Sue Turnbull

"Not just another *Buffy* paper': Towards an Aesthetics of Television'

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Teaser: Why I sometimes wish I was studying orthodonture

(1) There's only one place to buy coffee on my University campus and it's called *Caffeine*. Once in a health crisis, I asked for decaffeinated. They pretended not to hear me, it's that kind of a joint. It is, therefore, the only place on campus to meet anyone who has time these days to step out of their office, and it's where two months ago I ran into a distinguished colleague who asked me 'what I was up to'. I told him I was writing a paper on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* for an international conference on *Buffy* in Nashville. He looked aghast. 'Did you know', I continued in what I already knew was a doomed attempt at self-justification, 'that there are at least twelve serious academic books already published on *Buffy*?' He opened his mouth to speak. 'AND a very serious International Journal of *Buffy* studies?' He shook his head. 'What are you up to?' I beamed. 'A biography of Gore Vidal' he responded dryly, 'one of the most important intellectual figures of the twentieth century about whom very little has been written thus far.' I knew I should be crushed, I can detect an implied put down when I hear one. 'Ah well, this is not just another *Buffy* paper', I rallied, 'I intend to discuss the history of popular culture in the curriculum and argue for a new approach to studying television'. Awed by my hubris and momentarily daunted by the magnitude of the task, I paused. 'Read any good books lately?' he said.

(2) Reflecting on this encounter later, I realised how it typified most of my adult experience as a teacher of media, popular culture and television (just as I suspect it probably typifies the experience of many people here from across the academy and other walks of life). When people ask me what I do, or what I am studying, I almost always have to explain myself in ways which I would not have to if I were researching the works of William Faulkner, particle physics or orthodonture. Studying popular culture simply isn't taken seriously, even, it would seem, by *Buffy*.

Act 1: 'Taking Popular Culture Seriously: But Not in a Good Way'

(3) In Episode One Season Four, Buffy and Willow are discovered in a graveyard, discussing Buffy's subject choice for college while waiting for a recently buried vampire to rise. Willow runs through Buffy's options. Buffy, reverting to airhead mode, rejects the idea of studying the modern novel (too many words, not enough time), in favour of the short story –

although her preference for the modern blurb is clear. Discovering that the short story class conflicts with their Psychology 105 class, Willow suggests instead 'Images of Pop Culture' in which, she announces, 'they watch movies, TV shows and even commercials.' 'For credit?' asks Buffy incredulously. It would seem that even she cannot imagine how popular culture might be taken seriously.

(4) Having decided to take the class, she turns up, only to discover that the lecturer in charge is a complete ass-hole who takes delight in public humiliation. He expels Buffy for asking a question of her neighbour while he is pompously making his opening pronouncements. As an image of popular culture, he's not a good look. Crestfallen, Buffy heads off to join Willow in Psych conducted by the 'renowned' Professor Walsh who oozes academic credibility as she outlines her expectations of her students:

> Make no mistake. I run a hard class. I assign a lot of work, I talk fast, and I expect you to keep up.

Walsh means business, although her real business is extremely dodgy and will constitute the major story arc of Season 4., which all goes to show that one should never trust anyone in academia, but I digress.

(5) Back to the Images of Pop Culture moment. Is Joss Whedon, who wrote this episode, really suggesting that the study of popular culture shouldn't be taken seriously? Or is he simply rehearsing the general prejudice in order to make fun of it? Or is Whedon (as usual) having it both ways, mischievously mocking the notion of an academy which would dare to take popular culture (and therefore his creation *Buffy*) seriously, while having a dig at those who don't? In any case, by Season Four of *Buffy* he must already have been aware of the ways in which the series had already been picked up and picked over by academia.

