

Bodies and Narrative in Crisis: Figures of Rupture and Chaos in Seasons Six and Seven

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"From Beneath You It Devours"

The first five seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* were organized around certain assumed ideas: the metaphor of adolescence as hell, the battle of good versus evil, and season-long arcs ending with the definitive defeat of a different big bad. In the final two seasons of the show—the dark seasons, the UPN years, post-Buffy's death, and post-9/11—these defining elements of the show were abandoned, subverted, and blown to hell as good and bad characters traded places, evil became a fluid concept, metaphors dissolved and shifted, and faithful and thoughtful viewers were forced to react to what many saw as annoying, boring, confusing, disgusting, inconsistent, and incoherent structuring elements and plot developments. *Buffy* was always subtly subversive; the final two seasons, however, were constantly disruptive, upsetting the progress of storyline and character while drawing attention to these disruptions, forcing viewers to reconsider the narrative consistency of the show.

The final seasons challenge metaphysical assumptions about time, continuity, and narrative and cut to the heart of our contemporary anxieties about the stability of those long-held assumptions, creating tension between a desire for coherence and an unsettling awareness of destabilizing figures of rupture. Elements of inconsistency, insanity, and violation

serve as (de)structuring devices and push us to question received ideas of structure and reception—questions which may have been part of the thematic structure of the first five seasons, but which now become part of the viewing experience. By looking at the disturbing idea of heaven, the multi-layered themes of rape and violation, the uncanny, ironic, and confusing nature of the villains, and the subversive presence of chaos that underlies the final two seasons, we will illustrate the tension produced when viewers' dependence on particular tropes to hold a series together is challenged by devices pointing to the impossibility of such unity. Like the images of torn and decaying bodies that threaten our ideas about the stability of the self, these images of rupture compel viewers to face the impossibility of coherence that is a defining feature of the last two seasons and of our post-modern world.

"Where Did I Go?"

From the shocking scenes of Willow violently stabbing a struggling fawn and vomiting up a snake, to Buffy's waking up in her coffin, the first episode of Season Six ("Bargaining" parts 1 and 2) announces in a multitude of ways that *BtVS* will be different from what it was in the past. We are in a different world—one where Buffy and her friends will suffer and inflict extreme violence and terror—and these extreme experiences are often expressed and negotiated through the idea of the body. Seasons Six and Seven develop the idea of the body as cultural text, rewriting it through acts of (re)appropriation, misappropriation, passing, imitation, doubling, and resignification. In a short sequence near the end of the second hour, for example, we see Buffy as a rotted corpse, we see a body torn into pieces, and we watch a demon threaten violent, flesh-tearing rape. Decaying bodies, torn limbs, and ripped vaginas are just a few of the ways that Seasons Six and Seven use the body as a site and metaphor of rupture, insecurity, and destabilization.

Therefore it is not surprising that the most striking scene of rupture in this episode requires us to witness a body destroyed. Midway through the episode, a dazed Buffy, having clawed her way out of her grave, wanders through Sunnydale, while a gang of demon bikers prepares to destroy the Buffybot, a robot replica of Buffy that her friends have been using to keep the demon-vampire world ignorant of her death. The bikers form a circle around the robot, each bike attached by a chain to its body, while the human Buffy, still disoriented, drifts unobserved onto the

scene. In celebration of his triumph, Razor, the leader of the gang, points a gun in the air (the rare and always startling appearance of a gun on *BtVS* indicates another radical direction this season will take), announcing: "This here's a momentous occasion. The beginning of a new era." They are performing, he declares, "a symbolic act to commemorate a new order ... all in one quick really *really* violent fell swoop." The gun fires as the two Buffys recognize each other. The Buffybot calls out an unheard "Buffy!," the real Buffy screams "No!," her first word since emerging from the grave, and the bikes roar off in different directions, tearing the body of the Buffybot into pieces before Buffy's eyes.

