Postmodernism and Buffy: Challenging Mass Media's Ideological Grip on the Simulacra

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Introduction

The television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)* has gained widespread attention and popularity from television viewers as well as many philosophers, as evidenced in the publication of books such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy*, an online journal, *Slayage*, dedicated to scholarly writings on the show, and *BtVS* conferences which have been held worldwide. In very postmodernist fashion, the show deconstructs and challenges many traditional notions of morality and truth. “Most of the series’ humor derives from the (sometimes contrived) irony of postmodern teens dealing with premodern monsters, without the assistance of the clueless or complicitous adults,” (Owen, 1999, pp.24-25). The show offers a unique chance to explore some of the ideas of postmodernism that have seeped into American popular culture, particularly those regarding sexuality and violence. Through this lens, *BtVS* challenges many of the ideological solutions dependent on binary oppositions in traditional mass media.

Although an exact definition of postmodernism or a description of everything that it encompasses would be very difficult to achieve, there are several aspects of this philosophy which are relevant to *BtVS*. Postmodernism is a philosophical movement that arose as a challenge to the metaphysical beliefs that have been entrenched in the Western way of thinking for centuries without any questioning or arguing. Terry Eagleton (1996), a writer on postmodernism, says:

> Postmodernity is a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity, and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation. Against these Enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of skepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities. (p.vii)

Television has long supported the traditional notions of truth of which postmodernism is suspicious. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard believes that an essential difference exists between the moving images of television and cinema and the other traditional arts such as painting, drawing, theater, and architecture. The more traditional forms of art dissimulate reality, whereas television simulates reality. A key difference exists between dissimulation and simulation. "Pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear. It is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary,'" (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 3). Television threatens a stable concept of reality precisely because it tampers with this barrier between reality and imagination.

Television presents characters who are simulating reality. Communication theory provides an interesting cycle created by television.

Social cognitive theory suggests people model the behaviors they see on television. "Acquiring generative rules from modeled information involves at least three processes: extracting the generic features from various social exemplars, integrating the extracted information into composite rules, and using the rules to produce new instances of behavior," (Bandura, 2001, p. 275). The person watching television will still pick up the behaviors exhibited but in a general way, *i.e.*, if a violent show is watched, they may exhibit violent behavior but not necessarily by punching or kicking someone else. Further, cultivation analysis in mass media argues that:

> Television neither simply "creates" nor "reflects" images, opinions, and beliefs. Rather, it is an integral aspect of a dynamic process. Institutional needs and objectives influence the creation and distribution of mass-produced messages which create, fit into, exploit, and sustain the needs, values, and ideologies of mass publics. These publics, in turn, acquire distinct ideologies as publics partly through exposure to the ongoing flow of messages. (Gerbner, 1998, p. 180)

These two theories suggest a very vicious circle in television spectatorship. As viewers interact with television's simulated reality, they integrate these simulations into their lives, thereby shaping a "cultivated reality" of imitation and identification. New television shows then simulate the current cultivated version of reality, which people then take and integrate into their lives *ad infinitum,* creating the ever-evolving simulacra of the American reality. This process can continue on infinitely, cycle after cycle, until no notion remains of what was originally understood as reality, leaving only the hyperreal.

> A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences (Baudrillard, 1981, pp. 2-3).

This simulacra is important because the dominant ideology of the American culture is closely bound to the images of mass media which are proliferated within the simulacra, and as the cultivated cycle continues, challenging the grip of American culture on those simulated ideologies becomes more and more difficult. Through the themes present within it, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* succeeds in challenging the dominant ideologies in the simulacra, which include cultivated simulations of sexuality, dominance, and gender.

The media has three major impacts on children and thus society as a whole: teaching signifiers, setting the agenda, and offering solutions to problems (Silverman, 1992; Katz, 2003; Fiske, 2003). Fiske (1986) argues that:

> The television audience is composed of a wide variety of groups or subcultures, and that in order to be popular a television program must be polysemic so that different subcultures can find in it different meanings that correspond to their differing social relations. The dominant ideology is structured into the text as into the social system, but the structure of both text and society allows space for resistance and negotiation (p. 391).

