



**Barbara Maio**

### ***Buffy the Vampire Slayer***



**Trans. Jeffrey Bussolini from *Cult Series*, Vol. 1, edited by Franco Monteleone (Dino Audino Editore, 2005).**

#### **Girl Power and Magic in the service of a cult**

The *Buffy* series represents a model of fiction which is perfectly fitted to the definition of cult: an absolutely original and intelligent production that hides itself in the false skin of an adolescent series and is, because of this, initially undervalued by the critics. Despite never being at the top of the audience charts (especially in Italy),<sup>[1]</sup> this series knew how to create its own world where the fans find themselves conversing in *slayer slang*,<sup>[2]</sup> enjoying the references, citations and autocitations--moving in a world which feeds on popular culture as much as classical cinema, on literature as much as comics, on pop music as much as Hollywood musicals. .

Just as the concept of cult isn't stable but evolves over time thanks to fans who examine their prior experience and renew it each time<sup>[3]</sup>, each little happening in the world of *Buffy* refers back to the entire preceding narrative arc and makes reference to the construction of characters who grow up with the viewer and who are reflections of the viewers themselves through a 'ceremony of appropriation',<sup>[4]</sup> permitting an immersion and participation which proves even more surprising if one thinks that the story moves in the binaries of the fantastic, the grotesque, the surreal, one interpretation which is repeated time after time, viewing after viewing.

Since the 1990s the term cult has been more and more often used in the definition of television series made in the mode that authors such as Whedon or Carter place beside some Lynch and Tarantino, entering, then, into a world reserved exclusively for a type of filmmaking that binds itself to a certain kind of cinema, the B Movie and, above all, to the ties that it creates with the viewer.

#### **How to Underline Umberto Eco**

The object of the cult must be loved, obviously, but that is not enough. It must create a world completely structured in a manner such that the fans can cite protagonists and episodes as if they were aspects of the world of the fan herself...Naturally all these elements must have a call to the archetypes.<sup>[5]</sup>

Only television series are fully adequate to this definition. And in many cases we can go so far as saying that the television of recent years has surpassed cinema in quality.<sup>[6]</sup> The presence of multiple stories, metatextuality, intertextuality, and intratextuality are elements often highlighted in the definition of *cult television*<sup>[7]</sup> or, more generally, of cult. The common trait which seems to link the 'objects' which come from time to time to be elevated to cult status is the overturning of classical aesthetic canons which leads, as was mentioned, B movies, genre films, and underground productions to become objects of a cult for the fans who appropriate the world created in the series or film in question.

In *Buffy* we can find all of these elements combined in a convincing and original manner, tracing new semantic paths of the definition of cult in the sphere of television. The structure of the series presents itself in an original manner also with respect to other high level series. As Roz Kaveney has noted "most American TV drama series, especially those with strong genre elements, have an anthology format—characters apart from the regular cast hardly ever recur."<sup>[8]</sup> In *Buffy* it is almost impossible to find anthology episodes; every story is followed from the beginning to the end over an entire season. We could say that a season of *Buffy* is like one long episode if it weren't the case that frequently the stories also continue over several seasons. In practice, to appreciate, understand and study a series like *Buffy*, it is advisable to see all the episodes, in rigorous chronological order.

During the arc of the seventh season the story develops in a coherent manner difficultly leaving unresolved facts, allowing constant and attentive viewers to enjoy the possibility of noting little references to the preceding episodes, clear citations, or the development of clues sown tens of episodes before. For example, the evolution of the character of Willow is looked after in an exemplary way from the beginning to the end of the whole story. The best friend of the Slayer is presented initially as a timid and insecure girl who succeeds, thanks to her presence in the group, in acquiring her own autonomy. Her emancipation comes from the study of the magical arts, a passion which is born in the second season and that develops and grows in the course of the successive seasons. On more than one occasion, especially thanks to the observations of the character of Giles, it was underlined how this 'passion' could be transformed into a 'dependence' and, in fact, the *Big Bad* (as the main villain of the season has been termed) from the sixth season was the same Willow who had by this time lost control of her magic. Yet—referring to direct citations—in the very last episode a scene from the pilot is repeated with a nearly identical cue with the four characters one in front of the other: "The earth is doomed," says Giles in *The Harvest* (01.02), "The earth is definitely doomed" declares Giles in *Chosen* (07.22) with a self-citation that winks an eye at the loyal viewer and, at the same time, pays homage to the series itself.

At still another level, the series absorbs every extra-textual change in a coherent way; thus when the English actor Anthony Stewart Head decides to abandon the series to return to his homeland, Whedon models the story on this departure with the character of Giles deciding to return to England because Buffy and, in general, all the group, no longer have need of a classic mentor since they are by now adults.

*Buffy* has, after all, the esteem of maintaining a very high quality standard in its entirety. The series never loses the will to experiment and risk, succeeding even after 100 episodes in truly astonishing the viewers with a musical episode or a final battle which, with the proportionate economic due, has nothing to envy in the *Lord of the Rings* saga.

