Vivien Burr

Buffy vs the BBC: Moral Questions and How to Avoid Them

[1] *Buffy* viewers will not be surprised that the BBC has regularly edited the show for its 6.45pm transmission in the UK. Cuts have routinely been made to scary, gruesome, sexual or violent material, reflecting a variety of concerns about the potential impact of such material on the audience. This editing has been of understandable interest to regular viewers and fans, who have been vociferous in their complaints that editing disrupts the narrative, affects character development and generally does not respect the artistic intentions of the writers. On the positive side, as pointed out in their essay "Vampire Hunters: the scheduling and reception *of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* in the UK" by Annette Hill and Ian Calcutt (2001), such complaints eventually led to a Friday late night unedited repeat broadcast of *Buffy*. Of course *Buffy* is not the only show to suffer in this way nor is the BBC the only culprit.. It may be argued that the potential popularity of *Angel* was limited by the cuts made by Channel 4 when this show was transmitted at 6pm, and both *Buffy* and *Angel* have been cut, although not as severely, by Sky.

[2] In this paper I will focus on the editing of sexual and violent material in Season 6, and in particular on the extensively edited "Dead Things" (6013). I am not going to discus the reasons why such cuts are made; public opinion, censorship laws, and their interpretation all play a part. Cuts to different episodes are, in any case, often inconsistent, so that material that is allowed in one is excised from another. It would be difficult, therefore, to try to discern a consistent pattern that might suggest a clear position on what is seen as acceptable and unacceptable even in the eyes of the BBC. Instead, my concern will be with the implications of such editing for the moral agency of the viewer. The portrayal of sex and sexuality in *Buffy* has of course already received a great deal of attention from fans, particularly with respect to the handling of the lesbian relationship between Willow and Tara, and to the BBC's cuts to scenes between them or that refer to the sexual nature of their relationship. Although I will not directly address the portrayal of the Willow/Tara relationship here, the argument I will make can also be applied to this.

[3] From "Once More With Feeling" (6007) through to "As You Were" (6015) we see the development and decline of a sexual relationship between Buffy and Spike. From the outset, in the final scene of "Once More With Feeling", this is a relationship initiated by Buffy (though desired by Spike since early in season 5). In "Smashed" (6009) their relationship is unromantically consummated in a derelict building at the culmination of a vicious fight between them. Elsewhere (Burr, 2003) I have analysed the relationship between sexuality, love and hatred exemplified here, but for the purposes of this paper I want to focus on Buffy's sexual agency. In the edited final scene of this episode, Buffy throws Spike against a wall and kisses him. As she lifts herself up onto his body, we fade to the credits. What we do not see is Buffy quite clearly initiating sex in a very direct way, unzipping Spike's pants (this is heard rather than seen) and lowering herself onto him. The act of sex that follows is brief, almost brutally physical, and without joy. Viewers of the edited version, while they may guess that sex took place, are not faced with some potentially uncomfortable questions. Buffy is in our minds a "good" girl—do good girls take the lead in sexual encounters? How do we feel about her unashamedly direct approach? We cannot tell ourselves that things later "went a bit too far," that Buffy got carried away on a tide of passion. Sex with Spike appears more like a commodity she needs and takes. Is that ok? Do we have to love someone to have sex with them? These are questions that have no easy answers and have been given a good deal of airing on discussion lists by people fortunate enough to have seen the unedited version.

[4] The sexual relationship between Buffy and Spike is developed in the next few episodes. At the beginning of "Wrecked" (6010) we find them waking, naked, the morning after their encounter in "Smashed." Although the fact of their sexual encounter will now be clear to even a young audience, the nature of this sexuality continues to be subtly concealed. Buffy, bewildered, asks "Wh-when did the building fall down?" Spike replies "I dunno—sometime between the first time and the…," but this is cut. It is not the fact of their having sex at all, which is quite evident from the beginning of the scene, that is concealed here; rather, it is the fact that they apparently did it several times. The sense of neediness and of sexual appetite that this brief dialogue represents is denied. Moments later, further evidence of the nature of this sexuality is cut. Buffy bridles at Spike's addressing her as "love." "Don't call me love," she says, to which Spike replies "You didn't seem to take issue with that last night" but the rest of his line is cut: "…or any of the other little nasties we whispered." His words endorse what has already been suggested in "Smashed": that their sexual relationship entails conflictual feelings, and that their attraction to each other is infused with a desire to hurt.

