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# Anti-Imperialism in the Buffy-verse: Challenging the Mythos of Bush as Vampire Slayer

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## **Anti-Imperialism in the Buffyverse**

### **Challenging the Mythos of Bush as Vampire Slayer**

**Samuel A. Chambers and Daniel Williford**

*Poroi*, 3, 2, December, 2004



She's a hero, you see. She's not like us.  
— Rupert Giles, "The Gift"

- 1 On questions of foreign policy (and sometimes domestic policy as well) the Bush administration since 9/11 has conveyed to the American public – and often brandished to the broader international community – one central underlying message: moral certainty. In the face of the shattering uncertainty produced by the tragic, graphic, and profound attacks on American soil, the need for clarity, for black and white distinctions, grew paramount. In addition to the shock, fear, and sadness elicited by watching the events of 9/11, almost all Americans, along with large numbers of people throughout the world, truly felt a specific sort of moral clarity: that the tragedies of 9/11 were *wrong*.
- 2 It was this certainty that produced the overwhelming feeling of “unity” in America, cited by so many Americans and by so many foreigners who visited the states in those days. Such firmness of conviction may also have played a role in the hate-crimes perpetrated against Arab-Americans and in less consequential events like the controversy over Bill Maher daring to question the President’s charge that the terrorists were “cowards.” But as the horror of 9/11 began to recede into the past, many Americans – and most of the rest of the world’s citizens – realized that the events leading up to the terrorist attacks were complicated. While there could be no underlying causal factor such as globalization, there also could be no such determining cause to be found “good versus evil” or “those who love freedom” versus “those who hate those who love freedom.”<sup>1</sup>
- 3 Since 9/11, and for the United States invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration has categorized various entities – al Qaeda, the Taliban, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, and other anti-US countries – as

terrorists who oppose freedom, democracy, and the people of the United States.<sup>2</sup> The rhetoric of Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and President Bush has been one of moral righteousness: reducing the attacks on 9/11 and the UN's trouble with Saddam Hussein to a fight between good and evil. In his State of the Union address in January 2004, Bush asserted that "the enemies of freedom will do all in their power to spread violence and fear." Later he said that, "because of American leadership and resolve, the world is changing for the better." Such an approach leaves little room for criticism; and it makes America's aggressive actions with Iraq appear as the obvious, if not the *only*, response.

- 4 In "Cowboys or Vampire Killers ?" John Nelson offers a penetrating analysis of American foreign policy read through, and woven into, the mythos of vampires and demons – a reading that helps to elucidate this overarching political strategy.<sup>3</sup> Citing well-known horror tales of Dracula and more minor vampires, Nelson effectively illustrates how demonizing political enemies recasts America's vulnerable and uncertain post-9/11 position into the familiar tale of heroes who hunt and destroy supernatural villains. Vampire killers are humans who kill demons; Americans are freedom-loving democrats who help to liberate those who are oppressed, while smoking out terrorists and ousting dictators. They need a superhero in this brave venture, and the courageous, plain-spoken loner, Bush, does the job quite nicely. Rather than the mythos of the cowboy, which Bush calls upon directly and self-consciously, Nelson argues that the superhero embodied is in fact a vampire killer. Consider how, in the latest State of the Union address, Bush describes the situation in Iraq: "Men who ran away from our troops in battle are now dispersed and attack from the shadows . . . . Thousands of very skilled and determined military personnel are on a manhunt, going after the remaining killers who hide in cities and caves and, one by one, we will bring the terrorists to justice." Compare the voice of Dr. Van Helsing talking about the enemy Dracula in Bram Stoker's famous novel: "Thus are we ministers of God's own wish: that the world, and men for whom His Son die, will not be given over to monsters, whose very existence would defame Him."<sup>4</sup> Nelson shows most compellingly, then, how the mythos of the vampire killer gets at the imperialist project that is American foreign policy since the unilateral war in Iraq – if not going back to Afghanistan, or all the way to 9/11.
- 5 In the context of Nelson's argument, we offer a potential antidote. We do so not by suggesting alternative foreign policy prescriptions. The options there abound and have been raised by

thinkers far wiser than we in matters of foreign affairs. Instead we challenge the mythos itself, to ask after the political effects produced by the construction of an alternative mythos. Still filled with demons and the champions who slay them, it is ordered quite differently. As Nelson makes clear, his analysis focuses on two sources for the vampire mythos.<sup>5</sup> He excludes a recent, extremely popular contribution, namely, the “buffyverse.” This is an awkward and half-joking formulation that goes to the core of the vision of Joss Whedon, the creator and executive producer *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. This television series, recently concluded, rearticulates the vampire mythos. Thus the buffyverse is a discursive construction produced by seven seasons of *Buffy* and five of *Angel* (a series that spun off from *Buffy* after its third season) as well as the interactions among their writers, producers, directors, and fans.

