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The Politics and Ethics of Researching the Buffyverse



(1) Many things, including the range of material listed on the "*Buffy Studies Bibliography*" of this journal, attest to the robust health of *Buffy Studies*. No other television program and few if any other cultural phenomena have attracted the same weight of sustained academic attention within the short period of time that has seen the rise of *Buffy Studies* (Stevenson, 2003, 4; Wilcox, forthcoming). Yet, at the same time, this work, from its inception to the current day, has been the subject of widespread criticism from a diverse range of sources. Thus, for example, Lavery notes of one of the first academic *Buffy* conferences:

Though growing by leaps and bounds, *Buffy Studies* has not been without its detractors; the 'brainy bloodsuckers' (as *Entertainment Weekly* once referred to them in what was presumed to be a compliment) who engage in BS have come under attack from a variety of angles. At the final plenary session of the Blood, Text and Fears Conference in Norwich, England, one of the organizers (Prof. Scott MacKenzie) and a member of the panel (Prof. Peter Kramer) both voiced their surprise at a certain lack of objectivity in the conference presentations, almost all of which were given by academics. The *Buffy* scholars gathered there, they suggested, seemed hesitant to ask the same kind of hard questions—about the industry, narrative structure, television flow, merchandizing, demographics, advertising, influences—that have come to be expected in media studies. (33)

More widely, Levine and Schneider have argued that

[t]here has been much less of the kind of self-reflective work about the nature of *BtVS* scholarship—what it is about and what it is trying to accomplish versus what it should or could be about—than there should be, or than there in fact is within various disciplines in the humanities generally as regards their objects and methods of study. *It is BtVS scholarship that warrants study at this point, not BtVS itself*. Those in English, Film and Television, and Cultural Studies departments would be better off investigating the nature of the unreflective and narrow critical responses to *BtVS* instead of responding to the show unreflectively, narrowly, and mistakenly themselves. (299 emphasis added)

In this context the purpose of this article is twofold. First, it will seek to add to the existing analysis, notably by Burr (2005), Lavery (2004) Turnbull (2004) and Wilcox (forthcoming), of the reasons why *Buffy* Studies has “been met with a certain amount of Parnassian disdain from the halls of the academy” (Battis, 2005, 9), the politics of *Buffy* Studies, and then, secondly, it will look at what impact, if any, these criticisms should have on those academics who are doing research into the Buffyverse, the ethics of *Buffy* Studies.

(2) In her recent study of *BtVS* Jowett notes early on in her exegesis that “I have already stated that I am an academic and a fan, two positions which do not sit comfortably together (it is not always acceptable to admit in academic circles to being a ‘fan’. . .) (8). Jowett’s unease reflects the widespread feeling, not just restricted to the position of those in *Buffy* Studies, that “scholar-fans are typically looked down as not being ‘proper’ academics. . . ” (Hills, 2002, 21). Scholar-fans are seen as being subversive of the academic project insofar as their passion as fans impedes their academic ability to dispassionately analyse the subject of their enquiry. Hills notes the expectation that “[t]he scholar-fan must still conform to the regulative ideal of the rational academic subject, being careful not to present too much of their enthusiasm. . . ” (11). If they fail to do this then their very standing as academics comes into question and

for television researchers interested in social equity, an interesting question might be: why do some fans get paid to employ their expertise and write articles about *Buffy* for *Slayage*, while other fans do not?” (McKee, 2002, 69)

Even *Buffy* scholars have queried the role of the scholar-fan. Burr notes of the 2004 *Slayage* Conference on *BtVS*, “[m]any delegates felt that fandom interfered with academic rigour on occasion” (Burr, 2005, 377).

(3) The apparent marginal status of scholar-fans in the academy seems to provide an attractive explanation for the insistent attacks on *Buffy* Studies. On this view *Buffy* scholars, far from following the proper intellectual course of rational analysis dictated by their position as academics are instead mere enthusiasts; at best, in Weber’s dichotomy, dilettantes rather than scientific workers (136). However, whilst this explanation for the rancour that *Buffy* Studies has sometimes met with does have merit, it also raises a number of problems if it is seen as a complete account of the reasons for the hostility that there is towards *Buffy* Studies.

