

## Chapter 11

*Death:**They're Going to Find a Body*Quality Television and the Supernatural in "The Body"<sup>1</sup>

There is the house whose people sit in darkness; dust is their food and clay their meat ... They see no light, they sit in darkness. I entered the house of dust.

Gilgamesh mourns Enkidu in the epic of *Gilgamesh* (34)

I really made that episode to capture something very small. The black ashes in your mouth numbness of death.

Joss Whedon<sup>2</sup>

You can shut off all the emotions you want, but eventually, they're going to find a body.

Buffy to Faith in "Bad Girls" (3.14)

The popular vision of Quality Television has certainly been slanted toward Realism, with its supposed transparent verisimilitude. In *Television's Second Golden Age*, Robert Thompson, giving his list of defining characteristics for Quality TV, notes that Quality TV series "are usually enthusiastically showered with awards" (15). Yet the Emmy Awards, bastion of conservative

popular taste, regularly disregard writers, directors, and actors from science fiction/fantasy series (with rare exceptions, such as Gillian Anderson's award in acting for *The X-Files*—but she played, of course, the character who did not believe in the paranormal). In the 2003 Academy Awards sweep of eleven Oscars for *Lord of the Rings*, director Peter Jackson noted that fantasy has been "the F word," the equivalent of obscenity among the tasteful—or, rather, those popularly presumed to be of mature taste.

In distinction from the popular view, scholars such as Fiske and Hartley have long recognized the constructed nature of the "realistic" view. Nonetheless, many scholars and professional critics have also equated Quality Television with realism. "Quality TV aspires toward 'realism'," declares Robert Thompson (15); and though one should acknowledge his use of quotation marks around the term, one might also note his disparagement of *Twin Peaks* in the same volume. More recently, scholars Piers D. Britton and Simon J. Barker have asserted, "The aspiration toward naturalism has become ever greater in television as the medium has sought to ape film" (18–19, emphasis added), seeming to imply that television is not yet evolved enough for true realism.<sup>3</sup> Science fiction or fantasy television is more likely to be described as Cult TV than Quality TV. And the term "cult" is typically pejorative, with the suggestion that admirers of such series are few and fannish. The *Buffy and Philosophy* collection, edited by my friend James South, includes a last chapter titled "Feeling for Buffy," wherein Michael P. Levine and Steven Jay Schneider identify the series as Cult TV (295) and castigate by name several critics (myself and David Lavery among them) for liking it. Despite Matt Hills and his discussion of scholar-fans and fan-scholars, many in academe share the view of Levine and Schneider. We like it too much, so how can we know if it's good? It must be cult, not quality. O Apollonian fathers of art, watch out—the critical Maenads are coming.

Yes, "realism" can be identified with received taste (and thus the established power structure). Nevertheless, more and more scholars (as, for example, several collections edited by David Lavery show) have come to be fascinated by television which is unquestionably not realistic in the generally accepted sense of the term: *Twin Peaks*, *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The fifth-season *Buffy* episode "The Body" (5.16), in which characters react to the death of Buffy's mother, has often been cited as one of the series' best (see, for instance, Jonathan V. Last's 20 May 2003 *Weekly Standard* article). Written and directed by series creator Joss Whedon, it generated widespread critical praise and, indeed, much Emmy "buzz" (see, e.g., Joyce Millman on Salon.com, 12 March 2001). It never

received an Emmy nomination. The praise right after its broadcast often focused on the episode's "raw, mournful realism" (Nussbaum, "Must-See Metaphysics" 58); and David Bianculli proclaimed it "super yet natural ... a gem of realism" in the *New York Daily News* of 27 February 2001. Critics often remarked on the instance of a vampire's appearance in the closing act as the single flaw in an otherwise uninterrupted realistic surface (the complaint was often implied rather than directly voiced; see, e.g., Bianculli; Phil Kloer in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*). This non-realistic element of the otherwise highly realistic and highly admired episode offers a special opportunity for examining the confrontation of the realistic and the non-realistic in Quality TV. I contend that, far from being the single flaw in an hour of "quality," Buffy's encounter with the vampire in "The Body" is one of the episode's great strengths, a key moment of fractal resonance. Both its immediate emotional violence and its connection to the pervasive themes of the series are significant. Furthermore, it is the necessary prelude to and catalyst for the episode's exquisite, visually allusive closing scene.