- 6 Our goal is not the same as Nelson’s. Rather than try to type the mythic *figures* that Bush and his crew seek to inhabit, a project Nelson carries out quite gracefully, we delineate what sort of mythic *universe* they seek to populate.<sup>6</sup> What is most troubling about the mythos as it informs, explains, justifies, and legitimates the foreign policy of the Bush administration is not that Bush, Cheney, *et al.* are vampire killers but that they are vampire killers within the wrong mythos: they are vampire *killers* in a world better navigated by vampire *slayers*. By reading the buffyverse for its construction of a specific political and moral realm, we mean to challenge the comfort that our political leaders find in taking up the mythos they do. To put this bluntly, Bush might make a good vampire killer à la Blade, but he would not have the honor of holding Buffy’s stake. The buffyverse helps us evaluate Bush not just as a vampire killer but as a President.<sup>7</sup>

### **Resignifying the Genre**

- 7 The horror genre is all about giving form and shape to the dark forces that lure people away from purity and moral righteousness.<sup>8</sup> Written from within the context of Judeo-Christian moral codes, stories of evil vampires spring from and reinforce them.<sup>9</sup> The vampire figure proves particularly potent because its form is the most human. Furthermore its *modus operandi* tends to be exceptionally deceptive and particularly sexual. Once human, vampires are without a soul. Since sunlight would destroy them, they walk the night in human form, attacking from the shadows. While they feed on the blood of living humans,

vampires are dead already and thus defy conventional methods of killing. Nelson observes that, after 9/11, Bush “vowed a ‘crusade’ against terrorism. In that missionary spirit, his administration regards the Americans abroad from Afghanistan to Africa as ‘paladins of democracy.’” He argues that Bush’s approach comes from spiritual zeal, “confronting Evil with the force of his personal convictions.”<sup>10</sup> Mythically Bush becomes the “super-powered vampire killer.” His rhetorical depiction of Saddam Hussein likens Saddam to the demon who “sucked his people dry and threatened the apocalyptic destruction of others.”<sup>11</sup> Now we can elaborate Nelson’s argument by observing how the media focused on Saddam Hussein hiding in a tiny “hole” six feet below ground. The story plays directly into the fantasy that Saddam sleeps Dracula style: undead in a coffin during the day, presumably to plot and attack in the dark of night.<sup>12</sup> Bush’s moral convictions, bolstered by his image as the killer of vampires, become his most powerful justification for war with Iraq.<sup>13</sup>

- 8 The familiar monsters that haunt the shadows and caves in the buffyverse do not often provide the slayer and her friends with such a certain justification. Whedon has mentioned numerous times that at the thematic heart of his mission for *Buffy* lies an attempt to reverse, rework, or undo a number of traditional tropes in the horror genre. So it should come as no surprise that his vision of vampires and their killers diverges from the tradition Nelson details.<sup>14</sup> Whedon’s favorite target, cited in numerous interviews, is the recurring cliché of the blonde girl who wanders naïvely into a dark alley, to find herself suddenly (though not unexpectedly, at least for the viewers) attacked by a vicious creature.<sup>15</sup> Much toner has been spent describing Whedon’s vision, motivations, and intentions; but he might summarize it best: Whedon wants that blonde girl to kick some ass.
- 9 Buffy Summers – a fashion-conscious, LA-valley, blonde, high-school teenager – finds herself unexpectedly in the role of ass-kicker. She is the reluctant heroine whose very calling is to slay vampires and demons. Conveniently she moves to Sunnydale, CA, which just happens to be located on a hellmouth. On this basis, Whedon looks for reversals – twists, turns, and redirections – in every place he can find them. Thus he opens the pilot episode of *Buffy* with a different blonde girl who, along with a cute-but-dangerous-looking boy, we see crawling late at night through a locked window and into the local high school. As they wander the halls together, he becomes more aggressively amorous, and the music becomes more ominous. The viewer is certain that two

things might happen: a monster might jump out at them, or the boy might turn out to *be* the monster. Instead the *girl* turns, smiles to herself, morphs into a vampire, and drinks the boy's blood.<sup>16</sup>

- 10 Whedon's efforts to resignify go well beyond the level of genre, and those efforts become particularly conspicuous when one reads the buffyverse as a whole mythos – with its own rules, its own inertia, its own gravity.<sup>17</sup> If the imperialism of American foreign policy rests in some significant if not necessarily direct way on a specific mythos – of right versus wrong, freedom versus terror, bad guys versus good guys – that promotes moral clarity and certainty, the buffyverse as alternative mythical construction can become a counterweight. It can cut across the earlier mythos and, at least indirectly, undermine the political imperialism implicated by it.
- 11 Yet such an argument cannot simply displace, let alone replace, the ethos of certainty in foreign policy by the Bush administration or in the vampire-killing mythos that Nelson details. It cannot merely substitute a world marked by ambiguities and shades of gray: a so-called postmodern world of amoralism.<sup>18</sup> Far from it. The mythos of the buffyverse goes back to the first slayer who was called to kill demons and vampires. Even beyond that, it traces to "The First," a name used to describe an originary evil. In the buffyverse, vampires, demons, and a whole host of other non-humans *do* exist; and most of the time, they *do* seek to destroy human life. The destiny of our heroine, Buffy, lies in the mission to slay vampires. Much like the mythos that Nelson details, therefore, the foundation of the buffyverse is built *with* (though not necessarily *on*) a central dichotomy between humans and demons.
- 12 The dichotomy, however, never offers Buffy simple moral clarity. Starting with just the brief first season, Buffy's biggest ally in her quest to kill the "master" vampire is a mysterious, dark, and handsome stranger named Angel. He appears randomly, often out of nowhere and usually emerging from the dark. From their first meeting, nonetheless, Angel makes it clear to Buffy that he is on her side. He always seems to have just the right, helpful information – even if Buffy never feels quite certain that she can trust him. It grows clear that Buffy and Angel are more and more eager for their encounters. Beyond their respective roles in fighting the forces of evil, they fall for one another as well. Only then does Buffy discover his secret: Angel is a vampire.

