

**“SHE KICKS ASS...IN HEELS”: NEGOTIATING
REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININITY IN *BUFFY THE
VAMPIRE SLAYER***

by

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ABSTRACT

Television programs are important cultural artefacts that inform everyday expectations and experiences of viewers. However, how viewers incorporate these meanings generated from negotiating these texts into their cognitive repertoires is often poorly understood. Much research in audience studies still tends to reinforce the traditional dichotomy of popular culture as false consciousness versus popular culture as radically, at least potentially, subversive of the status quo. These polarized arguments are particularly apparent when examining current representations of femininity in prime time programming. Many feminists argue that these representations are negative, while others argue for their radical potential. Rather than focus on this either/or dualism, I argue that it is a case of both/and: televisual constructions of femininity *both* reinscribe normative ideologies *and* offer a potentially subversive space within which to play with these constructed ideologies.

I undertake both a textual and contextual analysis of the popular television program *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (BtVS). Using qualitative interviews, I explore the participants' own understanding of how they pleurably generate both textual (within the program) and contextual (their everyday lives) meanings of femininity, as well as how constructing these meanings may provide a relative sense of power. These ambivalent, and at times contradictory, meanings are discussed both within the program itself and in terms of how they inform, and are informed by, larger social concerns of gender. I argue that the viewing positions offered by the text – self-conscious irony, metaphor, emotional realism and the tragic structure of feeling – encourage a negotiated viewing position that both mimics and

shapes the experiences of femininity in the participants' everyday lives. I also trace the close historical relationship between genre and gender, asserting that the reason for the show's popularity is its ability to meaningfully, if ambivalently, represent the social changes and ongoing contradictions in definitions and daily experiences of femininity. I conclude that BtVS is one of many sites in which we can read the ambivalence with which women grapple with femininity in both popular culture and their everyday lives.

DEDICATION

I have been truly lucky to have been surrounded by a great number of supportive and caring people, far more than I can acknowledge here. Having said that, there are several people I would especially like to thank: my mother and father, Sara and Tristram – for accepting me, challenging me, and loving me. My heart is bigger because of you.

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INTRODUCTION

Television is a major institution of cultural expression in North America. Television is a ubiquitous presence in our lives. A dominant purveyor of popular culture, television is a ubiquitous presence in our lives, and popular culture televisual texts are an important intermediary in the construction of its consumers' identities. Therefore, televisual texts are an important part of how we learn to see ourselves. The meanings generated from engaging in televisual texts both positively and negatively influence our understandings, expectations, and larger sense-making narratives of everyday life. Kenneth Burke argued that literature is most fundamentally 'equipment for living' (1966); surely the same can be said for omnipresent television. As White states, "given TV's prominent position in contemporary social life, its dense network of texts, and its pervasive implication in a larger consumer culture, it constitutes a major arena of contemporary ideological practice" (White, 1992, p.196). As with any cultural artefact, television is used by viewers in a multiplicity of ways: for pleasure, escape, information and social connection, just to name a few. Television images and narratives both reflect and construct contemporary social norms, practices, and expectations, and viewers are in a continual process of negotiating these ideologies within a matrix of their own lived experiences and desire. Yet how viewers make and use these meanings is often poorly understood and contested among scholars.

By conducting a textual analysis of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, I will provide the groundwork for addressing how female viewers actively, if not necessarily always consciously, engage in the construction of appropriate femininity. This focus on gender is particularly important, as it is

one of the main ways through which audiences are addressed. An unanticipated outcome of the interviews and focus groups I have conducted for the purposes of this thesis has been similar to consciousness raising sessions for both the participants and for myself. The research participants, in the process of dialogue became aware of the dialectical negotiations they undertake with the show, and the complex interconnection with their gender identities. For myself, I became aware that the theoretical and methodological ground from which I argue is also intimately intertwined with my gender position. In this sense, my research not only contributes to the body of literature on feminist audience studies, but also serves as a pedagogical tool that renders visible the connection between popular culture and gendered identities, as well as the importance of foreground the researcher's own gendered subject position from which this knowledge is generated.

Buffy and Me: Research Questions and Self-Reflexivity

While I do not remember when I first start watching BtVS, and have often missed whole seasons, I can also remember going out of my way, even in the face of ridicule from others, to watch it when I could. Here was a young woman I could identify with, if only in fantasy; sexy, strong, imperfect and irreverent – and by god she could kick some serious demon ass. Eventually, I became an avid viewer, increasingly engrossed in the plot and character development; something that has never happened for me with any other show. I derived great pleasure from the show, but an interesting thing happened: the more involved I became, and therefore the more enjoyment I received from participating as a viewer, the more conflicted and ambivalent I began to feel about it. I wasn't sure how I felt about Buffy with her perfect body, fashionable clothes, and obsession with relationships, even though the producer publicly and repeatedly positioned BtVS as a feminist text. I began talking

about my confusion with other female friends who were also fans, and found that I wasn't alone; our pleasure seemed to be inextricably linked to feelings of ambivalence and often to outright contradiction. As time passed, my interest continued to grow, and I began to question the show more methodically. I didn't want to dismiss the real pleasure I, or others that I talked with, received from engaging with the program; however, I also did not want to unproblematically embrace this pleasure. What I wanted was to try and tease out *why* the show was so pleasurable and engaging for so many women, while at the same time attempting to locate this negotiated pleasure within larger fields of influence. Ien Ang, in her historic study of *Dallas* and its viewers, struggled with a similar problematic. Discussing her own engagement with the show, she states that:

This ambivalence is on the one hand connected with my identity as an intellectual and as a feminist, and on the other hand with the fact that I have always particularly enjoyed soap operas like *Dallas*...the admission of the reality of this pleasure also formed the starting point for this study – I wanted in the first place to understand this pleasure, without having to pass judgement on whether *Dallas* is good or bad from a political, social or aesthetic view. Quite the contrary, in my opinion it is important to emphasize how difficult it is to make such judgements – and hence to try to formulate the terms for a progressive cultural politics – when pleasure is at stake (Ang, 1985, p.11-12).

As a woman, I am also intimately concerned with how mass media informs public and private understandings of what it means to be feminine in Western society. Pleasure, as an emotional state, does not exist outside of context or influence. In order to understand the pleasurable process of engaging with televisual texts such as *BtVS*, we cannot disengage these texts from the very political, social and aesthetic concerns that Ang chooses not to address – in fact it is these concerns which form the very ground of what constitutes something *as* pleasurable. And it is a combination of these political, social and aesthetic influences that help to constitute appropriate understandings and embodiments of femininity

and womanhood. Foregrounding this interconnection, Andrea Press, in her study of women and television, negotiates the contradictory terrain that comes from being at once fan, woman, feminist and scholar.

I was convinced that consuming media gave women, (including me) great pleasure; I was convinced also that consuming the media images that are dominant in our culture makes women's lives in many ways more difficult, and more painful, by reinforcing stereotypes...which are unconsciously limiting and often damaging to our self-esteem. Like most of the women I interviewed, my attitude toward television was conflicted, a mixture of both sets of beliefs (Press, 1991, p.188).

My self-identification as a feminist is merely a public way of stating my belief that: 1) the gendered experience of being female continues to be a primary organizing category for sense-making narratives, 2) Western society continues to be organized around, and to legitimate, masculine ways of thinking, and 3) while progress has inarguably been made in these areas, systemic discrimination and misogyny must be meaningfully addressed (Grosz, 1993; Longino, 1993; Millen, 1997; Smith, 1974). As a feminist, I understand BtVS to be making subtle prescriptive and proscriptive statements about what constitutes appropriate femininity. Since the program also consciously positions itself as a feminist text, I argue that the show, as a semiotic microcosm reflecting its larger social and political context, powerfully informs what constitutes acceptable public and popular understandings of 'liberal' and/or post feminism as the standard for contemporary constructions of femininity.

Therefore, and inescapably, my own - and often highly personal - interests have been fundamental in shaping this thesis; my subject position (in brief and in part) is that of a fan, a woman, a feminist, and a scholar. While extensive self-reflection within the course of academic research can mask narcissistic tendencies, publicly locating my desires, interests

and concerns – in short, my subjectivity – may help the reader to understand the influences that have shaped this work (Finch, 1984; Press, 1991; Radway, 1984; Roman & Apple, 1990). This may also help to distinguish between revealing my feelings on the topic and too forcibly imposing my judgments on the reader (Wolcott, 1990).

The goal of this thesis is to simultaneously address and construct theoretical complexities of negotiation, ambivalence, contradiction, and pleasure with respect to how a small group of female viewers negotiate the discourses of femininity both within the text of *BtVS* and more generally in their daily lives. While I am intimately concerned with the larger social, political and aesthetic implications of the pleasure gained from engaging in *BtVS*, I believe it is possible to address these issues without a priori descending into the historical binaries produced in many scholarly discourses of popular culture: popular culture = oppression/false consciousness versus popular culture = appropriation/resistance. There has been a long tradition of viewing television as a culturally debased realm of engagement, both for viewers and for scholars, and cultural studies has been partially responsible for this construction (Corner, 1999). While Seiter states that “there is nothing inherently progressive about pleasure” (1987, p. 5), feminist scholarship has begun to demonstrate that there is nothing inherently oppressive about it either (Macklem, 1992). Women’s voices and experiences, particularly in the realm of pleasure gained from consuming popular culture is an area that needs further theorizing, from many perspectives and positions. It is my goal to validate the importance of women’s understandings of their own actions, while creating a narrative that includes larger fields of possible influence – in short, a document that is ‘good to think with’ for all of those involved.

This then brings me to my central concerns. I will argue that television texts are an important cultural matrix in which viewers learn about themselves and their experiences, using femininity as the example of this process. I also construct a theoretical argument that there is relative power and pleasure to be gained from engaging in televisual texts that provide both micro and macro forms of sense-making. Further, I assert that the subject positions offered by television are inherently ambivalent and contradictory, requiring negotiation on the part of viewers. However, these assertions are still overwhelmingly abstract. Do concrete, individual viewers actually engage with and negotiate televisual texts and their available subject positions in the ways that I argue? If so, how does this occur? What meanings of femininity are generated? Are the meanings pleasurable, and do they provide viewers with a relative sense of power?

My reasons for focusing on this show are several: I am an unabashed fan who has personal, theoretical and political interests in the narratives of femininity on the show, but more importantly, I chose the program because the producers of BtVS self-consciously position it as a feminist text, and publicly champion the show as a progressive, complex and 'realistic' text of femininity. This self-conscious appropriation of the critical language of feminism, as well as an ironic incorporation of the critique of popular culture, ensures that BtVS is a program, par excellence, from which to examine contemporary representations of femininity. Another crucial reason I chose this program is that it has a huge and loyal following of fans who find the show deeply pleasurable and meaningful, a perspective borne out by my interviews with ten women who were eager to discuss their involvement with the show. As discussed previously, the show has garnered a huge cult following among fans and academic critics alike. Clearly, it is a show that engages audiences, who find meaning and

pleasure from negotiating the text. Therefore, it makes for an excellent example of how specific viewers generate and discuss the televisual understandings that may inform their understandings and experiences of femininity.

The specific questions that guided my research were:

- 1) How and what meanings of femininity are constructed by the participants through viewing the show?
- 2) How are those meanings informed by their understandings and experiences of being inscribed as feminine?
- 3) Does the pleasure gained from engaging in negotiating and creating meaning in the contradictory textual terrain of BtVS help viewers construct meaningful understandings of, and therefore positions of relative power within, the contradictory lived terrain of femininity in contemporary capitalist society? If so, what are the benefits and limitations of these understandings?

In discussing the program and its viewers (abstract and concrete), some of the larger social, political, and economic influences shaping both will be addressed, albeit in a necessarily tangential fashion. In particular, these concerns, which ground my research questions, stem from an interest in mass mediated representations of post feminism, and in media's tendency to valorize the political impetus of third wave feminism as liberal feminism¹ and girl power², as well as in its engagement with popular culture as political activism. More specifically, my concern here centres on commonly circulated and negotiated representations of the contemporary and commodified female body in post feminist popular culture. How do these representations labour to shape the corporeal and imagined bodies of those females

who engage with these representations? How do we understand and articulate the power, contradiction, and pleasurable ambivalence experienced from occupying, desiring, and denigrating those self-same bodies and their representations of femininity and feminism? I believe these to be critical questions for those of us who are both compelled and concerned by the increasingly common conflation and articulation of feminism as popular culture, feminism as consumerism, and feminism as a 'finished' political project.

Post feminism here is defined through two differing definitions of the term. In much of mass mediated popular culture, post feminism is defined as a historical moment where social, economic and political concerns of first and second-wave feminism have been meaningfully addressed, or exposed as myths, and takes for granted that equality between women and men has largely been achieved. This understanding of post feminism also argues that feminism is 'dead' (hence 'post') due to a heady mixture of anti-foundationalist movements. Post feminism has often been defined through an engagement with, or represented through, popular culture. The 'ideal' post feminist in popular culture is often constructed as a young woman who is no longer concerned with systemic change, enjoying the freedoms won by her foremothers; she is strong, independent and sexually assertive, gaining pleasure from engaging in the world as an individual rather than facing any struggle against systematic gender oppression. It is a subject position of accommodation rather than resistance. Many young women who do not identify as feminist still consider themselves post feminist in the sense that their concerns differ from first and second-wave feminism, and while they do not deny that changes still need to be made, they are not willing to denigrate their pleasures in popular culture and elsewhere. There is also a definition of post feminism, used by many third wave feminists (third wave feminism itself being partially

structured as a response to the mass media's assertion that feminism was 'dead') which recognizes the historical continuity of discrete moments in feminist thought, as well as the continuing importance of feminist thought, even as it is informed and challenged by other perspectives. Here post feminism becomes plural, in that post feminisms "[facilitate] a broad-based, pluralistic conception of the application of feminism, and [address] the demands of marginalised, diasporic and colonised cultures for a non-hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and post-colonial feminisms'" (Brooks, 1997, p.4).