The symbolic, metaphoric, and structural importance of this scene is evident on several fronts. Razor's heralding of a "new era" evokes *BtVS*'s move to a new network, while Buffy's watching herself being ripped violently apart proclaims the emergence of a darker, more violent series. Buffy's destroyed body is a metaphor for the dark and fragmented Season Six, encapsulating questions about how she will react to her own death, whether she will be able to put herself back together, and if she can accept and move beyond the death and violence that define her renewed existence as a Slayer. The doubling of Buffy with the Buffybot is emblematic of the splitting which Buffy will experience in multiple spheres and across the season, including the division between her sexual relations with Spike and the front she presents to her friends, and the psychic confusion she will suffer at the hands of the Trio. Further, Buffy's body itself will become a site of questioning. Her liminal status between living and dying forms a location at which ideas about life-death, human-not human, heaven-hell, here-not here are negotiated throughout Season Six. The scene also presents a larger project for Seasons Six and Seven, which use the idea of the body as a space to question ideas of fragmentation, unity, and continuity, and to explore what it is that makes us human. Our ideas of solidity and of certainty reside in the fragile security that we know who we are, and that we know the limits and boundaries of our own skin, and from the pieces of the Buffybot, to Buffy's "No!," to later scenes of violation, flaying, and torture, Seasons Six and Seven continually investigate this sense of certainty through challenges to the idea of bodily integrity.

When Dawn picks her way through the broken body parts, the robot suddenly opens its eyes wide and asks, "Where did I go?" Dawn slowly realizes that the question refers to the "real" Buffy, but it also resonates on a deeper level. The robot's final, "Where did I go?" along with the first sentence Buffy asks Dawn, "Is this Hell?" form the framing questions of Seasons Six and Seven, seasons that will be defined and characterized by

questions. Buffy's existential questions, from "Where did I go?" and "Is this Hell?" which develop into "why am I here?" and "what is my purpose?" as well as the frequently asked, "What did you do?" go unanswered, and are instead established as unanswerable. Willow's spell, Razor's words, and the broken robot are all violent figures of rupture — figures that explore and enact a breaking away from the expected, safe, and predictable into territory that destabilizes the ground of understanding. By the end of Season Six, the Hellmouth is no longer just beneath Sunnydale, it is beneath viewers of the show as well.

By Season Seven, although Buffy appears to have put herself back together, her most common answer to difficult questions will be only a repeated, "I don't know." If Season Six offered a more violent and fragmented vision, then Season Seven challenges expectations through disruptions to the expected linear viewing experience. Although critics such as Elizabeth Rambo and James South have argued persuasively for the "philosophical consistency" of Season Seven (South) and its "remarkable coherence" (Rambo, 32), the arc of the entire series can also be seen as a move from coherence to incoherence, order to chaos. The final two seasons are about constructing new identities and new modes of organizing information — constructions that will question (although not abandon) concepts of linearity, duality, and causality. From Buffy's heaven, which shouldn't exist, to the shocking theme of rape, to evil characters that make little narrative or logical sense, both Seasons Six and Seven remove the grounds of certainty from which standard views of understanding narrative depend, moving instead towards a network of fragmentation and chaos.

"Things That Are Not": Negative Spaces of Instability

The violence required for bringing Buffy back to life, her terror when it happens, and the force of her later revelation that she believes herself to have been ripped out of heaven establish her return as an important rupture within Season Six. Buffy shares her feelings about it with Spike:

I was happy.... At peace.... And I was warm and I was loved and I was finished. Complete. I don't understand about theology or dimensions, or any of it really, but I think I was in heaven ["After Life," 6.3].