- 13 How can this be possible? Aren't vampires simply demons? Not quite. In the buffyverse, a vampire is a demon who has taken over the body of a human. Thus vampires are not pure demons, but soulless human bodies with demons inside. Vampires have all sorts of character traits, abilities, desires, quirks, and needs that come from their humanity. According to the *Buffy* mythos, pure demons, which rarely appear in our world, seek only to kill. If pure demons were to walk the earth continually, they would destroy all human life and turn this world into yet another hell dimension. Vampires and the other sorts of demons that come to Buffy's town of Sunnydale or walk the streets of Angel's Los Angeles like to eat, play, scheme, torture, and sometimes even love.
- 14 On rare occasion, vampires can have souls. Angel was cursed by gypsies who restored his soul to him so that he might suffer endless guilt for the hundreds of humans he maimed and killed. (Angel had been a particularly vile and vicious vampire.) In an utterly Sisyphean effort to repay his debt to humankind, Angel has taken up the cause of the slayer: to fight evil or, as the slogan emerges when he gets his own show, "to help the helpless." If the complications ended there, we might reconcile a Manichean world of good against evil with an Angel. He could be the exception that proves the rule, but that is too tidy for Whedon. As *Buffy* progresses, we discover that some demons, even those without souls, do not care for harming human beings. They have assimilated into human society: they love poker games, soap operas, and snack chips. Many even find reprehensible the destruction caused by "their kind," and they help the forces of good when asked.<sup>19</sup>
- 15 In fact, *Buffy* explodes any purity of evil that might be attributed to the demon world. Over the seven seasons, we witness allusions to hundreds of races, dozens of various hell dimensions, and an intricate "demon history" – in addition to the varied individuals and groups of demons who appear as specific villains on the show. We learn that those who appear in human form are not always what they seem, and we discover that obvious demons are not always simply "evil." Evil acts almost always are motivated not by some pure evil in itself but by emotions and experiences familiar to viewers. Humanizing "evil" characters sets the buffyverse apart.
- 16 Humans in the buffyverse enact complex and subtle relationships to the world, demons, and each other. *Buffy* has its own Dracula story in season 5, when Buffy meets Dracula himself. Again, however, the drama is not some ultimate battle between the slayer



and her mightiest foe. Theirs is not a great clash between good and evil, nor an apocalypse-averting finale, but a stage-setting premiere for the season. Buffy does not *slay* Dracula; he *seduces* her.<sup>20</sup> The physical seduction allegorizes Buffy's flirtation with evil and spurs her to explore her dark side. The powers of the slayer tie her primordially to evil forces. Buffy's journey into her own darkness does not conclude with an ultimate victory over evil; it ends with her death in the fifth season's conclusion. (The season that might have been *Buffy's* last.) It teaches Buffy that, to fight in the (under)world to which most day-walkers remain oblivious, she must become a part of that dark realm by accepting her own "otherness" as the Slayer.

### Going It Alone

- 17 The mythology of the Vampire Slayer within the buffyverse seems, at first, to parallel the metaphor of Bush-as-vampire killer that Nelson proposes. The slayer is chosen by destiny – "unto every generation a slayer is born" – and is endowed with unusual physical strength and recuperative power. Once the slayer has been killed, a new one is "called" immediately into service as a slayer by receiving superpowers and being contacted by her "watcher." The men and women of the *Watchers' Council* are responsible for training and guiding the slayer. Nelson notes that the character of the vampire killer, aligned with Bush, has a "mentor," a trajectory of "destiny," and a plot of romance. All these hold for Buffy. They seem at first to hold for George W. Bush too. Endowed with the powers of extraordinary status, mentored by his father, virtually destined to become President, Bush fits the slayer's form.
- 18 To add to this, the Council is a stuffy and traditional guiding body placed overseas. It has responsibility for protecting and transmitting huge bodies of knowledge on demons, magic, and alternate universes. It performs the thoroughly conservative task of preserving the customs of watchers and slayers. Buffy, unsurprisingly, proves to be unusually rebellious. She continually flouts the Council's high-minded standards. She troubles it with her independence and highly unorthodox methods. Her watcher, Giles, lets this pass most of the time because she is unusually sensitive and intelligent. Buffy eventually breaks from the Council entirely because she insists on doing things her own way.<sup>21</sup> There is an obvious resemblance to Bush's relationship with the United Nations. His defiance of the U.N. and his unilateral approach to



the “war on terrorism” match Buffy’s recurring sense that, in times of crisis, she would rather follow her instincts than the directions of the Council. Bush the vampire slayer, indeed.

- 19 *Buffy* repeatedly explores a third set of themes common to Americans in the world after the Cold War: the loneliness, responsibility, and danger in being the sole superpower. Buffy’s calling will always isolate her from others, but she often actively rejects help from her friends so that she can go it alone. Even when she works with them, she always knows that she ultimately carries the key burden. This theme has been made painfully explicit in recent American foreign policy, when Bush eschewed cooperating with the U.N. in favor of his “with us or against us” approach.
- 20 To take Bush as a slayer, then, can make sense in a whole host of registers. But the parallels end abruptly, and they turn out to be utterly superficial. A closer reading of the *Buffy* mythos suggests that, within its terms, the Bush administration is less a league of vampire slayers than a conclave of conservatives who lack foresight. Within the moral terms of the buffyverse, the administration of Bush, Cheney, Rice, Rumsfeld, and Rove parallels the Watchers’ Council. In both the Bush White House and the Council of Watchers, people close their eyes to the world around them and rely on reductive declarations about the fight between good and evil. Buffy, by contrast, faces the world squarely. She makes difficult and defensible choices without the aid of an unduly fixed moral compass. Buffy’s break from the Council results not from her faith that she knows some higher truth, but from her experience that the Council has hypostatized its own simple categories. The Council sees the slayer as its army against evil, leaving Council members with no need or desire to know (much less help) their enemies. The Council has no particular attachment to any one slayer; for the Council, the slayer is scarcely a person. She is a role, an office, a position filled instantly by the next chosen one when a slayer dies. (The life expectancy of a slayer is very short.) The Council bases its power on the constant of the slayer, who always exists even when one embodiment or another is killed.
- 21 The character of Kendra illustrates these points. She is the vampire slayer called when Buffy dies during the finale for season 1. Soon Buffy revives; and since then, two slayers exist at once – an unprecedented situation. Sent to Sunnydale to “do her duty” and kill vampires, Kendra embodies the traditional slayer that the

