

Chapter 6

And the Rest is Silence: Silence and Death as Motifs in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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Silence has become the indicator of an unusual intensity of feeling—emotional intensity in the Hollywood film; public solemnity in the two-minute silence on Veterans' Day; the one-minute silence before kick-off in which to honor someone's death.

(Simon Frith, "Music and Everyday Life")

Thus, from whichever direction we approach it, music in our societies is tied to the threat of death ... Everywhere in fact, diversity, noise, and life are no longer anything more than masks covering a mortal reality: Carnival is fading into lent and silence is setting in everywhere.

(Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*)

"The hardest thing in this world is to live in it":¹ Silence as Death in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

The world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is replete with noisy representations of death and dying—excessive music and language underscore the demise of vampires, demons, humans, and hope. Over its seven years, as in the narrative conventions of some of the most enduring dramas and soap operas, where narrative death is never quite as final as it would seem, two of the main characters in *Buffy* died and returned to life: Angel from hell or purgatory; while Buffy herself died twice and the second time was brought back from heaven through magic.² And yet, despite the recurring accounts of rebirth and redemption, the sense of menace, doom, and

¹ Buffy's last words to Dawn in "The Gift" (5.22), which Dawn then repeats back to her in "Once More with Feeling" (6.7). The allusion to Hamlet's final words to Horatio (5.2. II. 357–8) in the title of this essay is used sarcastically in *Buffy* by Giles in "The Dark Age" (2.8) as he describes Buffy's music choice as "noise."

² Within the long narrative arcs and generic conventions of daytime soap operas, particularly some exceptionally long-running ones originating in the USA such as *Days of Our Lives* (1965–), *The Bold and the Beautiful* (1987–), *Passions* (1999–), *As the World Turns* (1956–) and *The Young and the Restless* (1973–), death (although sudden and violent) is often not as final as it would seem. Many characters in these series become victims of

anxiety never quite disappeared but remained like a never-ending underground rumble. I argue that this sense of doom, the unanswerable threat that did not go away, was represented most poignantly in the series not through noise and music but through the gaps and silences.³ In the original *Buffy* film (1992), Whedon himself twice articulates the link between silence and death using Hamlet's final words to Horatio, "the rest is silence": once by Merrick (Donald Sutherland), Buffy's Watcher, as he lies dying and then by Buffy (Kristy Swanson) who repeats the line to Lothos toward the end of the film when she realizes what it means.

As the two quotations that head this chapter indicate, many cultures still use stillness and quiet in informal customs and in more formal rituals to capture and reflect on peace, human frailty, and mortality. While these are moments of truth and self-awareness, when the participants step out from their everyday world of turmoil and uncertainty into a utopian space of peace, they are also moments that highlight the ephemeral nature of our everyday existence. Perhaps for this reason, the concept of silence itself can be slippery and hard to pin down. It never simply means absence of sound but connotes a range of feelings and beliefs. It has been defined (when used as a noun) as the state of being silent (as when no one is speaking); yet the absence of sound can not only indicate peace and quietness but also muteness or a refusal to speak when expected. It can thus also connote secrecy, the deliberate act of keeping things hidden. When used as a verb, silence can also mean to force quietness or speech upon oneself or on others, so to repress or to keep from expression. Silence has also been defined as white noise: sounds that we choose not to, or have forgotten how to, hear; that which prevents us from hearing significant sounds or from communicating effectively. At its most extreme silence signifies nothingness, loss of subjectivity and consciousness, "to be no more," a total powerlessness, a yielding up of the self to the ultimate oblivion of otherness, the universal cosmos, death.⁴

In a series where music and language are so central, this chapter explores their obverse, the narrative role of gaps and silences that underscore the inescapable paradox of death as that which is both desired and feared. Although the characters speak of and might even positively experience an after-life, death for all of the protagonists is seen as an avoidance of the necessarily difficult process of

severe accidents or trauma resulting in (near) death, disappearances, or comas, and they often make spectacular recoveries or reappearances.

³ For other related interpretations of the use of silence in *Buffy* see Kelly Kromer, "Silence as Symptom: A Psychoanalytic Reading of 'Hush,'" *Slayage* 19 (2006); and Patrick Shade, "Screaming to be Heard: Reminders and Insights on Community and Communication in 'Hush,'" *Slayage* 21 (2006).

⁴ The works of Harold Pinter (1930–) and Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) have both explored the use of silence in dramatic texts; the musical work and theoretical explorations of John Cage explored the idea of silence in music and poetry, perhaps most famously in his 1952 work *4'33"*, during which the performer makes no intentional sounds. See John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writing* (London, 1987).

living. That is, it is seen as a poignant desire to return to an existence devoid of responsibility or, in Derrida's terms, a return of the "orgasmic" or "demonic." Derrida argues that, despite modernity's belief in control and order, the seductive demonic is always threatening to re-emerge.⁵ By "demonic," Derrida implies a re-emergence of the pre-Platonic state, an extension of what Freud has called the "the death instinct"⁶ and Roger Caillois called "*le mimetisme* [mimesis]."⁷ The relinquishing of responsibility may mean a life without agency, yet the payoff can also seem attractive.

In *Buffy*, the recurring motif of silence can be seen in four main modes as representing the protagonists' fears along a continuum of unease—from small niggling doubts to full-blown anxiety. None of these modes is used exclusively, of course, but they are frequently combined or juxtaposed within an episode. However, when some modes are particularly dominant and extended in a sequence, such as in "Hush" (4.10) or "The Body" (5.16), they lend a particular emotional feel to the episode, as explained more fully below.