The dominant ideologies of the simulacra are continually cultivated through the solutions to problems presented on television shows. While Fiske suggests most shows present that dominant ideology while remaining open to alternate interpretations, *BtVS* actually opposes the dominant ideology of the simulacra.

Dominant ideology generally portrays a strong man as a hero:

> According to the media, such men are heroes. They protect their families. They are honored by those around them. They are rewarded with the most attractive women available. Any boy unwilling to engage in violence can not be a "man." Girls also have something to learn. They need a "man" to protect them from becoming victims of rape and violence. As cheerleaders stand on the sidelines cheering on the team, they are taught to reward the guys who prove they are men. (Goodman, 2002)

The very premise of *BtVS* is based on a reversal of traditional roles. The creator of the show Joss Whedon said:

> This ... was my response to all the horror movies I had ever seen where some girl walks into a dark room and gets killed. So I decided to make a movie where a blonde girl walks into a dark room and kicks butt instead (quoted in Tracy, 1998, p. 6).

That blonde girl is the protagonist of the show, sixteen-year-old Buffy Summers. Whedon's reversal of traditional roles positions Buffy as the dominant hero who wields an ancient power which allows her to overcome evil. This woman warrior flies in the face of the traditional male hero of the media, turning these stereotypes on their heads.

BtVS first aired on the WB network in 1997, depicting Buffy as a new woman for an underrepresented audience. The show was the first to openly oppose the dominant ideologies of American culture and the simulacra. This opposition is postmodern in the way that it challenges traditional notions of truth and the single framework of the simulacra presented on television. Much literature has been written about the show, including the book *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*. The editor, James South says:

> The main point of this book is to demonstrate that philosophy can bring much to the watching of *BtVS* and that watching *BtVS* can provide ample opportunity for philosophical reflection (South, 2003, p. 2).

One article in the book, "High School Is Hell: Metaphor Made Literal in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," by Tracy Little (2003) suggests that it is the use of metaphor on the show which highlights its postmodern aspect:

> The writers and creator of *BtVS* have done just that: taken what seems unreal and made it more real than the real. In Buffy's world, High School really is Hell, but isn't it that way for everybody? (p. 287).

Through the lens of communication theory, one can see that the show is also postmodern in the way that it deconstructs traditional notions of morality and truth, creating in the process an additional framework of ideologies not previously present in the simulacra of mass media.

Analysis

The first show of the series begins with a boy and a girl stumbling into an empty school and making out. At first glimpse, this appears to be a setup for a typical scene where a man physically dominates a young woman; however, the woman is revealed to be a vampire and she attacks the almost entirely helpless young man who is saved only by the intervention of Buffy. This first scene tips the viewer off that this show will not contain normative gender roles and typical media solutions to binary oppositions. While Buffy is very strong and manages to fight off vampires and demons alike, she still retains a sense of the mainstream simulation of femininity, even trying out for her school's cheerleading squad at one point. In a sense, Buffy *is* the cheerleader standing on the sideline, yet she is more than capable of protecting herself from rape or violence as well as protecting her family and classmates. "Heretofore in television, we have not seen the adolescent female body in this way – signifying toughness, resilience, strength, and confidence," (Owen, 1999, p. 25).

Based on these observations, Buffy may seem to be nothing more than a gender reversal of the typical media hero, but upon further investigation, one can see that the differences are even greater. Buffy opposes the normative male hero ideology while still retaining a good deal of the normative feminine ideology. This contradictory aspect of her character links her to the instability of the postmodern world of multiple frames of reference and the skepticism of the coherence of identity, while allowing her to challenge the single framework established by the dominant ideology of the simulacra. Buffy is not honored by those around her. She is shunned by most of her classmates because she is different, though she saves many of their lives over and over again. She has a very small group of friends, later dubbed the "Scooby Gang," which consists mostly of characters who would be considered social outcasts by most normal teenagers. Aside from her two close friends, Buffy receives very little recognition from those around her until the very end of season three when her class gives her a class protector award at the senior prom.