In keeping with my interest to contribute to the corpus of feminist literature that discusses representations of femininity in popular culture, I also strongly believe that the continuous reinscription of the female body as *the* privileged (and yet simultaneously invisible, naturalized and erased) site for discourses of appropriate femininity and feminism – both by profit driven producers of popular culture and by academics – is deeply problematic. Bodies are not docile, and representations (including writings such as this thesis) of the body are powerful mechanisms which can potentially both liberate and constrain individual subjects. While one's essence is not necessarily reducible to one's body, it is a primary way in which we are located socially, economically, and politically. Within these cultural matrices, gender remains a locating device – a discourse – of fundamental importance; just think of the first question you ask when you learn that someone has had a baby. This innocent question shows the integral connection between gender, bodies and how we make sense of the everyday. In no way do I wish to valorize gender as *the* primary organizing category of experience; any attempt to do so works further to reify and naturalize the permutations of the very experiences I seek to explore, analyse, and challenge. Rather, I argue that gender is

both inscribed and inscribing, imposed and chosen, requirement and masquerade, a complex, evolving and ongoing dance between society and subject. Additionally, I have chosen not to address the articulation of gender with other equally important inscribed and embodied locating devices such as class or race. This is a conscious decision, based on constraints of time and length. My intent here is not a comprehensive examination of all aspects which constitute the feminine subject in North American society; rather, my goal is to explore a single, albeit critical, articulation of subjectivity in the activity of watching television: i.e., gender. However, it is my hope that this thesis will be able to both problematize and contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding these larger concerns.

In addition to my desire to examine the articulation between contemporary feminism and audience studies, and to contribute to the critical analyses of popular culture and gender, I have a tertiary goal with respect to this thesis. As mentioned previously, there is a plethora of both academic and popular writing surrounding BtVS, particularly feminist writing, and yet little research has addressed how concrete viewers of the program actually engage with the text. In this vein, what does exist has exclusively focused on fan fiction or online commentary from the many electronic posting boards (Bloustien, 2002; Heinecken, 2004; Papart, 2003; Rust, 2003; Saxey, 2001; Symonds, 2003). While these studies have started to broaden scholastic interest from purely textual analyses of BtVS, there has been no research which focuses on the negotiation between the diverse and contradictory viewing positions made available by the text and occupied by viewers. This oversight is an important gap in the literature, particularly given the enormous amount of debate regarding the program's 'effect' on female viewers. The research that does engage actual viewers rarely addresses the complex interplay between text and context in regards to representations of femininity and

how these representations are understood, contested and used by actual participants to inform their cognitive maps of appropriate femininity. In this context, the critical examination of gender portrayals in popular culture is not an abstract academic exercise that labours to impose meaning from above and outside the lives of those who engage in, and take meaning from, watching television; instead, as a member of all these groups (fan, critic, scholar, feminist), I seek to address an already articulated and negotiated engagement with the program. An in-depth exploration of viewers will allow for a more nuanced understanding of how a specific group of fans actually negotiate these representations, as well as contributing to the growing literature of audience studies, and BtVS in particular.

Due to time and organizational constraints, I collected most of my research through a series of open-ended interviews. Therefore, my work is most accurately classified as an ethnography of discourse, in that this thesis focuses on how the participants describe and discuss how they construct meanings of femininity represented on BtVS, rather than first-hand data collection of their actions. However, rather than see this as an impediment, I feel that my analysis of how the participants talk about their experiences with BtVS is of fundamental importance to understanding how the women make sense of the meanings generated from their viewing experiences. As well, since a researcher cannot ascertain how meaning is generated for participants without asking the participants themselves, it seems to me somewhat facetious to argue that using the participants' own perspectives as a grounding point somehow contaminates the research, as it is precisely these perspectives which I am trying to ascertain. However, it is equally dangerous to assume that viewers' responses in and of themselves constitute an adequate ground from which to investigate the generation of meaning; viewers are situated by text and by experiences and desires located outside the text

itself. Therefore, both aspects of critical analysis - text and context - are necessary in order to begin a situated understanding of how viewers use televisual texts to inform and make sense of experiences and desires outside of the televisual text. This thesis attempts to do exactly that, and does so through a triangulation: it combines a textual reading with interviews with viewers, and is grounded both in larger social, historical and economic fields of influence.

Television, in both form and content, is a part of who we are, and how we learn about ourselves and the world around us. Attempting to address the specific articulations between television and gender can take many forms; within the first chapter, the purpose is to trace some of the main themes emerging within audience and cultural studies in order to outline my main argument which emerges in its entirety in chapter three: that our subjectivity and its attendant cognitive maps are powerfully informed by popular constructions and representations of gender, and that this process occurs in ambivalent and contradictory ways. Further, for the group of women who participated in this research, their complex and fluid negotiation of these representations arguably generate a sense of pleasure and relative power outside the text itself. While this theoretical assertion was grounded through working with a small group of female fans, it would be a gross fallacy to unproblematically assume that the results discussed here hold true for all viewers who enjoy BtVS. Rather, it is my intent here to construct a theoretical framework that is both challenged and validated by local context, creating a situated and provisional understanding generated by the productive tensions and confluence of researching a small component of the compelling, chaotic activity known as watching television. Before turning to an examination of recent developments in the field of audience studies, a brief overview of the program will help to ground this theoretical overview.

Broadcasting and Audience Background

As a television show³, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* premiered in 1997, steadily occupying a primetime slot both on WB (Seasons 1-5) and UPN⁴ (Seasons 6-7) throughout its seven year run. The show ended in 2003, although it currently still enjoys high ratings in syndication, both in the U.S. (WB, Fox and F/X) as well as Canada (Space). The audience targeted by BtVS was the ever-profitable 18-49 year-old demographic, and in its first run, the largest audience share were females in their late twenties⁵, showing that while the show may have ostensibly focused on vampires and post-adolescent angst, the subject matter resonated with a wide age range. For most of the show, ratings ranged from 4.5 to more than 6 million viewers (Angel and Buffy Ratings, 2004). Among this desirable demographic, the show generated a spectacular amount of interest, and a TV Guide poll of viewers rated it as one of the best shows of all time (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 2004). Fan interest and participation is extraordinarily intense; there are close to two thousand web sites devoted to the program, more than three times the number generated by any other television program. As many as 10 million people watch the show in North America every month, and the show appears in 54 countries worldwide and more than 3 million VHS and DVD units have been sold (*Buffy Chaos Bleeds*, 2004). While industry acceptance has largely eluded BtVS (only two Emmys were ever bestowed on it although it was nominated on nine separate occasions), popular and critical praise has been almost embarrassing in its effusiveness. Academic interest in the show has increased to the point where there is arguably a sub-field of “Buffy Studies,”⁶ and with more than half a dozen scholastic books dedicated to the program, as well as numerous

international, university-sponsored conferences, there seems to be little chance of popular or critical interest diminishing, even with the end of the series.

And Here She Is...Miss America

“Into each generation, a Slayer is born. One girl in all the world, a Chosen One. One born with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires, to stop the spread of evil”. (“Welcome to the Hellmouth”)

“If the apocalypse comes, beep me.” - Buffy

The creators of BtVS have used a combination of horror, fantasy, melodrama, comedy, and action genres to generate a radically popular post-feminist television icon; a strong female superhero who is able to save the world on a daily basis, while wearing fashionable heels and dating the undead. As Josh Whedon states, “I invoke about five genres. I love superheroes. I was a comic book boy. I tend to create universes with the kind of sophomoric emotional bigness that really exists only in comic books and television” (qtd in Lippert, p.25). The show constructs Buffy Summers as a normal girl in most respects, except for two things: first, she is the ‘Slayer’, a protector supernaturally chosen from each female generation to keep the world safe from vampires, demons and the ever-present threat of the apocalypse, and second, she lives in Sunnydale, a southern California town located over a ‘hell mouth’, an inter-dimensional portal from which monsters, demons and vampires pop through with amazing regularity. Blonde, thin and beautiful, Buffy is nevertheless constructed as a ‘typical’ teenage girl who is fairly well adjusted except for the pesky business of having to fight vampires and demons; she is obsessed with boys and clothes, and does not have much interest in academic pursuits. As she muses, “Clark Kent has a job. I just want to go on a date.” As a superhero, Buffy embodies both stereotypical masculine and feminine

characteristics: she is both strong and vulnerable, experiencing intense pleasure in physically challenging encounters with various monsters, though she often attempts to find non-violent solutions, she is a loner but needs the collectivity of her friends in order to succeed, she is obsessed with her boyfriends, but willing to (literally) kill them when necessary. The show focuses on Buffy and her friends (better known as the Scooby Gang) who help her fight each seasons' 'big bads': Willow, her nerdy best friend, who eventually becomes a powerful witch, Xander, who has no power save for his bumbling loyalty, as well as Giles, Buffy's 'Watcher' who helps train and guide her with resources provided by the mysterious Watcher's council. The Scooby Gang also, at various times, contains Willow and Xander's partners: Oz (Season 1-2), Cordelia (Seasons 1-2), Anya (6-7) and Tara (5-6) (although none of the characters last more than two seasons). As well, there have been other slayers, replacements chosen during times that Buffy 'temporarily' died: Kendra (Season 2) and Faith (2-4). Often the show borders on, and happily crosses into, the absurd, with demon weddings and a never-ending supply of the undead and possessed. The characters continuously undergo fantastical transformations from being exposed to demons or magic, which provides much of the comic relief. They also engage in self-conscious Gen-X humour, providing a biting wit that requires viewers to play close attention in order to get all the popular culture references and intertextuality. However, the silly and self-consciously 'camp' form does not overshadow the content, which engages in social issues such as sexuality, identity, relationships and morality; these issues are particularly prominent in the final two seasons, when Marti Nixon became the head writer for many of the episodes.

Whedon as Feminist Auteur

I always intended it to have the kind of impact on popular culture that it did. I wanted Buffy to be a pop icon. I wanted her to be remembered. I wanted her to be in people's interior lives. I wanted her to be a hero...and she was designed very specifically for that so it wasn't a big surprise when it worked (Angel and Buffy News, 2003 , para.1).

As the above quotation demonstrates, the creator, executive producer, and head writer, Josh Whedon, had a specific idea when he created the characters and plots for the program. With a bachelor's degree in film and women studies, as well as a family background in writing television scripts⁷, Whedon states that,

I'd seen a lot of horror movies which I'd loved very much, with blonde girls getting themselves killed in dark alleys and I just germinated this idea about how much I'd like to see a blonde girl go into a dark alley, get attacked by a big monster, and then kill it!...If I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of a situation without their knowing what's happening, it's better than sitting down and selling them on feminism (qtd in Bellafante, 1997, p.83).

From the beginning, Whedon has continuously and publicly constructed Buffy as a post-feminist icon representing the potential of 'everywoman' to be a slayer of her own demons⁸; however, this construction of a strong woman is one which is 'acceptable' to an audience that finds female power threatening. This built-in ambivalence in regards to televisually signifying the changing social, economic and political roles of femininity is both celebrated and problematized by fans and critics alike.

Buffy as Post-Feminist Icon

Any discussion of the show will inevitably lead to the time-worn question of whether BtVS is a 'feminist' text in the sense that it empowers female viewers to challenge patriarchal

norms and dictates of femininity. There are two fairly entrenched camps on this issue; the first sees *BtVS* as a feminist text:

As an open-image fantasy of female resistance to patriarchal authority, *Buffy* helps to problematize the essentialized status of gendered physical attributes, notably by representing *Buffy* as an embodied subject who takes pleasure in aggressive behaviour (Early & Kennedy, 2003, p.83).

The second view sees the show as reactionary:

Far from being subversive in any positive sense, *Buffy* embodies questionable values and stereotypes on a number of levels...[the show] does not challenge sexual and gender stereotypes (except superficially) or those about romance and true love, but instead reinforces them (Levine & Schneider, 2003, p.64).

By focusing the narrative on a strong central female character who embodies both female and male characteristics, both the producer and certain critics identify *Buffy* as a role model for young women: competent, responsible, assertive, confident, albeit appealingly flawed (Buttsworth, 2002; Chandler, 2003; Early, 2001; Early & Kennedy, 2003; Marinucci, 2003; Miller, 2003; Wilcox & Lavery, 2002). However, many critics also correctly note that the show recapitulates traditional discourses of gender under the rubric of championing femininity as defined by liberal feminism: white, middle-class heteronormativity (Bodger, 2003; Tjardes, 2003). Other discussions focus on philosophy and/or morality, particularly on whether *Buffy*'s actions model a feminist or feminine ethics of care (Bradney, 2003; Early & Kennedy, 2003; Greene & Yuen, 2001, 2003; Helford, 2002; Kawal, 2003; McClland, 2001; Petrova, 2003; Riess, 2004; Rosenfeld & Wynns, 2003; Stevenson, 2004; Stroud, 2003; Symonds, 2003; Wilcox & Lavery, 2002; Zacharek, Nov. 28, 2001)⁹. Debates also centre on *Buffy* as a potentially feminine and/or feminist heroic role model, using both mythical and contemporary criteria (Boyette, 2001; de la Rosa, 2002; Early & Kennedy, 2003; Rattletrap, 2001). Another topic of academic interest that has been addressed is the show's use of

innovative metaphors that highlight adolescent angst and dangers that teenagers must navigate in the real world, particularly those related to sexuality (Bowers, 2001; Clark & Miller, 2001; Levy, 2003; Little, 2003; Scholzman, 2000; R. Wilcox, 1999; Wisker, 2001). The program has also been examined, albeit less frequently, through the theoretical framework of postcolonial studies, which addresses concerns of racial representation (Alderman & Seidel-Arpaci, 2003; Alessio, 2001; Bacon-Smith, 2003; Edwards, 2002; Molloy, 2003), and also in terms of its religious themes (Coleman, 2003; Erikson, 2002; Golden, 2003; Locklin, 2002; Playond, 2001). In addition, critics continue to discuss how BtVS presents and represents both postmodern aesthetics and postmodern angst, highlighting adolescent concerns of living in a world bereft from the comforts of modernist narratives of progress, truth and rationality (Muntersbjorn, 2003; Pender, 2002; Sharpe, 2003; Siemann, 2002; South, 2001; R. Wilcox). Throughout the majority of these critical works, a concern with representations of femininity and/or feminism is explicit; as a guiding philosophy of the show, it is impossible to deny the import of this main ideological problematic, and even works which do not directly address this topic do attempt to forward an understanding of BtVS as either a revolutionary or reactionary program in regards to representations of gender.

