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From the Valley to the Hellmouth: "Buffy"'s Transition from Film to Television



(1) The Buffy who fights demons in Sunnydale today is a far cry from the air-headed Buffy who fought vampires on the big screen in the early nineties. In the transition from film to television, *Buffy* has mutated from a bubbly Valley girl into a feminist heroine more in accordance with Joss Whedon's original vision. In this essay, I would like to examine the cultural currents which allowed for the emergence of a stronger, more complex Buffy, the differences in medium that facilitated this change, and the consequences of this transition on the depiction of young women in the media. I would like to examine the Girl Power wave of the mid-nineties, its impact on the character of Buffy as part of a larger media impact, and, in turn, *Buffy's* impact on the portrayal of young women on television and beyond.

(2) The film *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was released in 1992 as a campy send-up of the era's reigning teen film genres, supernatural horror as exemplified by the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series and *The Lost Boys* (a film Paul Reubens' glam vampire henchman is clearly meant to lampoon) and teen comedy such as *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Valley Girl*. "Buffy" the film existed as paper-thin parody, with many of the laughs at the expense of its Valley Girl caricature heroine. Buffy's vapidness and stereotypical femininity repeatedly place her in danger, and her lack of ownership of her own sexuality, displayed when she is reduced to a trance state during her pseudo-seduction at the hands of vampire Lothos, results in the death of her Watcher. Buffy is marked for slayership by a mole on her neck, her menstrual cramps act as a danger-detection system, Lothos seduces her in her dreams—she is a slayer barely in control of her own body. "Buffy" sticks to an obvious and physical gender logic, displaying her triumph over feminine weakness by wearing pants. Buffy's struggle as a woman and slayer is one to feel comfortable in both her womanly body and powerful role, and in the end, she is neither; at the film's close, dancing with her boyfriend Pike, Buffy tells him she does not want to lead, and he says the same. Not comfortable leading or being led, "Buffy" exists in a limbo, not ready to be a powerful warrior nor content being her former beautiful airhead self. Potentially a powerful statement about the drama of growing up and womanhood, this sentiment is not fully tangible under the film's many layers of distracting parody.

(3) Ultimately, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* sees itself as a comedy rather than horror film, and much of the film's humor is derived from the perceived incongruity of "Buffy" and "Vampire Slayer," of a gum-cracking Valley teen being accorded power

and responsibility. Despite her vampire-slaying prowess and heroism, Buffy is portrayed as a comic figure, and any possible social significance to be found in this depiction of one teenage girl's struggle to understand herself as a powerful figure is undermined by the film's cartoonish campiness (a high school principal places detention slips on the corpses of slain students; Buffy declares, "I'm the chosen one and I choose to go shopping"). Though creator Joss Whedon maintains that the script for "Buffy" was created as a tribute to the girls who were victimized in the era's slashed films, "Buffy" the film drowned in its own campiness and limp parody of teen horror films. Whedon himself later said, "When you wink at the audience and say nothing matters, you can't have peril" (Jacobs 20), and far from being any sort of feminist parable about taking back the haunted night, "Buffy" was an extremely timely film dependant on the movies it mocked, with a teen savior heroine who was almost a decade away from being anything other than a joke.

(4) The teen films "Buffy" sought to lampoon fell out of fashion soon after *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was made, leading popular cinema into several years of dominance by action films and the occasional "chick flick" emotional drama. At the same time, in other forms of media, the roots of the Girl Power movement which would one day allow "Buffy" to exist as a serious girl power feminist heroine were beginning to grow.