#### **Buffy as postmodern series**

The turn to quotation, the use of different genres which are hybridized with one another, and the metareflexive and autoreferential story are all classic traits of what we could define as postmodern television—an overused term that we could nevertheless agree still defines a certain type of fiction based on common traits. The characters of *Buffy* move in a world populated by vampires and demons but extremely real. It is a reality anchored in contemporary sociability and culture, without direct references to politics but from which politics itself isn't excluded.

The characters live the problems of their time: what clothes to wear for a dance or how to ask out the cute girl from the next row of seats. They listen to the same music and watch the same television programs that we do. The references to the real world are continuous and they serve to create a 'sense of reality' which can also accommodate the supernatural. In a dialogue between Giles and Buffy in the episode *The Pack* (01.06), she tries to convince her watcher that Xander is possessed by the spirit of a hyena and, not succeeding in convincing him she declares that she feels like she is facing Scully, the protagonist of the *X-Files* who remains unmoved and skeptical in the face of bizarre things that happen to her. Also, in the episode *Band Candy* (03.06), Buffy and Willow enter the Bronze, the local hangout of the youth of Sunnydale, and find the adults of the city, among them their teachers from school, who are singing and acting strangely. Growing suspicious of this behavior Buffy proposes doing the *Time Warp*, a citation of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and Willow suggests that perhaps there was a Billy Joel concert in town. On the other hand in the episode *A New Man* (04.12) Riley, speaking of Buffy, says that she is strong like Superman.

Citations like these are present in each episode of the series and serve to anchor it to the real and create a sense of familiarity with the audience, especially those who are the age of the protagonists. Also from an extra-textual point of view, *Buffy* moves in the real world. In the episode *Earshot* (03.18) a boy from school decides to shoot his fellow students because he feels unaccepted. Paradoxically, this episode was to have aired the week when the massacre at Columbine High School happened, and the episode remained unaired for some time. From this moment the series suffered cuts and censorship and Whedon made *Where the Wild Things Are* (04.18) where the protagonist spends all her time in bed with her boyfriend having sex, a 'pacifist' response to the accusations of violence.

Going outside the diegetic context and analyzing the cinematographic, *Buffy* presents a model of authorship which is part of a trend already defined in recent seriality. In fact, a characteristic trait of the series of the last years is a different use of camera angle which abandons the flat grid that characterized the 80s. If we think of series like *24* and *Six Feet Under*, the images which are offered are very far from the televisual standard which often compels a shoddy sense of quality notwithstanding an interesting story. *Buffy* forms part of this succession of series which use cinematographic techniques like steadicam, the dolly, the flat sequence, and the abandonment of shot-countershot in each dialogue; Whedon—as producer and often director of the series—isn't afraid to use high film language to speak of adolescents and vampires. We find a nice example in the episode *Band Candy* (03.06) where all the adults of Sunnydale are transformed into adolescents by some magic candy bars. In the moment when Buffy arrives at the candy factory to stop distribution, the framing is from high up on some people who are distributing candy; the camera raises on a dolly and goes toward Buffy who has arrived in the car with some difficulty at the parking lot in front of the factory. In its movement the camera grazes a couple who are making out and comes to a front view of Buffy. Successively, always in flat sequence, the camera moves in front of Buffy who has advanced into the lot but stops suddenly when the couple who are making out, and who Buffy has just passed by, enter again into the frame. We discover that it is Giles and Joyce, Buffy's mother: the protagonist is dumbfounded by this discovery and starts a verbal exchange between the three in the most classic shot-countershot. Also in one of the most studied and interpreted episodes, due to its richness of meaning and references to the future of the series, *Restless* (04.22), we explore the dreams of four characters and in the section of Xander's dream we see an interesting flat sequence which follows the boy from his truck where he is selling ice cream to his house and then, still in another flat sequence in steadicam, we follow him from Giles' apartment to the University and then, again, to his house, all without continuity solutions revealing the scenographic construction of the set, a procedure made possible since this is a dream episode. In the episode *The Body* (05.16), one of the most beautiful of the series, Buffy finds herself confronted with the sudden death of her mother because of a headache. The dissociation of the protagonist in the face of a tragedy of such significance is underlined in the choice of the montage, in the framing and construction of the episode itself. While, in fact, normally the narrative construction of the episode is classic enough, with a linear development of the story, here the storyline is practically congealed around this death. The resulting episode is constructed in blocks with a first part that shows us the discovery of the body of the mother by the protagonist, two successive blocks in which the reactions of the friends are shown, and a last block in which all the protagonists gather at the hospital. Each block is not constructed in flat sequence in the strict sense, but the framings are very much longer than usual, letting the protagonists move inside the frame and allowing us a participant-viewers' gaze on the story, a sensation which is reinforced also by the movements of the camera which tighten to envelop the characters, turning around them and showing them in all their fragility. In opposition to this choice Whedon also uses the fixed camera with long, practically immobile framings to fix the scene. Again, Whedon chooses a type of framing never clean and centered, but privileging oblique images to underline the inadequacy of the protagonists—normally occupied combating demons and saving the world—in the face of the cruelty of real life. In the scene in which Buffy is in the house talking to the paramedics, the countershot of the protagonist is given in a frame cut from the nose down on the medic who is telling her about the death of her mother. The protagonist cannot believe this loss and we cannot see clearly the bearer of the sad news; we are concentrated on his mouth but cannot really understand his words. A stylistic choice which recalls the use of the hand camera in cinema dogma with framing that is moving, nervous, and absorbing. We find the same technique, but this time using the audio, in the final scene in the hospital. Buffy is in front of the doctor who is telling her the cause of death of her mother. She listens to the words of the doctor but, suddenly, they are substituted for other words, less reassuring than those he was saying to her. This last choice of the author was completely lost in the bad dubbing of the series in Italian. A last note on this episode is the total lack of musical accompaniment for the whole duration of the episode which renders the entire situation even more heavy and realistic.