(4) “The rational academic subject,” the heir of the enlightenment and modernity, may have held unchallenged sway in the academy at one time but its standing in the current age is much more in doubt. In an era when movements as diverse as postmodernism and feminism have queried the epistemological and ontological basis of notions like rationality and objectivity the concept of the “rational academic subject” cannot be regarded as being seen as unproblematic (Burr, 2005, 380). Given that, for example, “academic feminism is. . . frequently viewed by the establishment as being insufficiently academic” (Morley and Walsh, 1995, 1) scholar-fans, whether of *BtVS*, *Angel* or otherwise, are a long way from being the only kind of academics who fail to

conform to this particular regulative ideal. More than this, to argue that the current rejection of *Buffy* Studies is the result of its identification with scholar-fans is to ignore the fact that the presence of scholar-fans in the academy is not something that is wholly new to the present age. To take only one of the more obvious examples, Leavis' championing of DH Lawrence seems to fit precisely within the category of the behaviour of the scholar-fan. As Leavis himself observed of his work on Lawrence

[w]hat I am brought to at this point is my own involvement in the history—it is proper that I should mention it only if to make it plain that I do not pretend to have been *au-dessus de la mêlée*. In fact, I had better say that, looking back, I can only see that involvement as a matter of my having been engaged in a long battle to win recognition for Lawrence, and to kill the currency of the grosser misconceptions and prejudices. (12)

Leavis' position as a scholar-fan certainly led to criticism of his work: "Was he an academic? Or a critic? Or a journalist?" (MacKillop, 1995, 174). It may have contributed to his failure to achieve the professional advancement that his then position within his discipline appeared to have otherwise deserved. It did not, however, lead to his writings being dismissed out of hand. Thus Mulhern writes of a journal set up in seeming opposition to Leavis' journal *Scrutiny*:

The new journal [Essays in Criticism] was not conceived of as an alternative to *Scrutiny*—Bateson's admiration of the latter was explicit—but its main objective was to transcend what its editor regarded as the chief limitation of *Scrutiny* criticism: a lack of scholarship. (297-298)

Other scholar-fans in the past and other scholar-fans in the present, the work of Ricks on Dylan for example (Ricks, 2003), have met disapproval but not dismissal tout court. What is different about the work of scholar-fans on *BtVS* or *Angel*? Indeed, rather than accepting as given the inferiority of the scholar-fan's motivation and impulses, Lavery's analysis of the position of *Buffy* Studies, drawing on the work of Hills, has argued for superiority of scholar-fan's commitment to their subject (Lavery, 2004, 7) as did scholar-fans who responded to Burr's survey (Burr, 2005, 378-379). Finally, to dismiss the work of scholar-fans on the Buffyverse is one thing but to dismiss *Buffy* Studies as a whole is another. Not every academic who writes about *BtVS* or *Angel* can be described as a fan. For some, whilst the programmes are a compelling focus for analysis, they are just that, grist for academic lives, texts whose many layers demand to be unraveled but no more. Scholar-fandom therefore seems to provide part of the reason for the hostility to *Buffy* Studies but not the whole answer.

(5) Turnbull has argued that the fact that *BtVS* is part of popular culture leads to resistance to its study within the academy.

When people ask me what I do, or what I am studying, I almost always have to explain myself in ways which I would not have to if I were researching the works of William Faulkner, particle physics or orthodonture. Studying popular culture simply isn't taken seriously. . . . (2)

Once again this seems to be an attractive explanation for the position of *Buffy Studies*. As Turnbull ably demonstrates the study of popular culture has struggled to find acceptance within the academy and *BtVS* and *Angel* as artifacts of popular culture thus seem likely targets for hostility. Commenting on a recent *Buffy Studies* conference at the University of Huddersfield in the United Kingdom, Nicholas Seaton, Chair of the British "Campaign for Real Education," opined that

[u]niversity academics should be concentrating on literature that has stood the test of time, rather than spending their time on trendy, modern TV programmes, no matter how popular. It's very hard to see how it will benefit academic study. (need page # for this quote)

The fact that *BtVS* is not just a part of popular culture but is also a television series further increases its marginality within the academy.