(6) In her account of Whedon's own undergraduate experience of academia at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, Candace Havens places considerable emphasis on Joss's dedication to Film Studies. This emphasis is confirmed by his mentor, Professor Jeanine Basinger, Professor of Film, who goes on to describe Whedon thus:

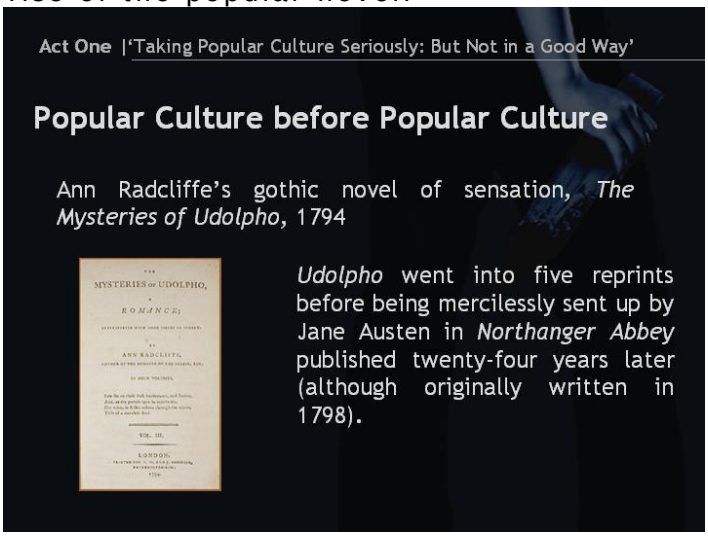
> He's incredibly smart. He is deeply, widely read. He's not one of those people who falls into show business because he taps the popular culture and nothing else. He has read the classics. He knows history (Havens 2003: 14).

There's a suggestion here that 'tapping into' popular culture is an activity of a very different order from studying the classics and history, and that the secret to Whedon's success lies in his devotion to the latter not the former. From Basinger's account, it therefore emerges that what Whedon's college education gave him was the classics and history, and, of course the academic study of film which unlike popular culture and television studies, gained academic credibility and a firm foothold in the Humanities curriculum in the sixties and seventies (Jancovitch and Lyons 2003: 3).[1] I can't help thinking there's an underlying cultural hierarchy at work here, which is reflected in Whedon's own comments about his career plans after graduation in 1987:

> I was sure I was too good for television….That's what my family did and I couldn't be bothered. I was a total snob. I never watched

> American TV, I only watched, like, *Masterpiece Theatre*. I was going to be a great independent filmmaker. The problem was, after school, I had no idea how I was going to make this happen (havens 2003:17).

(7) The desire not to enter the family business (it is well known that both Whedon's father and grandfather were successful TV scriptwriters) is hardly surprising. It's all part of growing up and rejecting the parental culture in a probably futile attempt to stave off the worst case scenario, that one might turn into one's parents. What IS surprising is that the man who so loves popular culture that it infiltrates every concept he creates, can honestly reveal that he himself has been a victim of the high culture/low culture prejudice which has dominated most western thinking about popular culture since the rise of the popular novel.



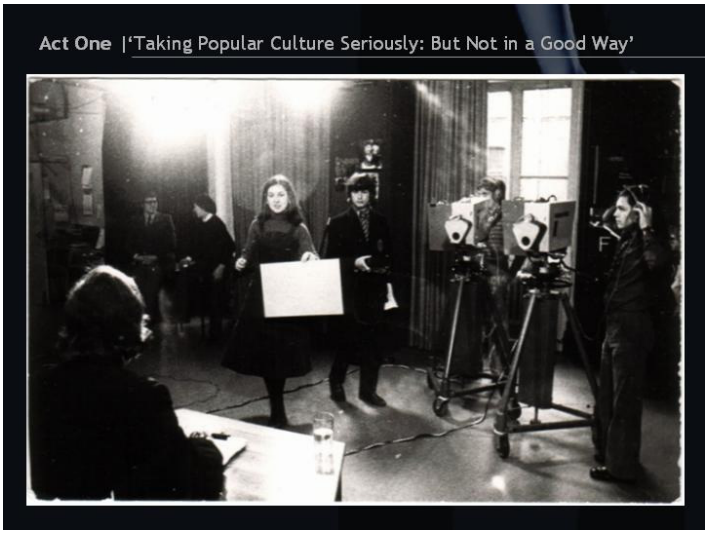
(8) Let me flip back to a putative point of origin for this prejudice against the popular with the publication of arguably the first blockbuster novel of its time, Ann Radcliffe's gothic novel of sensation, The Mysteries of Udolpho. First published in Britain in 1794, Udolpho went into five reprints before being mercilessly sent up by Jane Austen in Northanger Abbey published twenty four years later in 1818 (although originally written in 1798)[2]. Udolpho was, of course, but one ripple in a wave of gothic novels published in the second half of the eighteenth century which popularised the gothic imagery, symbolism and even the trope of the fair-haired virtuous heroine on which Whedon himself clearly draws (Callander).