The use of these cinematographic techniques assumes even more value because Whedon neither becomes enslaved to them nor makes a stylistic habit but employs these practices in the service of television standards. In fact, every episode of *Buffy* is structured in a classic manner with a prologue, the credits, three successive narrative blocks and the conclusion, all for a duration of around 42 minutes. The division in blocks, necessary for the insertion of the advertisements, suspends the narrative rhythm but, at times, serves also to create suspense.

### Between neo-gothic and teen horror

It is interesting to note how *Buffy*, more than many other contemporary series, does not reduce to a single narrative genre but, on the contrary, makes of hybridization a stylistic target.

Hybridization of genre isn't born with postmodern television<sup>[9]</sup> but it is in these years that it assumes a significance as stylistic choice of the author who puts genre at the service of narration. In *Buffy* this usage takes on a meaningful duplicity: the first is due to the integrity of the series that hybridizes in itself horror, teen-drama, fantasy and comedy into a metagenre which defines the series, and the second because some episodes specifically recall a primary genre like the episode *Once More with Feeling* (06.07) which imitates, obviously, the classical musical. Relative to the first point *Buffy* is tied principally to the horror thread, a classic genre which has been redrawn in recent years with the advent of films like *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) where groups of adolescents find themselves in the grasp of monsters and maniacs. This thread was then fed with tens of titles which reiterated the story in an often repetitive manner. In particular, the figure of the vampire is one of the most overworked in cinema, not only U.S. and European, containing more than a thousand adaptations.<sup>[10]</sup> Since the time of silent cinema, *Dracula* or, more generally, the figure of the vampire, has fascinated directors and producers, leading to the making of tens of films which have described the vampire as a monster of certain charm and charisma. In fact, the "un-dead" is often treated with a romantic and decadent aura, depicted as a melancholic hero who pines for love.

This legacy is traceable to the enormous success of the novel *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (1897) which brought the figure of the vampire to the centre of the narrative of the epoch so superbly ready to be a privileged subject for the emerging cinema. In reality, the historical figure of the

vampire turns out to be much less fascinating, more tied to a world of religious and anthropological traditions, which shows them in a negative light, if only for the fact that to live they must feed themselves on human blood.<sup>[11]</sup> In the first film adaptations of Dracula, the monstrous component was underlined also due to the lack of special effects which didn't allow the vision of the physical metamorphosis of the body of the count. Thus Orlok from Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) is presented as a hunchbacked and surly old man, of grotesque features which inspire, nevertheless, sympathy for his hopeless passion. It is difficult to find other representations of Dracula as repugnant if we except that of Klaus Kinski in the *Nosferatu* of Warner Herzog (1979). Cinematographically speaking, in fact, Dracula has been often tied to the elegant features of Christopher Lee (an actor who played the count on several occasions for the British Hammer Studios), Bela Lugosi (a highly theatrical Dracula in the eponymous film of ToF Browning of 1930) and, even an impeccable David Niven (*Vampira* by Clive Donner, 1974). Figures, then, extremely elegant and charismatic, with their hypnotic gazes and the way they don't ever show their monstrousness, if we exclude sporadic transformations into bats.

The double essence of the vampire, dead but with a human face, has been, in practice, seldom drawn attention to, leading, at times, to forgetting in the viewers that they are not confronted with the story of an elegant aristocrat but find themselves faced with a monster without a soul. Such duplicity becomes, instead, central in F.F. Coppola's masterpiece *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) where the representation of Dracula develops in the double image of the count as refined and exotic dandy in opposition to the monstrous image identified with the face of the old count, bats, and the wolf. Coppola creates a neo-baroque<sup>[12]</sup> gem where the continuous changes of the image of Gary Oldman don't disturb the participation in the romantic story of love, even when Dracula is only a mass of mice. The scenographic performance of this film characterizes it as extremely postmodern; the film presents itself as a continuous hybridization of genres; the references to painting and literature follow one after another and are superimposed. Even though not remaining faithful to the novel of Bram Stoker—especially in the portrayal of characters like Van Helsing or the pretenders to Lucy's hand—Coppola creates a film which is a pleasure for the eyes. The garments of the count in the scene of the final battle recall, simultaneously, Japanese art and the painting of Klimt. The insides of the castle in Transylvania pay homage to the Gothic image built on the many retellings of *The Castle of Otranto*.<sup>[13]</sup> The scenes in London of the first encounter between the count and Mina, in a cinema hall of the time, are a continuous homage to the birth of cinema itself. The visual beauty of the film cannot, however, make us forget the monstrous soul of the protagonist, exalted in the final death scene where, under the eyes of an estranged Mina, the transformation of the count comes to an end a final time, liberating the human from the oppression of the monster.