As Early states, “Programs such as BtVS portend a shift in gender representation in popular culture that invites critical study” (Early & Kennedy, 2003, p.55). Rather than focusing on an either/or dichotomy, several feminist writers address how the show can be understood plurally, i.e., as articulating the tension between its potentially liberatory aspects and its reinscription of patriarchal desires and demands of women (Cocca, 2003; Heinecken, 2003; Helford, 2002; Owen, 1999; Vint, 2002). Following the path charted by these scholars, rather than attempt to situate the program within a paradigm of feminine emancipation or feminine

oppression, I feel that it is most interesting to chart how BtVS is both, and how the two competing discourses of femininity are textually signified, as well as how they are understood and discussed by female viewers. Indeed, for many viewers, it is the intersection of these competing paradigms that lend the show its appeal.

The remainder of the thesis is organized as follows: in chapter I explain my methodological position and discuss the importance of investigating the epistemological foundations of researchers who undertake work in audience studies. Chapter three provides a critical diegetic analysis of BtVS using a genre and ideological analysis from a feminist perspective, as well as a close ‘reading’ of two particular episodes – *Bad Girls* (season three) and *Seeing Red* (season six) – that the participants and I watched collectively. The focus of the analysis is on how the producers of the show construct a diversity of feminine roles and why these may be both appealing and problematic to female viewers. In chapters four, five and six, I discuss the results of my research: chapter four centres on how the participants discuss their negotiations of the meanings and roles of femininity generated by engaging in BtVS. Moreover, in this chapter, I argue that BtVS provides the viewers with a sense of emotional realism and experiential identification, both of which are powerful ways to hail and interpellate the viewer. Chapter five focuses on how they negotiate and use diverse meanings of femininity outside the text to inform their daily lives and their often contradictory experiences of being gendered female. Chapter six addresses the potential connections between these meanings and textual representations of femininity in order to access how the conjunction of the two may provide relative power to these viewers by enlarging their cognitive maps of gender, and therefore the ways they express themselves in the world.

CHAPTER ONE: CURRENT THEMES IN AUDIENCE AND FEMINIST CULTURAL STUDIES

Introduction and chapter overview

In this chapter I examine two somewhat different theoretical focuses in regards to how viewers make and use meanings generated from watching television. The first section addresses some of current themes in audience studies which focus on the complex interplay between viewer and text, specifically the concepts of negotiation, polysemy, viewing positions, relative power, and televisual representations of everyday life - particularly femininity. I also discuss these concerns in relation to BtVS. The second section is a more general overview of the theoretical framework which grounds my particular arguments about the ideological importance of genre and gender, which emerge in their entirety in chapter three. In this section, a discussion of the use of cultural studies, poststructuralist and feminist influences is undertaken in order to clarify the ground from which I argue their interconnectivity. An in-depth examination of some key terms, including ideology, gender, subjectivity, contradiction and pleasure is carried out, not only to clarify my usage of them in this work, but also to interrogate some of the limitations, as well as benefits of using them to construct a situated interpretation of my participants' discussions and interactions with BtVS.

Current Themes in Audience Studies

A concern with how audiences negotiate televisual texts and generate meanings from them has become increasingly mainstream in communications research in the last twenty years.

Recent work in audience studies can largely be characterised by two assumptions: 1) that the audience is always active (in a non-trivial sense), and 2) that media content is 'polysemic' or open to interpretation (Ang, 1995; Fiske, 1987; Fiske & Hartley, 2003; Morley, 1992; Press, 1996; Radway, 1984). These assertions have their historical roots in Stuart Hall's work, where the viewer is understood as having some interpretative agency in 'decoding' televisual texts, and the ability to negotiate the potential diversity of encoded meanings is based on experiences and perspectives constructed outside and pre-existing the text itself (including other media and texts) (Hall, 1973). The strength of this position is that it emphasises both the text *and* the viewer as necessary components to the interpretative process, or what Hall calls the 'determinate moments' of constructing meaning. As well, Hall argues that viewers are able to decode in opposing ways, in that they are able to understand potentially conflicting readings simultaneously. While Hall's encoding/decoding model tends to conflate questions of recognition, comprehension, interpretation and response, it remains a powerful heuristic model and has led to a body of audience analysis research that demonstrates that media texts are polysemic, or open to multiple interpretations – some of which are oppositional or negotiated to the preferred meanings encoded in the texts. Correspondingly, the concept of negotiation has become increasingly popular in television studies (Ang, 1985, Fiske, 1987; Fiske and Hartley, 2003; Heide, 1995; Morley, 1980 and 1992, Press, 1996). Therefore, while textual deconstructions of televisual narratives remain crucial to understanding how meaning is encoded in a text, it is also necessary to undertake studies of

actual viewers to better understand how that meaning is decoded – made sense of – by the viewer¹⁰.

There is no inherent conflict between textual analysis and audience response approaches to understanding television. Text-based approaches stretch and expose the text by continually pulling from it a range of meanings of which previous audiences were unaware. Audience response approaches allow scholars the opportunity to follow those meanings as they are embodied in the experience of viewers. In these encounters, idealised constructs can be confronted with the messiness of real-life (Young, 2000, p.450).

In the face of the growing popularity of informing textual analyses with audience-based research, many theorists in television studies have enthusiastically begun to construct televisual texts as radically polysemic: not only open, but inherently amenable to seemingly endless interpretation, dependent only on the needs and pleasures of the individual viewer (for the clearest examples of this trend, see Ang, 1996; Fiske, 1992 & 1994). These recent reception studies seem to document "the total absence of media influence in the semiotic democracy of postmodern pluralism...[yet] this is readily submersible within a conservative ideology of sovereign consumer pluralism" (Morley, 1992, p.26). The assertion that the potential diversity of meanings generated from negotiating televisual texts as evidence of a radical semiotic democracy ignores that the meanings encoded are conventionally structured around the economic dictates of the medium – to produce profit. The underlying purpose of the medium is to sell audiences to advertisers, and in order to do so, those who create televisual texts must work within these economic confines, which require those texts to encourage ideologies amenable to the advertisers' need: an audience that desires to purchase the commodities of its corporate clients. These commodities are not ends unto themselves, rather their continuous consumption helps viewers to construct a desired 'lifestyle', a lifestyle that is constructed as desirable not only through the advertisements, but also through televisual narratives. Therefore, televisual narratives are commodities as well, which are

produced and consumed, sold to the audience both figuratively (consumption through viewing) and literally (viewers in turn become commodities themselves) (Smythe, 1981; Jhally, 1998; White, 1992).

Shall We Dance?: Negotiating the Hegemonic Televisual Text

This is not to argue that television is merely a vapid wasteland whose viewers are merely passive cultural dupes suffering under the yoke of false ideology. Far from it. What I am arguing is somewhat more complex, that meanings and pleasures generated from the negotiation of televisual texts are often contradictory – they are constructed both within and against many dominant ideologies, of which capitalism and patriarchy serve as two of the most powerful metanarratives for Western society (Bennett, 1986a; Eagleton, 1991; Grosz, 1993). The meanings generated from engaging with televisual texts are a result of the negotiated meanings created within these hegemonic processes, whereby 'common sense' is generated through struggles between those (television producers and executives and advertisers for example) who have the cultural power to define and circulate meanings of self, society, and experience, and those who do not have the same power (most viewers). Television texts inherently allow for a multiplicity of understandings; that is, as complex, and at times, contradictory bundles of representations, texts can never fully 'close' themselves off to alternative readings; however, specific forms of encoding, such as genres and production codes, work to guide the viewer towards specific preferred understandings of the material (Ang, 1995; Fiske and Hartley, 2003; Press, 1996; Rockler, 1999; White, 1992). This provides for a directive closure of potential meanings, in that "...polysemy is not without its own structure...there are within it signifying mechanisms which promote certain meanings; even one privileged meaning which suppresses others" (Morley, 1992, p.21). Televisual texts are in

a constant state of tension between closure and openness, and signifiers identify and limit the arena in which meanings may be found (Fiske, 1987). As well, producers of television texts have increasingly begun to create semantic space within the texts for viewing positions that allow for a variety of meanings to be generated; the use of irony, excess, and metaphor have become standard in many contemporary texts. The viewer, therefore, actively and continuously negotiates the complex nexus of televisual representations: their preferred meanings, the inherent openness of the text, and personal interpretations, which are based on previous experiences outside the text itself.

In a spiral of involvement and disavowal, the mass-culture spectator can move in and out of various positions, suggesting perhaps that it is precisely this weaving of contradictory positions, rather than the achieved assumption of any one position, that may constitute much of the power and pleasure of the operation of mass culture (Polan, 19981, p.193).

The encoding of televisual texts is not simply a monolithic exercise of ideological power on the part of the cultural and economic elites who create and distribute televisual programs – though this does occur to some extent – but rather, forms a part of larger practices and expectations of society itself, as all the participants of television engage in an uneven, but collective process of accepting or problematizing popular culture texts that circulate through the televisual medium. This critical perspective changes the focus on the micro-level from effects to negotiation, and on the macro-level from dominant ideology to hegemony (Gledhill, 1998; Morley, 1992). While televisual narratives may be the entertainment 'lure' to bring audiences to advertisers, to be popular amongst a diverse audience it must have the ability to accommodate, if not incorporate, opposing views, to have relevance, and provide pleasure for those who consume them. As Fiske argues, "Television is only popular if it has space to articulate with the social interest of its viewers" (Fiske, 1987, p. 83).

As interest in how concrete viewers move between these different viewing positions increases, the concept of negotiation also becomes increasingly important in television studies. This term highlights that the experience of television viewing is a process of negotiation through ambiguity, ‘openness’, and contradiction, which many analyses of popular television have shown to be fundamental to its success (Ang, 1995; Bennett, 1986; Eagleton, 1991; Fiske, 1987; Morley, 1992). Theories of viewer negotiation address how texts work to hail and interpellate the viewer (Mazzarella and Pecora, 1999; Press, 1991; Radway, 1984; Rockler, 1999). At the same time, this perspective examines the diverse ways that viewers receive and process televisual information through schemas shaped by previous socio-cultural experiences (Bachen and Illouz, 1996; Hall, 1978 & 1997; Press, 1991; Young, 2000). I argue that viewers are best viewed not as coherent individuals, but rather are sites of conflict, points of intersection between a variety of potentially conflicting discourses, which in turn derive from their different social positions and experiences. The production of meaning is therefore a complex and on-going process of social negotiation (Ang, 1991; de Certeau, 1998; Fiske, 1989; Gledhill, 1998; Morley, 1992). Reading texts is an active, though not free, process of constructing meanings and pleasures, a negotiation between texts and viewers whose outcome cannot be solely dictated by the text (Gledhill, 1988; Hall, 1982).

“I Can Relate to That”: Television Texts and Everyday Life

The ongoing process of negotiation encourages identification from viewers who may otherwise feel alienated from normative constructions of meaning in regards to their own experiences, and hegemonically works to align the interests of the socially marginal to those

of the socially powerful. This echoes Foucault's warning that "...marginalized people can be drawn to the power of 'reverse discourse' whereby they find themselves seeking legitimacy in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which they were disqualified" (qtd in Early and Kennedy, 2003, p.57). Here the personal meanings generated are semantically reworked by the viewer and these meanings are constructed as what the producer intended. An example of this is seen in Radway's work with readers of romance novels; the readers felt that the authors constructed the romantic heroines as strong, independent characters, and therefore the readers were able to gain a sense of empowerment from reading these narratives even though the authors (and readers) constructed male domination as something natural and to be desired by the heroine (Radway, 1984). While these romantic texts may not overtly incorporate feminist concerns with equality, there may be semantic space within them so that this negotiated reading, or reverse discourse, is possible.

Perhaps more importantly, however, the continuous process of accommodation and incorporation of semantic 'difference' highlights that televisual narratives, by necessity, *must* remain somewhat open to shifting ideological meanings if they are to hail and interpellate the viewer; in short, if the producers of popular culture narrative wish to gain a loyal following, the narrative must have real meaning, and therefore pleasure, which speaks to *the viewers' own experiences*.

Audience identification with the television presupposes recognition of on-screen roles. In texts providing such familiar experience, social roles supporting identification are seen by a viewer to be similar to his or her own, to pre-existing positions in mostly mundane and everyday life (Wilson, 1996, p.56).

An example of this evolution is the mass media's incorporation of feminist concerns over the last thirty years - from early shows such as *Mary Tyler Moore* to more current examples of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Sex in the City* and *The Gilmour Girls*, producers of television shows create strong, independent women who are all fuelled by liberal and/or post feminism, depending on the age of the target audience. And women, traditionally the largest television market, respond positively and overwhelmingly to these narratives, which represent some of the common experiences and feelings of being a woman in today's complex society. However, these shows are not merely unabashed celebrations validating the experiences and desires of contemporary and progressive female viewers; they also work to construct what it means to be a socially acceptable modern female; they help to set the cultural parameters within which meaning is generated, circulated and validated – in short, television texts are part of the complex process of 'common sense' making (Fiske, 1987 and 1989; Heinecken, 2003; Morley, 1992; Press, 1996). Brummett argues that "...stories do not merely pose problems; they suggest ways and means to resolve the problems insofar as they follow discursively a pattern that people might follow in reality" (1984, p.164). In this way, televisual texts, while inherently conservative in their dictate to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, both reflect and engage in social change.