This heaven seems far removed from the Christian ideal, and more like a state of absence or nothingness: Buffy was happy because she was *not*. Furthermore, her concept of heaven as a negative space is

thematically interwoven with her questioning of herself as human. Her conception of heavenly existence is strongly connected to other, more negative (and less angelic) states of being in which she is no longer present, and Buffy's absent presence in Season Six continually challenges the ontology of being and not being. If she was not really here when she existed as the Buffybot, her return, in her original, human form cannot guarantee her presence. In Season Five, Dawn profoundly said of Spike, "Chip — soul — same dif"; now, in Season Six, she cuddles with the Buffybot, only to later tell the human Buffy, "You're not really here anyway" ("Dead Things," 6.13). Buffy strikingly embodies the final line of John Donne's "A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy's Day": "I am re-begot / Of absence, darkness, death; things that are not." What really is the difference between the Buffybot and the Buffy-not? Buffy's idea of her heavenly state is a form of negative theology, as she describes a divine experience by what it *is not*: "no pain, no doubt." Though encouraged to understand Sunnydale as hell, we are uneasy at the idea of heaven as a blissful non-existence: it is too final, too totally unimaginable.

If we are unable to comprehend or fully accept the radical non-being that constituted Buffy in heaven, we are equally unsettled when we witness her, and the show's narrative itself, unraveling in "Normal Again" (6.17), where Buffy's hallucination that she is in an asylum offers another means of escape. Located at an uneasy place in the middle of Season Six, the episode shows Buffy expressing the desire to leave her life that drove her suicide attempt in the musical episode, and that she experiences throughout the season. After Buffy has ultimately rejected the institution and chosen the reality of Sunnydale, the doctor looks into her eyes and says, "I'm afraid we lost her." This surprising final moment invites troubling interpretations: unless the institution is somehow real, it makes no linear or literal sense. While few viewers could accept that the show would employ the "it was all a dream," cliché, the other alternative, that the writers would willingly allow uncertainty as to which reality Buffy occupies, is also disquieting. The scene and its links to Buffy's idea of heaven present irresolvable challenges to the moral or narrative continuity of the season. Buffy's doctor insists that her "fantasy world" of slayers and vampires is coming apart — Dawn's arrival caused "inconsistencies," and the grand monsters have become "three pathetic little men" — a meta-critical and postmodern comment on the discontinuities of the show itself in Season Six. "Normal Again" forces viewers to acknowledge fictionality, to see the cracks in the narrative — to be aware of an imperfect text.

Dead Things

At the beginning of Season Six, the dismembered Buffybot, its remains left in the street and never properly disposed of, foreshadows the human Buffy's traumatized condition upon her return, which will be fragmented, lost, difficult to piece together. Where Buffy's sojourn in heaven is beyond our knowledge, her reentry into Sunnydale is a psychic trauma with profound and continuing impact, echoed in further traumas that image rupture for viewers of the series. Thus, the splitting and splintering of Buffy's (robot) body and (human) psyche prepares us for what comes later, repeated in many facets of Buffy's existence and in the series as a whole.

The literal line between life and death that Buffy crosses at the will of her friends suggests an important metaphorical boundary between wholeness and disintegration. By depicting her return as a traumatic event, the show attaches a conceptual vocabulary to an unimaginable experience. Psychological trauma represents a rupture or a complete break from the past (post-traumatic stress disorder was initially defined by the American Psychiatric Association as being caused by something "outside the range of usual human experience" [qtd. in Herman, 33]), and it offers an appropriate framework within which to understand Buffy's having survived an event outside of established (slayer) boundaries, both in terms of the questionable ethics of Willow's act of magic in accomplishing it and the destabilizing effects of Buffy's idea of heaven. It is not Buffy's death that makes her "detached" ("Normal Again," 6.17), or "dead inside" ("Dead Things," 6.13), but the trauma of being pulled from another dimension and then left alone underground.