The human confronting the inhuman is at the base of the classic horror<sup>[14]</sup> genre and in *Buffy* becomes the norm since our heroes always face dangers coming from the beyond understood as foreign to our world, whether it be a monster or a human who has lost her humanity (as Willow in the sixth season). In almost every episode of *Buffy* different genres alternate and, often, overlap; funny moments of pure comedy alternate with the most dramatic or adventurous moments. We can take as an example *Hush* (04.10). In this episode the arrival of some demons in search of human hearts makes the inhabitants of the town lose their voices. This episode, silent for 27 minutes of the duration, alternates more amusing scenes like the slide show given by Giles to the group to explain how to defeat the demons that gives rise to a number of misunderstandings (a gesture of Buffy's is misinterpreted in an embarrassing manner) and reproaches (Buffy laments how she is portrayed in Giles' pictures), with more distressing and purely horror scenes such as the nightly raids of the Gentlemen (the demons who are inspired by the character of Mr. Burns in *The Simpsons*). This choice is even more evident in episodes like *Tabula Rasa* (06.08), a tripartite episode with first and last parts that are absolutely dramatic and a middle part of pure comedy or the splendid *Once More With Feeling* (06.07). In this episode the arrival in Sunnydale of a new demon obliges the protagonists to sing their dialogues. As in the more classic Hollywood musical comedies, the characters stop in the middle of an action to start to sing and dance. Here too moments and songs that are more funny and romantic alternate with very dramatic moments as in the song *Something to Sing About* where Buffy sings to her friends about having been pulled out of heaven, a revelation that will stir up the dramatic events of the sixth season. The direction combines videoclip with classical musical, alternating pieces in which the protagonists move as if on a stage with others in which the direction falls back to a frenetic montage in the service of the song.

Going beyond the adhesion to genre in the strict sense, *Buffy* ties itself to the neo-Gothic and to the neo-Baroque as well through all the visual imagery it offers. On this subject it is interesting to underline how, despite the series' inserting itself in the lineage of postmodern and adolescent horror of the 80s and 90s, in reality it ties itself to the classic vampire imagery. In fact, the heroes of the series fight vampires with crossbow, spikes, and holy water, using, then, all the tools and, more generally, a whole idea of the vampire which was depicted in the Gothic novels and in the films referring to this type of literature, an ideal which was abandoned in more recent films like *Blade* (Stephen Norrington, 1998), *Van Helsing* (Stephen Sommers, 2004), or, going a bit further back in time, *Near Dark* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1987) or *The Lost Boys* (Joel Schumacher, 1987). Under the California sun, the battle against evil takes place without the usage of modern equipment; the *Scooby gang*, as the group of protagonists has come to be called, relies upon hours of research of ancient texts, long organizational meetings, and, ultimately, on hand combat based on kicks, punches and, finally, the stake through the heart. Also from the point of view of religious representation, the cross and holy water appear frequently in the battle with evil even if, in general, the religious idea has more of a *new age* than a Catholic-Christian aura. Even the prince of darkness who comes to meet the Slayer in the first episode of the fifth season, *Buffy vs. Dracula*, is depicted according to the descriptions in the novel by Stoker, speaks in a strong East-European accent, a trait lost in many other representations, and is the only vampire in the series to make the human-bat transformation. In general, this whole episode is a long homage to Stoker, from the appearance of a mysterious castle in Sunnydale to the three vampire slaves of Dracula, from Xander transformed into "insect-eater" à la Renfield to the captivating magnetism of the pallid count which charms even the mother of the Slayer. This tie with the Gothic imaginary does not negate, however, the contamination of old and new that *Buffy* makes explicit from the general environment of the show: young Californians who are always well-dressed and ready for fun, like the boys in the Schumacher film or the group of teenagers in *Scream*. The new parallels continue with more explicit references like the escape in a camper in the episode *Spiral* (05.20) which recalls that used in Bigelow's film. *Buffy* makes contamination a stylistic target since it ties old and new, human and inhuman, hybridizing already-existing monsters with new creations. These contaminations are now accepted in the new horror imaginary as, for instance, in the film *Underworld* (Len Wiseman, 2003) where one of the protagonists is a vampire-werewolf hybrid. It draws on, that is, the most classic tradition of the genre turning it, however, in a postmodern key.