Furthermore, Buffy is not rewarded with the most attractive men around her. Because of her role as a hero, she finds it very difficult to fit in and to live the normal cultivated reality of the teenage life of dating, partying, and shopping. A common, recurring theme of the show is the disaster that is Buffy's love life. Of the three main people she dated over the course of the seven season series, two were vampires and one was a soldier in a secret military agency created to fight demons and known as the Initiative.

Buffy does not reap the benefits of the normal male hero, nor does she have any of the things the mass media normally attributes to heroes:

> Beyond her role as a slayer, she is forced to leave college and to get a horrible 'McJob' in order to provide for Dawn after their mother Joyce dies. She is constantly sacrificing her interests for the sake of others. Dawn recognizes this:
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> DAWN: Buffy's never going to be a lawyer or a doctor – anything big.
> XANDER: She's a slayer. She saves the whole world. That's way bigger.
> DAWN: But that means she's going to have crap jobs her entire life, right? Minimum wage stuff. I mean, I could still grow up to be anything. But for her… this is it. ("Doublemeat Palace")[1] (Kawal, 2003, p. 152).

Buffy's life is not grand, and she does not reap huge rewards for her struggles, but rather, she sacrifices herself and misses the teen lifestyle in order to do good for others which goes largely unrecognized. She has trouble dating, she can't devote enough time to studying, and while in high school she constantly faces detention and expulsion because of her involvement with violent events.

Two of Buffy's friends, Willow and Tara, also represent postmodern ideas. They fight on the side of good while maintaining a homosexual relationship. This relationship is atypical in the mass media of the simulacra. "Queerness is about destabilizing conventional categories, subverting the identities derived from and normalized by heteropatriarchy. Queerness defies binary and fixed categories," (Kanner, 2003, p. 34). By having these atypical and traditionally subversive characters fight on the side of good, *BtVS* is furthering the idea of postmodern instability

Another simulation perpetuated by the media is the idea of the superhero: “Society is held hostage by evil. The average person can do nothing. Only the superhero can defeat evil,” (Goodman, 2002; Kanfer, 1997; Tasker, 1998; Kinder, 1991; Silverman, 1988). This ideology is constantly fought in *BtVS*. Although Buffy is the only superhero with special powers, depends on her friends to assist her not only in researching the methods she uses to overcome the evil but also in fighting the evil itself throughout the series.

In the episode “Primeval,” Buffy faces a demon-robot-human hybrid named Adam that she is not able to defeat with her powers alone. She must draw upon the powers of the entire Scooby Gang including her friends Willow and Xander and her mentor Giles. Willow performs an enjoining spell that combines the mind of Willow, the heart of Giles, and the spirit joy of Xander into the hand of Buffy. It is only through the power of all of her friends combined that Buffy is able to extract the power source of Adam and defeat him. From this example, one can see that the superhero alone could not overcome evil, but had to depend on average people to help.

Xander is arguably the least likely superhero on the show. He has no special strengths or super powers or personal skills, and he even lives in his parents’ basement for much of the series. Yet, many times it is Xander, the

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[1] All transcripts in this paper taken from http://www.buffyworld.com/. Accessed 24 July 2003.

average person, who comes to the rescue of the Scooby Gang and even the entire world.

In the episode “Prophecy Girl,” Buffy drowns in a puddle after being thrown down by a vampire who has bitten her. Xander arrives on the scene and is able to revive her using C.P.R. He is again the hero in the episode “Grave.” Willow has become evil after her girlfriend was shot and killed, and she is planning to use magic to destroy the entire world. Buffy and the others are powerless to stop her magic. Xander arrives on the scene as she is about to begin the apocalypse:

> XANDER: First day of kindergarten. You cried because you broke the yellow crayon, and you were too afraid to tell 'anyone. You've come pretty far, ending the world, not a terrific notion. But the thing is? Yeah. I love you. I loved crayon-breaky Willow and I love ... scary veiny Willow. So if I'm going out, it's here. If you wanna kill the world? Well, then start with me. I've earned that. (“Grave”)

Willow proceeds to torture Xander, but he only responds with love in return. This causes Willow to break down in tears and collapse, returning to her normal self.