(9) Austen's comic critique of *Udolpho,* however, reveals that even at the height of its popularity, the gothic novel as a form of popular culture (before popular culture was invented) was hardly taken seriously, or at least only seriously enough to be made fun of. Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, cultural anxiety about the emergence of a new mass media created to entertain a new mass audience created by an industrial revolution which provided the technology to make the new mass media possible, grew exponentially. Popular culture, including the sensational broadsheet featuring gruesome murder, romantic novels of sensation, melodrama including the gothic, and other forms of supposedly debased culture, began to be taken very seriously indeed, but not in a good way.

(10) In 1869, Mathew Arnold, a former school inspector and Headmaster of the famous British public (which means private) school, Rugby, published his influential book *Culture and Anarchy* in which he forecast the end of civilization if the corrupting effects of popular culture and a devotion to the machine were not held in check and taught against. Almost sixty years later, Frank Leavis and Dennis Thompson published *Culture and Environment* (1933), another highly influential book which emphasised the need for teachers to teach good taste, discrimination, and

moral values as a way of mitigating the effects of an increasingly powerful and therefore increasingly suspect popular mass media. I would argue that the legacy of these interventions is still with us in the curriculum of the school and the university which remains dedicated to the classics and the canon (as a form of moral and aesthetic education), only dealing with the popular in terms of its (negative) power and affect, but rarely in terms of its (positive) aesthetic or cultural value.

(11) Back in the sixties and early seventies when I started teaching, there were three main justifications for dealing with popular culture and television. Option One: You had to teach students to deconstruct it, to see through it, in order to demystify it and limit its impact. What David Buckingham calls the prophylactic approach (Buckingham 1998). Option Two, you taught students how to make the media themselves in order to enable them to become the producers of a better, more democratic, more politically active media which would inevitably bring about the next glorious socialist revolution.



(12) Cue photograph – here I am in 1975 with a group of fourteen year old potential revolutionaries who are learning how to operate TV cameras and how to make the news broadcast which will announce the coming revolution. As you are no doubt aware, this failed to eventuate in England. We got Margaret Thatcher instead, and the redeployment of the left wing university not as a place of social critique and scholarship, but as a place of right wing education and training. By the late eighties, in England and in Australia, the new vocationalism had taken hold to such an extent that almost all of our students studying the media wanted to work in the media. So much for the prophylactic approach.

(14) The Third Option had to do with education by stealth. You could use popular culture in the classroom to seduce students into paying attention in order to get your message across about whatever it was you were trying to teach – which probably wasn't anything to do with the media in the first place.[3] However, as a teacher one was warned very strongly about the dangers of being 'sucked in' or duped into simply giving the students what they wanted. In other words, if it all got to be too much fun then the students couldn't possibly be learning anything useful. Off with the TV and out with the worksheets.

(15) What was largely missing from the above approaches to studying popular culture was any notion of its cultural or aesthetic value, except in entirely negative terms. Appreciating popular culture, such as the comic book, or watching television, except when the television in question was 'quality' television (about which much more shortly) were cultural pursuits frowned on by the school curriculum and the teaching profession. Indeed, poor levels of literacy in schools are still blamed on a television culture which feeds kids supposedly 'mindless' cartoons such as *The Roadrunner.*

Act Two: 'In Bed with Television'

(16) In the Season Four episode 'Goodbye Iowa', Giles, Buffy, Anya and Willow are in hiding in Xander's basement: the women delicately cordoned off from the men by a curtain much like the one in the 1934 romantic comedy "*It Happened One Night*" (a carefully placed intertextual reference for all the film buffs out there). Giles is rudely awakened by the sounds of a Warner Brothers *Roadrunner* cartoon as we discover Willow, Anya and Buffy in bed watching a very small TV on which a giant wrecking ball swings in a destructive arc towards Wile E Coyote, who contemplates its looming shadow with doomed resignation. 'That would never happen' says Buffy, the woman to whom the impossible always happens. Willow offers her a brief lesson in genre theory, 'Well, no Buff, that's why they call them cartoons, not documentaries'.