The first mode of silence is its most common occurrence in that, throughout the series, we can identify interrupted speech flow, which occurs in the form of pauses, stuttering, and faltering dialogue. These moments, which we might call mini-silences, are often part of an endearing or humorous aspect of characterization such as that of the self-deprecating, unconfident Willow, Tara, or Giles. Yet these mini-silences also signify moments when self-control and self-possession are lost for all of the characters. This is particularly salient for it is yet another way in which the series deviates from the usual American teenage drama: in the majority of similar programs that mainly target teenage viewers, nearly all of the main characters are fluent, articulate, and witty in their complex speech acts.⁸ In *Buffy*, however, alongside the humorous wit are many moments of inarticulateness when the snappy comeback fails, highlighting those times when the social masks and illusions slip, and the doubts and anxieties about personal worth and sense of self re-emerge. While most of the protagonists share the ability to play with language humorously and intelligently, they all also indicate their personal insecurities at various times by their halting speech, repetitions, and stammering. In such situations they use their language as a shield, using humor together with their self-deprecating speech, as when Willow explains her fear of expressing her feelings

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago, 1995), p. 35.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York, 1991), p. 244.

⁷ Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," *October*, 31 (1984), p. 25. Freud defines the *Trieb* or drive (which is translated as "instinct" by Strachey), to be "an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces" (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 46–9).

⁸ Karen Eileen Overbey and Lahney Preston-Matto, "Staking in Tongues: Speech Act as Weapon in *Buffy*," in Rhonda Wilcox and David Lavery (eds) *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Lanham, MD, 2002), p. 83.

in the opening episode, "Welcome to the Hellmouth" (1.1): "No, no, no, no. No speaking up. That way leads to madness and sweaty palms." Or her explanation to Buffy in the same episode when they first become friends about her lack of a boyfriend:

Willow: I—I—I don't actually date a whole lot ... lately.

Buffy: Why not?

Willow: Well, when I'm with a boy I like, it's hard for me to say anything cool, or, or witty, or at all. I-I can usually make a few vowel sounds, and then I have to go away.

Willow's lack of confidence is taken to the extreme in the episodes "The Puppet Show" (1.9), "Nightmares" (1.10), and "Restless" (4.22), where she is struck dumb by stage fright and forgets her lines completely. Similarly, Giles's stammer could arguably indicate his upper-class affectations but also his personal anxieties.⁹ For example, in numerous season one and two episodes, he reacts in a way similar to that described by Willow whenever he tries to talk to Jenny Calendar, particularly when he attempts to ask her out on a date in "Some Assembly Required" (2.2). This central insecurity remains even when the outward bodily façade suggests otherwise. For example, when in "A New Man" (4.12) Giles is turned into a monster and speaks in Fyarl, Spike not only translates Giles's demon tongue into English but, with his usual insight, can also see through the grim exterior to the real (far less scary) man beneath:

Giles (as monster): You help me and I don't kill you.

Spike: Oh, tremendously convincing. Try it again without the stutter.

This use of mini-silences runs throughout the seven seasons, serving as an ongoing backdrop to the other three, more complex ways in which silence is used within the over-arching narrative.

The second mode in which the motif of silence is used is what might be called "wordless silence"—that is, when all dialogue is removed, replaced by diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. The episode "Hush," a well-acknowledged example of this use of silence, is also significant for demonstrating the ways in which spoken language can sometimes mask genuine communication, becoming instead white noise blocking out interpersonal contact and truth. Several other episodes also have long wordless sequences in line with the common generic convention of soap operas and melodramas, the gap left by the lack of dialogue being filled

⁹ When we see Giles transported back to his wayward adolescence in "Band Candy" (3.6) we not only see a more childish Watcher but hear a very working-class British accent that perhaps indicates a youthful affectation, an attempt to appear "more cool" by distancing himself from the upper-class origins implied by a name like "Rupert." Thank you to Janet Halfyard for this suggestion.

with a plaintive non-diegetic score.¹⁰ Such moments—as when Dawn prepares herself for her own sacrifice in "The Gift" (5.22) by painstakingly folding her clothes—create a hiatus in the pace of the story and aim to increase the pathos and tension for the audience. This is just one of the myriad ways in which musical cues such as Nerf Herder's overall *Buffy* signature tune, Christophe Beck's themes for the Buffy-Angel relationship, or his score for the supernatural atmosphere in "Hush" deliberately create specific emotive qualities in the series. Sometimes the ambient music begins as a live performance in the Bronze such as those by Angie Hart, the songwriter and lead singer from the band Splendid, who appears three times in *Buffy* in "I Only Have Eyes for You" (2.19), "The Freshman" (4.1), and "Conversations with Dead People" (7.7). What begins as diegetic performance can shift to serve a non-diegetic function, as the music and lyrics continue to play in the non-diegetic background of the scene when the character moves outside of the nightclub space, as in "The Harsh Light of Day" (4.3) when the music of the band Bif Naked is used in this way. In some cases the use of music moving from diegetic to non-diegetic can be seen as acting as a metadiegetic soliloquy,¹¹ for it could be argued that, apart from its emotive quality, the music could be interpreted as being replayed in the character's head.

The third mode of silence is what I call "empty silence" when the sequence is completely devoid of sound, so that there is neither dialogue nor musical score. Lack of sound on television for an extended period of time is dramatically untenable even for the transgeneric world of *Buffy*, as it clearly flouts cinematic and televisual narrative convention and disturbs audience expectation.¹² For this reason this type of silence is usually sandwiched between moments of distorted or dislocated sound or followed by very limited, ambient sounds. While "The Body" presents the most obvious and sustained example of this mode of silence, there are also several other key moments in various episodes such as "Restless" or "Normal Again" (6.17) when diegetic sound alone carries the narrative or when the sound is deliberately dislocated from the image to reinforce the surreal atmosphere, such as in "Restless" when the voices in Xander's dream are dubbed into French.