(5) Girl Power as we know it can debatably be traced back to the "Riot Grrrl" movement of the early 1990's. Localized in the Pacific Northwest, Riot Grrrl was a feminist movement composed mostly of teenage and twenty-something and generally white and middle-class young women, with a focus on the arts and media. Though often the audience of popular media such as films, teenage girls were rarely catered to. Miramax Films chief Bob Weinstein asserted that "[t]wenty years ago, conventional wisdom was that you had to make movies for seventeen-year-old boys. They drove the market place. Girls deferred to boys" (Bernstein 88). Riot Grrrl was an anger-based feminine subculture, exposing and celebrating the anger young women were usually encouraged to hide, directed mainly at societal institutions, expectations, and pressures. Riot Grrrl also focused on a clear conveyance of the teenage female experience, and how it differed from the one depicted by the media. "Riot Grrrls felt able to open up, to write honestly about their experiences of being in a band, of sex and sexual harassment, of personal politics and revolution" (Raphael, xxviii). Riot Grrrl forged a link between young women and creation and criticism of media, while demanding attention about issues affecting the lives of young women.

(6) Over the next several years, young women began coming to media prominence, particularly in popular music. Female musicians, many with current or former Riot Grrrl affiliations, such as the bands Hole and Bikini Kill and singer-songwriter Liz Phair, began what was perceived as a female takeover in nearly every form of popular media. Riot Grrrl "undeniably gave women more confidence to make music" (Raphael, xxix), but as the topic of "Women in Rock" gained interest and support, it expanded from Riot Grrrl's expression of self-righteous anger to a movement to express the spectrum of women's experiences. The early nineties saw vast amounts of attention lavished on the concept of Women in Rock, in the form of magazines and television specials, and the concept snowballed out from there into other art-forms, all taken with the concept of female as creator.

(7) By the mid-nineties, a cross-media change appeared to have occurred in attitudes toward women, particularly young women as creators and performers. At the same time, attention was for the first time being given to the various issues of female adolescence. A generation of girls growing up in the wake of 1970's feminism, as they hit adolescence, was suddenly in the limelight regarding self-

esteem, eating disorders, and other long-ignored perils of girlhood. In her Generation X feminist anthology, *Listen Up!*, Barbara Findlen said, " We are the first generation for whom feminism has been entwined in the fabric of our lives"(xii); logically, this was the first generation of teenage girls to have issues widely addressed by feminist media. The wounded teenage girl became an icon of the mid-nineties. She got single-sex math classes and self-help books (Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*, Peggy Orenstein's *Schoolgirls*), all ostensibly to raise her self-esteem. To empower the white, middle class teenage girl became a major media goal, with countless news magazine covers and prime-time specials devoted to it, many with portraits of intense teenage victimhood like this one from Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*:

Cayenne was a typical therapy client. She had had a reasonably happy childhood. With puberty, the changes and challenges in her life overwhelmed her. Her grades fell, she dropped out of sports and relinquished her dreams of being a doctor. As she moved from the relatively protected space of an elementary school into the more complex world of junior high, all her relationships grew turbulent. She had decisions to make about adult issues such as alcohol and sex. While she was figuring things out, she contracted herpes. (35)

Though it claimed to desire to empower teenage girls, the mid-nineties victim-centric media wave truly discovered a new demographic. The first generation of girls to have grown up with feminism was now ready to be catered to. The teenage girl, once a shadowy figure to the media at best, was now a target market.