> GILES: ... Gave Xander the opportunity to ... reach her.
> ANYA: Xander?
> GILES: Yes. It was he who got to her in time. (smiling) He saved us all. (“Grave”)

Thus it is normal, average Xander who manages to save the world and at the same time fight the typical mass media ideology.

The above confrontation between Xander and Willow can also be cited as an example working against the mass media ideology that “Violence is the solution to problems,” and that one can “defeat evil through the use of violence,” (Goodman, 2002). Xander uses love, not violence, to stop the evil of Willow. While there is a great deal of violence in Buffy, violence as the answer to problems is not the overarching theme. “A morally viable alternative to unwarranted passivity and unwarranted aggression alike is the readiness to use appropriate violence in response to inappropriate violence,” (Marinucci, 2003, p. 74). Buffy uses violence when it is warranted, *i.e.*, against unwarranted violence from others, specifically demons, vampires, and other evil creatures. She manages to strike an important balance: she is not passive, allowing the demons to maim her, but she only uses violence when she is forced to do so in response to other violence.

Buffy is celebrated as a hero not because she uses violence, but because she *avoids* using it whenever possible. In season five, Glory is a goddess capable of destroying the world, and she involuntarily shares a body with the normal human Ben. Buffy chooses not to kill Ben – not to use violence – and puts herself and others at risk with this choice; yet, she is still celebrated as the hero:

> BEN: She [Buffy] could’ve killed me.
> GILES: No, she couldn’t. And sooner or later Glory will emerge and make her pay for that mercy – and the world with her. Buffy even knows that and she still couldn’t take a human

> life. She's a hero, you see. She's not like us. ("The Gift")

Violence is not upheld as the ultimate answer in *BtVS* as it is in many shows such as *24* or movies such as *Terminator* or *Charlie's Angels*, itself derived from a television show.

Love is a very complex theme throughout the show. Rather than being presented as the solution to problems, it sometimes seems as if love is the *catalyst* of all personal problems. Although Buffy goes through three main relationships on the show, many of the other characters deal with their own relationships and feelings as well. *BtVS* does not adhere to the traditional ideology that there is one person, one soul mate, one "true love" for each person, but instead it deals with the many complex feelings of love including feelings for other people and the struggle for balance between love and lust. This representation of love supports the instability of the postmodern world.

The relationship between Willow, a bi-sexual, and her boyfriend Oz, who happens to turn into a werewolf during the full moon, deals with these complex feelings several times over multiple seasons. Willow has had feelings for Xander since the beginning of the show, but Xander has always rejected her. Willow had seemingly buried these feelings when she and Oz started dating in season three; however, when Xander and Willow are trapped together in the episode "Lover's Walk" and believe they are about to die, the two of them begin to kiss, finally sharing passion for one another right as their respective significant others burst onto the scene to save them. Xander's relationship is ruined as his girlfriend Cordelia refuses to forgive him. The status of the relationship between Willow and Oz remains up in the air for several episodes as Oz deals with his feelings. He eventually decides to take Willow back and they rebuild their trust and relationship. These are examples of two couples, both seemingly quite happily in love, in the same situation and dealing with the same feelings of betrayal, yet with two very different outcomes. It was not "love" that made the difference but rather personal choices and convictions.

In season four, Oz begins to have strong feelings for Veruca, a female lead singer at a local club. Veruca also ends up being a werewolf. As a human, Oz fights off his attraction to her, though when they both turn into werewolves they get together and have wild sex. In this situation, the werewolf seems to be very symbolic of the more animalistic, sexual side of humanity – or the physical chemistry that can sometimes be so hard to deny. Veruca is killed when she attacks someone as her werewolf self, but not before Willow has seen Oz and her together. Willow is willing to forgive Oz, but Oz is having trouble dealing with what happened:

> OZ: No. Veruca was right about something. The wolf is inside me all the time, and I don't know where that line is anymore between me and it. And until I figure out what that means, I shouldn't be around you... Or anybody.
> WILLOW: (Crying.) Well, that could be a problem 'cause people... Kind of a planetary epidemic.