¹⁰ One of Willow's skills, used strategically at key moments, is her ability to use telepathy to convey her thoughts soundlessly and thus privately to Xander and Buffy. See for example "Showtime" (7.11).

¹¹ See Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington, IN, 1987), pp. 22–3.

¹² The sonic discomfort created by extended lack of dialogue and lack of emotive score recalls sections of Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), David Lynch's *The Straight Story* (1999), and much of Jane Campion's work such as *A Girls Own Story* (1984) and *The Piano* (1993). Only a few television writers/directors have regularly played with sound in this way: Dennis Potter comes to mind, some of his most well-known television series for the BBC being *Pennies from Heaven* (1978), *The Singing Detective* (1986), *Christabel* (1988), and *Blackeyes* (1989).

The fourth type of silence in *Buffy* is in a reflexive mode, when that which has been silenced or that which cannot be spoken, such as a taboo, is made overt and forced into articulation through a more foregrounded and reflexive thematic device. Such examples can be seen in hyperreal or surreal episodes such as "Restless," "Normal Again," or "Once More, with Feeling" (6.7) as described in more detail below.

In each of these four overarching modes, the motif of silence becomes a powerful negative presence, the fissure in the illusion of control which points to the limits of language.¹³ Indeed, as Wajnryb reminds us, "it may be that messages refracted through silence are the more powerful."¹⁴ Before looking more closely at examples of each of these modes, it is necessary to understand why the motif of silence works so effectively overall. To do this we need firstly to revisit the role of noise itself and then consider the concept and narrative device of mimesis which underpins the series as a whole.

"Don't speak Latin in front of the books":¹⁵ Noise, Magic, and Mimesis

The use of noise—excessive sound, burlesque, histrionics, music, humor—as a masking or distancing strategy, is hardly new or unique. Literature and other more recent media are replete with examples of humor and excess being deployed to explore and to avert the terrifying concept of human mortality, that over which we have no control. The gently humorous exchanges in *Buffy*, such as the following from "Prophecy Girl" (1.12), neatly capture this sense of uncertainty:

Master: You were destined to die. It was written!
Buffy: What can I say? I flunked the written.

Or (perhaps more poignantly) in "Lie to Me" (2.7):

Buffy: Nothing's ever simple anymore. I'm constantly trying to work it out.
Who to love, or hate... It's just, the more I know, the more confused I get.
Giles: I believe that's called growing up.
Buffy: I'd like to stop then, okay?
Giles: I know the feeling.

From Plato to writers and artists of today, such reflexive depictions of our everyday real-life anxieties and fears have been noted and analyzed, as for example in the

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London, 1978), p. 54.

¹⁴ Ruth Wajnryb, *The Silence: How Tragedy Shapes Talk* (Sydney, 2001), p. 35.

¹⁵ Giles to Xander in "Superstar" (4.17) when Xander's careless and inappropriate use of Latin creates a spell that causes the books to burst into flame.

works of numerous writers.¹⁶ The defensive use of humor and excess has also been recognized as such by contemporary readers and audiences everywhere for, as reflected in the many website posts, "might it be that truth is scarier than all the collective monsters put together?"¹⁷ As I have argued elsewhere, in *Buffy* these anxieties are frequently more chronic than acute.¹⁸ They are fears, usually expressed as "a rumbling paranoia rather than once for all fits of panic"¹⁹ reflecting a general sense of menace that, despite the humor and the lively fight scenes, is central to the show's "mirrored realism"²⁰ and echoes our lived experiences in late modernity. As such, the sense of menace represents both the constant irritations of life, as well as the greater manifestations of evil, combining the banal and the catastrophic, the minor difficulties and greater dangers, and thus it epitomizes the chaos and unease of life in the early twenty-first century. As a rumbling paranoia it waits in the wings for moments when the noise of distraction stops, knowing that it is the silence of loneliness, isolation, and oblivion that represents humanity's greatest fears. These are the moments when we can no longer fool ourselves or lull ourselves into our usual state of security by trying to convince ourselves, as Taussig caustically explained, that "we live facts not fictions."²¹

The mimetic faculty expressed through art, magic, or ritual is the vehicle by which all cultures interpret and attempt to control these fears of the uncanny, attempting to keep in check the irrational and the inexplicable. At its most straightforward level of meaning, mimesis can be interpreted as the symbolic transfer of power or energy from an object or person to its representation so we might imagine through the creation of the copy—a drawing, a photograph, a joke, a story, a play, or a nursery rhyme—that we have control over the real thing that frightens or disturbs. Most cultures still attribute great power to the photographic or recorded image, as for example is the case with many indigenous Australian

¹⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA, 1968); Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–39 (Theory and History of Literature)* (Minneapolis, MN, 1985); Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY, 1986); Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock* (London, 2000); Don Handelman, *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events* (Cambridge, 1990); Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (New York, 1993).

¹⁷ Tracy Little, "High School of Hell: Metaphor made Literal in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," in James B. South (ed.) *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale* (Chicago, 2003), p. 285.

¹⁸ Gerry Bloustien, "Fans with a Lot at Stake: Serious Play and Mimesis in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5/4 (2002), pp. 427–51.

¹⁹ Boyd Tonkin, "Entropy as Demon: Buffy in Southern California," in Roz Kaveney (ed.) *Reading the Vampire Slayer: An Unofficial Critical Companion to Buffy and Angel* (London/New York, 2001), p. 43.

²⁰ Brian Wall and Michael Zryd, "Vampire Dialectics: Knowledge, Institutions and Labour," in Kaveney (ed.), *Reading the Vampire Slayer*, p. 53.