[5] In "Gone" (6011) we are again denied access to a brief moment of Buffy's sexual agency. Xander enters Spike's basement, to find him naked in bed and (the viewer realises) having sex with the invisible Buffy. This more explicit material is, not surprisingly, cut. But the final moments of this scene are also edited out. Buffy, reluctant to give up the power that her invisibility has lent her, attempts to arouse Spike once more as he looks down at her (out of frame) saying "Hey, that's cheating." The scene is played for laughs, a way of gently leading us to the conclusion that invisible Buffy is performing fellatio.

[6] The brute physicality and "wantonness" of their relationship, briefly featured in "Doublemeat Palace" (6012) and is of course cut, opens the next episode, "Dead Things." In the teaser, the camera pans across the downstairs of Spike's crypt. We hear the sounds of what could be a fight—furniture being smashed, gasps and groans. In the unedited version, the camera finds Buffy and Spike immediately post coitus. They appear exhausted from their activity, which seems to have left them lying on the floor among a disorderly pile of rugs. Buffy endorses our assumption: "We missed the bed again." "Lucky for the bed" Spike replies. Our imagination immediately conjures a vision of super-powered sex between Buffy and Spike in this love-hate relationship: animated, spontaneous, violent,

lusty and enjoyed with abandon. However, the edited version takes us from the "noises off" directly to the next part of the scene. In a much more cosy, reflective moment, Buffy comments upon Spike's efforts to make his crypt more comfortable, and a comment now rather more inexplicably delivered from her position, naked, beneath the rugs. All but the youngest members of the audience must conclude that Buffy and Spike have been having sex again. But the nature of this sexuality is concealed, and this concealment continues through further extensive cuts to the dialogue:

> [7] CUT
> Spike: You were amazing…the things you do, the way you make it hurt in all the wrong places.
> Buffy: You got the job done yourself.
> Spike: I was just trying to keep up. I've never been with such an animal.
> Buffy: I'm not an animal.
> Spike: You wanna see the bite marks?
> END CUT
> And a few moments later:
> Spike: Do you even like me?
> Buffy: Sometimes
> CUT
> Spike: But you like what I do to you? HOLDS OUT A PAIR OF HANDCUFFS Do you trust me?
> Buffy: Never.
> END CUT

[8] This exchange tells us a lot: that Buffy is, sexually, giving Spike a run for his money, that she is open to and adept in the art of combining pleasure with pain, and that she regards his sexual attentions as a "service" to her. Again, this material poses difficult questions for the viewer. Is it ok, especially for a woman, to enjoy sex for its own sake, to avoid embedding it within a relationship with a broader compass? Is it ok for her to be sexually demanding, to be adventurous? Is it ok to enjoy hurting and being hurt during sex? The fact that it is Buffy doing these things, a character for whom we otherwise have immense respect and sympathy, makes our answer to these questions into a dilemma rather than a forgone conclusion. We are forced to wrestle with questions that make us uneasy. "Dead Things" concludes with Buffy confessing to Tara: "Why do I let Spike do these things to me?" Tara responds with "Oh" then a second later, with some discomfort, "Oh, really" as she fully realises Buffy's meaning. This latter part of Tara's response is cut, lest the audience should realise too.

[9] The editing of violence in "Dead Things" is perhaps of even more concern. This applies to two scenes in particular, and the first of these is the death of Katrina. I say "death" and not "murder" since the cuts make the manner of her demise ambiguous. The editing begins at the point when Katrina, under the influence of Warren's "cerebral dampener," accompanies him into the bedroom, kissing him and professing her love for him. It is clear from the previous dialogue between Warren, Jonathan, and Andrew that their plan is to use Katrina as a sex toy, each taking his turn with her. As Warren says "On your knees, baby," Katrina luckily emerges from the influence and she lays into him, angrily pointing out to the trio, and the audience, that this is no game; it is attempted rape. Until this point in the season, the antics of the Troika can be regarded as rather lame but humour-worthy attempts to be the Big Bad. But Katrina's speech arrests our laughter. The routine and invisible violation of women's bodies and personal space by men who are only "having a bit of fun" becomes suddenly available for our consideration—and it appears abhorrent. However, Katrina's accusation of rape is cut, and the power of this scene to question our assumptions is lost. Katrina is simply cross that she has been duped by her ex-boyfriend into playing embarrassing games.