(17) What Willow doesn't say, is that cartoons as texts have been taken very seriously indeed within Film Studies. Indeed, Richard Thompson's seminal appreciation and critique of the Roadrunner cartoons entitled 'Meep Meep!' originally published in 1969 has been frequently cited and republished, most pertinently here in Bill Nichols' edited collection, *Movies and Methods* (1976), a standard text in America Film Studies courses and one with which Whedon himself would no doubt have been familiar in college. Although Whedon did not write or direct this episode, I would like to make a case for his status as the 'author' of the series as a whole, given his role in over-seeing both content and stylistics. This scene is thus yet another ambiguous moment in the complex discourse of the popular which emerges in *Buffy* since while it presents us with the all too familiar image of kids watching cartoons on TV, the cartoon reference in question is by no means as simple as it seems.

(18) The Thompson article begins with a quote attributed to Pete Burness on the topic of violence in cartoons which might have been written about the violence in *Buffy*:

> In the American cartoon, death, human defeat, is never presented without being followed by resurrection, transfiguration. A cartoon character can very well be crushed into a plate by a steam roller,

> may be fragmented, cut up by a biscuit cutting machine, but he arises immediately, intact and full of life in the next shot. So it seems evident to me that the American cartoon, rather than glorifying death, is a permanent illustration of the theme of rebirth (Burness quoted in Thompson 1990: 217)

(19) Thompson's gloss on this comment is to add that while this may well be true, in the case of the cartoon character, rebirth only leads to the next debacle, 'More absolutely than zombies, vampires and the un-dead are cartoon characters denied the solace of eternal rest' (Thompson 1976: 135). Given the forthcoming ending Season Five, Buffy and Wile E. Coyote might have much more in common than she imagines. The major point to be made here, however, is that despite the serious treatment of the Warner Brothers cartoon in Film Studies where it has long been recognised as a 'subversive and surreal' art form never intended for children (Thompson 1976:129), cartoons on TV are still usually cited as a marker of mindless entertainment for a childlike audience, such as the power of the negative discourse about the role of television in the home since its arrival in the 1950s.

(20) Initially hailed with both utopian pronouncements of its potential for cultural enlightenment accompanied by dystopian prognoses of its negative effects, television has almost always been considered largely in terms of its social context of reception, the home. Such an approach is in direct contrast to the study of film which largely got over its social anxiety during the thirties (with the conduct of the Payne Fund Studies), developing a much stronger tradition of auteurist and aesthetic commentary which guaranteed it a secure niche within the Humanities tradition of textual analysis. Television Studies, on the other hand, has wandered about the curriculum over the last fifty years, frequently waking up with such promiscuous bedfellows as Education, Communication, or more recently, Cultural Studies and wondering how it got there.

(21) It got there, of course, because, unlike the cinema, television has rarely been imagined in terms of its discrete texts, but rather in terms of its social role as a technology. While I am well aware, as Lyn Spiegel (1998) points out, that the US and the UK initially embraced the study of television in very different ways4, I would like to argue that there has been a subsequent convergence of these traditions drawing largely on a Cultural Studies approach which emphasises the political implications of the text in terms of the technologies of reception. Such an approach might be traced to the moment when British cultural theorist Raymond Williams woke up in Miami after a transatlantic sea voyage around 1974, turned on the TV and found it almost impossible to work out what he was watching because of the 'flow' of images, the constant interruptions of ad breaks and the trailers for up-coming programmes (Williams 1974: 91-92).