I would like to take much of the chapter to examine certain elements of the episode's realism and to turn later to the fourth act's intrusion of the supernatural in action and symbol. While Fiske's *Television Culture* in particular analyzes choices that construct television realism as reinforcing certain class views, I will instead examine Whedon's choices to aesthetic effect. Among realistic elements I will focus on: first, the special use of seriality; second, the physical presentation of the characters; third, the use of sound; and fourth, "emotional realism," to use Joss Whedon's term.<sup>4</sup>

Critics such as Jane Feuer, Robert Thompson, and Horace Newcomb have long cited the peculiar advantage television as a medium can have through its serial nature. As early as 1974, Newcomb pointed out as an important "factor in the television aesthetic, the idea of continuity ... the possibility for a much stronger sense of audience involvement, a sense of becoming a part of the lives and actions of the characters they see" (253). He also pointed out the problem that in the 1970s characters had "no memory ... Each episode is self-contained. ... With the exception of soap operas, television has not realized that the regular and repeated appearance of a continuing group of characters is one of its strongest techniques for the development of rich and textured dramatic presentations" (253–54). But in 1984 Feuer used *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to point out "Mary's evolution as a character," noting that "critics whose conception of dramatic change can accommodate only earth-shattering moments of reversal are likely to overlook it entirely" (40) because the change accrues gradually, through

the serial form; and in 1995 she also noted the "potentially progressive narrative form" of serial television (128). In 1996, Thompson may have made the fullest argument for this realistic element of seriality (linked most notably with the 1980s *Hill Street Blues*); in contrast to Newcomb's plaint, Thompson could now say, "Quality TV has a memory" (14) and, noting Newcomb's parallel of television with novels, Thompson argues that "In soap operas and long-running series, we can see characters age and develop both physically and narratively in a way that even Wagner's longest operas or Dickens's most extended novels didn't allow" (32).

Of course, many series fail to take full advantage of the medium's serial opportunities; those of us who were fans of *The X-Files*, for instance, watched with dismay as that series began to trip over the cords of its own story. But in the introduction to *Fighting the Forces*, David Lavery and I argued for *Buffy* as a series with memory—in its seven years, perhaps the most successful series ever in that regard. And in October 2002 at the University of East Anglia's "Blood, Text, and Fears" conference (Chapter 2 of this volume), I made the case for a seven-year narrative arc based on Joseph Campbell's monomyth. The *Buffy* characters have grown and developed and become intimately known to faithful viewers.

This possibility for character familiarity means that television can portray death in a fashion available to no other medium. Neither paintings nor symphonies nor plays nor films can provide years of connection with a character and then withdraw that person as suddenly as a death in a real family. Television exists through time in a way no other fiction does. *M\*A\*S\*H*, one of the shows often identified as Quality TV, shocked viewers in 1975 when it allowed the Korean War to kill Colonel Henry Blake (McLean Stevenson) after the audience had known him for three years. Viewers of *Buffy* had known Buffy's mother for five years when she died in 2001.

The series added to the realism by having had Joyce Summers fall ill as early as the fourth episode of the season ("Out of My Mind," 5.4); it is gradually discovered that she has a brain tumor. The sequence of events is played out bit by bit through the course of the next half dozen episodes, with an operation that apparently saves her in the tenth episode of the season. The audience is allowed to believe that Joyce is a successful cancer survivor until the end of the fifteenth episode, when Buffy discovers her mother's dead body. "Was it sudden?" Buffy later asks about the death of Tara's mother; "No—and yes," says Tara; and the same could be said by viewers of Joyce's death. It is an extraordinarily effective use of seriality to represent the realistic shock of loss.

The establishment of character over years which Newcomb, Feuer, and Thompson recommend is applied to noteworthy effect in the sequence of episodes directly relating to Joyce's death. As I have mentioned, Buffy discovers the dead body at the end of the fifteenth episode, whereas "The Body" is episode sixteen. And in episode fifteen, "I Was Made to Love You," Buffy reaches a notably mature realization when she says, near the end of the episode, "I don't need a guy right now. I need me. I need to get comfortable being alone with Buffy." The immediate cause for her statement, the person she has chosen not to pursue, is the combinant character Ben/Glory. The audience knows they share one body, though Buffy does not. Glory, the self-centered, clothes-obsessed blonde goddess, is a parody of the kind of character the unobservant sometimes believe Buffy to be; and the handsome but ultimately self-centered young doctor Ben seems the incarnation of the traditional male "good catch." Buffy has turned away from a two-sided, double-gendered, superficial version of the old-fashioned American Girl's Dream. It is an act of significant maturity. Thus it is all the more poignant that, when she confronts her mother's body a few moments later, Buffy's last words in the episode are "Mom? Mom? Mommy?" Her emotional regression highlights the fact that this is yet another test she must pass on her way to adulthood.