Canadians average twenty-five hours of television viewing per week, or almost four hours a day, and the vast majority of that is spent viewing dramas or comedy (Statistics Canada, 2003). This means that many of us spend more time with television than any other form of leisure activity (somewhat of an irony in that this leisure activity can be understood as ideological 'work'). And while many viewers refuse to speculate on the importance of television's influence on our understandings of the world, stating that "it's merely

entertainment,” at the same time there are as many viewers who feel that the representations of television are problematic and influence us and the way we live in the world. This divide shows that viewers themselves are ambivalent as to the importance of television in making sense of their daily lives, a contradiction that was strongly echoed by the participants of my research project.

Television was created, and continues to evolve, within a social matrix (Williams, 1992). The programs shown on television do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are shaped by cultural, economic, political and technological influences. As an integral part of the social makeup of Western society, television occupies a central role in how we come to learn and understand ourselves and the world around us. Humans are, by nature, social creatures, and the constitution of self is inherently a social process – a process which, in the last fifty years, has been irrevocably changed by the influence of television. Televisual texts are a form of collective social imagination, representing ourselves to ourselves (Dow, 1996; Fiske, 1987; Heineken, 2003; Rockler, 1999). In Western society, television has represented our most important historical moments to us, and now, arguably, it shapes them¹¹. And yet it is the mundane, daily experiences that make up the bulk of televisual representations, and how we make sense of our selves and our experiences is partially formed through negotiating these complex and often contradictory televisual narratives (Ang, 1985 and 1991; Early & Kennedy, 2003; Katz et al, 1992; Wilson, 1996).

While the concepts of polysemy and negotiation have become increasingly mainstream within the academy, one area within the field of television studies has not been actively explored: the contradictory position of ambivalent pleasure that many viewers experience in

watching, understanding and using television to inform their larger sense-making narratives. Most studies focus on pleasure (Ang, 1985; Fiske, 1989; Modleski, 1986) or ambivalence (Cloud, 1992; Rockler, 1999), but there has been little detailed discussion on the relationships between the two in terms of viewers' understandings of their televisual experiences. Another under-theorized question in mass media communications research is how the often-contradictory and shifting constructions of gender definitions, positions, and identifications are articulated in the practices of television consumption (Ang, 1995; Dow, 1996; Press, 1996). Within these gaps, there remains the question of how pleasure, generated from negotiating and creating meanings within and against the text, is experienced and used by viewers to help them make sense of gendered daily life experiences and therefore serves to generate a sense of relative power.

“I Watch It Because I Like It”: Pleasure in (Relative) Power

Fiske argues that there are two types of pleasure to be gained from engaging in viewing television: the pleasure of the *process* of making meaning, as well as the *product* of making personally relevant meanings (Fiske, 1987, p.239). While he goes on to state that it is more important to construct theories of pleasure that centre on the power to make meanings rather than on the meanings made, I argue that these meanings are mutually constituted; how meaning is constructed from televisual texts is dependent on what meanings are relevant and pleasurable for the viewer. Therefore, any study that hopes to provide a situated understanding of what meanings are made from viewing television must focus both on the process and the product.

While the texts of television may offer a multiplicity of readings, as I have argued previously, these texts are not unstructured. Televisual programs offer potential subject positions that viewers must occupy, if only temporarily, in order to access meanings and gain pleasure from negotiating the texts. The vast majority of Western entertainment television constructs subject positions that assume the prototypical viewer to be White, middle-class, heterosexual, and ideologically conservative (Lewis and Jhally, 2000; Morley, 1992). The main reason for this assumption is that in order to be financially successful, the majority of mainstream television must appeal to as broad, yet affluent an audience as possible, in order to achieve high ratings, and therefore must have an audience with disposable income to sell to advertisers¹². However, other, less normative subject positions of negotiation or outright rejection are also available, as Hall argued. Regardless of the position that the viewer inhabits, this occupation requires that the participant at least understand the narrative from a position of acceptance - while the viewer can negotiate or ultimately reject the meanings generated from occupying certain subject positions, they all require that the viewer understand and make textual sense of the program from the position constructed by the producers (Deming, 1990; Rockler, 1999). The pleasure in generating meaning comes from occupying these sense-making positions, which facilitate how the viewer will decode the text, at least at the denotative level.

As previously argued, however, these viewing positions are negotiated, and viewers can inhabit more than one position simultaneously, or move through different subject positions throughout the viewing experience. To a large degree, occupation and movement is determined by the meanings, and, therefore, the pleasures offered by the interpretative perspective of each of the available positions. Viewers may move through various stages,

from emotional and experiential identification to ironic distancing, to a dismissal of the text altogether, to problematizing its narratives, and back again to identification, all in the course of a single show (Ang, 1985 and 1996; Rucker, 1999; Morley, 1992). This potential for mobility is why I believe that it is necessary to discuss the meanings generated, rather than focusing solely on the process of generation itself, in that this allows one to examine what positions get chosen and why. In asking why some viewers emotionally invest in some subject positions rather than others, Ang argues that the decision making process is defined by which subject positions provide the most relative power to the viewer (1995).

The process of making sense from a given text is based on a viewer's ability to successfully interpret the complex bundle of signs, narratives, and discourses which create a text in a way that allows for the generation of meaning. The ability to make meaning is pleasurable, and insofar as it helps the viewer to make sense of their surroundings, it is also a form of power. This can be understood as a basic and often taken-for-granted pleasure, as it usually occurs without our being aware of it. For example, many viewers flip through channels at a breath-taking rate, yet are aware of what each show is 'about' from the split second they are exposed to it. A second form of power and pleasure comes from the ability for those meanings to inform larger fields of sense-making, other than just those of the experience of the immediate text. In this case, viewers will take the meanings generated from television texts, and incorporate them into the way they make sense of the world and their experiences in it (Dow, 1999; Mazzarella and Pecora, 1999; Young, 2000). There is also a third position, in that viewers emotionally invest in subject positions which provide a safe cognitive space in which to fantasize about resolutions to the complex and contradictory experiences of daily life, where identification with, and desire for, socially or personally unacceptable experiences

can be vicariously experienced (Ang, 1985). I contend that this position is actually a subset of the second, in that our desires, fantasies, and daydreams are not merely forms of escape, but also important ways that we make sense of and live in the world.

Therefore, certain subject positions offered by the texts of television will be more desirable than others. Each position offers different methods of generating meaning and of making it relevant for the viewer. A televisual subject position that constructs the vampires in BtVS as stupid or silly, for example, is more likely to resonate with viewers who are older and more socially and/or religiously conservative; a viewing position that constructs these representations as metaphors of the realities of the sexual danger that women face daily will most likely appeal to viewers who have a perspective informed by contemporary popular culture. Pre-existing perspectives shape which televisual subject positions are relevant and therefore inhabitable and pleasurable (Ang, 1996; Bennett, 1986a; Morley, 1992; Hall, 1973). Hence, viewers attempt to choose and to move between a variety of positions that will give them the relative power to make sense locally. That is, viewers have the power to make sense of their immediate experience of viewing television, and, more generally, to add to their knowledge of self and to their experiences in the world. The act of negotiation itself can be deeply pleasurable, in that it offers viewers the ability and power to move through positions that afford them the most personal relevance.

However, it must be remembered that viewers are not choosing from an unlimited variety of available subject positions and possible meanings. While there may be a variety of positions available, in order to gain pleasure from creating personal meanings and understandings, the viewer must occupy those positions offered by the text. This is why the power gained from

engaging in televisual texts is relative, not absolute. If this is the case, i.e. that there is relative power to be gained from inhabiting certain subject positions over others, and yet viewers are forced to occupy positions not entirely of their own making, then this creates the conditions for the complex movement and negotiations that viewers undertake every time they turn on the television. What remains central to the basic organizing tenets of subject positions offered by televisual texts is the social construct of gender.

“Buffy Kicks Ass...In Heels”: Representations of the Feminine

One of the most important ways we come to learn about ourselves is through the experiences and expectations of gender, and television narratives are an integral part of the larger social discourses of gender ¹³. Television representations tend to mask the social origins of gender, and render them invisible, whereby traditionally gendered characteristics become ‘natural’ and expected (Early and Kennedy, 2003; Heinecken, 2003; Press, 1991; Rockler, 1999). The most potent way that society generally, and televisual texts in particular, represent femininity is through the female body and its mannerisms. A television character is feminine if she evidences traditionally social norms of femininity – a sexualized body that is the object of male desire ¹⁴. In our media saturated environment, those in Western society who identify as female are exposed from birth to these ubiquitous social narratives of gender, and therefore television seems to reinforce these understandings rather than to impose them. While many different and contradictory sets of femininities or feminine subject positions are in principle available to her, a viewer will adopt some of these more frequently than others, partially because some are more personally pleasurable, but also because some are more culturally legitimate than others, a legitimation that can provide social power and therefore pleasure as well (Ang, 1995; Press, 1991). Televisual narratives

help viewers to know what is expected of them in regards to how they represent their own gender, not necessarily by unthinkingly following television examples, but by informing the viewer's cultural repertoire of roles from which she may draw on and play with. As well, television helps viewers to organize competing social discourses of gender into a cultural hierarchy of acceptability by representing certain female roles much more predominantly than others ¹⁵.

Televisual narratives of gender have changed a great deal over the years, reflecting social changes brought about through the political, economic and social struggles of feminism; the 'new woman' portrayed on television is often physically and emotionally strong, has a career, and is independent. Contemporary shows such as *BtVS*, *Alias* and *La Femme Nikita* showcase women who are in control of their bodies and are key players in safeguarding democracy and the continuous threats against humanity. Yet these women are still almost uniformly defined through their bodies: they are young, white, thin, beautiful, and fashionable, and their concerns with heterosexual relationships often carry the bulk of the storylines and are integral to their self-development. It is clear that in recent decades, television's engagement with gender representation and feminist concerns has continuously been one of negotiation between 70's activism and the backlash of the 80's (Faludi, 1991; Helford, 2000). Television texts that construct and validate the 'new woman' are amalgamations of competing social discourses, coming together in uneasy, ambivalent and often contradictory representations.

These conflicting and ambivalent representations of femininity may be especially important to those viewers who identify as female, as "being a female implies a never-ending *process* of

becoming a feminine subject...women are constantly confronted with the cultural task of finding out what it means to be a woman...being a woman involves work, work of constant self (re)creation” (Ang, 1996, p.94, also see Grosz, 1993). These semantic contradictions can be difficult for female viewers to negotiate, in that these representations are powerful ways in which expectations of their own experiences of femininity are created. And yet these contradictions may also be a source of deep pleasure for female viewers in that many women experience in daily life the need to negotiate these very same contradictions of gender expectations. Therefore, these televisual texts can work to validate the viewers’ experiences outside the text itself, providing a sense-making narrative which helps them to navigate their own lives. Complex and contradictory popular culture representations of femininity can help to inform the female viewer’s own “cognitive maps” (Jameson, 1999), maps which attempt to provide shape and contour to the contemporary roles of femininity available in current capitalist culture. Televisual narratives are able to hail and interpellate female viewers not only because they provide normative representations of femininity, from which they can learn how to represent and play with their gendered identities, but also because these texts are able to address some of the uneasy, ambivalent and contradictory experiences of living within a body inscribed with femininity (Ang, 1995; Dow, 1996; Heinecken, 2003).

Therefore, it would be an egregious oversight to argue that televisual narratives of gender are passively absorbed by viewers; rather there is an on-going struggle in society as a whole, as well as more locally within individual viewers of television, to include representations that ‘speak’ to and reflect a diverse range of experiences that stem from living within a body that has been inscribed as female. This hegemonic process ensures that televisual representations are in a continual process of accommodation and incorporation of these perspectives.

Both understandings of the hegemonic process – accommodation and incorporation - as a part of the complex, ongoing process and struggle to generate social meanings, show that television does not tell viewers *what* to think, so much as *how* to think about a particular subject (Dow, 1996; Morley, 1992; Rockler, 1999). As argued above, the potential polysemic understandings of televisual texts do not exist in an unstructured field, in that "...all meanings are not equal or activated but exist within relations of subordination to the dominant meanings proposed by the text" (Fiske, 1987, p.93). Therefore, there is an irresolvable tension in how meaning is both encoded and decoded, for both the determinate moments of encoding and decoding of televisual texts require the generation of meaning to be constructed within contradictory, ambivalent, and ever-shifting fields of cultural and economic power. This hegemonic process of meaning making, both within and against normative frameworks, requires that the viewers engage in a continuous process of negotiation in order to gain meaning, pleasure, and as some theorists argue, relative power. However, before turning to a more comprehensive discussion of how the participants of this research undertook this process of negotiation, a further exploration of the general theoretical parameters which guide my research will be undertaken in the following section, to provide further clarity of my hermeneutic task.

Cultural Studies

Cultural studies is neither a method nor a theory. Rather, engaging in cultural studies is a way of asking questions; and yet, while cultural studies cannot be contained within a single framework, its overall focus is on an examination of how social and personal meanings are produced through three lenses: cultural texts, lived experience, and the articulated relationship between texts and everyday life, all of which must be understood in relation to

particular historical moments (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Focusing on the generation and circulation of meanings in industrial society, cultural studies

...start with the belief that meanings and the making of them (which together constitute culture) are indivisibly linked to social structure and can only be explained in terms of that structure and its history. Correlatively, the social structure is held in place by, among other forces, the meanings that culture produces...These meanings are not only meanings of social experience, but also meanings of self, that is, construction of social identity that enable people living in industrial capitalist societies to make sense of themselves and their social relations. Meanings of experience and meanings of the subject (or self) who has that experience are finally part of the same cultural process (Fiske, 1994, p.285).

Emerging from the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, some of the main scholars in British Cultural Studies have been Stuart Hall, Tony Bennett, David Morley and Angela McRobbie, all of whom are concerned with how audiences interpret a cultural product according to their place in the social order. While essentially Marxist in origin, relying heavily on Louis Althusser's construction of the importance of ideological state apparatuses and Antonio Gramsci's perspective on the concept of hegemony, the field has evolved to include structuralist, hermeneutic, and ethnographic concerns. I have grounded my research in the concerns of Marxist cultural studies in that I borrow from both Althusser and Gramsci in constructing my argument. As a scholar, my purpose in using this framework here is to hold theoretical and political questions in tension, "...constantly allow[ing] the one to bother and disturb the other, at the necessary cost of avoiding any final theoretical stabilization" (Morley, 1992, p.4).