²¹ Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p. xv.

and American groups.²² Consider also the way all cultures seem to create jokes or satire in times of greatest stress or fear, which Freud identified as having two functions—aggression and exposure²³—but which others have argued are also used to protect and shield the self.²⁴

Although the process of mimesis is often interpreted as straightforward imitation or copying, to do so underestimates the complexity of meaning and power in the concept, particularly through its literary, anthropological, and social dimensions. Taussig, for example, likened the process of mimesis to sympathetic magic, arguing that it is the faculty that enables us to “explore difference, yield into and become Other,”²⁵ a process of transformation by which a copy of something draws power from the original in order to assume the power of the original. Walter Benjamin, from whom Taussig draws his understandings, saw mimesis as an innate human quality, “the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else.”²⁶ It alters and re-emerges in each era,²⁷ at times—including now in late modernity—confounding “the boundaries of the subject ... the mirror of representation is refigured in terms of nauseating synthaesthesia.”²⁸ The words “nauseating synthaesthesia” point to the visceral power of mimesis, which overloads the senses in its awesome possibilities of separateness or “alterity” within similarity,²⁹ a reaction that was captured in Buffy’s very physical, human response to her mother’s death.

On a more banal but equally significant level, mimesis can be seen underpinning the power of advertising: we know that the product will not deliver the magical properties it seems to promise—beauty, prowess, attraction, wealth, or recognition—and yet somewhere subconsciously we seem to believe that the product does have the potential to deliver its promises and, despite our rational

²² These prohibitions are not universal, however, and many are undergoing change, permitting photographs of the deceased to be published, for example, if the deceased has expressly given permission. See Chips Mackinolty and Jamie Gallacher, “A note on referring to deceased Aboriginal people—and the use of the term “kumanjayi” and its spelling and linguistic variants,” *ABC Television: Media Watch* (2005), accessed 6 August 2006 at www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/img/2005/ep07/mackinolty.pdf.

²³ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York, 1963).

²⁴ See, for example, Chaya Ostrower, *Humor as a Defense Mechanism in the Holocaust* (PhD thesis, Tel-Aviv University, 2000).

²⁵ Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p. xiii.

²⁶ See Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York, 1986), p. 333.

²⁷ Mark Hansen, *Embodying Technesis: Technology Beyond Writing* (Ann Arbor, 2000).

²⁸ Sheli Ayers, “Virile Magic: Bataille, Baudelaire, Ballard,” *Speed: Electronic Journal of Science and Re-Enchantment*, 1/2 (2001), accessed 18 August 2008 at http://proxy.arts.uci.edu/~nideffer/_SPEED_/1.2/ayers.html.

²⁹ Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*.

judgment, we purchase. It is through the power of mimesis that we are moved empathically, sometimes even physiologically, by art or religion and it is the process of mimesis that underlies our belief in the efficacy of ritual, music, magic, and spirituality through its possibilities of transformation, protection, and power. As the means for cognitive and emotional immersion in the imaginary worlds of texts, mimesis underpins the audience’s affective responses to any art form, for it plays “a critical role in nearly all areas of human thought and action, our ideas, our speech, writing and reading.”³⁰

Language, spoken or written, represents one of the most powerful vehicles for the mimetic faculty, bridging the cognitive and affective gap between self and other through the use of words. But, while such bridging is about empathy (blurring of the me and the not-me), such intersubjectivity can be utterly terrifying. In *Buffy* one such example occurs in “The Killer in Me” (7.13) with the metamorphosis of Willow into Warren, the man that she killed, through her double sense of guilt: for his death and for “killing Tara” again, by her moving on into a new relationship: “I let her be dead. She’s really dead. (Breaks down into tears) And I killed her.”

While we most frequently lose the sense of being a separate individual through the experience of extreme ecstasy (sexual or spiritual love) as we feel the self seeming to merge with the other, we also signal our belief of the utter finality of death through our rituals that stress the merging of self and the cosmos. In the narratives of the Buffyverse these two states of utter abandonment are shown to be inexplicably tied together.

In all cultures, language is one of the main ways in which we try to regain control, to overcome the overwhelming fear of the not-me, using words to name, label, separate, and divide, and to re-present the imaginary power of individual self. In the *Buffy* narratives it is the very materiality of the language through the literal metaphors and the “palpable power of words and utterances”³¹ that serves this purpose. For example, as Adams perceives, particular language styles and linguistic patterns are not only used in *Buffy* to protect the self as a shield but also to attack the other as a weapon.³² As Overbey and Preston-Matto put it: “Any Slayer can brandish a weapon, but for Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the tongue is as pointed as the stake.”³³ We can see this not only in Buffy’s famous puns, which other characters such as Xander, Willow, and the Buffybot fail to replicate when they assume her Slayer duties, but also in the language of the other characters such as Cordelia’s sarcastic barbs in seasons one and two.

When language becomes the voice of seemingly rational or scientific reason it can become an even harsher form of weapon, often literally mechanized in *Buffy*

³⁰ Gunter Gebauer and Christopher Wulf, *Mimesis* (Berkeley, CA, 1992), p. 1. See also Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis, MN, 1993).

³¹ Overbey and Preston-Matto, “Staking in Tongues,” p. 73.

³² Michael Adams, *Slayer Slang: A Buffy the Vampire Slayer Lexicon* (Oxford/New York, 2003).

³³ Overbey and Preston-Matto, “Staking in Tongues,” p. 84.

as in the communication tools of the Initiative (see "Hush"). Here, again, language clearly indicates its potential to separate the self from the other, forming and underpinning social hierarchies and social capital. In more benign scenarios, even Giles's characteristic, British-inflected pomposity—he is described as "a textbook with arms" in "Welcome to the Hellmouth"—often leaves the young people's comprehension far behind as he waxes lyrical about the mythology of demons:

Giles: There is a fringe theory, held by a few folklorists, that some regional stories have actual, very literal antecedents.