The preceding episode, therefore, specifically aims the serial story at the theme of maturation. The use of serial development of characterization is clear. Even further, I would note, Buffy makes another use of the temporal nature of serial television in presenting the death of Buffy's mother. The last scene of episode fifteen is replayed as the first scene of the next episode. David Lavery, in his "Apocalyptic Apocalypses: The Narrative Eschatology of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" (*Slayage* 9, 2003), categorizes the ending of "I Was Made to Love Her" as, in Buffyspeak, "set-uppy"; preparing the way for a narrative pay-off. He notes that as many as thirty Buffy episodes fit into this category. None of these, however, had ever before reiterated an entire scene (as Joss Whedon notes in his commentary on "The Body"). Joyce's wide-eyed corpse clearly displays her death to the audience, if not to her desperate daughter; this is not a simple cliffhanger. But the fact that the content of the event reaches outside the confines of the single episode gives the effect of a reality that extends beyond the conventional limitations of the episode, even in its contemporaneous serialized form. There is life between the episodes.<sup>5</sup>

The use of seriality, then, clearly plants "The Body" in a field of relative realism. Just as important, however, is the immediate visual presentation

of the episode, most notably the physical presentation of the characters. Buffy has long been interrogated—particularly in terms of its feminism—because of the glamorous image of its stars, above all, Sarah Michelle Gellar, aka the Maybelline Makeup representative. Patricia Pender has nicely summarized (before challenging) complaints in this regard; as she says, Buffy "might justifiably be accused of subscribing to, and therefore reinscribing, commercial and patriarchal standards of feminine beauty: she is young, blond, slim, and vigilantly fashion-conscious" (36). Sheryl Vint has argued for the importance of distinguishing between the representations of Gellar (in ads and interviews, for instance) and the representations of Buffy herself. Though I will not interrupt this discussion to illustrate at length, I would argue that there have been, throughout the series, instances of normalizing the physical presentation of the character. In any case, for anyone willing to watch with open eyes, it can be seen that "The Body" realistically presents the character as far from glamorous. Joss Whedon has spoken more than once of his wish to engage viewers, and particularly young men, to the point that they might feel comfortable with a strong female character. In the early seasons, Buffy's appearance is almost always conventionally attractive. By the time of the fifth season, he could risk showing a young woman as she might really appear in the stress of waiting at the hospital to hear the verdict on the nature of her mother's death. Instead of seeing her dancing through a choreographed fight sequence punctuated by quips, we see her sitting, slumped, almost unable to speak. Her tied-back hair looks flat and a bit greasy; her skin is pale; there are shadows under her eyes. The v-neckline of her red sweater is slightly askew, not showing cleavage but bony collarbone. Under the harsh hospital lights she is seated next to the blue-clad Tara, a character whose more or less average body size has always presented resistance to Hollywood standards. I defy anyone to find glamour in that scene.

In fact, while Buffy's physical presentation is notably realistic, perhaps in part by contrast with her normal appearance, still all of the characters in "The Body" are presented in a physically realistic fashion. In particular, the dead body of Joyce is not a traditional Hollywood corpse. Her eyes are not closed as if in sleep; her limbs are not charmingly disposed. She is open-eyed, stiff, and pale. A close-up of her dead body, focusing on the face and upper torso, is the opening shot in each of the three acts after the first, in which Buffy discovers her, open-eyed and splayed stiff-limbed on their couch. The reiterated physical presentations of the characters combine to suggest physical vulnerability, mortality, just as glamour (consider the

magical connotation of the word) futilely attempts to suggest immortal, invulnerable beauty. "Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come" (Hamlet, 5.1—the gravediggers' scene).<sup>6</sup>

The third element of realism in "The Body" has often been briefly noted: its use of sound. The entire series makes a careful, conscious use of sound, but this episode is particularly noteworthy. Other than the theme song, this episode has no non-diegetic music. A number of critics have commented on the lack of background music as a reinforcement of the episode's realism. But, just as the realistic presentation of Joyce's dead body is artfully selected to frame the opening of each act, so too the use of sound is both "realistic" and artfully structured.

I've commented at length in Chapter 2 on the use of sound in the first act, so I'll limit myself here. We hear and see wind chimes moving in an open window, suggesting the sensation of a breeze and the beauty of the outdoor world at the same time that we hear Buffy vomit in reaction to the realization that her mother is indeed dead. The wind of the world is still there, and she faces it for a moment, rising to open the back door and stand listening to the sound of children, the sound of distant music, of more distant ocean waves. This selection of sounds is on the surface realistic for a California neighborhood, but they are clearly selected for their symbolic value as well—the ocean of life continuing beyond her door. Never before or after do we hear the ocean from Buffy's home.