(22) Revisiting Williams' concept of flow some eight years later, John Ellis (1982) fractured the flow into a sequence of segments (within the drama, the news, and of course the TV commercial as the segment par excellence), and once again the text was 'disappeared'. Ellis also distinguished the scopic regime of television from that of cinema by arguing that while we may gaze at a film (projected on a large screen in a darkened auditorium which simulates the dream experience and opens the flood gates to psychoanalytic interpretations of the text), we only glance at TV (because it is a small screen in a well lit social space which has to compete with all the irruptions of family life, frequently relying on urgent aural cues (the jingle, the title music) to direct our attention back to the

box. Writing in 1999, John Corner goes so far as to suggest that television production is entirely bound by the domestic context of reception and primacy of talk over the spectacular:

> With the exception of films designed initially or concurrently for cinema release, television images are framed and composed with the factors of reduced screen size and domestic contexts of reception in mind. […] Studio programmes of all kinds are often anchored in speech, in vision or in voice-over. The result is often a visualisation which serves primarily to indicate the space and place of talk. […] In popular television and series drama, the extensive use of close-up and medium close-ups provides for the special kinds of character familiarity, proximity, and everydayness which these fictions seek to generate in exploring dimensions of the domestic and the social (Corner 199: 30-31).

(23) While all that Williams, Ellis and Corner suggest about the television experience may well be true, I want to argue that these descriptions do not account for either the kind of television text which is *Buffy* nor the ways in which it is watched. I would argue that *Buffy* is watched differently not only because of changes in the technology of delivery, but also because the text itself demands a different sort of engagement.

(24) Let's start with technology and the ways in which the video recorder has changed our relationship to television, allowing us to record programmes for repeat viewing and enabling us to 'edit out' the commercials which might interrupt our attention to the text. Unlike Williams or Ellis, we are able to interrupt the flow, and to rearrange the segments into a discrete text which can be experienced as intensely as a film.

(25) Then along came the DVD with all its extras, its 'making-of' documentaries, directorial commentary and television started doing television studies for itself, enacting the kinds of critical and aesthetic analysis that film studies had been doing for some time, but with a different problematic. While the text of a film may be of limited and bounded duration, what constitutes the text in Television Studies when that text is a seven season series comprising over a hundred episodes narratively linked by episodic story arcs, seasonal story arcs and whole series story arcs?

(27) And then there was the internet. Although the debate about whether the internet was invented in order to serve the purposes of the US military or a legion of Star Trek fans (who might well have been the same group) may never be resolved, what is clear is that right from its inception, the internet has been used for the kinds of fannish activity which largely prefigure the new aesthetics of television study which I want to argue for here.

(28) Let me therefore go out on a limb and suggest that *Buffy* fans (or *Angel* fans, or *Firefly* would-be fans if they got a chance) don't watch *Buffy* as part of television's flow of images or segments, nor do they simply glance at the screen. It is far more likely they watch *Buffy* on a big screen TV (if they can afford one) in the dark, either in silence or with trusted viewing companions who might be in the room or on-line in a participatory viewing experience which is all about intense engagement with the text. Fans interrogate the text and each other, rehearsing not only close forms of textual analysis and commentary, but a knowledge of

authorship, genre and style as well as the conditions of production which impinge both on the creation and the delivery of the televisual product. Conditions which might include the use of particular televisual technologies, the exigencies of the televisual form, the contribution of specific production or acting personnel, or the machinations of a network, a production company or the television programmers who make the decisions about how, what and when the television product will be delivered – or not – as in the case of the intense fan speculation and attempted intervention in the axing of *Angel.*

(29) In other words, fans understand and are already in command of what John Thornton Caldwell calls the whole 'aesthetic economy of televisuality' which encompasses not only an understanding of the text in all its stylistic, referential and narrative complexity but also an understanding of the conditions of production which determine its form and style. Furthermore, *Buffy* as a TV series not only recognises that fans have this knowledge but also lets them know it knows by inviting them to exercise their advanced televisual skills over and over again and again. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Season Seven episode 'Storyteller' which as a *Buffy* fan, I read thus.