If Buffy's friends ruptured boundaries between dimensions by returning her to life, her crawling out of her grave alone establishes a trope through which this act of violation can be understood. The intentions and methods of Buffy's friends may be questioned (in Season Seven, we learn that their act created "unstable disruptions" that allowed for the rising of The First, therefore indirectly resulting in multiple deaths), but that they leave her alone in the ground, in frightening, darkened scenes that take us into the claustrophobic space occupied by a Buffy who does not yet know what has happened, irrefutably offers viewers an image of trauma. In this way, the series layers a moment of trauma over Buffy's unknowable, indescribable experience that she believes was heaven. If heaven, or death, was beyond description, then leaving the grave — something understood only by vampires — is a shameful, highly embodied trauma. Buffy

conceals her sense of woundedness, but when she finally tells of her belief that she was torn out of heaven, the disclosure opens up the idea not only that her friends have wrenched her from a peaceful state of non-being, but also that they have violated her by bringing her back.

Buffy's feelings after returning from death reflect the sense of some trauma survivors that they have "outlived" themselves and lead a "posthumous" life (Brison, 8-9). Their sentiments reveal the feeling that their true self has died at the site of the trauma, fragmenting their identity. Having herself survived being raped and left for dead, philosopher Susan Brison writes: "The line between life and death, once so clear and sustaining, now seemed carelessly drawn and easily erased. For the first several months after my attack, I led a spectral existence, not quite sure whether I had died and the world went on without me, or whether I was alive but in a totally alien world" (9). Brison's statements shed light onto the uncertainty of Buffy's posthumous state: death may have offered Buffy a welcome respite from her calling, but being brought back to life through an act of violation prevents her from ever feeling complete, or even completely alive. Forced to live, she will continually wonder if she is dead.

If Buffy's task in Season Six will be to recover an integrated sense of self, she first experiences increasing fragmentation, especially through her sexual involvement with Spike. Buffy and Spike's relationship will lead to the most extreme example of sexual violation, an important figure of rupture throughout Season Six. But the idea of violation will often be signified through literal and metaphorical threats of rape, as suggested from the beginning by Razor's violent, sexualized threats, and by Buffy's discovery in Season Seven that the first Slayer was herself profoundly violated, or, as Buffy puts it, "knocked up by some demon dust" ("Get It Done," 7.15). The primal significance of rape functions in these seasons as a powerful trope evoking fragmentation and disconnection, raising questions about our ability to trust and to harm one another; they are questions that, once introduced, prevent us from existing comfortably within the world of the show.

Rape, like other traumatic events, can "overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning," splintering our relationship to the world around us (Herman, 33). By depicting traumatic events, especially rape, that disrupt the individual's connection to the systems organizing daily life, Seasons Six and Seven represent a departure for *BtVS*. In considering this idea, we may once again turn to the opening episodes of Season Six and the rampaging biker demons. Encountering Buffy's friends, Razor threatens the women with

sexual violence, more explicitly than any demon before him. "We're not going to fight you," he tells them, "we're just gonna hold you down and enjoy ourselves for a few hours. You might even live through it except that certain of my boys got some anatomical incompatibilities that tend to tear up little girls" ("Bargaining," 6.2). Although Nikki Stafford echoes many fans when she deems this speech "completely unnecessary" (324), Razor's declaration of a "new era" is literalized in his terrifying threat, which introduces the possibility of violation through rape, threatening the dissolution of bodily integrity as well as feelings of connectedness and unity. While rape may not be "outside the range" of women's experience, as Judith Herman argues (33), it has been nearly unheard of in Sunnydale, so that the uttering of Razor's words constitutes a break with the past.

In the final seasons, the show also establishes connections between the concept of rape and broader themes of violation by pushing us to consider what happens when the assailant is a friend or loved one rather than a demon. As Lorna Jowett points out, more than once during Season Six Willow's actions may be understood in terms of rape (40). Willow's killing of Warren in "Villains," itself an enormous transgression in the taking of human life, is framed in ways that evoke the theme of rape, through her "penetrating his male body with a phallic weapon," the bullet that killed Tara, and her stripping him of his skin, which renders him an anonymous, barely recognizable form (Jowett, 40; Simkin, 26). Ultimately, of course, Willow's return to Sunnydale in Season Seven will be achieved in part through her falling victim to Gnarl, who, straddling her and luxuriating in tearing away her skin, simulates her earlier act of violation. Willow's shifting role as perpetrator and victim in a related series of violations further blurs the line between the human and the non-human, the violated figures of flayed bodies striking but no longer adequate markers of the boundaries between the two.