The next act begins with the single sound of the zipper of the body bag in which we see Joyce being enclosed. The zipper sound bleeds over into the next visual, in which we see Dawn standing in her school restroom, her friend Lisa about to emerge from a toilet stall. In this act, Buffy tells Dawn of their mother's death. She leads Dawn from her art class, a room enclosed in large glass windows, and the point of view shifts from the hallway in which they speak to the students and teacher (who looks very like Joyce—a live counterpoint to their dead mother) standing, watching in frozen sympathy from within the class. Thus, we hear Buffy and Dawn's conversation until just before the moment in which Buffy speaks the news of her death, when the point of view changes; realistically, we cannot hear the announcement of death; we, the students, the teacher, see through the glass, not darkly, but unable to touch them through the separation, the screen between us (whether it is the classroom window or the TV screen). Our hearing of Dawn's "no" is muted. Again, every sound is realistic, but the choice of the moment to shift the point of view and to shift the

presentation of sound is made to emphasize the emotion and convey the theme of the emotional isolation of the survivors.

Similarly, in the third act, when we first see Anya and Xander, the use of sound is both realistic and constructed to effect. Just as we have seen Buffy and Dawn through glass, so now we see Anya, quiet and physically withdrawn, through the glass of an automobile windshield. When the camera shows Xander, we hear the sound of the car, no speech from the characters. But in the moments before, during the shot of Anya from outside the car through the glass, we do not hear the sound of the car; the scene starts, in fact, with no sound, diegetic or otherwise. Both the separation of the glass and the soundlessness seem to suggest the character's withdrawal. In fact, the now-silent Anya will soon verbally express her emotional difficulty in an outpouring which viewers found memorable because, in language both realistic and profound, she voices a question for many:

I don't understand how all this 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 any more. It's stupid. It's mortal and stupid. And, and, Xander's crying and not talking, and, and I was having fruit punch, and I thought, well, Joyce will never have any more fruit punch ever, and she'll never have eggs or yawn, or brush her hair, and no one will explain to me why.

The rise in pitch of Anya-actress Emma Caulfield's voice on that word is part of the meaning, a realistic sound of loss of control—an echo of the greater loss of control of death, which the whole speech questions. (Some time after noting this, I viewed Whedon's commentary, in which he points out that he specifically requested that change in pitch to give a childlike effect; cf. Buffy's regression to "Mommy" in the teaser.) The loss of control is also implicit in Whedon's structuring of the speech, with its realistic stops and starts, fragments, and repetitions. Thus, once again, sound—this time in the shape of words—is selected to be both realistic and thematically significant.

It may be apparent by now that the fourth element I wish to consider, "emotional realism," in some ways inheres in all the others. But I will focus on certain instances which represent the psychology of the characters, again through methods which are at once realistic and artfully constructed. I should perhaps first reiterate that the phrase "emotional realism" is one that Joss Whedon used repeatedly to indicate one of his major intentions for

the series (Wilcox and Lavery xxiv). His DVD commentary clearly indicates his aesthetic purposefulness in construction. For example, he comments on the framing of a scene in which the Emergency Medical Technicians give Buffy the news of her mother's death. Most of the frame is taken up with the black-jacketed back of an EMT, with the result that Buffy appears "trapped," as Whedon puts it, in her small slice of the frame. He notes his pride specifically in conveying the emotion through the framing. There are many more such effects, and I will here concentrate on just a few.

Willow, for instance, rather than moving with action-adventure purposefulness to console Buffy, spends almost the entirety of Act 3 trying to choose the right clothing to wear. Joss Whedon has reported that he experienced this obsessiveness himself in similar circumstances; and it certainly seems a realistic example of psychological displacement, obsessiveness in response to the lack of control. Not only the characters' actions but the camerawork also represents this psychological distortion. In one of Willow's speeches about her clothing, the camera cuts repeatedly, continuing to focus on her each time and from the same angle, but at slightly different distances. Thus the interrupting cuts represent Willow's emotionally uncontrolled distress and match her interrupted speech: "I-I-I should wear the purple [cut]—the purple I think [cut] the purple."