Council expects. She excels in combative arts and demonology. Isolated from family and friends at a young age in order to live and work exclusively with her watcher, Kendra is a marine-like vampire-killing machine, a textbook example of the slayer-in-waiting. As such, she is ready immediately to defeat the enemy. Her first day in Sunnydale, she tries to kill Angel. When introduced to Buffy and Giles, Kendra finds their relationship with Angel just one of many inconceivable things. Once Buffy's friends (whom fans *and* characters often name ironically as the "Scooby Gang") all start to show up, Kendra is shocked to learn that these ordinary people know of Buffy's as a slayer, that Giles allows this, and that they help her to fight. Kendra follows strictly the guidelines set forth in the *Slayer Handbook*, and she takes such peripheral, emotional relationships to "distract from [her] calling." For her, emotions are simply a weakness.<sup>22</sup> Kendra knows her subordinate role in working for the Council; and she makes it clear, even to her enemies: "You can't stop me. Even if you kill me, another slayer will be sent to take my place!"<sup>23</sup> Buffy never invokes such logic, perhaps to the consternation of the Council.

- 22 In season 5, the Watcher's Council returns to Sunnydale to test rigorously Buffy's compliance with its standards for a slayer. (It had testes Buffy and Giles initially in season 2.) Just like the "Bush Council," no members of the Watchers' Council can be found on the ground fighting.<sup>24</sup> Like the White House, however, the Watchers have enormous resources, which they attempt to use to reassert authority over the slayer. Their arrival could not come at a worse time for Buffy: she is locked in season-long battle with, not just a demon, but a god – a hellgod named Glory. Only the Council knows that Glory is a god, and it tries to use the information along with its ability to deport Giles to force Buffy to work *for* the Council once again. Buffy protests the inanity of Council examinations of her methods, provoking the delegation's head to give himself away: "I think your Watcher hasn't reminded you lately of the resolute status of the players in our little game. The Council fights evil. The Slayer is the instrument by which we fight. The Council remains; the Slayers change. It's been that way from the beginning." On a traditional platform of good versus evil, the Council would train and deploy its one-woman "army" simply to kill vampires and demons. But Buffy reverses the traditional powers when she dismisses the Council's game, pointing out that, without her, it is impotent.<sup>25</sup> The Council of vampire killers may be a comfortable fit for Bush and his gang, but in the tumultuous space where the hellmouth and humanity collide and coexist, these

traditionalists prove nearly powerless. Like Kendra, the Council members might find new faith and power in themselves, but they can manage this only in abandoning the categorical clarity of the old morality.

### **Daring to Be Bad**

- 23 Kendra eventually dies at the hands of a powerful vampire, and next chosen by destiny to be slayer is Faith. The character of Faith highlights the complexity of the moral universe that a slayer inhabits and helps clarify how Buffy navigates that world. Faith is a leather-wearing, school-skipping, tough-girl slayer who joins Buffy and her friends at Sunnydale at a time when facing the forces of evil requires two slayers in town. Like Buffy, Faith has extraordinary powers; and the two are nearly unbeatable as a team. Early on, however, Faith rebels against aspects of her duty as Slayer. She also comments on the intoxicating sense of power she feels as a semi-super-hero.<sup>26</sup> As the season progresses, Faith continues to distance herself from Buffy. Finally, after she accidentally stakes a human, Faith tries to turn the others against Buffy. When this fails, Faith turns to “evil” by conspiring with the mayor of Sunnydale. He is a demon in disguise who plans an apocalyptic unveiling for the high-school graduation ceremony of Buffy and her friends.<sup>27</sup> When the gang tries to “save” Faith, she pushes them even further away, revealing a complex psychological motivation for her apparent turn to the dark side. Once established as an enemy, Faith becomes the great opponent of Buffy, and the stage is set for a great slayer-versus- slayer battle. The fight is between two powerful humans who are all too equally matched.
- 24 The story of Faith highlights how the series portrays “good” and “bad” as uncertain and unstable. Faith’s relationship with the Mayor shows not only their proclivity for diabolical action but also their humanity. In spite of the Mayor’s willingness to destroy the world so that he can ascend as a demon, he truly loves Faith. He loves her as a father would, he protects her with his own life, and he offers her a human relation like none she has ever experienced. He and Faith are touched by each other’s devotion – even as this seems to reinforce their violent, self-serving convictions.
- 25 The same might be said for the many Americans involved in the abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib prison. The psychological, sexual, and physical abuses of prisoners at Abu Ghraib are just one way in which the Bush justification for war in Iraq as a need for “the good

guys” to obliterate “evil” has been undermined by awkward realities. Those at fault for the prisoner abuse include dozens of soldiers, civilian contract employees, and high-ranking military personnel. The train of responsibility arguably reaches all the way up to Donald Rumsfeld and George Bush themselves, for they failed to end the abuse or fault any commanding officials. Faith chooses “evil,” whereas those who perpetrated violence on prisoners at Abu Ghraib did so because they did not view them as worthy of humane treatment. Both parties supposedly operate in a world marked by clearly defined conceptions of good and evil, in which they can see themselves as only one or the other. The media have dealt with this scandal by concluding that the individuals involved are “morally corrupt.” Within the Bush-verse, however, their perverse and disastrous action might be said to spring from a sense of moral certainty in their position as “good guys.”<sup>28</sup> Moral clarity, as much as moral corruption, can encourage the abuse. Of course, this might hold also for the war as a whole.