(8) The phrase "Girl Power" was originally coined in association with Riot Grrrl, but Girl Power as we now know it is a curious mix of softened feminist politics and economics. By the mid-nineties, " many . . . of us have integrated feminist values into our lives, whether or not we choose to use the label 'feminist'" (Findlen xiv), and "Girl Power," a term that not only lacked many of the negative associations the word "feminism" but openly declared its focus to be teenage girls, a group rarely spoken to or considered by mainstream feminism, came to represent a new kind of feminism for middle-class, teenage America. The subject of various mall-sold t-shirts and Spice Girls songs, Girl Power exists as imagined empowerment through self-esteem but actualized empowerment through purchase. Political activism marketed with matching nail polish, Girl Power has come to mean a fuzzy, de-fanged feminist philosophy of "Girls Kick Ass!" combined with mass realization by marketers of the \$82 billion disposable income teenage girls have every year (Bernstein 87) The little sisters of those who had been the targets of the mid-nineties self-esteem campaign, the girls of Girl Power came of age directly after Ophelia was revived. In her book, *Raising Their Voices*, Lyn Mikel Brown suggests that "girls' increased anger and assertiveness at eleven and twelve reflects their emerging comprehension of the culture they are about to enter and their place as young women in it" (15). "Girl Power" tended to reach younger girls most strongly, girls who had reached their age of anger during a time when they were encouraged by the world at large to indulge it. Perhaps the mass healing worked; middle-class white girls were now "more self-reliant" (Bernstein 88) and were changing the shape of media the only way adolescents can—through their spending habits. In the second half of the nineties, girls who had grown up in the era of various "Year(s) of the Woman" in everything from film to politics, began making box office successes of films with strong teen female leads, such as *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* and *Titanic*. The next challenge Girl Power would take on in its takeover of modern media was to re-create the traditionally misogynistic teen horror film into something teenage girls could identify positively with.

(9) The first step toward the modern reclaiming of horror as a genre in the name of Girl Power occurred in 1996's *Scream*. Despite a heavy dose of parody, *Scream* bent traditional horror film rules pertaining to female sexual independence and mores, and conveyed a strong message of female empowerment (the film's heroine shoots the villain with the assurance that in "her movie" he won't come back). *Scream* existed as a milestone in Girl Power, the first real mass media document to champion it. *Scream* set off the cinematic arm of the media wave that Girl Power rode, and like the teen media wave before it, this one would soon come to be dominated by romantic comedies and gore-filled horror outings. However, this media wave catered to young women, and soon self-determined young women became central figures in teen-oriented films. One of Girl Power's first major media coups was to reclaim the teen horror film, a traditional site of female degradation, and force it to become re-shaped into a vehicle for female empowerment. "In the 70's and 80's, the women in those types of films used to be the victims," said Miramax mogul Bob Weinstein. "They were there for eye candy . . . What's happened in the nineties is that females are the heroines. Young women have something to identify with" (Bernstein 88).

(10) Two years before *Scream*, in 1994, while still little more than a footnote in the "Women in Rock" issue of *Rolling Stone*, Girl Power saw its first impact in television, "My So-Called Life." Though cancelled after one season due to poor ratings, *My So-Called Life* was a critically praised dramatic exploration of the life of a teenage girl. Dealing with issues of sexuality, scholastic and familial pressure, and female independence, *My So-Called Life* was a watershed in Girl Power media history. Also, the strong grass-roots campaign to return it to the air after its cancellation, a letter-writing campaign that later led to the broadcast of re-runs of the show's first season on MTV, was spearheaded by adolescent girls, foreshadowing the media power the teens of the Girl Power generation would soon wield. Several years passed after the cancellation of *My So-Called Life* with no real attempts to create further Girl Power television, until early 1997, when *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* aired on the fledgling WB Network.

(11) A direct descendant of *My So-Called Life* —creator Whedon himself has referred to it as a cross between *My So-Called Life* and *The X-Files* (Tracy 22)—*Buffy* debuted in the midst of Girl Power's cinematic prime but was the first television show of the late nineties teen media wave. Differing from its cinematic predecessor in many ways, such as location and premise (partially for metaphor's sake, partially due to the changing times, and partially out of convenience for the show's plot), the Buffy who now protected Sunnydale bore many surface similarities to the Buffy who roamed the Valley but immediately proved different. The change in media—film to television—was more conducive to the depiction of a multi-faceted Buffy than a ninety-minute film, but more had occurred than simply more screen time. In the wake of the Girl Power takeover, Joss Whedon's original vision, of the triumph of the bouncy blonde victim from slashed films "who was always getting herself killed" (Whedon), could exist as a reality.