Similarly, in Act I, while the EMT is telling Buffy the terrible news, the camera focuses on his mouth, placing the top of his head out of frame. The framing choice can be seen as reflecting the psychological response of the character, focusing not on the whole person, but on the lips making the announcement. When Buffy telephones Giles to incoherently tell him the news, her point of view on the telephone shows the numbers enlarged, looming in extreme close-up as a reflection of the disorientation of the emotion she feels. (Whedon says that he saw this as the moment she realized her mother's death.)

The extremity of Buffy's emotion is also shown with sound later in the episode: in Act 4, as the doctor reports on his examination of her mother's body and tries to reassure Buffy that Joyce would have felt little pain, she hears his voice say, "I have to lie to make you feel better," while she and the camera focus on his lips clearly mouthing other words. (Similar effects appear in the 2001 pilot of *Six Feet Under*.)<sup>7</sup> The moment remains realistic because it can be accounted for by the character's psychological reaction to the events.

The audience is also drawn into the psychology of the experience through instances of flashback and fantasizing in the episode. After the

teaser (in which Buffy discovers the body) and the theme song and opening credits, a commercial break is followed by a Christmas dinner scene in the Summers home with all the Scooby Gang—Giles, Xander, Willow, Tara, Dawn, Anya—and Joyce, very much alive. Signifiers of life—food, wine, and sex—come together in a kitchen scene in which Giles asks if he should open another bottle of wine, and Buffy makes an oblique, teasing reference to the episode in which Giles and her mother had sex ("Band Candy," 3.6). The whole communal scene is a happy family ritual of the sort regular viewers know Buffy longed for (cf. "Pangs," 4.8). The small imperfections of life are represented as pleasurable, as the mother and daughter consult over a slightly burnt pumpkin pie (part of the dinner ritual). When Buffy accidentally knocks the pie to the floor, we cut from this small domestic destruction immediately to ultimate destruction—an extreme close-up of Joyce's dead, open-eyed face.

It would seem at this point that we have just seen a memory of Buffy's which concentrated the essence of loving family life in the sharing of the meal and its accidental interruption. Because Whedon chose to place this scene immediately after the first commercial break, there is not what Feuer terms the "fantasy transition" (Seeing, 86)—there are no wavy lines or music of the harp to suggest a flashback. Some viewers may briefly wonder whether this is a subsequent, rather than an earlier, Christmas (although "spoiled" viewers would know otherwise, and the title of "The Body" would work against that interpretation, too). To one degree or another, viewers will share in Buffy's wrenching return when the episode cuts back to the dead body; we share in the emotional shock of the moment: real emotion in the audience, realistic emotion in the character.

Similarly, a few minutes further into the episode, Buffy imagines that the EMTs are able to revive her mother. To strengthen her fantasizing, Buffy imagines the EMTs saying that they've never seen someone brought back after so long and calling it a "miracle." Again, there is no visible "fantasy transition"—no marker for the beginning of the fantasizing, even though this time the vision in Buffy's mind begins within the scene—so viewers may be shocked when the episode returns from a shot of Buffy, Dawn, Joyce, and the doctor rejoicing in the hospital to the sight of Joyce's body still dead on the floor of the living room. (The brevity of the scenes which constitute the fantasizing may cue attentive readers to doubt—because of the lack of development.) Nonetheless, this experience can be conceived as contained within psychological realism, the "emotional realism" of the flow of Buffy's thoughts.

Many other instances could be cited, but I hope that these illustrations suffice to show that—through the special use of seriality, the physical presentation of the characters, the use of sound, and the “emotional realism” conveyed through multiple techniques—this episode is both highly realistic and artfully constructed scene by scene. Yet the entire episode is imagaically and thematically unified as well. I’d like to focus on two unifying patterns: thresholds and bodies. As I noted in Chapter 2, the episode is saturated with threshold images. The whole episode is, of course, about a threshold event—death. Several of the threshold images I have already mentioned in the course of this analysis, and some I have yet to touch on. The episode begins with Buffy’s crossing a threshold: she enters the house of dust, the house of death, when she opens her front door. In spite of the flowers sent by her mother’s recent date, Brian—a sign of the life she could have had—here Buffy has to confront death. The camera moves with her to emphasize her desperate emotion as she walks rapidly back and forward through doorway after doorway inside the house, calling for and failing to find help from outside. Repeatedly as she stares at her mother on the couch, we see her head in close-up in the left of the frame and behind her, the stairwell. The stairwell in Buffy’s house is symbolically significant, often the site of emotional passages: for instance, Spike looks up it and Buffy looks down to him when he tells Buffy, just before her death, that she treats him like a man; and their positions recur when they see each other for the first time after her return from death (see Chapters 2 and 7). On this stairwell are placed several pictures of thresholds. In “The Body,” we repeatedly see, along with the stairwell, one of the threshold images in the right of the frame as Buffy’s face is shown in close-up contemplating her mother’s corpse.