- 26 Though she proves a powerful and at times ruthless enemy of Buffy’s, the show makes clear that Faith is not evil in any simple sense. Her failures are human: insecurity, distrust of others, even self-loathing. Faith resists those who would get close to her emotionally, and she becomes corrupted by her immense power as a slayer – eventually seeing herself above the law. Greg Forster notes that Faith illustrates the human struggle in choosing between good and evil.<sup>29</sup> He compares her ethical approach to Plato’s *eudaimonism*. Hers is an ethics of fulfillment from actions that produce happiness, which for Plato means actions that are just. Forster shows that Faith mistakes evils for goods when her bad acts provide pleasure. When she and Buffy switch bodies, Faith again feels the effects of living a just life. Forster rejects the notion that living a morally good life involves a resolute moral certainty. He argues instead that moral life involves complicating factors of “confusion, self-deception, or indecision.”<sup>30</sup> But Faith tries to escape this moral complexity in a life of pure pleasure and defiance.
- 27 Buffy does not always make the most just choices. Still in comparison with Faith, Buffy does what she feels is morally just and resolutely rejects the idea of taking advantage of her special powers for selfish gains. These differences appear throughout season 3 and especially in the turning point for their relationship. Faith accidentally stakes an “innocent” human bystander, one who was not a good guy but not evil either. The next morning, Buffy

comes to Faith's dank and dirty hotel room. Buffy insists that Faith tell the authorities; Faith dismisses her. Buffy says they'll eventually find the body; Faith explains, "there is no body," (Faith has disposed of it). Finally Buffy's desperation at the situation mounts, and she exclaims: "Faith, you don't get it, you killed a man!" Faith smiles as she responds: "No B., you don't get it; *I don't care!*" A similar disconnect could characterize some of the American soldiers working at Abu Ghraib prison. Some perpetrated acts that may have seemed reasonable to them yet outraged most other people when revealed in the press.

- 28 Buffy's knowledge that the world is not black-and-white never leads her to abandon a vital sense of right and wrong. The buffyverse is not a world of anything-goes relativism, nor is it a space of pure power and pleasure. Faith wants it to be a world of power and pleasure, but Buffy proves her wrong. Eventually she is able to kill the mayor and put Faith into a coma by stabbing her with the knife that the Mayor had given Faith: the symbol of their family love. Yet Buffy never lets her belief in right and wrong become a rigid dichotomy between good and evil. Though only a teenager when the show begins, Buffy continually finds herself extraordinarily responsible for others, and she learns to be extraordinarily responsive to them. On the surface, the buffyverse seems to be chronically violent, with Buffy and Angel always fighting, "killing," slaying. Because good and evil are not always clearly defined, especially in the stark visual terms of other horror myths, many viewers grapple with the justice of the violence, which the show is not always consistent or straightforward in presenting.
- 29 Mimi Marinucci notes that Buffy does not act according to a moral code that says "only harm demons and vampires, never humans."<sup>31</sup> Instead she evaluates the "Propensity to commit evil willingly."<sup>32</sup> Hence Buffy often ignores demons, and she often fights (though never kills) humans. In season 4, Buffy accuses her boyfriend, Riley, of being a "bigot" because he assumes that all demons should be killed. The choice to fight must always be just that for Buffy: a choice. Fighting can never result automatically from simple category analysis. Riley's inability to choose well may arise from his position in a covert anti-demon military operation. The fourth season of *Buffy* centers on a centralized military project gone awry. "The Initiative" tries to root out *all* demons and destroy them, but it cannot distinguish between the dangerous demons and the not-so-dangerous (sometimes "good") half-demons or others. This incapacity to figure out who among "the

bad guys” is truly a threat comes back to destroy the Initiative and almost the world. Arguably the Bush choice to topple Saddam Hussein rather than press the fight against al Qaeda in Afghanistan likewise has alienated allies, helped terrorist recruiting, unsettled a second region of the world, and aggravated overall threats of terrorism to countries throughout the West.

- 30 Judith Butler says that the United States has reacted to events of 9/11 by trying to rectify a feeling of vulnerability through striking out in violence that dehumanizes its targets.<sup>33</sup> She explains that this dehumanization works with a kind of racism that comes from Orientalism.<sup>34</sup> Once a racial hierarchy subordinates the “other” as less than human, there is no need to treat the other “humanely.”<sup>35</sup> In its second and third seasons, *Angel* explores themes of race and racism in depth. It pits the racial issues within Angel’s own team of detectives against the racism in the indiscriminate killing of demons. In these story lines, we see the difficulty – *and the necessity* – of making complex distinctions among individuals; and we recognize the humanization needed for good choices as opposed to the categorical killing of all who are different.<sup>36</sup>
- 31 Butler argues that Bush went to war in Iraq to “eviscerate our own vulnerability and to establish our own impermeability. What results,” she says, “is a kind of horrid masculinism.”<sup>37</sup> This helps explicate a difference between Buffy and Faith on violence and death. Faith’s self-doubt is a weakness that leads her to lash out in violence. Buffy’s self-criticism is a strength, reinforced by her community of morally strong people, that prevents knee-jerk reactions. Instead of striking almost automatically in anger, Buffy examines the nuances of each situation presented to her. She informs her emotions. Faith is more the one-note “vampire killer” that Nelson details and associates with Bush. Hers is a relentless campaign against sheer Evil. But that way, as Buffy recognizes, lies lots of mistakes, all too much like abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison where “terrorist monsters” or any who might have information about them become fair game for any pain, humiliation, or death the forces of Good might inflict.
- 32 “Grief equalizes us,” writes Butler, who adds that a choice for peace commits us to “living with a certain kind of vulnerability to others and susceptibility to being wounded that actually gives our individual lives meaning.”<sup>38</sup> Faith’s violent turn against Buffy and her friends signals Faith’s sense of vulnerability and her lack of independent self-respect in addressing the slayer in alliance with some “ordinary” humans and demons unbenighted. Buffy, by



