the activities of vampires and demons, as well as the Slayer herself, and there is no suggestion that the Council possesses a prison or even a building. Like Buffy and her friends, the Council also seems to have much more knowledge about demons than The Initiative. However, rather than representing the evolution of punishment towards the Panopticon, the Council seems to be modeled on the sovereign's use of disciplinary power. Not only do the trappings of the Council mimic medieval society, a fact emphasized by their British, "Old World" origins, but the Council also seems to employ Buffy as an executioner whose only role is to follow orders and slay without question. According to Foucault, the executioner is the sovereign's representative in a symbolic ritual of power in which the criminal's act against the sovereignty is revenged; in punishing a crime, therefore, "the intervention of the sovereign is not . . . an arbitration between two adversaries: . . . it is a direct reply to the person who has offended him" (47-48). In a similar way, the Council does not seem to be concerned simply with punishing those who break the law, but rather they treat all transgressions as direct affronts to their authority. In condemning Angel, for example, the Council reveals that it is more concerned with preserving its own codes than it is with justice, or, as Wesley tells Buffy, "It's not Council policy to cure vampires" ("Graduation Day, Part One"). This emphasis on preserving authority is even more pronounced when the transgression is committed by one of the Council's own members. For example, Wesley refers to Buffy's desire to help Angel as "mutiny," a term which seems highly extreme, and in the episode "Who Are You," where Faith is chased for committing murder, the Council's retrieval team says to her, "The Watcher's Council used to mean something. You perverted it." This accusation is shown to be doubly misplaced in that it not only reveals the Council's megalomania but also their ineptitude; due to a magical device, Faith has switched bodies with Buffy, and the Council's policy of following orders without question allows them to capture and accuse the wrong person. This episode also depicts the Council's brutality: rather than returning Faith to the U.K. for trial, the Council orders her immediate execution, and thus Faith's eventual confession to the police in "Sanctuary" depicts the legal system as a much more civilized and modern institution. (The legal system is rarely shown in such a positive light in the series; it is only in contrast to the primitive extremism of the Council that this is possible.) The Council applies the same extreme measures to all vampires and demons, measures that bear a striking similarity to what Foucault describes as the "limit of punishment": "The dissymmetry, the irreversible imbalance of forces were an essential element in the public execution. A body effaced, reduced to dust and thrown to the winds, a body destroyed piece by piece by the infinite power of the sovereign constituted not only the ideal, but the real limit of punishment" (50). The show's use of special effects to make the vampires explode into dust whenever they are killed would seem to be the most perfect illustration of this limit, and the Council's blanket use of this extreme form of punishment shows its medieval nature. By rejecting the Council, Buffy also rejects this excessive use of force.

(15) But perhaps the clearest way in which *BtVS* illustrates Foucault's model of discipline and punishment is in the notion of the Slayer itself. As the prologue to the show's early episodes states, the Slayer is a mystical figure who appears in each generation and who possesses superhuman abilities that allow her to combat the forces of evil. Buffy is not the only such slayer, but rather the latest in a long line of slayers who have all performed a similar function in society. Unlike a typical superhero, the power of the Slayer in no way resides uniquely in Buffy Summers herself, but rather in the position that she is temporarily occupying. This replicates Bentham's notion that the perfect panoptic system is not dependent upon any single individual, but rather it is "a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it" (201). Foucault also emphasizes that "it does not matter who exercises power. Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine" (202). This principle can be seen in the episode "What's My Line?" in which a new slayer appears to take Buffy's place after she has been dead for only two minutes. The idea of disembodied power is also apparent in *Angel*; while the show appears to emphasize Angel's unique identity as a vampire with a soul, we learn in the episode "I Will Remember You," in which Angel becomes temporarily human, that Angel is only one of the warriors fighting for the PTB and he is replaceable. Buffy and Angel are further removed from the typical superhero and linked more with the Foucaultian model in that they are themselves subject to the power which they represent. Buffy, for example, repeatedly struggles with the demands of being a slayer. In "Never Kill a Boy on the First Date," Buffy argues with Giles about whether or not it is possible for a slayer to date boys. Buffy compares her role to that of Superman, who had Lois Lane, but Giles argues that, for a slayer, "dating is problematic at best." Buffy also differs from Superman in that she is fulfilling a prophecy and therefore is not allowed the same freedom to make choices or mistakes. As she complains in the episode "Reptile Boy," "I told one lie, I had one drink," to which Giles replies, "Yes, and you were very nearly devoured by a giant demon snake. The words 'let that be a lesson' are a tad redundant." While such scenes serve to metaphorically depict the trials faced by average teenagers, as Wilcox points out (20), they also demonstrate the severe consequences that accompany Buffy's attempts to ignore or circumvent her slayer duties. These episodes demonstrate that Buffy's behavior is controlled and disciplined even while she appears to be the one doing the disciplining. Angel presents an even more extreme case: due to a gypsy curse, he is given a soul that forces him to realize the horrors he committed as a vampire, and, in addition to this burden of guilt, he is unable to experience even a moment of true happiness or he will once again transform into his evil self. Like Buffy, Angel is prevented from having a normal life, and he is forced to concentrate only on the role he plays for the PTB.

(16) Therefore, rather than being "anarchists," as Colonel McNamara of The Initiative claims, Buffy and her allies actually fulfill the promise of Foucault's institutional apparatus. Due to its excessive and inefficient use of force, The Initiative is repeatedly shown to be a failed institution of discipline and punishment, and even the Wolfram and Hart law firm, which appears to be incorporating demons into modern institutions of penality, is similarly shown to be a corrupt perversion of the legal system. In contrast to these institutions, Buffy and Angel operate within a system that efficiently employs surveillance and discipline in a new economy of power. Although on the surface Buffy might appear to be a figure of feminist resistance, and *BtVS* might be interpreted as politically progressive, a closer look at the show's representation of power relations reveals that the figure of the young woman is merely being employed to signal the fact that modern structures of discipline and punishment are so thorough and diffuse that they can be embodied in even the most unlikely agents. Rather than simply relying on formal analysis, then, an argument for the show's actual potential for effecting positive political change can only rely upon a study of its reception among fans and audiences.

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