While Willow's acts of violation are powerfully rendered, nowhere will the theme of rape as violation be dramatized as explicitly as when Spike sexually assaults Buffy ("Seeing Red," 6.19). Where the violent, complex nature of Buffy and Spike's earlier sex scenes confronted us with uncomfortable connections between sex and power, desire and shame, now Spike nearly carries out Razor's terrifying threat. Like Buffy's friends, who assume that she suffers in death, he insists that he knows what she needs, despite her protests. His actions extend his earlier assertion, in 6.18, "Entropy," that what is between them is real, as the rape becomes a highly misguided way to force his reality upon her, to finally fix the meaning of what she is and what she feels. The rape is therefore a violation on multiple levels, an

idea that is borne out in the repetition of Spike's language in another scene. As Stevie Simkin observes, when Willow penetrates Warren with the bullet ("Villains," 6.20), she declares her wish for him to feel it, in language that directly echoes Spike's insistence that Buffy feels their connection when he is inside her, and that she will feel it again when he forcibly enters her (26; n.25). The visceral sense of the real penetration is increased by its extreme contrast to the clean and non-graphic staking of vampires that characterizes the show. Accustomed to years of jokes about "Mr. Pointy," viewers of the show are likely to be astonished by these elaborate attempts at penetration and their clearly bodily consequences — not dust but wounds left in their wake.

In these scenes, the repeated language of desperation, vengeance, and desire — for power, for sex, for revenge or restitution — signals Spike and Willow's occupying an in-between space of good and bad, human and not-human. Additionally, in requiring others to feel what *they* believe is real, in other words, by dominating them, the friends who perpetrate these acts of violation will mimic the dizzying disruptions to time and space, blurring of identities, and repetition of events eventually effected by the Trio, and foreshadow the slippage between feeling, truth, reality, and violence that characterizes the actions of the First.

Uncanny Evil

The villains of Seasons Six and Seven serve to break the mold of previous seasons, forcing (often reluctant) viewers to revise their perception of what constitutes evil. The nerds of Season Six and the First Evil of Season Seven challenge viewers by being both too familiar and too impossible. Like Freud's "uncanny," which is defined by the juxtaposition of familiarity and strangeness, the Three are familiar as parodies of the personalities that consume texts like *BtVS*, yet they perform some of the most unbelievable acts, shifting time and realities at will. Similarly, The First is primarily psychological and internal and yet radically different and other, impossible to comprehend in its entirety. The fact that it is possible to describe Willow as the big bad of Season Six and Buffy as the big bad of Season Seven, as many have done, offers further evidence of the slippery construction of evil in the final two seasons. The evil characters should "wear a sign," as a confused Faith says upon her return to a more ambiguous Sunnydale ("Dirty Girls," 7.18).

Much of Buffy's suffering during Season Six is caused by the Trio,

the Three or the Troika, whose antics, pathetic at first, grow increasingly dangerous. With Warren in charge of technology, Jonathan working magic, and Andrew summoning demons (channeling figures of disruption from the prehistoric to the postmodern), they seek Buffy's attention even as they wish to defeat her, their interest in her failures and triumphs rivaling that of her friends. Lacking superior physical strength except when they borrow or channel it, their efforts frequently take the form of mind control, and they repeatedly succeed in deepening Buffy's feelings of confusion, isolation, and fragmentation by seeming to bend space and time or to blur the lines between life and death. As the season progresses, the young men focus their inventiveness, but also their rage, on exercising their power in highly sexualized ways.