OZ : I'll find someplace.
WILLOW : Well, how long?
OZ : I don't know.
WILLOW : Oz... Don't you love me?
OZ : (Holding her, pressing his forehead to hers as she sobs.)
My whole life... I've never loved anything else.
WILLOW : Oz... Oh, god. Oz... ("Wild At Heart")

Love alone is not able to overcome the problems caused in this relationship by attraction to others. Although both still love one another, Oz does not feel he should be around Willow or anyone else until he is able to conquer his animalistic desires and urges. After traveling the world, Oz returns later in the season having conquered such desires, but Willow is now in love with her new friend Tara. Though she still loves Oz, she does not want to destroy the relationship and trust she is beginning to develop with Tara. Love in this case does not make things easy at all but complicates them greatly and causes pain for all involved; it is not the answer, not the easy solution so often presented by mass media.

Buffy's struggle with love throughout the entire series presents an interesting cross-section of the different types of relationships and the problems that go along with them. Buffy's relationship with Spike is very sexual. Although they have been enemies in the past, Buffy and Spike are attracted to one another, recognizing the dangers of being together and that their passions may ignite danger. The two are shown again and again having wild, rough sex. Buffy even admits that being with Spike makes things simpler if only for a little while; despite that, the relationship isn't giving her everything she needs:

> SPIKE: … you love me.
> BUFFY: No, I don't.
> SPIKE: Why do you keep lying to yourself?
> BUFFY: I'm not saying I don't have feelings for you. I do. But it's not love. I could never trust you enough for it to become that.
> SPIKE: Trust is for old marrieds, Buffy. Great love is wild and Passionate and dangerous. It burns and consumes.
> BUFFY: Until there's nothing left. That kind of love doesn't last. ("Seeing Red")

There is love between the two, and although it hurts both of them, Buffy recognizes that in the long run the best thing for her is to end the relationship. Again, we see love not solving problems but creating them.

Buffy faces almost exactly the opposite problem in her relationship with Riley. Riley is able to assist her in her fights with evil because he has military training. The two care deeply for one another, and both protect and nurture the other. It is obvious that love exists between Buffy and Riley, but at the same time, they both acknowledge that something seems to be missing from the relationship. While they still have sex, the hint of passion seems to be missing: They share romantic love but not erotic love. They are happy spending time together, yet still something is missing from the relationship. They struggle to reconcile their feelings and create that passion but never seem to be able to manufacturer chemistry that just is not there. Their eventual break-up is heart-wrenching because they still love each other so much; love is the catalyst for these problems, not the solution, as so is depicted as multivalent and not trapped within the oppositional infrastructure of the American mainstream simulacra.

Buffy seems to come closest to the media ideology of “true love” in her very first relationship of the series with the vampire Angel. In the show vampires are portrayed as being soulless creatures. Angel is unique because gypsies restored his soul so he would feel guilty for all of the death he had caused while he was evil. Because Angel is a vampire and Buffy is the slayer, they have to work very hard at any type of relationship, overcoming difficulties such as Angel’s not being able to be outside during daylight and his need to consume blood. The two seem to mesh however, and they have both a romantic love and an erotic love for one another. When they finally do have sex, it is a wonderful experience, but the next morning when Angel wakes up, he is evil; the same gypsy curse that gave him a soul has caused him to lose that soul because he experienced a single moment of true happiness. Though he eventually regains his soul, the curse proves to be fatal for the relationship, as it prevents the two from sharing any affection that would allow Angel to experience another moment of true happiness. Despite the fact that these two appeared to share “true love,” outside obstacles still prevented them from being together. Yet again in the postmodern world, love – even true love – is not able to solve all personal problems as is suggested by the dominant media ideology, but instead it creates pain and suffering between Angel and Buffy because they cannot be together.