[T]elevision has tended to be seen as less important, less worthy of serious attention, than other media (such as literature, cinema and the press). It has attracted few major theorists, either academic or political, and it is often dismissed as a bastard medium, whose only interest lies in the way it debases purer forms and people's consciousness. (Hartley, 128)

Nonetheless, although the fact that it engages with popular culture and is a television series may be part of the reason why *Buffy Studies* is regarded by some with scorn, this explanation, like the idea of scholar-fandom, has its limitations.

(6) *BtVS* and *Angel* are programmes that are less likely to be attacked as not being fit for study simply because they are examples of popular culture than is the case with many other television series. At the beginning of his article on *BtVS*, Macneil asks

[w]hy is a TV show like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* so bloody brilliant, when others, in the same time slot, age demographic and generic vein, like *Charmed*, are so utterly charmless? (2421, emphasis in original)

Implicit and sometimes explicit in much of the scholarship in *Buffy Studies* is the proposition that *BtVS* and *Angel* are examples of popular culture that differ from the norm in a variety of ways. Most important for the argument in this present article is the notion that "*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be viewed as a morality play: every week Buffy and her friends fight evil in some form and in doing so make complex moral decisions" (Greene and Yuen, ¶11). The combination of the overt moral turn to *BtVS* and *Angel* and the subtlety of approach to that turn is one of the things that distinguishes them from most other examples of popular culture. Both *BtVS* and *Angel* are about, amongst other things, morality but neither series moralises. They suggest questions, issues and directions for answers but they do not dictate a position; their subject is the inevitability of making ethical choices but they are not a prospectus for the right moral choice. In this the programmes mirror the movement in literature from the romance to the novel.

The novel is at the present time universally recognized as one of the greater historic forms of literary art. . . .

Among the last apologies for the novel—an apology in which we fully sense, however, the surge of confidence and power generated by the phenomenal rise of this relatively new genre—is the preface that the Goncourt brothers wrote for their novel *Germinie Lacerteux* (1864). 'Now that the novel,' they observed, 'is broadening, growing, beginning to be a great, serious, impassioned living form of literary study and social research, now by that means of analysis and psychological inquiry it is turning into contemporary moral philosophy, now that the novel has imposed upon itself the investigations and duties of science, one may make a stand for its liberties and privileges.' (Rahv, 222-223)

For some in the present day this remains one of the chief justifications for the study of the novel within the academy (see, for example, Bloom, Part One). Given that this is so, it does not seem too difficult to make out a similar case for the legitimacy of the study of *BtVS* and *Angel*. *BtVS* as a case-study of the travails of adolescence and *Angel* as a study of angst, detachment and connection in modern urban life are, on this argument, as worthy of investigation as the novels that litter the lists of departments of literature. But the argument can be taken further. Both *BtVS* and *Angel* are examples of programmes that transcend the idea of popular culture not just in the fact that they may also be seen as being high art but in their prominence within public life.

Since its inception, television has supported what can be called, to use a later coinage, 'watercooler shows'. Such programmes passed beyond the boundaries of the text to become more widely circulated, to become programmes which even non-viewers knew about. Not simply watched by large audiences, they also became part of the culture in which they were broadcast. An imperative existed, not simply to watch these shows (although many did), then to know about them as party of the condition of living in a public culture. (McKee, 2003, 184-185)

Such is their ubiquity and quality,

each minor event on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is contextualised with hours of prior narrative or 'backstory' that invests each moment, and the character's responses within it, with a weight of nuance and significance. (Janovich and Lyons, 1)

BtVS and *Angel* are part of the culture, not just the popular culture, of modern society in many countries with even those who have little knowledge of television being aware of at least some of their elements. Even if studying popular culture were to be regarded as suspect such "watercooler shows," particularly when they are also examples of Quality Television (if a fantasy programme can be Quality Television) (Wilcox, 2005, 174-175), do not seem the most obvious candidates for venom.