Act Three: 'Oh, Hello There Gentle Viewer'

(30) The opening shot of the teaser to 'Storyteller' begins with a close-up on two leatherbound volumes in a bookcase. The names on the spines are Nietzsche and Shakespeare. There are no titles, perhaps because the names are intended to be sufficient clues for the viewer to tease out; perhaps in terms of Nietzsche's concept of the 'ubermensch' which might be relevant to this episode, the season or *Buffy* as a whole;[5] perhaps in terms of how Shakespeare's status as both a canonical auteur and popular dramatist problematises the too easy distinction between high and low culture, the classics and the popular. Whatever the final reading of this gesture towards the classics, (which the *Buffy* scholar knows Joss Whedon has read) the seasoned viewer also knows that these signs matter within the inter-textual treasure trove which is *Buffy*.

(31) The camera gracefully pans across an elegant study, taking in an open comic book, a Star Wars poster with action figures in front, an anime poster and tribal masks (more significant signs carefully placed for the viewer to decode) until we discover Andrew, in silk smoking jacket, sitting in a leather armchair before an elaborate fireplace in which an open fire burns. He is reading from an ancient tome, pipe in hand as the classical music fades and he welcome us with the courtesy of a nineteenth century novelist, 'Oh, hello there gentle viewer'. [6]

(32) This opening shot, accompanied by classical music on the soundtrack, thus visually and aurally brackets the classical and the popular, high and low culture, the comic and the serious. But how are we to read it in the context of the series as a whole? What are the stylistics

of this shot which tell us something strange is going on? And just what is the nerdish Andrew doing in this chair?

(33) In interpreting this scene, the Buffy scholar already has to hand Andrew's narrative baggage, including the knowledge that he is an ardent *Star Trek* fan, and the only remaining member of the Season 6 failed trio of 'arch nemesises' including Warren and Jonathon. At this point in the narrative, which we also know is heading towards a season and series finale, we are also aware that Andrew is the 'guestage/hostage' of Buffy and of vital importance to the Season 7 story arc involving the latest Nietzschian 'ubermensch' to threaten the Buffyverse, the First. However, the fact that Andrew the TV fan is routinely portrayed as comic provokes the niggling possibility that the creators of this series can't help but construct fandom for popular culture as somehow inherently 'funny'. Is the portrayal of Andrew therefore yet another moment of ambiguity about the status of the popular in this series which both reveres and mocks those who take it seriously?

(33) In 'Storyteller', Andrew is performing the fannish endeavour of making a documentary about Buffy, Slayer of the Vam*pyrs*, as he pronounces it with the emphasis on the final syllable, thus recalling to my mind Louis Feuillade's original film *Les Vampires*, a serial in ten episodes made between 1915-167, yet another inter-textual reference for fans to play with: a reference which raises the diverting question, just when did *Les Vampires* stop being popular culture and become a film classic? Or is it both? Does the distinction even matter? Andrew is, however, portrayed primarily as a TV fan whose fantasy is to imagine himself as the host of the PBS TV series *Masterpiece Theatre* originally hosted by Alistair Cooke from 1971-1992,8 although I couldn't help thinking the more pertinent and comic reference might be to *Monsterpiece Theatre* with Alistair Cookie. This is hardly accidental, since the allusion to *Masterpiece Theatre* recalls not only Joss Whedon's own admitted undergraduate snobbery about television, but also a concept of 'quality' television which involves a restaging of the literary classics and British costume drama as a marker of high culture.9

(34) So what is going on here? Is *Buffy* having a go at fans whilst also having a go at the high culture pundits? Is Whedon mocking his former television snobbery?10 And just what kinds of televisual knowledge do we need to make sense of this teaser?

(35) Consider the stylistics of this scene which is lit and shot as if it were film. The filmic effect involves not only a masterfully executed pan, but also the kinds of saturated colour only made possible by the technological advances of the 80s, as described by Caldwell, when television began to look like film not only because it began to be shot on film, but because of the visual aesthetic of such television producers and directors as Michael Mann (*Miami Vice* 1984-1989), Steven Spielberg (*Amazing Stories* 1985-1987) and David Lynch (*Twin Peaks* 1990-1991).11 In other words, the stylistic premise of this opening scene of mock-*Masterpiece Theatre* is that 'quality' television not only restages the classics, but also looks like film. While this may be true, it is surely significant that this filmic look is the stylistic of Andrew's other fantasy sequences which include; the breakfast scene when Buffy, a half-naked Spike and Anya all appear in sensuous slow motion in a sequence somewhere between a shampoo commercial and a soft porn moment; and the scene in which Andrew imagines himself, Jonathon and Warren as Gods.12 In other words, the filmic look of the 'quality TV' a la *Masterpiece Theatre* is also being used for comic purposes here.