As she waits for the ambulance and the EMTs, she stands in the open doorway but does not cross outside; in the upper corner of the frame, a small, leafy green branch of a tree waves—life in the outer world still—but she no longer steps into it. When the EMTs leave, we see her again standing in the open door, but not stepping through it—wishing them good luck as they move on to help someone who does have a chance at life. After she falls to the floor and vomits, she once more raises herself and opens the back door to look out upon the living world—but once again, though she looks out, she does not step across that threshold, as if acknowledging the depth of separation. Just so, Act 2’s school room scene behind the glass and Act 3’s automobile windshield scene reiterate the uncrossed threshold.

But Buffy’s friends do cross an emotional threshold, do go out into the

world to connect with her; and, near the beginning of their act, Act 3, the camera moves in through the window of Willow’s room and, at the end of the act, the camera moves back out through the window as they leave to go help Buffy. (“It’s what we do,” says Xander; though “How will we help?” asks Anya.) In the Act 4 scenes in the hospital, the door to the morgue is focused on—and the long dark corridor through which the doctor walks, steps echoing, emphasizes the passage to the other state of existence. The camera also dwells on Dawn moving through the same dark corridor (to face the morgue door) and later on Buffy as she follows Dawn. To save Dawn, whom she can hear being attacked, Buffy breaks through the locked double doors to the morgue, breaks through the physical threshold to prevent Dawn’s crossing the threshold of death. The uncrossed threshold images in the first part of the episode, emphasizing the helplessness of the characters, are in some degree balanced in the last part of the episode by images of thresholds crossed by choice.

Another set of images also unifies the episode thematically—images, not surprisingly, of the body. In Act 2, which focuses on Dawn, we see in her art class three body images which parallel her mother. First, director Whedon chose for the teacher a woman who looks quite like Joyce Summers—blonde, attractive, adult but not aged: the teacher and mother as live/dead counterparts. Second, the students are drawing a white marble, Greek-style statue of a female—the colorless stone and classic form a counterpoint for a live body—and the dead body just a bit closer to the stone. Finally, the camera also focuses on the students’ charcoal drawing of the artificial body—one step farther removed from reality. As Buffy approaches Dawn, and Dawn recognizes that some dreadful news is coming, we see her hand, in extreme close-up, drop across the paper, charcoal dragging down with her emotions. The teacher has instructed, “We’re not drawing the object—we’re drawing the negative space around the object.” Just so, the episode deals with the reaction around Joyce—or rather, around the body. “Negative space—what’s that about?” Dawn asks just before Buffy enters; it is, of course, about loss, about absence.

Earlier in the same act, we have heard mention of Dawn’s “cut[ting her]self”; the episode itself mentions family trauma and a rumor that Dawn was adopted, and faithful viewers know that the cutting was at least in part in reaction to Dawn’s questioning her own identity, her own reality—her incarnation in a human body. At the beginning of Act 3, the shot of Joyce’s body shows that it is about to be cut open, this being intimated by the sight of her slip being cut by scissors in bodiless hands; and at the beginning

of Act 4, the marks on her now naked body suggest that it has been cut open. Dawn's self-inflicted wound and the opening of Joyce's body find an echo in Act 3 when Xander vents what he calls "some pent-up ..." by smashing his fist through the wall as he stands just inside the doorway (one more threshold) of Willow's room. We see a shot of his bloodied hand, and Xander and Tara exchange small smiles as she says, "It hurts." It is a curious and, to me, inexpressibly touching response: perhaps it refers to his having created a physical copy of the emotional pain; it does recognize the fact that he feels the pain because he is alive—as Whedon comments, "physically, as a living thing, not just a dead thing." It is in any case a combination of images of the body and the threshold. Like Dawn, he has broken into his own body; but his attempt to smash through the wall is as fruitless as an attempt to cross the larger threshold they face.

The combination of images of threshold-crossing and body-wounding should not be surprising in a text that, as a whole, focuses on vampires. Buffy's vampire mythology does follow the tradition of the importance of the threshold to vampires. The threshold can, of course, be seen as a sexual threshold—vampires penetrate the body, and vampires can only cross the threshold to the home (representing the body) when invited. There is a notable exception: if the person is dead, the vampire needs no invitation: the threshold has already been crossed, the home/body already entered. And with this context we can move to contemplate the entry of the vampire into the text of "The Body." (Yes, the episode; but I'll accept wider applications of those words.)