(7) One possible explanation for the large-scale rejection of *Buffy* Studies that is hinted at in some of the criticisms above but that has been little explored is the place that *Buffy* Studies has, and necessarily has, in the structure of academic life. In their ethnography of academic life Becher and Trowler note that

[i]t is a common finding of studies of what motivates academic researchers that what moves them is primarily factors intrinsic to the discipline itself, particularly the desire to develop a reputation in the field and to contribute significantly to it. (75)

Most academics are not engaged in a solitary quest for truth but rather see their work as being validated by the place that it takes in the community, usually the academic discipline, to which they owe allegiance. In part this is a response to the pressures consequent on the ever-increasing quantity of information with which the academic must wrestle.

Only by strict specialization can the scientific worker become fully conscious, for once and perhaps never again in his lifetime, that he has achieved something that will endure. A really definitive accomplishment is today always a specialized accomplishment. (Weber, 135)

(8) If “[i]t is arguable that disciplines are the life-blood of higher education: alongside academic institutions, they provide its main organising base” (Becher, 151), where does this leave those who study *BtVS* and *Angel* and where does this leave *Buffy* Studies? It has been argued that *Buffy* Studies is a discipline:

And now we have *Buffy* Studies. Now we have a regional institution of higher education, in an American state with a second rate university system, a state better known for the spawn of Graceland and as the home of country music, *internationally known as a result of [Buffy] studies*. (Lavery, 12, emphasis in original)

However, is *Buffy* Studies an academic discipline in the usual sense of the phrase and can those who work on *BtVS* and *Angel* make a contribution to and find their place in the discipline in the manner that is normal in academic life?

(9) Assessing the disciplinary status of *Buffy* Studies is predicated on an understanding of what it means for something to be a discipline within the academy. Consideration of some of the literature on the notion of an academic discipline suggests that *Buffy* Studies does have some claim to being a discipline or at least a nascent discipline.

Disciplinary cultures, in virtually all fields transcend the institutional boundaries within any given system. In many, but not all, instances they also span national boundaries. That this is the case is to be seen through the existence of national, and often international subject associations which embody collective norms and exercise an informal control on undergraduate and graduate curricula, as well as providing a shared

context for research. It can also be observed in the easy mobility of academic staff from one institution to another; the common readership of academic texts (whether books or journals); the frequent informal communication between individuals in different geographical locations; the existence of international conferences; and the incidence of collaborative enquiry which involves researchers in more than one university (and often more than one country). (Becher, 153)

Buffy Studies has some of these required features of a discipline. It is international in character, it has one academic journal that is subject specific, it has an ever-increasing range of essay collections and monographs that are beginning to form a canon of secondary material and there have been a number of large-scale conferences in different countries with more planned for the future. There are already courses on *Buffy* Studies and a future research centre devoted to *Buffy* Studies does not seem inconceivable. However, it seems doubtful that all of this does, or can ever, add up to a discipline of *Buffy* Studies.

(10) Academic disciplines find their place in the institutional structures of the academy.

Any full understanding of how the higher education system works must depend on an understanding of the basic units which together make up its constituent institutions. By basic units we mean the smallest component elements which have a corporate life of their own. Their identifying characteristics would normally include an administrative existence (a designated head or chairman, a separately accounted budget); a physical existence (an identifiable set of premises); an academic existence (a range of undergraduate training programmes, usually some provision for graduate work and sometimes a collective research activity). (Becher and Kogan, 87)

Disciplines are intellectual entities but they need concrete physical settings to attach themselves to and they need to do this on an international basis. Disciplines need departments, faculties or schools and the infra-structure of administrative assistance and budgets to thrive; they need them in not one institution but in many institutions; they need them not just in one country but in a number of countries. The establishment of any significant number of units of *Buffy* Studies seems implausible as does any frequent movement of staff from one institution to another because they are *Buffy* experts as opposed to their movement because they are cultural theorists, academic lawyers or whatever and their pursuit of *Buffy* Studies is seen as legitimate within that discipline and by those departments. Thus there is, in strict terms, no such things as *Buffy* Studies.