Buffy: And in some language that's English? (Gingerbread, [3.11])

Giles, who is less comfortable in social discourse, especially when anxious or embarrassed ("Prophecy Girl", "Helpless" [3.12]), comes into his own when he needs to refer back to ancient languages, texts, or knowledge. Language as social capital, of course, always works to segregate the dominant from the subjugated, tending to separate the adult from the child, but it can work the other way as when the younger Scoobies' innovative, creative, and manipulative "slayerspeak" leaves certain adults and peers outside of the accepted circle.³⁴

In its most transparent and mystical representation of mimesis, language is the vehicle through which spells and other magical incantations enable the individual to attempt to gain control over the natural (and unnatural) universe. It is the link between the real and the symbolic, in which the figurative becomes concrete or literal, that underpins the metanarrative and central conceit of *Buffy* as well as much of the humor and the drama of the series.³⁵ This use of the literal metaphor is a perfect example of the way mimesis is applied to language in the series so that, through symbolic association and magic, the cognitive becomes concrete. Thus, high school actually becomes hell-like; the overlooked students literally become invisible; the "hot" cheerleader really catches on fire; the mother who longs to relive her childhood indeed swaps bodies with her daughter;³⁶ and the daily often melodramatic "routine" or "arrangement" of Buffy's life becomes a musical soap opera in "Once More, with Feeling" and her friends provide back-up through songs. When Buffy tells the First to "get out of my face" in "Chosen" (7.22) she means it both metaphorically and literally. It is worthy of note that when Willow is at her most powerful she no longer needs to speak the incantations out loud: she and the dark magic become one. The mimetic blurring is complete; there is no more division. As Giles explains in "Lessons" (7.1), "It's inside you now, this magic. You're responsible for it."

³⁴ Rhonda Wilcox, "'There will Never Be 'a Very Special' Buffy': *Buffy* and the Monsters of Teen Life," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 27/2 (1999), pp. 16–23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ See "The Witch" (1.3), "Out of Sight, Out of Mind" (1.11), and "Storyteller" (7.16).

In all of these ways the mimetic faculty helps to hold back the anxieties of everyday life, constraining the underlying fear of mortal reality. However, when reality under the flimsy veil of containment threatens to become too overt, then the noise has to become greater and metaphor needs to become excessive to drown out the fear through burlesque, humor, irony, or caricature. Freud's analyses of jokes or Bakhtin's description of the carnivalesque revealed the ways the terrifying realities of life had to be transformed and distanced through exaggeration, excess, or self-deprecating humor.³⁷ Similarly, in the Buffyverse, the ultimate fear of mortal reality is deflected through distancing techniques. These more excessive exaggerations, as in "Hush" and "Once More, with Feeling," always point to the moments when "contradictory realities coexist, each seemingly capable of cancelling the other out."³⁸ Sometimes such strategies fail, and the fear becomes so acute that no humor is possible.³⁹ In the Buffyverse, as I indicated above, several episodes such as "Restless," "The Body," and "Normal Again" particularly express this poignancy and anxiety, demonstrating the myriad ways in which the mimetic silence of death and loss of self is both represented and concealed in varying degrees of intensity. Leaving aside the mini-silences, it is to the first of the other three overarching modes of silence that I turn my attention now.

"Won't say a word":⁴⁰ The Mode of Wordless Silence

For an episode that is renowned for its use of silence, the first quarter of "Hush" is full of demonstrations of talk as an ineffectual masking strategy, with several amusing incidents showing spoken language as noise rather than communication and, indeed, as avoidance of genuine communication. For example, despite the episode's opening dream sequence, which clearly reveals Buffy's unconscious desires to herself as well as the viewers, Buffy and Riley in their waking states avoid any physical contact and thus any expression of their mutual sexual attraction. Instead, they engage in their usual "babble fest." Xander and Anya argue in public because Anya refuses to distinguish between public and private conversations and Xander cannot articulate his love and commitment, a failure that is to have more disastrous consequences later in the series. Giles and Olivia initially engage in inconsequential chat rather than physical affection after a long separation until Olivia calls a halt: "that's enough small talk, don't you think?" Meanwhile, Willow attends a Wicca group where the "blessed-wanna-be" members derisively dismiss

³⁷ See Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*; Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

³⁸ Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual* (London, 1993), p. 36.

³⁹ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*; Bloustien, "Fans with a Lot at Stake."

⁴⁰ Buffy's teasing words to Riley at the beginning of "Hush" (4.10) prove to be prescient.

any talk of magic and spells as disempowering stereotypes, preferring to discuss their cake stall and fundraising.

When the Gentlemen arrive in Sunnydale shortly afterwards, bringing death and silence into the town by stealing hearts and voices, their appearance also removes much of the possibility of both communication and miscommunication, although not all. As speech cannot be used, the characters revert to other methods of expressing thoughts and commands such as gestures, drawings, posters, music, signs, and written messages. Professor Walsh, for example, types into an electronic speech machine, its mechanical (and masculine) voice devoid of emotion and intonation, reinforcing its pragmatic purpose as a vehicle for maintaining order. Because these methods are less sophisticated than speech, where clarification can immediately be sought and given, we see several humorous examples of misinterpretation especially during Giles's childlike illustrations of the Gentlemen's gruesome purpose and methods.⁴¹ Yet, when the dialogue stops, moments of genuine interpersonal connection do occur during this silent time: Buffy and Riley finally kiss, expressing their growing attraction for each other, and reveal their respective secret identities of Slayer and fighter for the Initiative; Xander demonstrates (through his frenzied attack on Spike) that he does truly care for Anya when he believes mistakenly that she is Spike's victim; Tara and Willow, through their clasped hands and shared focus, reveal and combine their mutual magical powers, demonstrating that their combined force is more than the sum of their separate selves and heralding their future romantic and sexual unity.