With the entry of the supernatural—the vampire—the episode crosses a genre-threshold from realism to fantasy. "The Body" leads viewers to experience death in consciously physical terms. Buffy turns from thinking of the possibility of romance for her mother, smelling flowers sent by her mother's date, to seeing Joyce splayed stiffly, blank-eyed, on the couch. As she tries to administer CPR, she and we hear her mother's bones crack, with "almost obscene physicality," as Whedon says. "She's cold" [emphasis added], she tells the emergency worker on the 911 telephone line. Sense after sense is engaged in the horror. When Buffy vomits, it is "as if her very body rejected what had happened," as Carolyn Korsmeyer notes (167). Buffy pulls her mother's skirt down over her slip, and Willow later searches for the sweater she feels she should wear—but nothing can clothe this misery. In the autopsy, the doctor cuts into Joyce's slip and then her body. Buffy, waiting in the hospital with her friends and sister, inhabits her body in a fashion devoid of glamour, as she and Tara sit hunched together,

talking of their mothers. Sartre writes of the body as the signifier of one's reality (see Badley, *Film*, 28); and Nancy Chodorow collates Freudian views, noting "the reality principle is in the first instance this separateness [from the mother]" (69). Thus in representing the death of the mother, Whedon has chosen the ultimate confrontation of self with reality. Why, then, the intrusion of unreality in the shape of a vampire?

Buffy engages in another major realistic confrontation with death in Season Three, in the arc in which Faith, the second Slayer, accidentally kills a human being (Wilcox, "Who"). When Faith attempts to deny the significance of the event, Buffy tells her, "You can shut off all the emotions you want, but eventually, they're going to find a body." The authorities will find a corpse—or (as I confess I first understood the line): emotions will take shape, be embodied, made real in you. In either reading, it is necessary to confront both the physical and emotional reality of death. The third-season arc deals with the death of the Other, while Season Five deals with the death of the mother and thus, metonymically, the self. At the same time, it is separation from the mother that indicates facing reality; thus facing her death means facing reality and moving towards maturity. And as I hope I have shown, this episode gives an extraordinarily realistic depiction of the characters confronting death.

But, as Cynthia Fuchs has pointed out, this series has been "seven seasons of death." In episode after episode, Buffy "dusts" vampires—she holds off the fear of death for us again and again. For a while in "The Body," it seems she is to be allowed a time of quiet grieving with family and friends. But death is always there; the vampire is always there. A number of commentators have noted that, since it is Buffy's day-to-day job to kill vampires, the presence of the vampire reminds viewers of the unwelcome presence of mundane responsibilities even in times of mortal misery—and Whedon's commentary confirms that that is part of the meaning. But because of the preceding verisimilitude of the episode, the vampire's attack in the morgue—its intrusion into the realism—is as violent as death itself. It is death within death. This vamp does not have to cross Buffy's threshold; Buffy and Dawn have entered the house of dust, the morgue. The formal generic intrusion is constituted of the series' reiterated metaphor for death (the vampire attack) entering into the realistic portrayal of the death of the mother/self: metaphor attacking the real. It is the culmination of the unifying motif of threshold-crossing. In the context of years of instruction by the series, it is possible for a viewer simultaneously to contain the metaphor, the realism, and the meta-metaphor of the genre transgression.

Consider, furthermore, the construction of the vampire attack. Dawn, feeling the need to see her mother's body, has sneaked into the morgue alone. She is attacked by another body in the morgue, which has just arisen as a vampire. Buffy breaks down the locked doors and fights the vampire to save Dawn. Other than the vampire, then, the three people involved are Buffy, her mother, and her sister—who is often seen as a symbolic daughter for Buffy. Mother, daughter, self: in a sense, then, we see three aspects of the same being, placed against death. The larger patterns live within the realistic presentation. And in spite of the vampire's supernatural nature, the presentation otherwise does continue to be realistic. Instead of the usual genre convention of heroic score music, we hear only the grunts of the struggle between Buffy and her enemy: this scene, like all the others in the episode, is as scoreless as most of life, denied the usual emotional cues of music. The hero's opponent is not dashing: this vampire lives in mottled, dead flesh. Another series anomaly, the vampire's nakedness (continuing the motif of the failure to clothe death) reasserts the physicality of death. (Whedon says, "Here's young Dawn confronted by not only a vampire but a naked man—it's an intrusion, it's offensive, it's completely physical.") In the body shot at the beginning of Act 4, we have seen from her bare shoulders that Joyce, too, is naked under the sheet, before the doctor covers her entirely. In the confrontation with the vampire, the covering sheet is drawn from the top of Joyce's body. Stephen King says, "All our fears add up to one great fear ... of the body under the sheet. It's our body" (Badley, *Film*, 25). Joyce's body under the sheet is now as frightening, in its own way, as that vampire: mother, daughter, sister, death live in the same space: generation and dissolution coexist. The battle against the vampire Death results in pulling that sheet, that divider, aside. By the encounter with death incarnate as the anonymous vampire, the physical realism of the episode is made contiguous with the metaphysical. It is a metaphor as extreme, in its way, as that of a Metaphysical poet; John Donne's stiff twin compasses are no more strenuous in their extension.<sup>8</sup>