(12) The Buffy of television was a significantly stronger character than the Buffy of the screen; as the first television ambassador of Girl Power's "Take Back the Night"-type reclaiming of horror, Buffy became a far different slayer than her screen sister. With the loss of the film's precognitive menstrual cramps, Buffy was no longer victim to her fate but master of it, determining danger with keener than average senses and fighting skills. Buffy Summers is a girl tightly in control of herself and her life in all the ways the previous Buffy was not.

(13) *Buffy's* appropriation of horror as a feminist form is so dramatic because, despite steps forward made in films such as *Scream*, violence on the part of female characters in horror films is still accepted only in terms of self-defense. The typical female horror movie heroine—the “last girl standing”—is permitted to use violence of any sort, because she is “[p]reyed upon, tormented, and terrorized, she is pushed to the limit and driven to fight by any means necessary” (Pinedo 77). Though “Buffy” exists more in the vein of the gothic and supernatural (where, from Mary Shelley to Anne Rice, there has traditionally been a place for females, at least as creator) rather than the more recent “splatter” genre, *Buffy* inverts all of slash cinema’s clichés about female victimization. Joss Whedon has said, “[T]he idea of ‘Buffy’ came from, a beautiful blonde girl walks into an alley, a monster attacks her, and not only is she ready for him, she trounces him” (Whedon), and within the series’ first episode, Buffy has done just that, in a sequence modeled on classic slash cinema: Buffy runs down a dark dead-end alley like a thousand pretty blonde girls on celluloid before her, but she is the first not only to come out alive, but with her foot across her stalker’s neck.

(14) *Buffy* exists as a show filled with sexuality, both literal and metaphorical. The dichotomy of young women’s sexuality—the societal push to be a virginal “good girl” yet sexually available and desirable—is a theme repeatedly approached by the show, frequently represented by the use of doubling, particularly in the show’s third season. In that season’s “Faith, Hope, and Trick” (3003) the character of Faith is introduced, a fellow vampire slayer who acts as Buffy’s raw id, seduces Scooby Gang member (and long-time wannabe-paramour) Xander and openly admits to (and enjoys) the sexual nature of vampire slaying. Clad in black leather and tattooed, Faith presents Buffy’s dark side, which she occasionally tempts Buffy to indulge (“Bad Girls,” 2012), and with her absentee parents and dead Watcher, Faith is perhaps a nod to the film’s Buffy, a glimpse of what reality may present for a girl in the film’s circumstances. “Doppelgängerland” deals with the theme of sexual doubling even more explicitly, with the re-introduction of “evil Willow,” a sado-masochistic (see “The Wish’s” extremely sexualized torture of Angel by Willow) sexpot double of shy Willow, suggesting a powerful sexuality bubbling beneath Willow’s bookish exterior (and prompting the classic Willow remark, “I’m so evil and skanky. And I think I’m kinda gay”). The topic of the dual lives of teenage girls and the choices they must make regarding them is dealt with in simpler terms in the show’s first episode, “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” in a scene where Buffy is dressing before her mirror:

Buffy: (holding up a tight vinyl dress) Hi, I’m an enormous slut.
(holding up a floral patterned dress) Hello, would you like a copy of “The Watchtower”?

Dodging the sexualized bite of vampires, yet surrendering her virginity to one, “Buffy” displays the complexities of decisions that teenage girls must make, the tangled threat of their own sexuality they must learn to negotiate. Not content to be “good” or “bad” girls, the women of “Buffy” show teenaged sexuality to be the complex, sometimes strong, sometimes confused thing it is, and it is the frankest dealing with such ever on television.

(15) Buffy’s increased independence is also showcased in her dealings with her Watcher; television Buffy begins where the cinematic Buffy left off, starting the series with a chip on her shoulder about her destiny, but faith and trust in her Watcher, yet over time defying him and eventually becoming autonomous. Though

the television addition of a "Watcher's Council" neuters her Watcher to some extent, the creation of a more fallible Watcher facilitates a more empowered Buffy. While the film's Slayer is forced into sudden and awkward autonomy by the death of her Watcher (a death partially attributable to her lack of will power), television Buffy takes her independence slowly, eventually reaching the point where slaying can be navigated with the aid of a Watcher as a peer, not an authority figure. (*Buffy* is a show with an anti-authoritarian streak a mile wide: all positive authority figures — Principal Flutie, Giles, Principal Snyder, Prof. Maggie Walsh—must eventually be killed, dethroned, revealed as evil, or some combination of the above.)