(36) In the final scene of this teaser, Andrew's fantasy of himself as quality TV host is rudely interrupted by Anya banging on the bathroom door and we discover that he is actually sitting on the toilet talking into a camcorder. When asked what he is up to, Andrew replies 'Entertaining and educating', a phrase which echoes the mission of a public service model of quality TV. Anya's interruption, however, returns us to the 'real world' of *Buffy*, or rather the televisual aesthetic of *Buffy* which is the 'standard' for the series, the 'standard' which we take for granted, but to which the variations in televisual style in this episode draw attention because of the nature of their difference.

(37) Take for example, the third televisual aesthetic at work in this episode, Andrew's vision through the cam-corder. In this televisual style there is an explicit foregrounding of the video technology through the on-screen framing markers, the record sign and the simulation of the kinds of jerky and unplanned hand-held camera work which marks the aesthetic of the home-made. We also get the self-conscious and amateurish direct to camera address, whether the person being addressed is figured as Andrew – holding the camera – or Andrew addressing an imagined audience of *Buffy* fans as he performs his fannish act of devotion, retelling the story *his* way with the aid of a whiteboard.[13]

(38) The televisual aesthetics of *Storyteller* thus shifts between three stylistic modes: the explicitly filmic look (which is Andrew's fantasy vision), the video look which mimics home made television, and the '*Buffy* standard'– the TV aesthetic of the series as a whole. What is interesting is that the '*Buffy* standard' can contain, mock and mimic both the filmic and the video, using each style quite precisely in order to say important things about character and plot. In other words, in *Buffy*, as we have learned over the seasons, televisual style is intrinsic to the art of storytelling. Form and content, story and discourse, production and narrative elements are all wedded in a complex television text which clearly provides a model for how television *should* be studied.

(39) Here's the plan. Firstly, as so much fan discussion has clearly demonstrated, in order to understand *Buffy*, it helps to know about the production context in which it occurs, the constraints of the networks, the economics of production, the limitations of format. Let's call this the industry and production context. Secondly, in order to grasp the complexity of *Buffy* as a text, it helps to know as much as possible about its creators, specifically Joss Whedon, but also the ways in which other writers and directors make specific creative contributions to the series as a whole. Let's call this auteurism. Thirdly, the series requires a complex understanding of how a series' narrative might work in terms of story arcs and the logic of the narrative premise. Let's call this genre and narratology. Fourthly, the series is deeply allusive in terms of high and low culture, the classical and the popular, whilst, I would argue, being nicely ambiguous about its allegiance to either. Let's call this the postmodern cultural turn. Fifthly the series demands an understanding of different televisual styles and what these might mean in specific contexts. Let's call this the televisual aesthetic and note that it has a long and complex history which deserves to be studied carefully, largely because this is where it all begins, when the viewer encounters the text, which brings me to the sixth and most overlooked of all approaches in the study of television, the aesthetics of performance.[14] The moment when the performance on screen 'moves' us in ways which we experience emotionally and viscerally in and through our bodies but find hard to put into words. And it is here that I return to the return to the original

meaning of the term *aesthesis*, which as Eagleton suggests in its Greek formulation comprised 'the whole region of human perception and sensation' (Eagleton 1990: 13). In other words, the moment when aesthetics becomes not just a discourse of the intellect, but also a discourse of the heart.