In a pivotal scene, the Trio accidentally kills Warren's ex-girlfriend, Katrina ("Dead Things," 6.13). While her actual death is a shocking event, the episode is profoundly disturbing from the outset. In an experiment designed to test the "cerebral dampener," Warren goes to a bar, looking for Katrina, who left him when she discovered, earlier, that he had built a sexually submissive robot girlfriend ("I was Made to Love You," 5.15). Warren uses the dampener on Katrina, bringing her back to the clubhouse dressed in a provocative French maid's uniform, and making her behave like one of the sex-toy robots he has created. When Jonathan and Andrew join him in admiring Katrina and wonder when they'll get their turn, Warren promises them, "You play with her all you want, after I'm done with her." Alone with her, Warren tells her first "I love you baby," but then says "get on your knees." Dominating Katrina but willing to share her, Warren becomes a pimp, whose job it is to prepare a woman to service other men (Farrell, 284). His actions are consistent with what Kirby Farrell describes in another context as a "master-slave fantasy," in which, by "breaking the 'slave's'" will, the pimp becomes an executive self commanding other bodies — as in vampirism and the Nazi economy," and through which he establishes a "predatory prosthetic relationship" (284). In making Katrina less than human (as a human incarnation of the robots he made in the past), Warren, too, is transformed.

The Trio's violation of Katrina makes clear that no matter how humorous they may be — we laugh both with and at them, and, recognizing their sci-fi references, we identify with them more than we'd like — they are willing to perform the unthinkable. They are part of the darkness of Season Six, not just comic relief from it. While Season Six seems designed to make us uncomfortable with the boundaries between silliness and seriousness, fantasy and reality, like Razor's threat of rape, their manip-

ulation of Katrina takes us further into the territory of criminality and violation than we have been conditioned to expect. Their intended acts of sexual violation destabilize lines between the familiar worlds of fantasy they consistently refer to (video games, comics, "free cable porn") and one of troublingly real violence.

Katrina herself will make this overwhelmingly clear. In an initially consoling moment, the dampener wears off before she can perform the sexual favor. She is thus momentarily able to avoid being violated further, though she will soon lie dead, the Trio's first human victim. Katrina angrily voices what the audience may be feeling: "This is not some fantasy. It's not a game, you freaks! It's rape!" The word "rape" shocks Jonathan and Andrew, much as it shocked many viewers waiting for the scene to turn to humor. It produces disruption on both levels of the show, altering the characters' perception of events and also signaling a shift for the audience. Initially leading viewers to find the Trio funny and inept, in the characters' perpetration of real evil, the show violates expectations and seems to put its unstated contract with viewers into jeopardy. This one spoken word — "rape" — is a pivotal point for Season Six, piercing into the viewer's consciousness that this season may be funny at times, but it will be no joke.

Finally, the Trio's entry into real evil is underscored by their attempts to make Buffy believe that she has murdered Katrina. Once again altering Buffy's sense of reality, they engage Buffy in a fight in which she seems to have killed Katrina accidentally. Katrina's dead body becomes a thing from the moment Jonathan refers to her corpse as "it" (in the manner of Nazis referring to dead Jewish bodies as *figuren* in order to separate the material body from the idea of the human), and Buffy temporarily resembles one of Warren's robots, her mind controlled and her reality altered by the Trio. Later, in a troubling dream, Buffy sees herself alternately straddling Katrina and then Spike, handcuffing or penetrating them, or being penetrated herself, her positioning in the dream sequence mirroring her physical stance during the real events of earlier that night, and implying her belief that she is, like Spike, "dead inside." Buffy's dream literalizes the continuum between victims and perpetrators, the powerful and the powerless, the living and the dead that has been a frightening theme in Season Six. Measured according to their relationship to Katrina's body, a "dead thing" which has been manipulated, prostituted, defended, murdered, and dumped in a river by the time of the episode's conclusion, the capacity of any individual or individual body to occupy different spaces along that continuum is made all too powerfully clear.