From Gramsci, I have taken the now commonly used term hegemony, which foregrounds the notion of ideological struggle as a constitutive part of existence, positing a constant, and at times, productive contradiction between ideologies and the social experiences of the

subject who necessarily engages with them (Bennett, 1986b; Eagleton, 1991). Further, I borrow from Hall, and not only his concept of encoding and decoding popular culture texts, but also his articulation model (Hall, 1986). The articulation model posits that,

...meaning is determined by the intersection (articulation) of various ideologies within the viewer's social experiences, including both individual and social factors...[viewing] meaning as an historical moment in which cultural forces, textual features and social pressures on the individual receiver all intersect and articulate meaning to the receiver...meaning is the result of a myriad [of] intersecting factors, many of which are contradictory, including...the fantasy of the text, the ideologically and culturally charged social, gender and labour positions of the receiver, and currently felt, so-called 'real' lived experience of the receiver (Heide, 1995, p.22).

This model, while only used implicitly in this thesis, helps to remove the troublesome tendency that some cultural studies theorists have towards 'textualization', where "...the cultural phenomena under analysis [drifts] entirely free from their social and material foundations" (Morley, 1992, p.5). Jameson famously argues that "texts are always already read," (1981, p.1) meaning that viewers of popular culture texts such as BtVS do not interact with them as blank slates; instead, both viewers and texts are already bound up in a dense, complex and fluid field of orientations, expectations, meanings, and material concerns. Additionally, following Gramsci, I argue that meanings are constituted as part of, within, and against, larger discourses of social power, structures of domination and subordination that are never static, but rather always the site of contestation and struggle; therefore, meaning itself is inextricably both product and process of this ongoing struggle. As Williams argues, this process of social determination and reproduction is part of a "complex and interrelated process of limits and pressures" (Williams, 1977, p.87) where social factors, including media technologies, "set limits and exert pressures, but neither wholly control nor wholly predict

the outcome” of social and cultural practices (Williams, 1992, p.124, also see Rivera-Perez, 1996).

Further, the ruling class can only become a hegemonic class to the degree that its ideology is able to accommodate, to find some space, for opposing class cultures and values, and therefore hegemony is secured not by ignoring or denigrating other class cultures, but rather through its articulation with the culture and ideology of the ruling class. As Eagleton argues, this ongoing process of negotiation and struggle is precisely why hegemonic representations often appeal to a wide range of people, in that “a particular social sign is pulled this way and that by competing social interests, inscribed from within with a multiplicity of ideological 'accents'; and it is in this way that it sustains its dynamism and vitality” (1991, p.194). This emphasis on negotiation and struggle over the meaning of representation as the negotiation and struggle over the social, political and economic *power* to represent, has been particularly useful in media and popular culture studies, which see these representations as one of the central arenas in our increasingly mass mediated environment in which ideology is constructed, reflected, contested and negotiated.

However, I break from a traditional British cultural studies framework in that while I while I am concerned with the role pleasure has to play in our engagement with popular culture, and with its potential to be used as a tool for gaining the consent of a social order that continues to socially, economically, and politically dominate those that it amuses, I am unwilling to *only* assign negative judgments to these feelings. In its most basic definition, ideology is merely the set of beliefs by which a group or society orders reality so as to render it intelligible (Word Reference, 2004); and while these beliefs are organized and legitimated by pre-existing

discursive fields of power, ideology cannot be reduced solely to an implement of domination. Ideology is fragmentary, shifting and internally complex; hence, the usefulness of a Gramscian approach to understanding that it is the process of struggle, of opposition and accommodation, the ongoing tension both within and against potentially liberating and oppressive narratives of understandings with which subjects make sense of their selves and of the world around them – in short, generating a ‘common sense’. It is an impoverished perspective that sees ideology only as inherently negative, merely as a way to normalize and benefit the economic, social and political elite; ideologies are also important mechanisms for organizing, negotiating, and creating meanings in ways that allow subjects to not only understand the world around them, but also to change it to benefit themselves, their families, their communities, and even humanity itself.

From Althusser, I am interested not so much in his theoretical construction of ideological state apparatuses and their role in overdetermining the subject, which I believe tend to construct ideology as inherently negative and all-powerful, and its premises that state apparatuses have total control in forming the subject as I am interested in his understanding of hailing and interpellation, where hailing is the process by which language identifies and constructs a social position for the addressee, and interpellation is the larger process, locating these subjects in the broader map of social relations in general (Bennett, 1986a; Eagleton, 1991). Following de Lauretis’ interpretation, interpellation is the “process whereby a social representation is accepted and absorbed by an individual as her (or his) own representation, and so becomes, for that individual, real, even though it is in fact imaginary” (1987, p.12). While I vary somewhat from his emphasis on the importance of ideological state apparatuses, Althusser’s definition of ideology remains a robust understanding of the

complexities and subtlety that ideology can take. He describes ideology as “not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they ‘live’” (Althusser, 1971, p.165). I find this definition particularly apt in that it highlights the connection of the lived world to our collective and individual imaginations and fantasies, rather than being solely determined by the material, economic infrastructure¹⁶. Further, he argues that “all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects” (1971, p.171). In this way, ideology can be understood not only as ideas and representations, but also as effects and practices. However, in attempting to chart the importance of gender as ideology, and as a central organizing category of experience, Althusser’s construction of ideology fails its own internal logic; his construction of the subject is ungendered, leaving no room for the female subject. Therefore, as de Lauretis aptly notes,

If gender exists in ‘reality’, if it exists in the ‘real relations which govern the existence of individuals’, but not in philosophy or political theory, what do the latter in fact represent if not the ‘imaginary relation of individuals to the real relations in which they live’? In other words, Althusser’s theory of ideology is itself caught and blind to its own complicity in the ideology of gender (1987, p.12).

Althusser’s concept of ideology is a crucial beginning point from which to understand the complexity of ideology, allowing for a focus on “the themes, concepts and representations...involv[ing] a shift away from problems of determination in favour of articulation” and it creates a certain ‘space’ for subjectivity that is “complex, layered and at times, contradictory” (Woollacott, 1982, p.105), and which addresses the importance of both textual and contextual concerns. However, in and of itself, this definition of ideology, while a critical starting point, needs to be refocused toward a look at how ideology actually ‘works’ through discursive practices, labouring to reconstruct itself, even through attempts at

deconstruction. Informed by Althusser's work, Terry Eagleton's discussion of ideology begins to incorporate this concern as to how discursive practices can work to constitute an ideology of gender, while simultaneously exscribing gender, in that

there is a third way between thinking of ideology as disembodied ideas on the one hand, and as nothing but a matter of certain behaviour patterns on the other. This is to regard ideology as a discursive or semiotic phenomenon. And this at once emphasises its materiality (since signs are material entities), and preserves the sense that it is essentially concerned with meanings...It may help to view ideology less as a particular set of discourses, than *as a particular set of effects within discourses*...effects, for example, of 'closure', whereby certain forms of signification are silently excluded, and certain signifiers 'fixed' in a commanding position (emphasis mine, Eagleton, 1991, p.194).

The importance here is that even academic and deconstructionist discourses of ideology are constituted by the larger ideological discourses which both construct and reflect ideology as a practice¹⁷. Therefore, Eagleton's understanding of ideology can be conceived of as less a static set of ideas, and more as a set of complex effects internal to discourse. This concern with effects in both the inscription and excription of meaning can not only address ideology as a primary site which constructs and naturalizes gender, but also leave 'room' to understand gender as an effect of ideology, as well as how the ideology of gender has shaped the historical construction of the capitalist division of labour and the reproduction of labour power, showing the integral connection between the importance of gender in the relations of production and its effects.

Further, understanding ideology as effect allows for a theoretical construction where subjects both use, and are used by, ideology, as a way to 'suture' contradictions, contradictions which are paradoxically constitutive of their identity. Instead of conceiving of ideology as crude casual factors, here ideology, following both Althusser and Eagleton, is more fruitfully understood as offering a set of imagined reasons for such material conditions and effects, as

well as addressing how ideology works to excribe its own presence (Eagleton, 1991). The power of ideology is that it is a “language which forgets the essentially contingent, accidental relations between itself and the world, and comes instead to mistake itself as having some kind of organic, inevitable bond with what it represents” (Eagleton, 1991, p.200). In this sense, ideology can be seen to have an intimate connection with Foucault’s now-famous emphasis on the importance of discourse, which this thesis also borrows from.

There are many theoretical definitions of the term discourse; however, following Foucault, discourse here is constituted as:

...ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (Weedon, 1987, p. 108).

Discourses are complex bundles of language, practices, institutions, abstract thought and concrete embodiments. Discourses are the nexus of power and knowledge which serve to reinforce each other while inscribing these relations on and through bodies. Foucault states that the mechanism of power is the construction of the subject by a discourse that weaves power and knowledge together into a coercive structure that “force[s] the individual back on himself [sic] and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way” (Foucault, qtd in Alcoff, 1988, p.415).

Ideology here becomes a constitutive, and grounding, aspect of daily life which is shaped and experienced through engaging in, and being subjected to, discursive practices. However, discourses contain many ideologies, some which reinforce others, and some in active

contradiction to competing ideologies. As a practice, negotiating televisual texts is both an engagement with, and a response to, pre-existing discourses: discourses of technology, leisure, and gender, to name just a few. One of the benefits of undertaking an examination of discursive practices is that this framework highlights the importance of the body and the ideological practices and effects on the body, a point not lost on feminist scholars, particularly in relation to gender and how it comes to be presented and represented.

Gender and Bodies

Gender is a central organizing category of experience and constitutes an important ground upon which our subjectivity is based. This section addresses three aspects that are relevant to a discussion of the importance of gender: 1) that gender is (a) representation, which has material effects, 2) that the representation of gender is its construction, and 3) the construction of gender is as active today as it has ever been. I define gender as separate from sex, which is commonly understood in terms of the biological organs of the vagina or penis. Gender, on the other hand, is a binary social construction of female or male¹⁸, commonly based on the sexual organs (and the assumption of their reproductive capacities) of the subject, i.e. vagina = female, penis = male. The characteristics of femininity and masculinity are therefore socially constructed in relation to the appropriate sexual organs; however, because gender must be socially produced and reproduced by the subject, it is never a fixed category, and its representation is based on historical social, economic, and political precedents. For the purposes of my discussion here, I largely use the works of Judith Butler and Teresa de Lauretis, who attempt to problematize any definitive category of gender. Both have been commonly categorized as queer theorists based on their concern as to the institutional discourses which work to produce and reproduce gender, rejecting stable

categories of gender altogether, and addressing how subjects 'perform' sexuality and gender identity. By using Foucault's notion of power and discourse as productive, Butler and de Lauretis argue that gender is an effect of discourse and its ideologies, rather than an inherent characteristic of the body. De Lauretis argues that "gender is not something to be represented but is always already a representation" (qtd in Bray & Colebrook, 1998, p. 42). Butler's position is that gender is a (necessary) performance; while the subject may feel that gender is 'natural', in actuality, they perform gender acts, and these significations paradoxically render these artificial conventions necessary in order to signify gender. Therefore these performances are not an act of the subject's agency so much as the subject being acted upon by discursive forces.

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again (Butler, 1990, p. 76).

Gender is the product of various institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, critical practices, and ideological practices of daily life, of which engaging in social technologies such as television is a critical aspect. Gender has real material effects, and leads to material changes in existence and bodies. In this way, discourse is understood as the totality of events which includes the non-material and corporeal - the body, consciousness, and being - as the effect of the particular and specific folding of discursive formations (Bray and Colebrook, 1998).

The importance of the body in signifying and therefore in performing gender cannot be overemphasized; subjects are gendered through their bodies. Bodies may be corporeal,

however bodies are also imaginary bodies, in that the body is the site of gender constitution. Female subjectivity and experience are constructed in a specific relation to sexuality; not only are women gendered, they are also sexualized as man's 'other'.

Sexuality as a construct and a (self)representation...does have both a male form and a female form, although in the patriarchal or male-centred frame of mind, the female form is a projection of the male's, its complementary opposite, its extrapolation – Adam's rib, so to speak. So that, even when it is located in the woman's body...sexuality is perceived as an attribute or a property of the male...in other words, female sexuality has been invariably defined both in contrast and in relation to the male (de Lauretis, 1987, p.14).

Performing gender can be both a form of self-surveillance and a subversive act ¹⁹.

Several feminist theorists have argued that to understand gender as a performance (albeit a necessary one) creates an understanding of femininity as masquerade ²⁰ – a series of masks that can be changed, manipulated and played with. The notion of masquerade was first addressed by Joan Riviere in 1929, in her seminal piece entitled "Womanliness as Masquerade." While trapped by the social and historical constraints of the time that associated women who portrayed masculine characteristics as a type of repressed lesbian, she did argue that femininity was above all a performance, and that there was no difference between genuine womanliness and its masquerade. "My suggestion is not however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing" (Riviere, 1999, p. 131). Discussing film, Doane argues that there are moments of "double mimesis" (1987, p.181) where female subjectivity momentarily addresses itself, where representations of femininity are so exaggerated as to become "fantastic, literally incredible" (1987, p. 180). This provides a distancing, rather than identificatory function, and therefore image thus becomes "manipulable, producible, and readable" (1982, p. 87), and therefore pleasurable. The pleasure referred to here comes from recognizing femininity as a social construct, rather

than as self-identification. Bartky argues that the growing independence of women calls into question normative popular culture representations of femininity, creating a dissonance if not an outright contradiction, yet paradoxically these very social, political, and economic changes that have led and continue to lead to greater self determination, result in feminine subjects being subjected even more intensely to the masculine gaze (1988, p.82-3). The importance of the ambivalent pleasure generated from recognizing the contradictions of subjectivity will be more fully addressed in the following section on pleasure, subjectivity and contradiction.