The Buffy-vampire ties area obviously central, if only for the role of the protagonist as the killer of vampires. The series, though, amplifies the concept of evil fishing themes and styles from the traditions of literature, film, television and from the horror genre in general. In fact, if the vampires always remain at the foundation of this battle, the citizens of Sunnydale host a varied monstrous fauna which is not limited to the undead. Already in the first seasons the *scooby gang* faces witches, giant insects, ghosts, Frankenstein's monsters, fish people, mummies, robots, and, ultimately, alien demons. Every monster recalls classics of horror, modernizing and hybridizing the preceding representations. As such the Californian Frankenstein of the episode *Some Assembly Required* (02.02) is an ex-football player from Sunnydale High brought back to life by his brother who promises to give him a companion, on the model of the novel by Mary Shelley; the theme of assembled bodies will be taken up again in the fourth season where the *Big Bad* will be Adam, a human-demon hybrid so powerful as to require the mystical union of the powers of the entire *scooby gang* to defeat him. The fish people inspired by *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954) are members of the swim team of the school in the episode *Go Fish* (02.20), where the entire team risks transformation because of the use of steroids and fish DNA to improve their athletic performance. In the episode *Ted* (02.11), the robot has the reassuring semblance of John Ritter, Jack Tripper of the sitcom *Three's Company* (1984) and, more recently, Mr. Dorian in *Scrubs* (2002), and protagonist of another sitcom, *8 Simple Rules* (2002), a well-known face of American television always identified with positive personages, here, instead, the lunatic robot assassin, who tries to seduce Buffy's mother to make of her the perfect wife. As well, the representation of the character Drusilla, mad vampire and ex-lover of Angel and Spike, recalls with her long black hair and long, straight dresses, other film and TV characters who form part of the collective imaginary, like Morticia of *The Addams Family* (1964-1966) played by Carolyn Jones who embodied the character from the comics devised by Charles Addams in 1935, or, also, *Vampira*, played by Maila Nurmi, television presenter of horror films and protagonist in 1959 of the cult trash *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (Edward D. Wood, jr., 1959). To close the circle of references and citations, observe that the film of Wood was, in its turn, an homage to *It Came from Outer Space* (also by Jack Arnold based on a story by Ray Bradbury, 1953), which was cited between the lines by Giles in the episode *Listening to Fear* (05.09) where the watcher declares that they are looking for a monster "from outer space."

### Feminine/Masculine: sexuality in the buffyverse

One of the most-studied aspects of the series is feminine representation. The feminine figure has been at the base of many series in the last years where the protagonists affirm an entirely new type of femininity.<sup>[15]</sup> The characteristic trait of this new model is the force, physical and moral, of these "heroines" who take on typically masculine characteristics without losing their feminine nature. As was underlined in the postmodern critique,<sup>[16]</sup> the necessity to assume masculine characteristics on the part of feminine forms was due to the will of affirmation, a condition denied to woman in herself. As Michelle Callander notes in her paper "Bram Stoker's Buffy: Traditional Gothic and Contemporary Culture,"<sup>[17]</sup> Buffy—and, more generally, the feminine figures which we find always more often in cinema and TV—represent a sort of third level with respect to the heroine of the classic Gothic novels, who always waits to be saved by the masculine hero. A second level, indeed, could be represented by Mina in the novel of Stoker who is defined by the character of Van Helsing as "with the brain of a man but the heart of a woman" but who, all the same, succumbs to the power of Dracula. Buffy represents the third level since she doesn't succumb, not even to Dracula, and she makes her weaknesses into strengths.

The birth of the character of Buffy has its origins in a new vision of the hero; Whedon has many times said, as a matter of fact, that the founding idea for the show was that of overturning the stereotype according to which "the blond girl runs into an alley, is attacked by a monster and is reduced to whimpering."<sup>[18]</sup> Buffy embodies a superhero without having the physicality. She is small, fragile, not particularly attentive in her studies, almost always makes the wrong choice in love. She is, in sum, an ordinary girl. She is like every girl who goes wrong and who pays for it. The role in which she has been put gives her remarkable physical power and the ability to heal quickly from injuries, but does not leave her any particular indication on how to develop her role. The presence of Giles at her side serves as a guide but only because Slayer and Watcher modify the rapport that there is between them. In fact, the other Slayers like Kendra and Faith don't succeed in assuming the role of hero because they are alone, Kendra because she has a purely professional relationship with her watcher, Faith because she pushes away any human contact. But in a world where women exit from the standard classical representations, the men also necessarily redraw their figures. The men of the Buffyverse are, for different reasons, non traditional figures. Buffy's father is practically absent. Angel, Buffy's first love, incarnates the romantic hero—also because he is a vampire—but is struck down by Buffy in the moment of reckoning. Even with his return he will be forced to abandon the city since he isn't able to be a valid companion. Riley lives in a continual insecurity of his position as "macho" in the relationship with Buffy and even he voluntarily abandons Sunnydale to re-enter the army, where his form will finally seem secure and stable. Spike represents a figure more complicated if you will than the two preceding ones since his love story with the Slayer is born in a moment of weakness and assumes violent traits culminating in the attempted rape of the episode *Seeing Red* (06.19) after which Spike too leaves town. Even the minor romantic stories of Buffy's (Owen, Ford, Scott) fail the moment when the partner at the time doesn't succeed in finding his "non-masculine" dimension while remaining within the sphere of heterosexuality.<sup>[19]</sup>