contrast, stands strong when she fights a demon-human-machine hybrid named Adam. Apparently he is omnipotent, a misbegotten product of the Initiative's spectacular miscalculations in war planning and execution. Yet Buffy calls on a spell performed by Willow, Giles, and Xander that enables them to join her in spirit to defeat the seemingly insuperable foe. Symbolically the combination of (feminist) witchcraft with (multilateral) reliance on a team succeeds where the (masculinist) vampire killer's insistence on going it alone as the world's singular Superpower would not.<sup>39</sup>

### **Becoming Good**

- 33 The stories of the buffyverse *can*, in a certain sense, be boiled down to a tale of right and wrong. Yet Whedon's telling emphasizes that human beings are capable of both, as are demons. Thus one of the three main characters on the show, Willow, once a shy geek but later a powerful witch, becomes the central villain in season 6. She lets herself be taken over by the intoxicating powers of dark magic and eventually sets out to destroy the world. She cannot be simply killed, as an evil vampire could, but must be saved by the love of her friend. This love comes not from our heroine but from a mere mortal (with no superpowers). In season 7, the world is saved again – keep in mind, the world is saved from apocalypse at the end of each season – but not by *any* of the humans: the entire *Buffy* series closes with the world being saved by a vampire – and no, not by Angel.
- 34 We could argue that *Buffy* is less the story of Buffy Summers than of Spike, the vampire who has killed more slayers than any other in the last few hundred years. In the series named for her, Buffy grows older, wiser, and enlarges her independence. She becomes not only the best slayer she can be but also an adult. Always the slayer, Buffy turns out to be a human above all: evils tempt her, she teeters on the brink of wrongs, but she finally stays on the paths of goodness. Spike, on the other hand, follows a path of redemption. He begins as a dangerous vampire, becomes domesticated (by implantation of a government chip that prevents him from harming humans), then voluntarily goes through a series of ultimate trials to *earn* a soul. Unlike Angel, Spike *chooses* his soul; he must strive and suffer to deserve it. Spike's quest is to "become a good man." And even as a vampire, his deviations from that path are more human than demonic.
- 35 As the *Buffy* back-story tells us, Spike kills his first slayer as part of his own personal struggle to become a "bad" vampire. This is to

overcome his geeky, poetry-writing, human past. Spike loves to refer to himself as “the big bad,” but in ways that never prove *quite* convincing to viewers. His internal struggles after coming to Sunnydale revolve around the love he has for Drucilla – his lover and the vampire who sired him. Spike’s humanity appears throughout his story arc. As he comes closer to realizing it, in part by falling in love with Buffy, his internal contradictions come to a head. Since his demonic conduct has occurred mostly before the narrative time of the *Buffy* series, fans find it fairly easy to forgive Spike for the hundreds of humans he killed earlier, but many have difficulty getting past his attempted rape of Buffy late in season 6. This attempted crime is heinous, but it is not a crime of demonic evil; it is an act of violence motivated by human passion.

- 36 Spike’s story ends with the *Buffy* series – although the buffyverse lived on, if briefly, in *Angel*.<sup>40</sup> In the *Buffy* finale, Spike finally finds redemption by sacrificing his life to save the world. As Buffy leaves Spike to do his final duty, she tells him she loves him, and he tells her she does not. This completes the arc of Spike’s journey. His struggle to become “a good man” transcends Buffy’s passage to adulthood and living with the burden of being a superhero. Along the way, the series demonstrates powerfully that doing right can never be reduced to being on the right side of the battle, let alone being the right species or race. Morality comes from moral choices, particularly in the face of complexity and conflict. *Buffy* asks “viewers to grapple with the quotidian world’s inherent ambiguities, ambivalence and unpredictability.”<sup>41</sup> It avoids the fantasy where a hero who defends justice by one fell swoop makes the world safe for all.
- 37 In one of his most important resignifications of the genre, Joss Whedon allows no room for righteousness in the buffyverse. His reminders are humorous interruptions: whenever a *Buffy* character begins a morally stuffy soliloquy or a self-righteous speech, action intervenes to disrupt and undermine the declaration. The moralistic character gets shot, stabbed, stunned, ignored, refuted, or dismissed. Some *Buffy* fans among us American citizens probably fantasize about Whedonesque interruptions of speeches by President Bush. Bush’s infamous “bring ‘em on” quip, if uttered by a character in the buffyverse, would have been directly followed by, for example, tripping over a tombstone into an open grave or some other such comic embarrassment.<sup>42</sup> Our interpretation of good and evil in the buffyverse thus serves to demonstrate the point we suggested at

the outset: Bush would not make a very good vampire slayer.