"Hush" also demonstrates the ways in which silence can hide something that is too frightening to articulate: that which has been "silenced." In the UK Channel 4 countdown of the *100 Greatest Scary Moments* (2006), "Hush" came in at a respectable 25. As Joss Whedon explained in his interview for the program, "silence is the essence of horror." In the same program TV critic Angie Errigo referred to "Hush" as epitomizing the uncanny. As Giles realizes, the characters of the Gentlemen are straight from fairy tales and dreams, from the world of the hidden, the taboo, and the unconscious, where extreme fears are repressed and submerged under the babble of the everyday.⁴² Through the musical score of "Hush" composer Christophe Beck deliberately references the work of two renowned cinematic artists of the grotesque: writer and director Tim Burton and composer Danny Elfman (whose collaborative work scored all but one of Burton's

⁴¹ Misunderstandings occur in other episodes too with humorous results due to the lack of a mutual spoken language, as for example in "First Date" (7.14) between Giles (whose "Mandarin is thin" and whose Cantonese is "a little thinner") and Chao-Ahn, the Chinese potential who only speaks Cantonese. Thanks to Vanessa Knights in personal communication for reminding me of this.

⁴² Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London, 1981); Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman*. Also see "Gingerbread," where Giles had already pointed out that "fairy tales are real," or "Killed by Death" (2.18), where Buffy agrees with the small children that "there are real monsters."

films). The work of these two artists frequently expresses the unconscious fears underlying polite society. The satiric film *Mars Attacks!* (1996), while not drawing on Gothic horror, as in "Hush," certainly uses its science fiction plot to create a parodic but still gruesome scenario of attacks by outsiders, alien invaders who also reflect our fears and paranoia. The narrative resolution of "Hush," exploding the heads of the Gentlemen by Buffy's discordant scream⁴³ is certainly also more than a nod to the similar technique used in the Burton film where the yodels of Tom Jones produced a parallel effect for the Martians. As in "Hush," where lone heroes, reason, and technology fail to overcome the evil invaders, discordant sound and human collaboration succeed.

"It's mortal and stupid":⁴⁴ The Mode of Empty Silence

While "Hush" is an excellent example of wordless silence, other episodes illustrate the use of complete or almost complete silence, as explained above, where all but ambient sounds are removed. In "The Body," Buffy discovers the body of her dead mother, dead not by the hand of any supernatural monster or phenomenon, but from natural causes. As Giles noted much earlier in "Killed by Death" (2.3), death and disease are "possibly the only things that Buffy cannot fight," such knowledge reinforcing recognition of both the heroine's and our own human frailty and mortality.⁴⁵ The following extract from the episode was transcribed online by a self-identifying fan:

Buffy turns and walks toward the kitchen, putting down the phone on a table. She gets to the back of the living room just before the kitchen door. Suddenly she falls to her knees and vomits on the floor. We hear the sound of wind chimes over the retching noises.

Buffy stands up slowly, her back to the camera. She puts a hand on her stomach, walks through the kitchen to the back door, opens it and looks out. We hear birds

⁴³ Interestingly, several online fans and critics have commented that Buffy's scream in "Hush" was in sharp contrast to the way female screams on screen usually connote vulnerability. Rather, this one was "in line with what Chion describes as the male 'shout' which is imbued with power and mastery." See Katy Stevens, "Vocal Indexicality in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" (2002), accessed 15 August 2005 at <http://www.katystevens.com/essays-buffybazin.html>. Also see Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York, 1999).

⁴⁴ Anya, the ex-demon Anyanka, describes death in her struggle to understand mortality in "The Body."

⁴⁵ This is said early in the series. Later the show demonstrates that there are several aspects of evil that Buffy cannot fight alone; to overcome them she requires the combined efforts of all of her key friends, "the source of our power" ("Primeval" [4.22]), with their respective cognitive, spiritual, and emotional strengths and skills.

singing, distant voices, ordinary city noises. Close-up on Buffy's face, sweaty and pale. She stands there for a moment, then turns back inside, leaning on the door for support. She looks at the kitchen island, goes over to it and takes a bunch of paper towels off the roll. Leaving the back door open, she goes back into the living room and puts the paper towels over the spot on the carpet where she vomited.

Lingering shot of the paper towels on the carpet as the moisture begins to seep through.⁴⁶

Where words fail, Buffy's body emits its own non-verbal reminder that, despite her superhuman powers, she is still mortal, vulnerable, and fragile. The physiological reaction of vomiting indicates the loss of self-control and power. Note that the only sounds the viewer hears in this episode are heightened diegetic ones: Buffy's footsteps across the kitchen floor, the wind chimes as she opens the door to the garden, the sounds of the street and everyday life continuing from birds and the children's shouts, and the sound of Buffy's own retching as she vomits on the floor.⁴⁷

While the scene described above is particularly poignant, it is reinforced by other long silences and half-finished sentences but again without non-diegetic sound in various scenes in the episode. For example, when Buffy calls Dawn out of her art class to inform her younger sister of the death, the scene is filmed through the glass window between the classroom and the corridor. Just as in the art classroom, where the students are told to focus not on the body in front of them but "on the negative space around the object," the viewer too at this moment is led to a very different perspective on grief. Instead of a privileged close-up to the intimate moment, which is the usual framing in a television drama, the viewer is kept with the teacher and the classmates at a helpless and painful distance, behind the glass, listening only to the muted cries of the teenage girl. Similarly, when Xander, Anya, and Tara meet with Willow in her room before the funeral, they struggle to come to terms with Joyce's death in their own particular non-verbal ways. Willow anxiously tries to find the right outfit to wear, one that "Jo-Joyce really liked," one that shows she is supportive of Buffy, one that shows she can cope as a mature adult and "dress like a grownup ... can't I be a grownup?" Xander's dramatic punching of a wall is his way of expressing his pent up feelings of impotence:

Willow: Did it make you feel better?
 Xander: For a second there.
 Willow: A whole second?