Also abandoning the romantic sphere, the position of the men in the Buffyverse is precarious. Xander represents the "normal" since among the protagonists he is the only one who doesn't have a special power. His role is that of the class clown of the group since he can't help with strength (Buffy), with magic (Willow), or with intellect (Giles). But even if the virility of Xander isn't shown in the classic manner from the fifth season on, after having overcome the identity crisis of the fourth season, Xander is frequently presented as the "man of the house" for all the girls, he who drives the car, who does the repair work, who carries out, then, all these little jobs which don't require exhibitions of machismo but that are usually associated with the masculine figure. In his normality Xander is also the only one who comes close to matrimony—even if it is with an ex demon—that is to say the only one who tries to build a life which would be the most normal possible in a world that knows no normality. The other male protagonist, Giles, represents still another type of masculinity. Being, in fact, the only adult personage—even if Angel and Spike are older than he they present themselves with a youthful face inasmuch as they are vampires—Giles doesn't need to declare his position from a sexual point of view. The problem originates in the role that Giles must take on in the group from time to time. The first identification of Giles is that of mentor, not only of Buffy but of all the group. His presence in the first few seasons is almost always one of cultural and moral support. In the moment in which Giles decides to enter physically into battle he is easily stopped by Buffy with one punch. Every time that Giles finds himself in point he is hit in the head and loses his senses, as he himself notes in a comic manner on several occasions. His physical weakness is not, however, a symptom of weakness in a general sense. Giles is the one who sustains the group by supplying places to meet, economic help, moral support, culture, and information; he is, rather, the only one who covers all the roles normally occupied by the family while not having one in a biological sense. And it is no coincidence that the breakdown of the group takes place the moment that Giles decides to return home, leaving the gang thinking that they no longer have need of an adult. The moment that they come to lack a figure of reference, in the sixth season, all the other protagonists make wrong choices. Buffy starts a self-destructive relationship with Spike, Dawn becomes a kleptomaniac, Willow loses control of her magic, Xander abandons Anya at the altar. The turning point for the definition of this character comes, in fact, at the end of the fifth season in the episode *The Gift* (05.22): the gang confronts Glory who uses the body of Ben, a young doctor, to materialize herself. In the heat of combat Glory abandons Ben who is left alive by Buffy but, some seconds later, Giles comes up and kills Ben in cold blood to avoid Glory reincarnating herself again. This homicide proves important not so much in the economy of the story as much as in the successive development of the characters since Buffy, as Giles underscores, is a hero and cannot tarnish herself with a murder, she must keep her goodness intact. It is Giles who has to do the "dirty work" since he is the only one "strong enough to do it."<sup>[20]</sup> His position as adult obliges him to decisions which are necessary even if debatable. One use of violence this extreme is, however, an act of protection in Buffy's confrontations, that is to say toward the woman not as weak but needing masculine assistance, a bit like happened earlier in the episode *I Was Made to Love You* (05.15) where Giles threatens Spike, who continues to pester Buffy, leaving him with no possibility of reply. Just so, in the last episode of the sixth season, *Grave* (06.22), it will be Giles to stop Willow again in defense of Buffy. After all, the power of Giles shows itself in decisive moments, whilst in the majority of cases he conducts himself as purely passive but all the same effective because of support to the protagonist, the Slayer, which is, besides, in his instructions as Watcher.

The masculine/feminine dichotomy was subverted on one sole occasion. In the episode *Halloween* (02.06), Buffy, Xander, and Willow, along with part of the population of Sunnydale, are transformed, because of an incantation, into the costumes that they chose to wear (Xander is transformed into a courageous soldier, Willow into a ghost, and Buffy into a lady of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century) and without memory of their real identity—apart from Willow who loses only her corporeality. With the assignment of these new roles, the relations of force are subverted. At the beginning of the episode, Buffy had saved Xander from bullying by a schoolmate. Now it is Xander who sets himself up as defender of the damsels, and he who must take the situation in hand to save a plaintive and helpless Buffy, a Slayer who says: "It's not our place to fight, surely some men will protect us." This defenseless and unusual Buffy pushes Willow to ask why she didn't dress up like Xena, recalling another television figure linked to the idea of femininity incarnated, usually, by Buffy herself. Even the dress worn by Buffy for most of the episode serves immediately to identify the new feminine model, a dress all points and lace, legacy of all the heroines of Gothic and romantic literature, which emphasizes the transformation, from active to passive, of the Slayer. To note in this episode is that, outside of the change of roles between Buffy and Xander, Willow also finds a new role, exiting from her usual timid one behind the scenes to take the situation in hand and direct the action. Also important, finally, is the new role that Giles shows, which distances him from that of the nerdy and boring librarian which had defined him as "feminine" up to this point, to reveal his aggressive and decisively male nature. The origin of the incantation is shown to be, in fact caused by an old friend of the Watcher's, Ethan Rayne, who has come to Sunnydale to torment his old mate. At the moment of this discovery, Giles will act violently in his confrontations with Ethan in order to break the spell, revealing an absolutely unexpected side of the Watcher's character that will have repercussions in the course of the storyline of the entire series. His transformation is all the more relevant since it isn't the result of a momentary change destined to disappear at the end of the spell, but the disclosure of a side of the character already existing in the personality that is revealed in public on this occasion.