As Buffy pulls the vampire off her sister/daughter, she finally destroys it with one of the autopsy instruments. Struggling on the floor, she beheads the creature and, as the dust of its death dissipates into the air, she falls back, exhausted. Having dusted the vampire in the presence of her mother's corpse, she has saved Dawn, but we are keenly aware that she has not, ultimately, turned back death: it is in the room with them—flesh of their flesh, bone of their bone—inevitably, their dust as well. The camera shows Buffy, in her red sweater, lying face up on the floor of the morgue

in the same position that Joyce's body had lain on the floor of their home. Dawn, also on the floor, looks up to see just the edge of her mother's head above her.

The episode closes with a shot which visually recalls images from Kubrick and Michelangelo, in which a human hand attempts to touch ultimate mystery. In Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting "The Creation of Adam," one of the best-known images of western culture depicts God reaching out his hand and Adam reaching to God in a clear connection of the divine to human, the spark of the spirit. In Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the sequence titled "The Dawn of Man" shows the ape-like being reaching out to tentatively touch the black monolith as the sun rises behind it; and, as reviewer Tim Hunter noted at the time of the film's release, "the monolith ... represent[s] something of a deity" (154); and, he notes, by the end of the film, "Kubrick shows an ambiguous spiritual growth through physical death" (153). (During the writing of *2001*, Kubrick recommended Joseph Campbell to Arthur C. Clarke.) As J. P. Telotte says in discussing *2001*, "The genre questions its very fundament, hesitates in and even subverts its own efforts at explaining and schematizing human experience" so that "this world seems suspended between the mysterious and the real" (23, 22). These two well-known images by Michelangelo and Kubrick inform the final image of "The Body." Instead of the sun in alignment at the Dawn of Man or the Creation of Adam, we have Dawn aligned with our hero-woman. The camera moves to pull our vision to see Buffy, arms out towards Dawn, arms out towards their mother. (Whedon notes that he "desperately wanted" this "three-shot [...] to go from Buffy to Dawn to the three.") Dawn rises over their mother as the sun rose over the monolith. The last words of the episode are Dawn's question, in effect the same question Anya asked: "Where'd she go?"

In the last moments of the episode, her fingers reach towards her mother, as the fingers reached in Michelangelo's and Kubrick's images; but the connection is never made. Just before the fingers can touch, the picture cuts to black; the episode is over. That unmitigated cut to black—sharp, sudden, silent—is itself a representation of death. We do not cross the threshold; the final blackness plunges us into mystery. At the end of this episode, we "see no light"; it is closer in spirit to Gilgamesh's mourning for Enkidu than the Christian work of Michelangelo or the superhumanism of Kubrick. We are left to consider the crossing from the natural to the supernatural: can it be made?

To put it simply: it all works together, realist and supernatural

elements alike. The realistic elements are an extraordinary replication of the suffering of those who see death. This realism is constructed from a myriad of choices, some of which are in effect visual or aural metaphor, such as the cuts interrupting the distracted Willow's speech. The supernatural elements are another level of metaphor which introduces the contemplation of the metaphysical—a contemplation which spills out over the end of the episode, as we are plunged into mystery. If we accept the fact that all television is constructed, then we may see that the distance between the symbols capable of inhering in "realistic" texts are not so far from the symbology of fantasy after all. I once heard Ursula Le Guin say, with a cheerful sarcasm at the sociopolitical implications of the terms, "Women write fantasy. Men write 'magical realism'." If I may advert briefly to Žižek's work on Lacan, we might say that neither realism nor fantasy is Real; both are variant kinds of the Symbolic. Those who do not recognize or maintain consciousness of the constructedness of television are less likely to accept the connection. I hope that we will work to expand the still generally accepted definition of Quality TV so that work such as "The Body" will be honored as it deserves.