⁴⁶ Extract from *Buffy Episode #94: "The Body"* Transcript transcribed by Joan the English Chick, accessed on 16 October 2005 at <http://www.twiztv.com/scripts/buffy/season5/buffy-516.htm>.

⁴⁷ Thanks to Vanessa Knights who pointed out that these sounds, although diegetic, are hardly realistic, being isolated and louder than usual and exaggerated by the extreme close-ups and odd camera angles.

Anya, who with her demonic background regularly fails to adhere to politically correct conventions, refers to the Joyce they knew as "a dead body," an object that can be "viewed" and "cut open." After Willow's appalled rebuke—"Would you just ... stop talking? Just ... shut your mouth. Please ..."—and her admonition that "it's not okay for you to be asking these things," Anya painfully articulates what the others have covered up in their avoidance and coping behaviors:

I don't understand how this all happens. How we go through this. I mean, I knew her, and then she's, there's just a body, and I don't understand why she just can't get back in it and not be dead anymore. It's stupid. It's mortal and stupid.

If Anya alone among the friends is able to voice the ineffable in waking hours, the one place where fears are always expressed for everyone are in visions and dreams. Nightmares or "the dreams" have always been regarded as one of the defining characteristics of the Chosen One, as revealed in "Welcome to the Hellmouth" (1.1), but in "Restless" Buffy, Xander, Willow, and Giles share their anxieties through their dreams and are all visited by the spirit of the First Slayer.⁴⁸ In "Goodbye Iowa" (4.14), the friends realize that the only way to defeat Adam, a "kinetically redundant, bio-mechanical demonoid," is to magically combine their powers. It was a necessary step as Adam with his internal power source of Uranium 235, unlike other monsters that Buffy had faced, had also crossed genetic boundaries between demons and humans:

Adam: I'm aware. I know every molecule of myself and everything around me. No-one—no human, no demon has ever been as awake and alive as I am. You're all shadows. ("Superstar" [4.17])

The mystical combination of mind, spirit, heart, and hand evoking the power of the First Slayer by Willow's magic counters Adam and Spike's attempt to isolate Buffy from her friends in "The Yoko Factor" (4.20) and allows the newly empowered Buffy to defeat Adam. However, the spirit of the First Slayer, affronted by this evocation, brings fear and death to the entire group in their dreams. While the specific anxieties and paranoia about self-worth in the episode are directly linked to the characters themselves—such as Willow's latent social inhibitions, Xander's anxieties about his sexuality and commitment and his lack of direction, and Giles's feelings of failure about his role as Watcher—the audience can empathize because these concerns are easily identifiable and applicable to reality outside of the text. This insight brings us to the fourth mode of silence in *Buffy* where reflexivity highlights the deliberate engagement with audience and increases the fear to such an extent that the narrative vehicle has to become mimetic excess.

⁴⁸ "Restless" in turn refers back to "Nightmares" (1.10), in which each of the Scoobies was forced to confront and articulate their hidden anxieties and worst fears.

"It's all about subterfuge":⁴⁹ The Mode of Reflexive Silence

This self-conscious, self-reflexive mode, especially when framed within the formal structures of a televisual text, simultaneously proposes "a scepticism not only towards supernatural experience and superstitious belief but towards all naïve forms of credulity."⁵⁰ That is, the narrative pace slows as the audience is taken into a new space of discovery, a new confrontation of dramatic possibilities, removing as it does so the audience's sense of privileged observer. The real source of the terror, as becomes increasingly clear as the series develops, is not external to the characters (or the audience) but within. In *Buffy* the real hero is ultimately not Buffy but the combined force of the Slayer and her close companions—and of all potential Slayers everywhere by the end of season seven. Just as the Scoobies have to combine emotionally, sometimes mystically, losing the individual self in each other in order to defeat the all-encompassing evil, so too, in such moments, the boundaries between good and evil merge. It becomes clear at those moments that the First Slayer and the First Evil share the same foundation and in many ways the same goals. As Spike clearly and perceptively explained to Buffy in "Fool for Love" (5.7),

Death is your art. You make it with your hands, day after day. That final gasp. That look of peace. Part of you is desperate to know: what's it like? Where does it lead you? And now, you see, that's the secret. Not the punch you didn't throw or the kicks you didn't land. Every Slayer ... has a death wish. Even you.

At such moments of revelation, the separation between the self and the other becomes too blurred for comfort. Intimacy means loss of separateness, loss of hiding, or silencing those parts of ourselves that we desperately want to conceal—even from ourselves.

Several episodes including "Restless" use a combination of total silence together with sequences of surreal imagery and dislocation of sound from image to express this in-built anxiety about faltering or lost sense of identity. This is particularly highlighted by repeated reference to hiding, concealing, naming, and labeling things, as in Buffy's comment to Willow: "Your costume is perfect. [whispers] Nobody's gonna know the truth. You know, about you"; or later in Giles's explanation of the purpose of the play: "Acting is not about behaving; it's about hiding. The audience wants to find you, strip you naked, and eat you alive, so hide. It's all about subterfuge."