[10] As Katrina tries to leave, Warren pulls her back. She scratches him in the face, and in his determination to restrain her he reaches for an empty bottle and brings it down on her head, killing her. But Warren's murder of Katrina is cut, creating the appearance that she has somehow accidentally died during the struggle. However, this is not just the editing of a scene the violence of which, it could be argued, might be too visually shocking. Later in the episode, after Jonathan has successfully convinced Buffy that she is the one who has killed Katrina, he rejoins Warren and Andrew. They talk about what to do with the rest of the evening and Jonathan, who is visibly disturbed by what they have jointly done, says with irony unnoticed by the others "The night is young—there must be some more girls we can kill." These words are cut. When Warren discovers that Katrina's death has been recorded as a suicide, Andrew says "We really got away with murder—that's kinda cool." His words are cut too. The murder itself is therefore effectively excised from the script. Season 6 presents a complex moral picture with plenty of grey areas. We are posed some difficult questions. If a human being with a soul is a better person than a vampire without one, what if the vampire commits good acts and the human evil ones? Is being evil about what you are or what you do? If vampires and demons deserve to die because of their evil deeds, does this apply to humans who commit equally evil acts? Are the acts of Warren and Willow comparable? Once again, the erasing of Katrina's murder leaves us a little more cosy, without the need to seriously address these questions.

[11] The second scene of violence is Buffy's merciless beating of Spike as he tries to stop her from turning herself in to the police. In the full version of this scene, Buffy becomes incensed by Spike's defence of her and she fights him off, determined to "do the right thing." But as the powerful dream sequence in the middle of the episode (also cut) testifies, Buffy cannot distinguish herself from other "dead things"—Katrina's body and the undead Spike. As Spike shows up the moral grey areas even further, by arguing that "one dead girl doesn't tip the balance," Buffy tears into him, relentlessly beating him and crying "You don't have a soul. There is nothing good or clean in you. You can't feel anything real." We see that she is really expressing her own self-loathing and that her torrent of blows upon Spike is a punishment she feels she deserves (for an extended discussion of Buffy's self-loathing, see Rhonda V. Wilcox "'Every Night I SaveYou': Buffy, Spike, Sex and Redemption").This is a disturbing scene which in no way glorifies violence; rather, we are repulsed by its savagery. But the cuts to this scene (all but the final blow of Spike's beating,

and its accompanying dialogue) take away the possibility of drawing this meaning. We see only that Buffy will not listen to Spike's pleas, and that she puts a stop to them by apparently hitting him so hard that he cannot get up. We see only one physically powerful person silencing another through the use of force.

[12] My argument is not simply that this editing is wrong because it fails, for example, to positively represent the diversity of common sexual practices (and of course it does), or denies women's sexual agency (it does this too) but that it robs us of a precious opportunity to engage in a dialogue with ourselves about what we think is right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable. It is part of our moral education. TV is as important as real experience in this respect; perhaps more so since many of us will never experience at first hand some of the life events that raise ethical and moral issues upon which a person should take a view. Contemporary soaps (for example *Eastenders* in the UK) have recognised this, and have perhaps done more than any advertising campaign to raise awareness and encourage discussion of a range of issues such as HIV, alcoholism and domestic violence (and they have also drawn fire from moral crusaders for this). One of the things that is of great value in *Buffy*'s storylines is that they engage people in debate, and this is especially so where those storylines can be seen as controversial. If we are presented with sexual and violent material in a manner that allows us to respond to it with our habitual assumptions, if we are given no dilemmas or hard questions with which to wrestle, we cannot develop our own values. More importantly, we cannot question them.

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