However, for the vast majority of females, signifying their gender and therefore their sexuality is largely, if not entirely constrained by the ideologies which constitute the discourse of appropriate femininity. As Bartky states, the transition into occupying a properly feminine body can take many forms: “a rite of passage into adulthood, the adoption and celebration of a particular aesthetic, a way of announcing one’s economic level and social status, a way to triumph over other women in the competition for men or jobs, or an opportunity for massive narcissistic indulgence” (1988, p.75). However, as she goes on to argue, the social construction of feminine bodies may be all of these things, but most importantly it is an effect of discourse, and at its base it is discipline and a discipline of the inegalitarian sort. Gender is not just an individual activity, but works to locate individual subjects within larger fields of meaning, and it signifies a great deal of private and public information: identity, value and prestige, to name just a few. As de Lauretis states, “gender represents not an individual but a relation, and a social relation; in other words, it represents an individual for a class” (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 5). Gender may be a performance, but it is a

necessary one, with real material effects, particularly on the body, which is the main representational tool for signifying femininity.

Because femininity and masculinity are socially legitimated performances²¹, to diverge from the pre-existing representations not only marks the subject as aberrant within gender, but also within other fields of meaning and therefore affects social worth. This is particularly true for females whose historical roots of modern gender representation emerged in the 18th and 19th century; their gendered performativity could not be signified actively, as masculine gender was through the 'male gaze', rather their gender representations came to be focused solely through the self-policing and regulating of their bodies – a response to the changing concerns of the social, economic and political discourse of appropriate femininity(ies) ²².

The promotion of feminine characteristics was reproduced through representations of women's bodies...women's bodies came to signify femininity...[and] notions of appropriate feminine conduct operated as a process of monitoring and self-surveillance... This was further consolidated by the responsibilities which women were given. Women could show their respectably by carrying out particular responsibilities but not others, and labour and self-regulation were tightly linked to self-presentation. It was not just the dispositions and characteristics of respectability which signified an appropriate femininity but the performance of duty and obligation (Kirkham & Skeggs, 2000, p.313).

Useful here is Foucault's notion of discourse²³ as the confluence of power/knowledge, and discourse as 'active', which allows for the understanding that the surveillance necessary in order to reproduce appropriately gendered female bodies is both everywhere and nowhere; as Foucault states, "the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular" (qtd in Projansky and Berg, 2000, p.14). Further, normative femininity is becoming increasingly centred on the female body, no longer just on its duties, obligations and procreational abilities, but more centrally on its presumed heterosexuality and its appearance (Ibid, 2000).

This concern with the female body, its sexuality and in particular its *heterosexuality* has become increasingly a part of primetime television programming ²⁴, as will be further argued in chapter three. The discourse of appropriate femininity teaches women to be the object of the dual gaze; both of their own and of others, and “to compare themselves, and to be compared by others, to culturally defined standards of ideal female beauty” (Projansky and Berg, 2000, p.28). As Bartky eloquently argues in her discussion of the discourse of appropriate femininity,

[t]his disciplinary power is peculiarly modern: it does not rely upon violent or public sanctions, nor does it seek to restrain the freedom of the female body to move from place to place. For all that, its invasion of the body is well-nigh total: the female body enters ‘a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it’. The disciplinary techniques through which the ‘docile bodies’ of women are constructed aim at a regulation that is perpetual and exhaustive – a regulation of the body’s size and contours, its appetite, posture, gestures and general comportment in space, and the appearance of each of its visible parts (Bartky, 1988, p.80).

Therefore, discourse not only marks the body as an object of knowledge, but it also invests (or divests) it with social power through its ability to appropriately represent and embody femininity. It is important to understand that Western culture does not only inscribe, repress, and constrain feminine bodies and feminine sexuality, but has in fact produced femininity as an effect of discourse, as a privileged knowledge used to gain access to both individual and social bodies; a way of policing subjects through procedures and processes (ideologies) of normalization rather than outright prohibition; as Martin states, “the value placed on the body and its sexuality was bound up with the establishment in society of bourgeois hegemony” (Martin, 1988, p.8).

Having discussed gender as an effect and practice of ideologies which are in turn constituted by discourse, as well as examining some of the ways in which femininity is enacted through

social performance and physically inscribed bodies, a brief overview of television in terms of normative discourses of gender will help to understand how engaging in the negotiation of televisual representations of femininity both present and represent, i.e. take part in, larger discourses of femininity; in short, how television is a 'technology of gender', in the words of de Lauretis (1987).

As a social, and therefore ideological, artefact, television is often said to reflect us to ourselves. And like all artefacts, television takes part in and is shaped by larger discourses. One of the most examined discourses within televisual texts is the representations of femininity. Historically, television has constructed "complex and contradictory female characters who reflect, direct and occasionally critique America's fantasies and anxieties about historical gender roles and norms" (Helford, 2000, p.1). Further, scholars interested in popular culture have been quick to recognize that the cultural industries (as well as audiences) labour to gender both form and content. Byars and Meehan focus on four central concerns in relation to understanding television as a technology of gender.

- 1) That culture industries target gendered audiences, aiming specific artefacts and particular genders at either men or women;
- 2) that particular audiences, defined by gender, seem to have special relationships with particular genres;
- 3) that stereotypical expectations about both social behaviour and cultural taste [of gendered audiences] are utilized profitably by media corporations and advertisers;
- and 4) that media texts are widely believed to influence their consumers, leading to the conclusion that media representatives of gendered categories create at least in part the categories themselves (Byars and Meehan, 2000, p.144).

While chapter three more fully explores these assertions as focused through an examination of BtVS, one of the main strengths of the outline addressed here is that it includes the understanding that subjects "have a special relationship" to gendered genres, and therefore are partially complicit in reproducing gendered categories and experiences. This notion of

television as a central contemporary technology of gender through which gendered ideologies of femininity (and masculinity) are produced, reproduced, circulated, accepted and contested by audiences necessitates a brief discussion on the importance of subjectivity, contradiction and pleasure.

Subjectivity, Contradiction and Pleasure

Subjectivity, or how various cultures make sense of 'the individual' and the sense of self that individuals experience, is defined here as a product of social relations, as opposed to individuality, which may be seen as a product of nature, or biology (Ang, 1995; Bennett, 1986b; Eagleton, 1991; Fiske, 1987; Fiske and Hartley, 2003). The process by which subjects come to understand themselves and their experiences is based on the incorporation and use of a plethora of social sense-making narratives, which are organized through a diversity of ideologies, and which in turn are themselves organized into, and constitutive of, larger discursive formations. Following Volosinov (1986), I argue that consciousness is essentially social in nature; how we learn to make sense of the world and self is inherently a social practice informed by cultural narratives. However, not all of these social narratives have equal explanatory power for all people; certain ideologies have more social legitimacy and therefore subjects are exposed to them more frequently, and subjects are encouraged through hegemonic 'common sense' and sheer ubiquity to legitimate these ideologies; conversely, some ideologies are more pleasurable to incorporate than others, depending on their ability to make sense of, and give power to, the subject's heterogeneous social, economic and political positions within Western culture (Ang, 1991 and 1995; Bennett, 1986b; White, 1992).

...our personalities are not at all as we imagine them, as sort of unified boxes, but are full of very contradictory elements – progressive elements and stone age elements...we are full of the rag-bag and debris of ancient ideologies which have lost their systematic form, but still hang about. Even when we don't think with these bits, we feel with them...The notion that we are talking about a kind of rationally calculative system and figures of thought that just correspond to a rationally given economic interest does not describe the maelstrom of potential ideological subjects that we are (Hall qtd in Fiske, 1987, p.67).

As a composite of complex and conflicting sense-making narratives, the notion of subjectivity locates the subject not as a unified entity with a homogenous identity, but rather as a site of struggle between competing narratives and ideologies, creating a complex, disjointed and shifting understandings of self and the experiences of the world.

In our media saturated environment, mass media has become an increasingly important site from which Western subjects generate knowledge and meanings, constructing sense-making narratives which inform their subjectivity. Many viewers in North America increasingly rely on television 'news' as a conscious way of educating themselves on a variety of issues; however, it may be that the more pervasive and educational narratives are entertainment texts, such as the various kinds of drama, comedy, and melodrama that take up the majority of broadcasting time. As both a reflection and construction of the socially inscribed world, entertainment televisual texts are powerful and ubiquitous narratives that help subjects navigate their emotional and physical world, by making sense of the complex, ambivalent and often contradictory terrain of the experiences of daily life.

Any position of subjectivity is also a contradictory social position because the social, cultural, and political situations affecting subjectivity are not stable, nor are they fixed. Instead, they change as people become exposed to practices, like television practices, which call forth different modes of action...While the subject might evidence dominant tendencies, it does not slip easily into a single, inscribed unity (Deming, 1990, p.164-5).

The inherent contradictions that stem from occupying (at times simultaneously) different subject positions are often reflected and constructed through televisual texts, of which *BtVS* is a particularly clear example with respect to feminine subjectivities. In our culture, discourses of femininity inscribe females with a breathtaking diversity of roles: sexy, prudish, domestic, young, maternal, nurturing, passive, voluptuous, thin, assertive, strong, obliging, fit, soft, caring, catty, intelligent, supportive, giving, emotional, energetic, independent – the list is endless. These characteristics, or roles, can be tremendously enjoyable to play with, and contemporary society has certainly increased the abilities of females to engage in a diversity of roles, both traditional and non-traditional. The participants I worked with all described a sense of power that was generated from being able to negotiate and occupy the different feminine roles available, whether potentially stereotypical or progressive. Part of the pleasure was that they did not have to embody a single ‘type’ of role, but rather could play amongst the diversity offered to inform their own shifting subject positions of femininity. However, the problem here is that females are often required to be able to engage with *all* of these roles, or are encouraged through dominant social conventions to occupy certain roles they may not enjoy, and the inability or lack of desire to occupy all of these roles can often mark the female subject as aberrant.

I have discussed ideology as an effect and as a set of practices constituted by discourse, as ways in which contradictions between real material experiences and imaginary ones are smoothed over, and how the conflict between these two can only be expressed through contradiction. As continuously shifting ideological artefacts, televisual texts also work mythically to resolve contradictions; in the case of *BtVS*, the show demonstrates how to be feminine within both historical and contemporary normative constraints, while

simultaneously challenging those same conventions both in fantasy and in daily life. As Fiske argues, “traces of the value systems and ideologies we once held are still there contradicting the newer ones that our changed social experience has brought, and the two may exist simultaneously in the reading subject,” as well as the text itself (Fiske, 1987, p.163).

These contradictions inherent in subjectivity produce a ‘messiness’; a continual movement through a complex and never finished process of meanings and identities.

In a spiral of involvement and disavowal, the mass-culture spectator can move in and out of various positions, suggesting perhaps that it is precisely this weaving of contradictory positions, rather than the achieved assumption of any one position, that may constitute much of the power and pleasure of the operation of mass culture (Polan, 1981, p.193).

Therefore, it can be profitably argued that pleasure is generated from engaging with contradictory texts (such as BtVS) in two ways: 1) in a show’s ability to signify and encompass diverse representations that appeal to the lived experiences of the audience, a recognition of the shifting permutations and contradictions within the viewing subject, and 2) at the same time, encouraging the viewer to move within and between potentially contradictory viewing positions, mimicking the negotiations undertaken in daily life.

For female viewers, Buffy can be viewed as a complex icon of conflicting social narratives of femininity: white, petite, beautiful, thin, blonde, emotionally vulnerable, eternally obsessed with men and fashion, yet at the same time fiercely independent, physically powerful, and heroic, all while exploring and celebrating her sexuality. The pleasure that arises from engaging in BtVS is a paradoxical one: it allows the viewer some agency in choosing when and when not to identify with the text, depending on their desires and the viewing positions offered by the show, and it provides a fantasy space in which identifications that would be

harmful or impossible outside the text itself can occur, therefore lessening the need for a negotiated subject position. These pleasures are a result of both the freedom and control in constructing the viewer's own understandings of her femininity, within and against the preferred meanings generated by the text, and therefore they do provide a relative sense of power within the text, at the same time as they help to negotiate understandings of femininity outside the text itself. Stuart Hall (1973) calls this movement through the differing subject positions offered by a text the difference between dominant, negotiated, and oppositional decoding; Eco (1972) calls this process aberrant decoding; Fiske (1987), Morley (1992) and Radway (1984) call it distancing and closeness, Bakhtin (1973) calls it heteroglossia, Barthes calls it implication and extrication (1975). While it can be argued that this form of pleasure generated from moving through differing positions and constructing meaning is not necessarily subversive, this is somewhat tangential to my main argument here – that the pleasure is generated from the power to negotiate personally relevant meanings from televisual texts such as *BtVS*, and secondarily that the power and therefore the pleasure are a product of both accommodation and resistance. Pleasure is generated by selecting points of identification and distance, by being able to control one's relationship to the preferred meanings offered by engaging with the text. "In their restless relationship to television's stories, viewers move through forms of involvement, from moments of identification to experience critical distancing (and vice versa)" (Wilson, 1996, p.152). It is the *recognition* of the meaningful contradictions of gendered subjectivity, the rendering visible of the gap between subject positions informed by normative ideologies, rather than their resolution and suture, that may be the most powerful pleasure. The recognition of contradiction does not just produce dissonance, but also generates a feeling of ambivalence.

Ambivalence in and of itself is not necessarily a negative emotion, in that this subject position is also a powerful form of interpellation and articulation,

...an ambivalent incorporation into the fluctuating and chaotic processes of contemporary society [which] may be the most appropriate...tactic. A tacit incorporation that is armed by ambivalence would, after all, have the benefit of allowing many [viewers] the possibility of enchantment; to suspend cynicism and to invest in the pleasures and practices available within the culture of commodities and virtual realities. It is an enchantment that will necessarily be contingent and perhaps even temporary...nevertheless, it is still an enchantment that fascinates and delights (Lury, 2001, p.11).