(16) Buffy's independence and strength as both a woman and a slayer is also emphasized by the television show's lack of a male equal. The film portrayed Buffy's mortal love interest, Pike, as nearly as adept as she at vampire slaying, while the series' Buffy can find her match only in a 200-year-old vampire, Angel, and later, in a paramilitary soldier. Furthering the concept of Buffy's singularity of strength is the presence of her effete British Watcher, Giles, and sarcastic and unmacho Scooby Gang members Xander and Oz as the major mortal male presence for the first several seasons. Buffy's strength is unparalleled and inverts the gender stereotyping inherent in a super-heroics situation. Season Two's "Halloween" raised the question of gender roles on *Buffy* by dressing several major characters in hyper gender-stereotype costumes, and then having them each take on the persona embodied by that costume (Buffy becomes a helpless British aristocrat and Xander a soldier, while Willow, after putting a sheet over her revealing Halloween costume, ends up embodying the "Reviving Ophelia"-era teenage girl stereotype: a scantily clad invisible woman), suggesting that gender is simply a costume, a "drag" we don for approval.

(17) Particularly after the introduction of Faith, Buffy reveals her dark side more often than any super heroine (Wonderwoman? Bat Girl?) before her Buffy attempts murder for love and revenge, Buffy has sex, Buffy drinks too much and gets sick; she does these "bad" things not without consequence (hangovers, de-evolution, loss of souls) but without the undue shame and punishment of an after-school special. Fighting skills and magical knowledge aside, Buffy is most remarkable for simply being the first well-rounded, realistic portrait of the life of a young woman on television. Since the rise of Girl Power, television Buffy can be something the early nineties slayer never could be: a real teenage girl.

(18) Buffy stands out in social contrast to her film counterpart; though flashbacks have shown Buffy leading a life of cheerleading and popularity similar to her predecessor, her strength has been in her evolution into an everywoman, her journey from a vapid pom-pom girl into self-possessed savior of the human race, hinting that there was more going on behind the cinematic Buffy's cotton-candy façade. The changes Buffy has faced, from film to television, and even within the run of the series, show an identifiable evolution in the depiction of young women in that era. Ideal females of their times, film Buffy's transformation into TV Buffy, her evolution from caricature to full being exemplifies the changes that have occurred in the reign of Girl Power.

(19) *Buffy* the television series differs from the film importantly in that it was the trailblazer of its particular media (Girl Power horror and teen television) instead of coming late to the teen trend party like *Buffy* the film. The change in medium creates a wider sphere of influence in a more effective medium for conveying a mass message. While *Buffy* has created the template for tough television heroines, few have followed in its footsteps quite so boldly; other shows of the teen television

renaissance, many on *Buffy's* WB Network, deal with the issues of life as a teenage female, but in a more traditional comic way (*Felicity*, *Popular*) or as a side-note to the angst of male teens (*Dawson's Creek*, *Roswell*). *Buffy* still stands relatively alone.

(20) Each *Buffy* has been emblematic of her era; cinematic "Buffy" of the Valley girl eighties, television "Buffy" of the Girl Power nineties. The premise of both *Buffy's*—of having the weight of the world on your shoulders and having to fight just to remain true to yourself—is a story of growing up female, a story generally considered not worth telling before the advent of Girl Power. Television *Buffy* gets to grow up in a way cinematic *Buffy* never did. A long journey from the Galleria, Girl Power has brought *Buffy* to a place where the fate of humanity lying in the hands of a teenage girl can be more a one-note joke.

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