Thus one can see that love is a complicated, complex, and generally painful emotion in *BtVS*. More often than not it leaves more questions and problems than answers and solutions. In summarizing the love found in the show, Carolyn Korsmeyer, a professor of philosophy and fan of *BtVS*, says:

> In short, it would seem that although romantic love demands that we love only one person, forsaking all others, we may not properly be said to love truly if one person is all that we are capable of loving (Korsmeyer, 2003, p. 170).

These ideas and struggles of love challenge the stability of the long entrenched views about love that have been proliferated in the mass media. Love is contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, and indeterminate, just as postmodernism suggests. There is no certainty, there is no happy ending, there is no single soul mate with whom one is destined to be forever.

The show definitely manages to challenge the ideological norms of love and heroes and violence wrapped up in the simulacra of mass media, but perhaps *BtVS*'s most postmodern attribute is the portrayal of “gray” area within humans instead of the traditional binary opposition of good versus evil presented by the mass media. The show attacks the metaphysical givens of society that claim there is a single framework for the universe, or a Descartes-like “true self” to be discovered. Instead, in the world of Buffy, everything is constantly shifting and changing; everything is in flux.

The character development of Riley is a clear example of how the show challenges the traditional binary opposition of good versus evil. When Buffy and Riley meet, Riley is part of a secret military organization, the Initiative. He has been trained by this government organization to see all non-humans as inherently evil and to destroy them on sight. Buffy and her friends have a very different view of the universe, and as she and Riley continue to date, their views conflict when Riley finds out that Buffy's friend Oz is a werewolf. Riley believes Oz is evil and should not be allowed to associate with Buffy and her friends, much less be dating Willow:

> BUFFY: You sounded like Mr. Initiative. Demons bad, people good.
> RILEY: Something wrong with that theorem?
> (Buffy is exasperated. She takes a few steps away.)
> BUFFY: There's different degrees of –
> RILEY: Evil?
> BUFFY: It's just… different with different demons. There are creatures – vampires for example – that aren't evil at all. ("New Moon Rising")

As Riley is exposed to more demons (eventually even befriending Oz) he – after much struggle – comes to realize that Buffy was right all along and even demons are not inherently evil. "In 'Goodbye Iowa' he succinctly articulates what many identify as the postmodern crisis: 'I thought I knew… but I don't. I don't know anything,'" (Daspit, 2003, p. 124). In this quote, Riley shows his postmodern skepticism about the objectivity of truth, history, and the coherence of identities. In this moment, he realizes that the narrative framework of assumptions under which he's been living his life is not the only way to view things.

Riley is not the only one in the show who goes through this. Few, if any, of the characters have remained steadfastly on the side of good or evil during the course of the show:

> Characters' identities in *BtVS* are constantly blurred. Rarely is one simply as he or she appears to be, or often even what one might think. Characters are rarely defined by the modernist binary of Good and Evil; instead they are complex and their actions often ambiguous. Identity is never fixed, and the modernist quest for the authentic, or essential, self is generally revealed to be the illusion that postmodernism contends." (Daspit, 2003, p. 125).

Throughout the entire series, Buffy struggles with the idea of who she is and what her role is. In the beginning she rejects her role as slayer: she doesn't want to live a life of doing good because she would much rather live the life of a normal teenage girl who gets to hang out with her friends and go shopping at the mall. Living the "good" life is not always what is most appealing.

Buffy's struggle with her own character is perhaps most visible when she begins to associate with the rogue slayer Faith. Faith lives life on the edge, going wherever she wants and doing anything she wants. She argues with Buffy that as slayers, they are doing good and thus can do anything they want, such as stealing weapons from a local store. Through this line of argument, Buffy struggles to understand what is good and evil but comes to realize that things are not always black and white – there are different degrees of right and wrong and of good and evil. In other words, there is no certainty about what is good or evil and any judgment made about a person is always instable and contingent.

Later in the series, Faith manages to switch bodies with Buffy by use of a magical device. At first, Faith, always the wild and free roaming, unloving one, scorns all that is Buffy's life, but as she continues to live in Buffy's body, Faith begins to question her own ways and the bad things she has done to people. The very premise of this episode is quite postmodern, suggesting that there is no "essential" self to Faith but rather different narratives and different frameworks through which she can view her life and herself.