A last observation on the difference of the genders male/female, regarding the origin of powers. The strength of the feminine figure is always equated with a voluntary choice and, therefore, active. Apart from Buffy who was involuntarily invested with her powers—but guides them in a conscious manner—the other women of the show “choose” their powers; Anya is a vengeance demon by choice and, given the possibility, makes this choice twice. Willow acquires her magic powers after long years of study and practice; also Tara and Amy, the other two women with magic powers in the series, are not casually invested with them but get them through free choice. The discourse is reversed when we are speaking of the men. The origin of the strength of Angel and Spike is in the vampirization which they suffered and is the outcome, then, of a passive process effected, moreover, by two women. Oz, the boyfriend of Willow from the second to the beginning of the fourth season, finds himself a werewolf because of a casual bite, a condition of which he will only take account when the transformation is happening; Giles, who returns from England to save the group from the madness of Willow at the end of the sixth season, acquires his powers from a group of English witches. In practice, the overturning of the classic feminine-passive masculine-active roles is legitimated and made conscious even in the definition of the origin of powers.

### Fandom and the University: who watches Buffy?

Many of the academic television studies<sup>[21]</sup> of the 1970s and after revolve around analyzing the audience of television shows searching to understand if there is a tie between viewers of a given program or, more generally, of a format. Among the arguments on which the most accent has been placed one can single out the studies on soap operas and feminism which aim to reevaluate this type of “low” production demonstrating how it can be the vehicle for values and notions that will then come to be re-elaborated by the audience—often of a feminine nature—giving, after all, a distinction of culture also to products not exactly academic. Television shows, too, have often been objects of study (think, for example, of the many studies concentrating on *Star Trek* or on the famous British series *Doctor Who*) but never before *Buffy* was the academic community<sup>[22]</sup> troubled in such a heavy manner. To say nothing of the fans who, at more than three years from the definitive conclusion of the series, continue to multiply. *Buffy* begins addressed certainly to “an audience of intelligent young adults who have a mastery of televisual conventions and their genres.”<sup>[23]</sup> *Buffy*, however, overcame this idea, capturing a vast audience, as much in terms of age as in terms of gender, thanks to its textual stratification which permits one to see in *Buffy* different keys of literature: a teen drama, a postmodern horror, a comedy, and so on. But the most surprising fact is that many fans are contemporaneously scholars who sublimate their passion as viewers in high-level research, analyzing the series from innumerable points of view.

The bibliography on the series is vast and continues to grow from year to year, containing cinematographic, sociological, and textual studies touching all the fields of research possible. *Buffy* has become, in the course of the years, an object of world conferences, topic of courses and university theses, and focus of study groups on television consumption. The fact, then, that these studies not only continue, but increase after the end of the show only augments the importance. Even the fan freed from the academic world isn’t a fan like the others. Camille Bacon-Smith notes how “the fan of a television series doesn’t limit herself to a single series [...] but once she makes her choice it will identify her in a prominent manner\*\*\*\*\*”<sup>[24]</sup> The most part of Buffy fans show a visceral love for this series which is evidenced in the creation of materials that we could define as of the third level, with a first level representing the series in itself, a second level which includes output directly linked to the show such as the novelizations,<sup>[25]</sup> the publication of the original scripts, the comics, all of the extra material presented in the DVD editions, or, the games released for Play Station 2 and Xbox, and finally the third level of material produced by fans including *fanfiction*, unofficial comics, web sites, etc.

By *fanfiction* I mean a story, which could be short or long, which is based on the characters of *Buffy* but that, different from the novelizations, can be non-coherent with the plot and the personalities of the characters. *Fanfictions* are totally unofficial, are written by fans (even if this doesn’t keep it from being that some of these are truly well-written), and are proof of how fervid the imaginations of the fans are, often departing from small particulars of the original series, such as a simple battle or a glance between two characters and arriving, in turn, at the creation of entire series composed of many chapters of hundreds of pages. The particularity of this production—which wasn’t born with this series—is the quantity. There exist on the web tens of thousands of private sites that contain some tens of fanfiction stories each. And, if we take as a reference the site fanfiction.net—which is a portal to fanfiction on tens of different television shows—we notice that while for the most part there are small tens of stories, some few shows have more than one thousand, but for *Buffy* there are well over 25,000 fanfictions present. The immensity of work hidden behind these stories reveals how it is possible to both explore and expand *ad infinitum* the principal story of the series. A characteristic that unites most of these tales is the development of love stories that perhaps had not satisfied the fan in the original story and that, in this way, satisfies her wish to see a story come to the desired end.

As regards the novelizations on the series, these develop in two distinct lines: tales that share the presuppositions of the series but develop an original story and tales that, instead, focus on a certain period of the series and rewrite events already seen on television.<sup>[26]</sup> The writing of these tales, which are official and authorized, is not entrusted to the writers of the scripts but to professionals of this type of fantasy-horror narration like Christopher Golden and Nancy Holder—among the most prolific in this area—who have in their background the writing of horror novels and stories, the writing of comic books, and the editing of the *Watcher’s Guide*, in addition to the guide to the episodes of the series, official and extremely detailed. The type of narration chosen in these stories and novels is the same as the television series, that is it favors a story superimposed on several narrative lines, it uses the same type of language and develops the characters already seen in the show. Often the stories develop in a serial manner that is telling a story in several volumes, each one of which is also self-contained.<sup>[27]</sup>

Even Joss Whedon himself and his team of writers and collaborators ventured into extra-series narration with *Tales of the Slayers*,<sup>[28]</sup> a comic which sets itself as prequel of the series telling the succession of Slayers who preceded Buffy in the story. Each author chooses a different mode of telling but, in this case, they also choose a different mode of representation such that the comic comes across as an ensemble of different styles of drawing as well as narrative development.