- 38 Our main argument, though, is that the moral terms and terrains of the buffyverse provide a crucial alternative to the discourse of right and wrong propagated by the Bush administration.<sup>43</sup> The same goes for the mythos of the vampire killer that it echoes. Within this mythos, the horror of 9/11 and its complex history is reduced to a stock horror story where paladins arrayed in white defend American life from soulless parasites shrouded in black. Yet the genre of horror proves more subtle and sophisticated than all that, especially in the hands of Joss Whedon. *Buffy* suggests a distinct vision of moral choice and action that faces historical, political, and cultural complexity. Bush-as-vampire-killer tries to simplify the world by resolving it into the narrow terms of television sound bites. Yet even television proves more complex than that. The buffyverse promotes an alternative mythos to Bush as vampire killer. And when we refuse the moralistic terms of the killer mythos, we may refute the moralistic terms that underwrite a certain form of American neo-imperialism.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The academic dispute over *terrorism* as a term, a debate that almost never appears in the mainstream press, hinges on assuming or refuting binary distinctions where they really do not exist. If one proposes a clear and apparently neutral definition of terrorism, one will quickly end up cataloguing cases in ways that depart significantly from the expectations of the American people: either Hiroshima and Nagasaki become the largest terrorist attacks in the history of the world; or other, smaller-scale conflicts end up being named and categorized in ways that fall well outside the rubric of terrorism.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent discussion on this point, see Jeffrey Record, "Bush's 'Unsustainable' War on Terror," excerpt from *Bounding the Global War on Terrorism* in Salon.com, January 13, 2004, [http://archive.salon.com/opinion/feature/2004/01/13/war\\_report/index\\_np.html](http://archive.salon.com/opinion/feature/2004/01/13/war_report/index_np.html).

<sup>3</sup> John Nelson, "Cowboys or Vampire Killers? The Bush Gang Rides Again, or American Figures in Foreign Affairs," *Poroi*, 2, 2, November, 2003, <http://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/poroi/papers/>

nelson030904.html.

<sup>4</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, New York, Barnes and Noble, (1897), 2003, p. 376.

<sup>5</sup> *Blade* (1998) and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992).

<sup>6</sup> This distinction in levels of analysis – from characters to universe – requires clarification. Unlike Nelson's project, ours is not be a formal analysis of character types. Yet we offer an interpretation of the buffyverse sensitive to its moral richness and complexity necessitates various readings of the characters in that universe. Thus our argument discusses several characters, their actions, and their moralities. The goal of such readings is not to create a formal character archetype but to depict the universe.

<sup>7</sup> Concomitantly we seek to expose the gap between the moral universe in which George W. Bush either believes or pretends to operate, and the one that he (and the rest of us) actually live in. The Abu Ghraib prison scandal is an obvious comparison here. In fact, a writer for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* noted that the situation at the American-occupied prison severely compromised Bush's already-precarious position with regard to the war: "All that the Bush administration had in Iraq, in the absence of any grand strategy, was a grip on the moral high ground: Whatever else, we were way better than Saddam Hussein, who tortured and murdered the unfortunates who ended up in Abu Ghraib Prison." See Joseph L. Galloway, "It's Time for Rumsfeld to To," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 5, 2004, <http://www.keepmedia.com/pubs/PhiladelphiaInquirer/2004/05/05/461230?extID=10026>.

<sup>8</sup> For a compelling argument on the vampire myth as the basis for another recent threat to the American public, people with AIDS, see Ellis Hanson, "Undead," in Diana Fuss, ed., *inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, New York, Routledge, 1991, pp. 324-340.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the history of vampires and vampire slayers, see Bruce McClelland, "By Whose Authority? The Magical Tradition, Violence and the Legitimation of the Vampire Slayer," *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies*, 1, January, 2001, <http://www.slayage.tv/essays/slayage1/bmcclelland.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Nelson, p. 11.

**11** Nelson, p. 17.

**12** We might add Condoleezza Rice's convenient wording in defense of her administration that there is "not going to be a silver bullet to kill [Osama] bin Laden."

**13** Although complete discussion of vampirism and orientalist stereotyping lies well beyond the scope of this paper, we remain acutely aware that the vampire myth invokes such a history of "othering" for Eastern cultures through colonialism. In its formalist approach, Nelson's paper also does not address colonialism, but we would suggest that the discourse of orientalism provides much of the underlying force for depicting Bush as the vampire-killer hero. Bush relies on the image of the foreign, eastern, feminine, non-Christian, sneaky, destructive, white/American-hating, Arab terrorist to mobilize the unholy vampiric demon that must be destroyed through American ethics and Christian faith. In our discussion of the "vampire enemy," we wish to avoid deepening this association. Instead we hope to show that, even within that very narrative where good and evil seem to be clearly defined, lies a context that has the potential to be reworked, reversed, expanded, and challenged. In the uncertain realm of the buffyverse, both human and demon alike exist in precarious positions, ever on the brink of extinction. Thus if "othering" the enemy creates a stable identity for Bush, then *Buffy* emerges at that very margin where the enemy is not the vampire but the threat of invisibility and extinction.

**14** Holly Chandler notes that the vampire metaphor in the buffyverse remains fluid. This allows the show's writers and directors to explore feminist issues and to expose "the sexual dangers of the patriarchy." See "Slaying The Patriarchy: Transfusions of the Vampire Metaphor in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*," *Slayage*, 9, August, 2003, <http://www.slayage.tv/essays/slayage9/Chandler.htm>. The show's feminist takes on the horror genre and the archetype of the superhero tie specifically to our goal of contrasting Buffy the vampire slayer with Bush the vampire killer, as we discuss in the text. Also see Susan A. Owen, "Vampires, Postmodernity, and Postfeminism: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 27, 2, Summer, 1999, pp. 24-31.