Beyond their unexpected sexual violence, the Trio's ability to manipulate time and change reality made viewers uncomfortable by challenging the reality of the viewing experience, by making the suspension of disbelief impossible. Many Buffy fans like to think of demons and vampires as *possible*. However, as opposed to more or less traditional supernatural enemies, even though the Trio are normal human beings, they are also impossibly powerful. Their accomplishments in Season Six — disrupting time, discovering invisibility — are more dangerous than those of any of Buffy's other enemies, yet as more comic book villains than supernatural enemies, they seem frustratingly less believable to many viewers. The Trio again force a new reality on an unwilling subject, as to accept them into the context of the viewing experience is to accept such concepts as inconsistency and instability as part of the fabric of the show.

Dissolving definitions of good and evil, human and monster, and the unity of the soul are fully realized in the absent presence of The First in Season Seven, when the deconstruction of the unity of the body and the autonomy of the self that began in Season Six finds its negative expression in the incorporeal absent presence of the First. The body continues to be a site of contestation in Season Seven — note especially the ubiquity of bandages, casts, scars, and bruises. If holding onto the concept of the unity of the body is a guarantee of presence, then the absent and fluid nature of the First uses this instability to threaten the idea of order, and to increase our anxieties over the idea of the Other and of the post-human.

Prepared for by the destabilizing and chaotic effect of the Three, the First Evil is a force that is no-body and any-body, that exists as an unstable combination of the dead body that it occupies and the psyche of the person it appears to, and that very literally destabilizes the ground beneath our feet. However, in a reverse of what we might expect, while the Trio was unsettling in being too powerful to be believed, The First is a threat because it is too familiar and ultimately, in itself, powerless. Whether The First *created* evil or is created *by* evil is never completely clear. The First initially described itself as "beyond sin," "beyond understanding" and "the thing the darkness fears" ("Amends," 3.10). For Giles, "there's evil and then there's the thing that created evil" ("Bring on the Night," 7.10), but the other possibility is that the First, as Andrew says, is "made out of the Evil impulses of human beings" ("First Date," 7.14).

The villains of the final two seasons come together in the moment when the First appears as Warren to Andrew and convinces him to murder Jonathan in order to open up the Hellmouth. Operating through the physical bodies as well as the incorporeal presence of the Three is what

allows the First to unleash its own physical, or embodied, force from the depths of the Hellmouth. The manner in which the Three and the First enact their ruptures into the narrative suggests the concepts of "radical evil" and "banal evil" developed in philosophical works by Hannah Arendt and, more recently, by Richard Bernstein. The First is radical because it cannot be explained by comprehensible motives, and the Three represent radical evil in that their actions disturb the ground of understanding of those affected by them. Both can be understood only outside of our metaphysical tradition, especially as it is represented by traditional television dramas, which depend on teleological narrative. Yet both evils are banal in that they represent the most ordinary or internal aspects of the human condition: they are essentially, and only, all of us. Although philosophers argue over whether these two formulations of evil are contradictory or compatible, in Seasons Six and Seven they are symbiotic, working together. Evil is banal and radical, boring (or funny) even as it forces absolute breaks in our understanding of ourselves and confronts viewers with the impossibility of philosophizing their own metaphysical existence.

In the End Is Chaos

Repeated figures of rupture — unexpected images of rape and violation, unsettlingly ambiguous and unstable images of good and evil, and disturbing breaks in the narrative and narrating process — are all part of what make Seasons Six and Seven an exploration into our need for order and our resistance to fragmentation. Buffy may tell the Potentials that they "have a reason" and that they are not "here by chance" ("Potential," 7.12), but that is exactly the kind of moral and cosmic certainty that Season Six and Seven continually question. Season Seven, especially, abounds in statements of uncertainty. In the episode "Selfless" (7.5), Spike says, "I don't trust what I see anymore." Buffy claims, "It is never simple. It is always different. It is always complicated," and Anya admits that "I'm not even sure there's a me to help," three questioning statements that express, respectively, a doubt in empirical knowledge, narrative, and the existence of an autonomous self. Throughout the season it is stressed that although we may desire balance, order, a sense of self, and a definition of good and evil, these things are ultimately denied us.