Basically, I define pleasure in this context as the relative power to generate and negotiate meanings that are personally relevant within the ideological constraints of television narratives. Pleasure can be hegemonic or a 'popular' point of resistance, and here I argue that it is both – viewers can experience both authorized and illicit pleasures without necessarily having to choose between them. Due to my desire to theoretically bridge both textual and contextual analysis, defining pleasure becomes a bit more problematic: these fields have a tendency to define it in two rather different ways. They both address pleasure, but their conceptions and effects of pleasure differ. Feminist scholars using textual analysis tend to identify pleasure from popular culture texts as being in the service of dominant and constraining ideologies, textually determined and ideologically complicit, whereas context analysts focus on the responses that exceed the text and are dependant on a range of contextual determinations (Mayne, 1989, p.231). Terry Lovell explores different understandings of pleasure, stating that

ideological analysis can identify the manner and extent to which those pleasures are mobilised for ideological functions. Use-value analysis will be able to identify the resistance which these commodities offer to that ideological role...The interface between the two is...always and necessarily an irregular one (Lovell 1981, p. 48).

Using both textual and contextual approaches allows for an understanding of the ranges of pleasures that are generated from negotiating popular culture; from recognition and identification to contradiction and resistance. “This versatility itself becomes pleasurable...thus, the notion of popular culture as ‘sheer’ or ‘immediate’ pleasure has to be abandoned. On the contrary, pleasure is concurrent with displeasure rather than opposed to it” (Polan, 1988, p. 200).

Within current explorations of audience studies, pleasure has been defined in a myriad of ways, perhaps borrowing most heavily from Barthes’ understanding of what he calls ‘plaisir’ and ‘jouissance’, where plaisir is a mundane pleasure and jouissance the bliss that transcends the ordinary.

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom) unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of [her] tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis [her] relation with language (Barthes, 1975, p.14).

Fiske describes jouissance as being similar to Freud’s notion of affect, in which, “...the intensity of the experience is its important dimension” (Fiske, 1987, p.224). Awareness and negotiation of the social contradictions of femininity can provide a feeling of both plaisir and jouissance for viewers of BtVS, and the two are mutually informing: “Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic: it is the seam between them, the fault, the flow, which becomes so” (Barthes, 1975, p.16). Generating meaning from televisual texts, which both construct and reflect popular culture narratives of femininity, can provide viewers with feelings of plaisir, in that being able to decode and create meaning is a pleasurable activity, if one that is taken-for-

granted and mundane. The personally relevant meanings generated through negotiating the text may give viewers a form of pleasure and therefore power to make sense not only of the text, but also to connect these meanings to larger social concerns of gender which help shape their cognitive maps – at the same time, they may provide narratives that allow for the possibility of resistance to the very meanings generated. This certainly seems to be the case with the women I interviewed; they were able to describe a sense of common plaisir in their (often daily) engagement with the program, as well as a sense of jouissance, in discussing their pleasurable ambivalence in regards to how both they and the text interrogate the social contradictions of femininity. Engaging with BtVS can also entail a form of jouissance in that viewers transcend to a realm of affect through their emotions, grounding this pleasure in their bodies. The emotional connection, the feelings of realism invoked, can lead to jouissance, in that “one of the pleasures of [television texts] is not only the plaisir of expressing emotions and an identity which social life frequently represses, but often the jouissance of reading with the body, of establishing a presence that is...concerned with presence and intensity” (Fiske, 1987, p.229). This creates a dissonance, a contradiction in the viewing subject, in that the subject

who keeps the two texts in [her] field and in [her] hands the reins of pleasure and bliss is an anachronic subject, for [s]he simultaneously and contradictorily participates in the profound hedonism of all culture...and in the destruction of that culture: [s]he enjoys the consistency of [her] selfhood (that is [her] pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is [her] bliss). [S]he is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse (Barthes, 1975, p.14).

Therefore, using a critical perspective that encompasses the concerns of both textual and contextual analysis can address the complex relationship between the two understandings of pleasure, their function and effects. It can deal both with pleasure as mundane and pleasure as bliss, and, of course, with their contradictory interplay.

However, I am wary of structuring my definition of pleasure only within Barthes' psychoanalytic framework, in that I am constructing an argument that is essentially grounded in the viewers' own narratives and understandings. Psychoanalytic perspectives are important; however, they often construct pleasure as a largely unconscious phenomenon, as a product of tensions and forces mostly outside the subjects' ability to understand. Therefore, while I borrow some of the language and definitions that are used by psychoanalysis and post structuralism, such as subject position, interpellation, and contradiction, it is in order to better understand how specific viewers consciously and actively discuss how *they* understand the pleasure *they* derive from negotiating with the text.

And yet I have also argued that the formation of subjectivity is never a process free from external forces, and therefore pleasure cannot always be seen as conscious, "...rather any form of pleasure is constructed and functions in a specific social and historical context" (Polan, 1988, p. 196, also see Bennett, 1986a; Eagleton, 1991; Jameson, 1981). Pleasures generated from engaging with popular culture are an integral part of larger discourses of power; pleasure has normative and political implications. Pleasure is a way to generate feelings of enjoyment and consensus for activities that work to reinscribe unequal power relations of social, political and economic dominance against the long-term interests of those with less power (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972; Bennett; 1986a; Eagleton, 1991; Foucault, 1972). As I have previously discussed, the pleasure that viewers gain from engaging with BtVS has deep ideological implications in terms of how dominant narratives of appropriate femininity are circulated, naturalized and problematized. For females, this constructs a double bind, and is particularly problematic: their social concerns are already considered

'other' and marginalized, and therefore their real pleasures generated from televisual texts such as BtVS are also marginalized, and yet these meaningful pleasures may also work to de-politicize their concerns and render them more amenable to ideologies that constrain and discriminate against them. Therefore, the genuine pleasures, the potential for social critique, as well as the simultaneous normative reinscription that occurs from engaging in the text are minimalized and rendered unworthy of social commentary – the classic contradiction, a catch twenty-two. Radway speaks eloquently to this problem:

Perhaps the easiest way to deal with contradiction is to dismiss it...such a move enables one to explain away...readers as the untrained and self-deceptive perception of women who either do not know what the [texts] really say or who refuse to admit that meaning to consciousness. Their statements...become, in this theory, mere rationalizations and justifications, false consciousness as it were, which masks their actual reasons...The true, embedded meaning...can only be found by scholars...It is their specialized training that enables them to discern the nature of the connection between these tacit meanings and the unconscious needs and wishes that readers have but cannot acknowledge because they conflict with their conscious beliefs (1984, p.5).

One of the most pressing problems with attempting to discuss pleasure and popular culture is the belief that pleasure from entertainment texts such as BtVS is a feminised pleasure; these texts construct sense-making narratives that are confined to the private sphere, and the personal lives of women are only discussed in terms of the small mundane pleasures offered under patriarchal capitalism (Dow, 1996; Fiske, 1987; Lovell, 1981; Modleski, 1982; Morley, 1992; Press, 1991; Radway, 1984). Historically, women's genres in popular culture have tended to emphasize this focus; romance, melodrama, and soap operas have all been firmly classified as 'women's genres'. The pleasure gained from these texts has been degraded, and attempts to devalue it have been so tremendously successful that much of the response to my statement that I was doing my thesis on the pleasures of watching Buffy was one of

simultaneous condescension and excitement: “Wow, I didn’t know you could do that!”, as if my topic matter was inappropriate for ‘serious’ study. This devaluation of pleasures generated from popular culture is recursively connected to a denigration of what is perceived as feminine in our culture, and has traditionally been constructed in television studies as an expression of false consciousness, the weak feminised mind being colonized. However, the last three chapters explore how pleasure is a constitutive aspect of how (at least this group of) subjects chose to interact with the text of BtVS, and how they construct conflicting meanings, which have implications as to how they make sense of the world and their gendered place within it. I believe that constructing theories of pleasure that can address the pleasures generated from both localized meaning making, as well as from a more global sense of making personally relevant meanings, will offer new and innovative ways of theorizing how we come to understand ourselves as complex, shifting, ambivalent and contradictory gendered subjects, within and against complex, shifting, ambivalent and contradictory ideologies of appropriate femininity in popular culture.

However, to end my overview of some of the theoretical constructs of cultural studies that I am using, as well as my discussion of how I am using feminist, psychoanalysis and post-structuralist theories, I should mention that my concern with feminist thought also keeps me (as it did with the psychoanalytic approach to pleasure) from wholeheartedly embracing a traditional British cultural studies framework. My reservations are due to its focus, which tends to give class primacy over other organizational narratives such as gender, that the public sphere has primacy over the private sphere, and that resistance is always rationally expressed. My work here argues that gender continues to be a central discourse for organizing experience of both self and society (without denying the importance of class or

concerns of ethnicity), that both the public and private sphere need to be examined, and that resistance is always simultaneously embedded in accommodation, continuously shifting and taking myriad forms to which theorists must remain sensitive. In order to more fully construct my own theoretical and methodological position, the next chapter will provide an overview of some of the feminist deliberations within these theoretical and methodological concerns.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to address some of the main issues addressed by scholars interested in how audiences negotiate televisual texts. An extensive overview of current themes in audience studies, as well as my own theoretical framework within the field has been examined. Particular focus was given to the concepts of negotiation, contradiction, pleasure and relative power, in order to build an argument that put forward a nuanced understanding of audiences as complex, fragmentary and fluid in both their viewing and social subject positions. I addressed the theoretical underpinnings of my argument, paying close attention to the productive tensions within each of the frameworks of cultural studies, in particular, definitions and usages of ideology, as well as poststructuralist understandings of subjectivity, contradiction and pleasure, and contemporary feminist concerns with the myriad definitions and effects of gender. While these explorations are a bit longer than what usually appear in most master's theses, I believe that this chapter has provided textual reflexivity, and begins to address some of the inherent complexities of attempting to construct an argument about how meanings of femininity are generated, circulated and contested between televisual texts and their viewers.

CHAPTER TWO: EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

Introduction and Chapter Overview

Before turning to a textual and contextual analysis of BtVS and its female viewers it is necessary to examine, in some detail, the methodological ground from which I make my assertions. The purpose here is to interrogate both the framework (methods) and the content of the framework (knowledge) from which I generate my interpretations. The construction of knowledge – how we explain and make sense of self and experiences – is never neutral, rather it both reflects and takes part in larger discursive practices, and in this sense is part of larger discourses of power. Questioning how we validate, circulate and contest competing knowledge claims is particularly important for researchers who attempt to interpret and discuss other people's experiences. Since knowledge is such a pervasive and often under-acknowledged form of power, foregrounding my methodology clarifies how I have shaped my interpretations, as well as highlighting how I have been shaped by, and take part in, the same discursive forces of gender that also affect my participants.

The contention that feminist methodology is a value system as much as a practice is explored through the theoretical directives of the methodology which grounds this thesis.

Furthermore, this argument refutes the necessity of constructing a definitive 'truth' regarding these women and their experiences; instead, I am putting forward a situated interpretation, albeit one shaped through a theoretical framework partially informed by pre-existing works.

Through a discussion and overview of some of the main concerns within feminist

methodology, feminist epistemology, and ethnographic practices, my intentions with regard to feminist methodology are to: 1) understand how the social and historical construction of gender continues to be an organizing category for these women's experiences of BtVS, 2) to highlight the importance of contradiction, negotiation and ambivalence, which are often overlooked in attempts to create a unified theory, 3) to validate women's voices and experiences, and 4) to create a document that is good to 'think with', for all those who are interested in women's experiences with televisual texts.

Feminist Methodology

The last several decades of academic interest have generated intense discussion as how to undertake 'valid' research in the social sciences. It is not my intent here to provide an overview of that debate; however, a brief summary highlighting some key developments within feminist research will explore research as praxis, a focal point for understanding how knowledge is produced, circulated and legitimated. My own work is not exempt from this form of examination, and therefore the purpose here is not only to provide an outline of the methods I have chosen to use, but also to examine the philosophy that has shaped them. I believe it is important to share some of the more general epistemological concerns that ground this philosophy, with the ultimate intent of providing both self- and text- reflexivity.

Feminist methodology has transformed research perspectives. It has sensitized researchers to the understanding that gender is a basic organizing feature of social experience; it has challenged the norms of androcentric 'objectivity' within diverse academies; it has highlighted the permeable boundaries between public and private in social science research; and it has questioned how knowledge itself is constructed (Cook, 1986; Millen, 1997; Olesen,

1994). Perhaps most importantly, feminist concerns regarding methodology have worked to disclose that the research process is also always a political and historically situated process (Finch, 1984; Hammersley, 1994; McRobbie, 1982).

Methodologically, the use of gender as an organizing category for experience means that I have focused on how these women participants understand and explain their lives through a gendered lens. However, I am also conscious of the historical moment I occupy in regards to larger social conversations of feminism, and of the fact that my research will at least partially reflect “the current level of debate and argument within academic feminism” (McRobbie, 1982, p. 47), rather than merely the participants’ expressed concerns. Additionally, part of my interest in the field of popular culture and in women’s interactions with it stems from my desire to learn what women - who do not necessarily identify with feminism or as feminist - are thinking about personal and social constructions of femininity and how they understand their gendered experiences under patriarchy (McRobbie, 1982).

However, there has also been a great deal of debate as to what constitutes feminist methodology. While there have been attempts to construct an ideological foundation which epistemically privileges the lived experiences of women (Harding, 1987), many self-identified feminists are wary of constructing and reifying a single methodological perspective that assumes a homogenous or unified experience of women’s subordination (Cook and Fonow, 1986; Roman, 1990). While attempting to remain open to the potential of other approaches to inform a feminist methodology, many others have tried to construct guiding principles or ‘rules’ of conduct (Cook and Fonow, 1986; (Opie, 1992). However, as these feminist researchers are well aware, any formalization or codification can endanger its radical

potential, and threaten its ability to be flexible and open, and to evolve – the very qualities that mark it as a departure from previous models of qualitative methodology. And herein lies the crux: without a general consensus as to what constitutes it, feminist methodology is open to both internal dissension and external ridicule as to its role within research. So the question remains: What constitutes an adequate feminist methodology?