"What exactly is *Buffy* Studies? If we set out to categorize existing scholarly writing on *BtVS* as I have done in a bibliography now available on the *Slayage* website [http://www.slayage.tv/EBS/buffy_studies/buffystudiesbibilography.htm], we discover that *Buffy* Studies currently comprises at least fifty (**fifty!!**) disciplines, methods, and/or approaches. . . ." (Lavery, 13, emphasis in original)

Buffy Studies is the work of a wide range of scholars drawing on a wide range of often disparate disciplines, methods and concepts to analyse a common subject. It is a truly interdisciplinary endeavour.

(11) The interdisciplinary nature of *Buffy Studies*, in part, both explains and answers some of the criticism that it has met with. The fears expressed after the first *Buffy* conference were whether the “hard questions” of media studies would be addressed by those in *Buffy* studies (Lavery, ¶133) but those in *Buffy Studies* who do not come from media studies might find these “hard questions” tangential or irrelevant to the intellectual agenda with which they are familiar. Levine and Schneider’s criticisms about *Buffy Studies* are directly addressed to those in English, Film, Television or Cultural departments (Levine and Schneider, 299) but there are many other disciplines in *Buffy Studies* and there is no obvious reason why one discipline’s agenda should take priority over another. McKee’s concern is with “social equity” (McKee, 2002, 69) but there are other concerns that equally, urgently demand academic attention. And for those writing about *BtVS* and *Angel* who do come from the disciplines named by critics the issues and concerns of others writing about the programmes may take on a greater importance than the questions and problems of their home discipline; interdisciplinarity leaches out some of the disciplinary power that is otherwise exercised.

(12) The interdisciplinary nature of *Buffy Studies* is no more a complete explanation of the academy’s hostility towards such work than is the notion of scholar-fandom or the ire raised by the notion of the study of popular culture in general or television studies in particular. However, to the degree that it provides any kind of explanation at all it suggests a more intractable difficulty for *Buffy Studies* than either of the first two problems. The problematic position of scholar-fans can, in principle, be met either by raising that status of such academics, as Lavery suggests, or by encouraging work by non-scholar-fans on *Buffy Studies*. One can argue and re-argue, as does Turnbull, for the importance of work on popular culture in the academy. Not only those who work in Television Studies have argued for the importance of analysing television; thus, for example, Steiner, whose work has been on comparative literature, has written that “film and television—now the commanding instruments of general sensibility” (Steiner, 1997, 156). The position of interdisciplinary work is, however, inherently difficult within the academy. The paradigm within the academy is the discipline and work done outside disciplines seems to be perpetually destined to be marginal. Yet, even here, there may be limited hope for the position of *Buffy* scholars.

(13) Reflecting on his long career Steiner has written that “[m]y belief that cows have fields but that passions in motion are the privilege of the human mind has long been held against me” (Steiner, 1997, 155). Steiner’s rejection of the notion of research fields, his celebration of interdisciplinarity, “the carnival of understanding and judgement” (Steiner, 1997, 20), reflects the fact that whilst working with disciplines is the paradigm within the university there are other ways of being an academic and indeed, as Steiner’s career, with posts at Princeton University, the University of Geneva, the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge and Harvard University, demonstrates, other ways of being a hugely successful and influential academic. Within

an academic universe of disciplines *Buffy Studies* may be destined to be marginal; that does not mean that all of those writing about *Buffy Studies* must themselves be marginal.

(14) Consideration of the reasons for the criticism of *Buffy Studies* raises one final and more provocative question. Why, if at all, should those working in *Buffy Studies* concern themselves with such attacks?