Oz is another outstanding example of a character who is neither inherently good or evil. He fights alongside Buffy and the Scooby Gang, but when he assumes his werewolf form he is capable of harming and even killing others. He can suppress his werewolf side, though it takes a great amount of concentration and even meditation. Oz is both good and evil, as the two forces are ever present within him. Despite his inherent darkness, he is still upheld as a sympathetic and laudable character.

The vampire Spike is at first presented as completely evil, but as the series progresses, even he is revealed to be a complex character who cannot be categorized as either good or evil. He shows his affection for his lover Drusilla repeatedly, even if that affection is shown by killing people on which she can feed. He constantly puts her needs ahead of his own and seems to show a very selfless love. Drusilla eventually breaks up with Spike because he is not demon enough for her, and he is utterly heart-broken.

The Initiative eventually plants a chip in Spike's head which causes him physical pain if he tries to harm a living human being. Soon after this implant, Spike begins to fall in love with Buffy. Because Buffy has died in the past, he can harm her without suffering any pain from the chip, but he still chooses not to harm her because of his love. At one point, Drusilla returns and offers him just-killed humans on which to feed, but he refuses her offer. Spike eventually decides for himself that he wants to go on a quest to regain his soul. Spike cannot be categorized as either all good or all evil. He can at times be very evil, but he can also be loving and caring.

There are numerous examples of malleable characters in *BtVS* who destroy the traditional binary opposition of good versus evil, as other examples already given in this paper demonstrate. Angel goes through stages where he is good and evil and then good again. Willow is always thought of as a good and caring person, but even she falls into the depths of evil and tries to use her magic to destroy the world as revenge when her lover is killed. No character in Buffy stays constantly on the side of good or evil. Life is presented as a series of choices and sometimes people choose actions that are considered good while other times they choose those which are considered evil. The characters are not inherently good or evil, but rather are some shade of gray.

In *BtVS* there is no final goal one works toward. Struggle does not make things easier in the long run. There is no ultimate truth. “Life is filled with uncertainty and holds no final answers,” (Early, 20) as demonstrated in the following dialogue:

> BUFFY: You know, it’s just, like, nothing’s simple. I’m constantly trying to work it out, who to hate or love… who to trust… It’s like the more I know, the more confused I get.
> GILES: I believe that’s called “growing up.”
> BUFFY: I’d like to stop now then, okay? … Does it ever get easy?
> GILES: You mean life?
> BUFFY: Yeah. Does it get easy?
> GILES: What do you want me to say?
> BUFFY: Lie to me. (“Lie to Me”)

The circumstances and the lives of the characters certainly direct the viewer to the questions raised by postmodernism. Heroes do not have wonderful lives, neither love nor violence is the best answer to any problem, and the characters are very complex, having many different degrees of what is traditionally considered good or evil within their personalities. All of these strategies undermine modernist tendencies in American culture.

Conclusion

The popularity of *BtVS* is interesting because it goes against so many of the ideas present in traditional media. Is the popularity of the show due at least in some part to the postmodern emphasis that can be seen throughout? While the show may not be able to escape the simulacra, it can at least offer us a separate path, a different line of thinking from that of the rest of the media. Perhaps it has gained such attention from fans and philosophers alike because it spreads a message so different from the ones we are bombarded with by the rest of the media.

Presumably the media began presenting society with the ideas of heroes and true love and the binary opposition of good versus evil because that is what society wanted; that is what made the consumer purchase the media content. Yet, the popularity of *BtVS* seems to suggest that at least a very large portion of the American culture is willing to spend that money on ideas that have not been so traditionally popular in the media. Have postmodern ideas trickled down and been integrated into the American culture enough so that a show so seemingly different is not only successful but wildly popular? The widespread popularity of *BtVS* would seem to suggest just that. While the popularity of this show may not end the simulacra, it at least creates another framework of ideologies within that simulacra from which the audience may see life – a very postmodern effect in its own right.

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