In "Restless", this reflexive mode—revealing each character's hidden insecurities, dramatized through performances that are judged and the bizarre incidents that stress watching—is heightened by a number of silent sequences. As the threat becomes too extreme for comfort, the non-diegetic music and

⁴⁹ Giles in "Restless" (4.22).

⁵⁰ Markman Ellis, *The History of Gothic Fiction* (Edinburgh, 2000), p. 14.

the behavior of the characters—which often underscores (and exaggerates) the seriousness of the situation—is then swiftly undermined, either by physical humor, mainly through the characters' facial expressions, or the timed delivery of the lines, or the use of wit and puns. The extreme juxtaposition of the humorous with the more conventional language of terror, such as Giles's singing denouement at the Bronze—accompanied by his appreciative audience holding up lighters, a rock-concert convention for particularly soulful or "iconic" numbers indicating the listener's involvement and identification with the emotion of the song—is immediately followed by his gruesome "scalping" by the First Slayer.

The quintessential reflexive episode in terms of taboos and silences is "Once More, with Feeling." In this episode the whole community of Sunnydale is affected by a spell that is in many ways the obverse of the one that created havoc in "Hush." This time everyone is compelled to vocalize through song their innermost feelings but also their concerns and anxieties, especially the ones they would prefer to keep hidden. Buffy sings of the meaningless routine of her life, which is just "going through the motions" and why "she came from the grave much graver." While her friends believed that they had brought her back to life from a kind of hell dimension, she has in fact been pulled out of heaven. She has regained life but she confesses that now she feels emotionally dead. The deliberate use of the slurring semi-tone shift as she sings "heaven" is discomfiting, offering again a musical equivalent to the stutter, noted above. Spike's response and admonition to her about the need to "go on living/So one of us is living" repeats the same emotionally discordant break.

Xander and Anya admit in song that they are terrified of their coming marriage commitment for they could "really raise the beam in making marriage a hell!" Even the romantic song "Under Your Spell," performed in an idealized pastoral setting by Tara, has darker connotations with its ambiguous lyrics. As Tara herself comes to discover later in the episode, Willow has literally been "playing with [her] memory." She has bewitched her lover into forgetting any discord between them: "Willow, don't you see/There'll be nothing left of me," a poignant reference back to her literal loss of self, dependence, and extreme vulnerability in season five when, as a victim of Glory's gruesome attack, she was deprived of her mind and reason. Giles sings of his realization that Buffy will always remain childlike, emotionally dependent on him if he stays in Sunnydale and then both he and Tara are heard in harmony although singing separately about the painful necessity of leaving Buffy and Willow. Spike's song laments his frustrated sense of unrequited love for Buffy with his plea that she should let her (un)dead lover "Rest in Peace."

The ways in which the humor and the music are used in this episode exemplify the reflexive mode of mimetic excess, discussed above. The episode not only makes explicit the taboos and secrets that have been silenced throughout the series so far but it also deliberately implicates the audience in the performance. The regular viewer understands the *double entendres* of the lyrics and is overtly invited to step back from their usual emotional enmeshment in the diegesis. The conventional dramatic fourth wall, where the audience is allowed to be a separate, omniscient

observer of the performance, is removed by the unconventional soap opera opening credits, the several direct incidents of address to the camera such as “and you can sing along,” and by references made by the characters themselves to their roles as actors, such as Xander’s “this is my verse, hello!” or Anya’s awareness that “It was like we were being watched ... Like there was a wall missing ... in our apartment. Like there were only three walls and not a fourth wall”; or Willow’s plaintive “I think this line’s mostly filler.”

While this episode has rightly been acknowledged as exceptional in its transcending of both its genre and the medium⁵¹ it needs to be recognized also for the way it again highlights the darkness, tragedy, and silence of the Buffyverse that underlies the music, humor, and excess.

A recent article by the Australian novelist Marion Halligan described the concept of death as something that underpins all art and popular culture as the “powerful shaping narrative,” the “defining fact of life,” and a “marvellous liberating secret.”⁵² As she argues, drawing on examples that range from classical literature to contemporary television, while we accept that death is necessary to life, we do not want to face it just yet. Instead, as Joss Whedon also eloquently illustrates, we build up a mountain of strategies, masks, masquerades, and euphemisms, “from the bathetic to the solemn” to block out the silences that we fear will overwhelm us.⁵³ This chapter aims to further these insights by demonstrating the complex role of “silences” in the *Buffy* series, achieved through four different narrative techniques: interrupted speech flow or “mini-silences”; “wordless silence” where some form of diegetic sound but no words are used; “empty silence” where anxiety and fear are underscored through a lack of all diegetic and non-diegetic sound; and finally the foregrounded reflexive use of silence, where the inescapable paradox of death as that which is both desired and feared is articulated, made overt, faced through the surreal, the hyperreal and mimetic excess. Together these examples illustrate attraction and (ironically) the longevity of the Buffyverse, for its enduring attraction for its fans is not simply its fun, its intelligent though dark humor, and its music but ultimately because it dares to state and clarify what we all know and fear—that “ripeness is all; the rest is silence.”

⁵¹ See Rhonda Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (London, 2005), pp. 191–205; John Kenneth Muir, “Cult TV Friday Flashback #9: Buffy the Vampire Slayer: ‘Once More With Feeling’” (2005), accessed 26 June 2006 at <http://reflectionsonfilmandtelevision.blogspot.com/2005/09/cult-tv-friday-flashback-9-buffy.html>.

⁵² Marion Halligan, “He Kindly Stopped for Me,” *The Weekend Australian* [Review section], 19–20 August 2006, p. 9.

⁵³ *Ibid.*