(15) Basic principles about the nature of the university tell us that researching into *BtVS* and *Angel* needs no special justification and attacks on *Buffy Studies* thus need no response. Newman's classic nineteenth century defense of the university, reiterated more recently by writers such as Nussbaum, argued for the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself. Questions that can be asked, whether about *BtVS* and *Angel* or anything else, should be asked. "[T]he asking of questions is the supreme piety of the spirit. . . ." (Steiner, 1978, 149). "More than *homo sapiens*, we are *homo quaerens*, the animal that asks and asks" (Steiner, 2001, 16). However, this fact in itself necessitates consideration of why and how we are asking the questions that we ask. Although *Buffy Studies* does not need validation by others within the academy, the fact that some scholars wish to ask questions about the Buffyverse is sufficient warrant for them being asked, nevertheless self-reflection must be as integral to the pursuit of *Buffy Studies* as to any other aspect of life. Questions about the process of questioning are themselves part of the process of questioning; an unconsidered life for a scholar of *Buffy Studies*, as much as for anyone else, is not worth living. In this sense there is a necessity to examine and re-examine critiques of *Buffy Studies* in order to see whether they provide or provoke suggestions about the way in which work within *Buffy Studies* can be improved. Given the politics of *Buffy Studies* described above, *Buffy Studies* may need pragmatic defense if it is to be given an appropriate budget but, more than this, the ethics of *Buffy Studies* demands that scholars within it attend to their own motivations and methods if they are to fulfill their scholarly role.

(16) However, notwithstanding this legitimate reason for considering the criticisms made of *Buffy Studies*, there may also reactions to these criticisms by *Buffy* scholars that are more difficult to justify. Marginality for some *Buffy* scholars may matter in itself; marginality may indicate that their own work is considered unimportant; marginality may mean that their arguments are failing to succeed since other non-*Buffy* scholars do not cite their arguments in academic work outside of *Buffy Studies*. Given the academic concern with reputation noted by Becher and Trowler above, such feelings about marginality would be understandable but consideration of the content of both *BtVS* and *Angel* suggests why it may be difficult for *Buffy* scholars ethically to defend treating marginality as being important.

(17) Many within *Buffy Studies* are concerned with analysing the moral arguments examined in *BtVS* and *Angel*. Most commentary puts a positive gloss on these arguments. Thus Kawal observes

[w]hat I hope to show in this section is that Buffy holds deep moral commitments that lead her to an ongoing pattern of heroic and saintly

actions. As such we have good grounds to treat Buffy as a moral role model. (150; see also, amongst others, Stevenson and Reiss)

What these moral commitments are is, of course, a complex matter. However, one aspect of the morality of both *BtVS* and *Angel* does seem clear. “[H]eroism [that is acting morally] is not defined as a grand quest to eliminate evil, but rather as an existentialist determination to fight it, ‘to help the helpless’ . . .” (Wall and Zyrd, 59). Thus *Angel* demands that “w[e] live as though the world was what it should be, to show it what it can be” (“Deep Down,” 4001). Many episodes of *BtVS* and *Angel* demonstrate this but the final episode of *Angel*, “Not Fade Away” (5022), provides a powerful illustration. Knowing that they will almost certainly die in this particular fight *Angel*, Spike and the others nevertheless agree first to assassinate the members of the Circle of the Black Thorn and then gather at the alley behind the Hyperion to face the thousands sent to kill them by the vengeful senior partners. *BtVS* and *Angel* are not morality plays about what to do when faced by demons or vampires. Instead what *Angel*, Spike and the others do is also enjoined to everyone else, including *Buffy* scholars, in their quotidian lives; “everyday heroism” is necessary (Reiss, 11).

(18) Given the ethic of the Buffyverse, the required response to the marginality of *Buffy* Studies on the part of those *Buffy* scholars who profess to accept this ethic follows. There are more questions about *BtVS* and *Angel* that are still to be answered. *Buffy* Studies may in fact be irredeemably marginal within the academy but the ethics of the Buffyverse forbids considering this a matter of consequence when deciding whether or not to attempt to answer to these questions. Local conditions vary and the precise degree of difficulty inherent in doing work on the Buffyverse will be dependant on matters such as the precise nature of one’s parent academic discipline and the national structures of higher education within which one works. However the wealth of past writing on the Buffyverse is testimony to the possibility of future research. Therefore, as *Angel* says at the end of “Not Fade Away,” “[I]et’s go to work.”

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