Andrew most clearly represents this desire for definition, order, and linear narrative, constructing charts in order to discern patterns and creating his own coherent narrative of events through a homemade

documentary. A parody of that great symbol of television narrative, *Masterpiece Theater*, the episode "Storyteller" (7.16) with Andrew as the host, opens with a close-up of the spines of two leather bound books labeled "Nietzsche" and "Shakespeare," perhaps signifying the two great traditions of literature and philosophy. But while Shakespeare represents a paradigm of five-act narrative, for Nietzsche "unity, identity, permanence, substance, cause, being" are to be seen as only man-made "fictions" (*Twilight of the Idols*). Therefore, there is a sense in which Nietzsche and Shakespeare do not represent two great traditions, but opposing storytellers that cancel each other out and clear the playing field for new participants and a new type of story. Although, like Andrew, we want life to make sense as an organized coherent narrative, for us, like the gang in the final season of *Buffy*, there is no going back to a simpler more linear world. Buffy tells Andrew that "life isn't a story," and her character's arc in Seasons Six and Seven involves a gradual realization of the necessity of disorder and uncertainty.

The final seasons of *Buffy* force us to let go of our certainty, and to admit we don't and can't know. If Season Six is defined by the questions "Where did I go?" and "Is this Hell?" then the most important and often repeated answer to questions in Season Seven is "I don't know." This is Buffy's response to Dawn when she asks, "What does it mean that Spike is all soul-having?" ("Him," 7.6), to Spike's questions, "Why is it [the First Evil] doing this to me?" ("Sleeper," 7.8) and "What does this mean?" ("End of Days" 7.21), and to a potential's inquiry, "Are you, like, back?" ("End of Days," 7.21). This repeated response to questions of the importance of a soul, structure, plot, and meaning (and also the unstated answer to the final question of the series) pushes the season into a questioning, non-positivistic space of chaos. As Masterpasqua and Perna point out in *The Psychological Meaning of Chaos*, "a system in chaos takes the stance 'I don't know.' It is thus open to any number of evolutionary paths" (91). The study of chaos challenges "both the assumption that there is an objective verifiable universe and that there is a self-contained, individual self who can know the one truth" (Demastes, 10). The villains of Seasons Six and Seven destabilize and rupture our sense of a single reality, but rather than fight against that, we, and the characters on the show, must learn from them, learn to see and seek multiple paths and narrative. The new possibilities contained in the new, non-linear model are only possible after Seasons Six and Seven, after the Trio and The First.

To use chaos as a tool or metaphor of understanding is to develop new ways of processing complex information, and it is what allows Buffy

to visualize her plan to defeat The First. In their final act together — performing a ritual that destroys the line of power passed on from one slayer's body to another, therefore giving every potential slayer the power of the chosen one — Buffy and Willow must defy the rule of a “bunch of men who died thousands of years ago” (“Chosen,” 7.22). Our ideas of order, of power against chaos, all come from the rules of long-dead men: Aristotle, Moses, Jesus. Buffy and Willow's act can be seen as an act of anti-myth and as a dismissal of traditional metaphysical order, a releasing of chaos upon a cosmic order. If the many potential slayers in Season Seven were confusing for viewers, the shift to a world of thousands of slayers is incomprehensible. In this final act, Buffy attacks the socially constructed roots and apostolic succession of her own mythology and religion and rids her power of any sense of absolute essence. The body of the slayer, the space of conflict and magic (when Buffy's body died, another slayer was created), is now disseminated to a point of unintelligibility. The conclusion of Season Seven, and of the series, becomes, in this context, a metaphorical exploration of what it means to signify the end of a narrative, of the unity of the individual, of teleology, and of history — in short, it questions the ideas of origin, narrative, and continuity on which episodic television (and Western metaphysical traditions) have conventionally been based.

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