Certainly, the series continues to live for years after its official end thanks to the creation of a metaseriality that draws from many sources, official and less so, that moves on different communication models that go beyond television, and allows the orphans of the Slayer to continue to live in the *buffyverse*.

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- [1] The definition of cult is frequently linked to a narrow circle of fans since frequently 'objects' promoted as cult are those which don't gain a wide public success. This point also serves the fans of the cult in differentiating themselves from simple popular success and living the situation as a sort of caste from which the neophyte is excluded.
- [2] The term *slayer slang* was made official by the book *Slayer Slang: A Buffy the Vampire Slayer Lexicon*, by M. Adams, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, and refers to language used in the series which creates neologisms and verbal games, often using popular speech and making light of the opposition between the American and English tongues.
- [3] Such a definition is used by J Rosenbaum regarding the Rocky Horror Show in "The Rocky Horror Picture Show, cult film," in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, January 1980.
- [4] Cf. P Le Guern, "Toward a Constructivist Approach to Media Cults," in *Cult Television*, ed. S. Gwenllian-Jones and R.E. Pearson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London, 2004.
- [5] Cf. Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes. Travels in Hyperreality*, Vintage, London, 1998.
- [6] Cf. C. Kennedy, "Is Television Getting Better than the Movies?," in *Empire*, October 2002, or, in addition, P. Kramer quoted in *Quality Popular Television*, ed M. Jancovich and J. Lyons, British Film Institute, London, 2003, p. 01.
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- [8] R. Kavaney, *Reading the Vampire Slayer*, Tauris, London and New York, 2004, p. 13.
- [9] *Classical Versus Postmodern*, in *Film/Genre*, R. Altman, British Film Institute, London, 1999, pg. 139.
- [10] Cf. S. Jones, *The Illustrated Vampire Movie Guide*, Titan Books, London. 1993.
- [11] Cf M. Introvigne, *La stripe di Dracula*, Mondadori, Milano 1997.
- [12] V. Zagarrio, *Francis Ford Coppola*, Il Castoro, Milano, 1995, pg. 127.
- [13] *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole was published for the first time in 1764 and enjoyed an extraordinary success. The idea of the author was to combine the classical and the modern novel, giving way to a hybridization of ghost, adventure, and mystery stories which signifies the birth of the Gothic novel in building the imaginary for this genre which has, since then, been reiterated and legitimated in hundreds of other novels and stories.
- [14] Cf "Non Realistic Genres—Horror," in *Narrative and Genre*, N. Lacey, Palgrave, New York, 200, pg 234.
- [15] Among the most interesting studies on this point is *Athena's Daughters: Television's New Women Warriors* edited by F. Early and K. Kennedy, Syracuse University Press, 2003, where Xena, Buffy, Nikita, and the female figures of the series *Star Trek: Voyager* are analyzed in particular. Specifically regarding Buffy it is possible to find interesting analyses in the book *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy*, edited by J.B. South, Open Court, Chicago, 2003.
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- [18] See the interview of Joss Whedon in J.L. Longworth, Jr., *TV Creators: Conversations with America's Top Producers of Television Drama*, Syracuse University Press, New York, 2002, pg, 209.
- [19] L. Jowett, *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT, 2005.
- [20] J.M. Held, "Justifying the Means: Punishment in the Buffyverse," in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy*, edited by J.B. South, Open Court, Chicago, 2003.
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- [24] C. Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and Creation of Popular Myth*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1992, pg. 07.
- [25] By novelization I mean a story of fiction that has its origins from situations and characters present in the series. These novels are based on a rigorous rule of respect of the natures of the characters and of the tone of the story, often developing in an alternative manner the story of a moment seen in the television show. This mechanism allows the infinite development of the story, going in directions that, if only for reasons of time, the show couldn't explore. For an in-depth study on the subject of "Novelization" see "Bianco & Nero," *Fascicolo* 548, 01/2004, Edizioni del

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[26] Regarding the novelizations that develop original stories I cite C. Golden's *The Wisdom of War* (2002) where the Scooby Gang find themselves having to fight an aquatic monster, or *Resurrecting Ravana* by R. Garten (2000) where our heroes fight against a Hindu demon; for the novelizations that draw on episodes of the series I mention *The Journals of Rupert Giles* by N. Holder (2002) where in three stories the three birthdays of the Slayer, from 18 to 20, are retold from the point of view of the Watcher, or N. Holder's *Chosen* (2003) which runs through the entire seventh season again. A citation merited in part by its origin is *Chaos Bleeds* (2003) by J.A. Moore which is based on the second Buffy electronic game, in its turn "written" by C. Golden and T.J. Sniogorski, and that unfolds in a manner between so-called "hardhitting" games, that is ones of pure combat, and those games of investigation where the protagonists must resolve enigmas and discover signs through research, just as in the original television series. All the literary works cited here are from Pocket Books of New York.

[27] Among the best works of this type I refer to C. Golden and N. Holder's *The Gatekeeper Trilogy*, composed of the novels *Out of the Madhouse*, *Ghost Roads*, and *Sons of Entropy*, 1999, Pocket Books, New York.

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