(40) And yet it would seem that the aesthetics of the television text, which matters so much in this moment of encounter with the viewer, hardly seems to figure in Television Studies. Perhaps because the concept of the aesthetic has had a bad rap in recent times, having been largely erased by what Caldwell identifies as the Cultural Studies approach which treats the text symptomatically in terms of its ideology and audience whilst largely ignoring the role of the industry and technology in shaping the moment of encounter between viewer and text.15

(41) This, I would argue is *the* critical moment in Television Studies: the moment when the history of the text and the experience of the viewer come together in a potentially productive intellectual and emotional encounter. I want to call this moment the aesthetic moment, and to suggest that as teachers and fans we can share this moment, explore it, and extend it through an exchange of knowledge and experience in which there should be no hierarchies of cultural value since all forms of knowledge (including knowledge of the classics, history and the popular) are of equal importance in the quest for understanding how meaning is produced and how texts are experienced. And it is with this moment, with this quest, that a revised notion of Television Studies should begin, since as the myriad fans of Buffy have already demonstrated, it's in this moment of shared understandings, shared knowledge and shared aesthetic experience that we all stand to learn from each other.

(42) It's time to take television and popular culture *seriously* seriously – and in a good way.

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1 While *The Journal of Popular Culture* although edited by Ray Browne of Bowling Green University commenced publication in 1967, as David Branculli points out in his book *Teleliteracy* (1992), the academic study of film was well under way in the fifties in France with the publication of *Cahiers du Cinema*. It might also be noted that the influential British film theory journal *Screen* commenced publication in 1960 in the UK.

2 These dates are taken from the Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Literature, originally published in 1939.

3 I am well aware that this is still one of the major ways in which Popular Culture, including *Buffy*, creeps into the curriculum in subjects as diverse as Linguistics and Religion in which *Buffy* stages the example from which the lesson will derive, as David Lavery has demonstrated in his paper presented at Sonic Synergies conference in Adelaide 2003.

4 Spigel reveals how the early academic study of television in the US was closely linked to the industry and that it was CBS which initially commissioned the first quarterly magazine of television criticism *The Journal of Broadcasting* in 1960,

5 Karl Schudt (2003) discusses the concept of the ubermensch in Buffy in relation to the Mayor in Season 4 of *Buffy* in James B South's edited collection of essays, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy.*

6 The patrician TV host, clad in a smoking jacket and sitting in an arm chair by an open fire is a television trope denoting high seriousness

and more which goes back to the early days of American TV – well before *Masterpiece Theatre* in 1971 (note from Robert J. Thompson)

7 It might be noted that Feuillade was the creator of one of the great screen vampires of all time – the mysterious Irma Vep as played by the actress Musidora (Thomson 1994: 238-240).

8 The host from 1992 to the present is apparently Russell Baker about whom as an Australian resident I have no knowledge whatsoever.

9 *Masterpiece Theatre* first aired on PBS in January 1971 with a 12 part series imported from the UK entitled *The First Churchills.* In the first year of broadcast it also *screened, The Spoils of Poynton, Pere Goriot, Jude the Obscure, The Gambler* and *Ressurrection.* Hosted by Alister Cooke from 1971-1992 and Russell Baker from 1992 to the present at time of writing. Source www.dmoz.org

10 Although the writer of this episode is Jane Espenson, I am assuming Whedon as the author of the series as a whole – who would have input into the scripts. At the very least, once could say that the writers he gathered around him for this series were like minded and like educated others who probably shared the same cultural values and tastes.

11 I have chosen only three figures here from Caldwell's list of creators which also included Steve Bochco and Stephen J. Cannell, largely because I want to emphasise those creators who have also made significant names for themselves as creators of film.

12 Another fantasy moment occurs in flashback when Andrew recalls a moment when he imagined himself, Jonathon and Warren as gods, cavorting in togas on an Elysian Field.

13 The Ancient Greeks had a name for this kind of aesthetic endeavour, ekphrasis, which Lesley Stern and George Kouvaris (1999) gloss as a desire to transform the lived experience of a work of art into a description couched in words.

14 I have endeavoured to write about the aesthetics of performance elsewhere in an essay on James Marsters as Spike (Turnbull 2004)

15 Which was why I was so amused by the article in *The Irish Times* reporting on the recent Quality Television conference in Dublin. While the academics at the conference appeared keen to focus on issues of aesthetics, this was not what the press though they ought to be doing: 'What was perhaps most troubling about the conference to me was the emphasis in many papers on the aesthetic and formal qualities of the programmes discussed, often at the expense of any consideration of their content, and the ways they might play into real-life relations of power and politics'.

Credit Sequence

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