**15** Especially see the detailed commentary provided on the *Buffy* series DVDs.

- 16 Vampires in the buffyverse can look perfectly normal when trying to blend with humanity. This suggests that, like the terrorist, the enemy can *hide in plain sight*. When adrenaline gets pumping – in a fight or during a “kill” – the vampire faces take on a monster-like appearance: complete with fangs, gnarled foreheads, and glowing yellow eyes.
- 17 Whedon also offers a powerful, if subtle and comical, critique of Christianity: a key element in his transfiguration of the vampire genre. For reasons of space, time, and focus, we must ignore this element of the buffyverse.
- 18 To be sure, *Buffy* can be read successfully through post-structuralist lenses. Here we refer to a “*so-called* postmodern world” to distinguish our reading from crude or naïve senses of postmodernism that merely produce moral ambiguity – a relativism to counter Bush’s fundamentalism. Our argument seeks to move beyond that narrow view, and it leaves to the side debates over postmodernism.
- 19 One ex-demon named Anya, who has lost her powers of darkness, even becomes a part of Buffy’s gang when she dates Xander, one of the three central characters in *Buffy*.
- 20 Robert Hanks reads this plot as another example of Whedon’s reversal of the very expectation of the horror genre. He argues that such reversals define the show. Buffy is in fact “seduced less by [Dracula’s] saturnine good-looks and his ability to control minds than by his sheer celebrity. Knowing what to expect from a Dracula story became the programme’s subject.” See Hanks, “Deconstructing Buffy,” *The Independent: News/UK/Media*, July 1, 2002, <http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/media/story.jsp?story=310937>.
- 21 Buffy makes this announcement and performatively makes her break from the Council in “Graduation.”
- 22 See “What’s My Line, Part 2.”
- 23 See *ibid*.
- 24 Is Colin Powell simply the exception that proves the rule here, or have his counsels been too ignored by the Bush administration to count him as part of its war council? Either way, he seems to support the comparison more than undermine it.



**25** For a closer reading of Buffy's break from the Council, see Anthony Bradney, "Choosing Laws, Choosing Families: Images of Law, Love, and Authority in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," *Web Journal of Current Legal Issues*, 2, 2003, <http://webjcli.ncl.ac.uk/2003/issue2/bradney2.html>.

**26** See "Bad Girls."

**27** Mimi Marinucci observes that, "where there is political corruption, vampires or demons are usually involved." See Marinucci, "Feminism and the Ethics of Violence: Why Buffy Kicks Ass," in James B. South, ed., *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy*, Chicago, Open Court Press, 2003, pp. 61-75, on p. 66.

**28** Edward T. Pound, "A house of horrors, revealed," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 6, 2004.

**29** Greg Forster, "Faith And Plato: 'You're Nothing! Disgusting, Murderous Bitch!'" in South, ed., *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy*, pp. 7-19, on p. 13.

**30** Forster, p. 13.

**31** Marinucci, p. 63.

**32** *Ibid.*, p. 64.

**33** Judith Butler, interview with Jill Stauffer, *The Believer*, 1, 2, May, 2003, pp. 64-72, quote on p. 65.

**34** See Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Random House, 1978.

**35** See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, New York, Verso, 2004, p. 89.

**36** See especially, "The Thin Dead Line," in season 2, and "That Old Gang of Mine," in season 3.

**37** *Ibid.*, p. 66.

**38** *Ibid.*, pp. 67 and 68. Throughout seasons four and five, such vulnerability is produced in the buffyverse by Buffy and the gang's tacit (and sometimes explicitly rued) decision to allow Spike to live. As we discuss later in the text, Spike is one of the most dangerous vampires in history; but when he becomes helpless

(from the Government chip in his head), Buffy consistently rejects or resists the urge to kill him.

**39** On the other hand, the theme of “joining together” to vanquish the enemy must be complicated. The simplistic moral message that victory comes through teamwork will not hold. Much to the chagrin of many fans, the episode in which Buffy and the gang join together to kill Adam does *not* serve as the fourth season’s finale. Instead Whedon shows that the moral balance in the universe has somehow been upset by the group’s actions; so that all four of them are visited in their dreams, and almost killed, by the first slayer in the utterly surreal finale, “Restless.” *Buffy* repeatedly shows us that the problem that Buffy and (at least on its own self-understanding) America share – the problem of being the sole superpower – can never be resolved simply. For this entire line of argument, we thank an anonymous, thoughtful reviewer for *Poroi*. On the topic of teamwork in *Buffy*, see also Daniel A. Clark and P. Andrew Miller, “Buffy, the Scooby Gang, and Monstrous Authority: BtVS and the Subversion of Authority,” *Slayage*, 3, 2001.

**40** *Angel* was recently canceled, after its fifth season.

**41** Bradney, “Choosing Laws, Choosing Families,” p. 17.

**42** George W. Bush, quoted in “Perspectives,” *Newsweek*, 142, 2, July 14, 2003, p. 23. Also quoted in Nelson, p. 1.

**43** So convincing is this narrative that it perpetuates itself the world over. Thus Pope John Paul II could pray publicly that “humanity find the strength to face the inhuman and unfortunately growing phenomenon of terrorism, which rejects life and brings anguish and uncertainty to the daily lives of so many hard-working and peaceful people.” See “End ‘Logic of Death’ in Iraq, Mideast, Pope Says,” *Reuters*, April 11, 2004.