This issue, I believe, has been constructed as a bit of a straw-man argument. Rather than constituting the debate solely within techniques and examples of existing qualitative methodology, I think it is more productive to look beyond this paradigm in order to “delineat[e] some of the general values which it might uphold” (Millen, 1997, para. 2), allowing any research that satisfies these concerns to be considered feminist, regardless of its methods. For many academic theorists, methods, theories and practices are feminist when they draw on the differences, as well as the similarities, between women in order to better understand these commonalities and differences (Barrett, 1982; Hintikka, 1983; Jaggar, 1983; Smith, 1974). While it would be somewhat of an oversimplification to argue that there is absolute consensus as to the underlying values guiding feminist methodology, two main themes emerge as fundamental concerns: the need to be aware of the role of gender in society, and the differential experiences this provides for females and males, as well as the need for a critical approach as to how knowledge is generated, circulated and validated (McRobbie, 1982; Millen, 1997; Opie, 1992). Both of these points are grounded within the larger field of feminist epistemology, where not only the forms of knowledge, but also the very way knowledge is constructed and circulated through gendered understandings are questioned.

Feminist Epistemology

As a critical pursuit, feminist epistemology - the theory of which practices produce what sorts of knowledge - can enlarge feminist audience theory in three ways. Firstly, feminist epistemology interrogates the hermeneutic frames of how knowledge is constructed and gendered; secondly, it foregrounds the need to incorporate women's voices and experiences in knowledge construction, and finally, it validates local and diverse knowledges.

When examining the feminist methodologies of female audiences, it is not enough to question the theoretical and methodological *frames*; we must also interrogate the building material (knowledge) *itself*. Methods do not merely uncover knowledge; they create it as well. Knowledge is not contemplative; it is active. In other words, knowledge does things; it has power (Grosz, 1993; Harding, 1993). This concern with how knowledge is generated and validated is the central core of much debate in feminist epistemology²⁵.

Elizabeth Grosz argues that theorists need to acknowledge the body in the production and evaluation of knowledge. Following Nietzsche, she states that knowledges and truths are the results of the knower's corporeality and material position (Grosz, 1993). Grosz's concern is that, constructions of knowledge have erased their corporeal genealogies. By this she means that what has been traditionally constituted as 'truthful' knowledge is not self-inclusive; the subject is absent. She argues that many features of contemporary knowledges are linked to male disembodiment from their bodies and their desires, the traditional Aristotelian dualism between rational mind and the irrational body. Paradoxically, this form of "rational" construction of knowledges is irrational; without self-inclusion, it is necessarily incomplete (Grosz, 1993; Harding, 1993). Additionally, since knowledge is generated through the

knower's corporeality and material position, ideas that are not self-aware of this inclusion are then mistaken as cerebral. Therefore, disembodiment and detachment, as the preconditions for the generation of truth, are the very things that ensure the naturalized construction of women as 'other', since they are socially constructed through, and attached to, their bodies and their sexuality. Arguing that sexual difference demands social representation, in that social roles and procreative functions are socially required, produced and regulated, rather than simply existing in nature, Grosz states that by not including sexed corporeality into the generation of knowledge, sexual differences are naturalized and essentialized because this ignores the corporeal power interests that ground them. This mistaken notion of knowledge as existing only as ideas, without corporeal grounding, works to naturalize a certain, masculine way of knowing. The detachment of sexed corporeality in knowledge production and legitimation ensures that the 'maleness' that grounds contemporary thought is effaced. Arguing that the body is a hinge, or a threshold, Grosz positions it between "a psychic or lived interiority and a more socio-political exteriority that produces interiority through the inscription of the body's outer surface" (Grosz, 1993, p. 83).

Sandra Harding picks up this thread and links these feminist epistemological concerns to an inclusion of women's experiences and voices as a starting point of research. She states that since all knowledges are socially situated, and since not all social locations are equal, some social locations - or standpoints - are better than others as places from which to begin to challenge the dominant, and seemingly universal, masculine perspectives which constitute the fundamental assumptions of knowledge (Harding, 1993). Since women are in a liminal position within patriarchy, as both its subject and its object, Harding argues that a 'strong' methodology needs to start from, but must not be limited to, the lives of women. Roman

agrees, stating that “while there is no unified experience of feminine subordination, a primary condition...is that it should represent the world from the standpoint of women” (Roman & Apple, 1990). Only then will more critical questions regarding knowledge construction be generated, producing less partial and distorted accounts.

By embracing multiple, and at times incompatible, theories that satisfy local standards, knowledge can then be better understood as a set of local practices and as a partial map of larger fields of theory. This is not an abstract exercise; if we can see theory as a model, as a specification of the structure, then even locally competing knowledges can find equal validity. Longino's position is that as a way to map some part of the relations/structure onto some part of the world as we experience it, conceiving theory as a model allows practitioners to judge the adequacy of the knowledge claim:

[G]iven that different subcommunities within larger communities may be interested in different relations or may be interested in objects under different descriptions, different models may well be equally adequate and provide knowledge, in the sense of an ability to direct our actions, even without a general consensus as to what's important...The notion of theories as sets of propositions requires that we view the adequacy of a theory as a matter of correspondence of the objects, processes, and relations described in the propositions of the theory with the objects, processes, and relations in the domain of the natural world that the theory purports to explain; that is, it requires that adequacy be conceptualized as truth (Longino, 1993).

Attempting to meet standards of adequacy in research, through attention to theoretical complexity, methodological concerns, and epistemological reflexivity, is a difficult task, and one which can only provide provisional and situated outcomes. However, one methodological component which can work to include these standards is the practice of ethnography.

Ethnography

Ethnography has become an increasingly popular practice for researchers. Originating in anthropology, ethnography has traditionally been defined as a detailed and often long-term “process of discovering and describing a particular culture. It [is]... an intimate and personal activity...[an] attempt to learn how the members of a particular group see their worlds” (Spradley, 1996, para. 1). Ethnographic accounts examine all aspects of a social world in order to better understand how both the individual and their larger social worlds are mutually constituted; this makes for a multi-layered or ‘thick’ description (Geertz, 1988). The underlying concern of ethnography is to describe and map multiple sections of a society: its actions, beliefs, narratives and artefacts – in short, to attempt to understand how a society attempts to explain itself to itself, publicly and privately, consciously and unconsciously.

Because of its increasing popularity, the term ethnography has begun to be applied as a catch-all term for any research that incorporates interviews or focus groups, regardless of the amount of time spent with participants or the diversity of the information gathered.

However, the definition and standards of ethnographic work have not been static; as a practice, it has been influenced by social history and by theoretical developments such as feminist methodology and epistemology (Clifford, 1988; Geertz, 1988). Therefore, while I have been careful not to label my fieldwork as ethnographic, I do believe that my gathering of data, as well as my interpretation of it, has been guided by its basic principles. These principles include: 1) a desire to understand how a particular group sees its own world, 2) the construction of a multi-layered or ‘thick’ description, and 3) the inevitable partiality of theorizing and research.

The ethnographic desire to build theoretical understandings framed through the voices and experiences of those they work with and whom they study allows for the validation of local knowledges. My work with women's lived experiences has helped to build an evolving framework of how women understand their lives as gendered subjects. This is not to argue that the only valid source of information resides in the individual, for the individual is at least partially constituted through community and the larger society, as I've discussed in the section on cultural studies. One of the strengths of ethnographic practices is precisely this interest in larger material forces, which provides an explanatory theory that situates the understanding of both the researcher and his/her subject within these fields of influence (Roman & Apple, 1990). By focusing, at least initially, on how individuals explain their experiences to themselves, ethnography highlights the importance of the practices of everyday life, and their connection to larger spheres of influence. This theoretical and methodological complexity addresses both the individual and their society, as well as the complex interconnections between them. This dual focus, or tension, removes the theoretical focus and causality from either texts or individuals alone (Opie, 1992; Press, 1991; Radway, 1984). As Jensen argues, researchers cannot define audiences merely by their formal and somewhat abstract social roles, but must also address "the interpretive frames or repertoires" they use, which are often of a much more personal nature (Jensen, 1996, p. 71). The local and grounded work of ethnographic methodology is continuously built on throughout the research and writing process, culminating in a partial mapping of the social and cultural context in which the individual viewer is embedded.

The question of how individuals come to understand themselves and their actions through pre-existing patterns of social relations is a central feature of ethnography. As Press argues,

this form of qualitative methodology “presupposes that events at [the] individual level, though not the only level we should investigate, are nevertheless meaningful and contribute to our greater understanding of culture” (Press, 1991, p. 17). For myself, using ethnography to inform my methodologies is a hermeneutic task – not as a sufficient, but rather a necessary condition. Ethnographic work contributes to our knowledge of the network of cultural relations and interactions in which texts are caught and which help to shape their possibilities in the face of the structuralist perspective that texts alone are responsible for the production of ideological interpellation in the patriarchal order. According to Michel de Certeau, it is only by analyzing how users manipulate images that they have not made that we can “...gauge the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization” (de Certeau, 1984, p.4). Ethnographic practices may help feminist researchers create frameworks in order to understand the presence and circulation of televisual texts that include the experiences of their users. Whether in audience studies or elsewhere, ethnography is an attempt to multiply the discourses involved in the construction and validation of knowledge. As Annette Kuhn argues, “experience is undeniably a key category of everyday knowledge, structuring people’s lives in important ways...- my memories, my feelings- are important because these things make me what I am, make me different from everyone else” (Kuhn, 1992, p.237).

Ethnographic practices also help to build a multi-layered or ‘thick’ description of the negotiation necessarily undertaken by individuals in their daily lives. This encourages the discovery of what Opie calls the “in-between places,” where “data is read and interpreted highlighting the paradoxical, the contradictory, and marginal” (Opie, 1992, p.5). Here, research outcomes are contingent and incomplete because of the awareness that

contradiction and ambivalence are not methodological or theoretical difficulties to overcome, but rather a constitutive part of daily life and our attempts to map it. Kasper argues for this point as well, stating that feminist scholarship of “women’s experience of self and society shows fundamental conflicts of meaning between cultural expectations for women and women’s lived experiences” (Kasper, 1986, p. 32). Understanding that the culturally imposed meanings women are socialized to accept often contrast with lived experiences, she goes on to state that “conflict between culturally-imposed and experientially-felt meaning may be part of the condition of contemporary women which remains unresolved” (1986, p. 32). So instead of trying to ‘smooth’ the potential sites of conflict either within women’s experience and voices or within theoretical and methodological disparities, my work is to attempt the opposite – to highlight how women may simultaneously create oppositional and conformist readings of televisual texts and femininity. This attention to the constant process of negotiation in consuming BtVS has helped to me to understand that the contradictory experiences viewers express can have simultaneously pleasurable and constraining effects on how they understand their lives as gendered subjects.

While ethnography does not necessarily work to blindly decontextualize and valorise the experiences of the individual, it does attempt to address the subtle permutations of women's experiences and voices within a multiplicity of subject positions in order to highlight the complex, and often shifting, ways in which women understand themselves. The twin themes of accommodation and resistance to larger social forces are what interest me here – the ambivalent, simultaneous ‘within and against’ that all of us live out on a daily basis. By working on a micro level with women’s voices and experiences, I have attempted to map

plural and often contradictory perspectives onto larger macro level theories. Following Michel de Certeau's understanding of the practices of everyday life, I believe that ethnography highlights that a "...relation (always social) determines its [the individual's] terms, and not the reverse, and [yet]...each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of such relational determinations interact" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 4). Rather than constituting women and their experiences as monolithic or reified, ethnographic mapping of negotiation may allow for the realization that a range of possible positions of identification can exist within any given text, and that viewers will unavoidably (albeit, often desirably) shift subject positions as they interact with the text. Ethnographic work is critical in that it contributes to the knowledge of how ground-level networks of social and historical relations shape textual readings and interpretations and the socio-historical parameters and possibilities in the text's existence. The concepts of negotiation, ambivalence and contradiction are highlighted; and the tension and complementarity of both theoretical and applied methodology contribute to a fuller understanding of what it means to be a female viewer.

The purpose of this section has been to challenge the notion that research is a value-neutral practice, which, if properly undertaken, will yield a 'truth' concerning the subjects of the study. Questioning the epistemological foundations of qualitative methodology shows that the inevitable partiality of research and its theoretical frames are not things to hide; acknowledging them can lead to new possibilities of understanding. However, in my attempt to address the strengths of feminist methodology, feminist epistemology and ethnography, upon which this work is based, I do not wish to slide into absolute relativism. Following Geertz, I do not believe that my use of self-reflexivity means that this thesis is fiction in the

sense of being false, but rather that it is necessarily incomplete and partial, and yet "...it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something" (Geertz, 1988, p. 20). Ethnographic accounts, as cultural analyses, are necessarily an ongoing process of guessing at meanings and drawing conclusions from a series of ever refined guesses.

However, even given this foregrounding of partiality, contestation, and interpretation, one of the most troubling issues raised by both opponents and proponents of the process of working from women's voices and experiences is the question of voice and its validity. In agreement with Finch, I believe that "issues of power are central to gender relations, [and] therefore ethics are essentially political questions" (Finch, 1984, p. 72). Thus, questions surrounding the use – and misuse – of voice are not merely abstract methodological concerns; they challenge the very ability of researchers to collect, shape and interpret data. Previously, I have highlighted the benefits of using women's voices and their experiences as the ground from which to construct theoretical frames, this section addresses some of the challenges of doing so.

If the central feature of feminist methodology is the dual attention to gender as an organizing category of experience and a focus on the construction of knowledge, then one of its most problematic questions is how we choose to construct theories based on the narrative experiences of women. Under the rubric of appropriation, the concerns addressed here are: 1) the role of researcher/author as interpreter and 2) a sensitivity to working with participants who may hold non-feminist or anti-feminist beliefs.

Whose Voice?

The majority of feminist researchers are concerned with the appropriation of voice, attempting to ensure that their research will not ultimately be used against the collective interests of women, while understanding that some textual appropriation is an inevitable outcome of their work (Finch, 1984; McRobbie, 1982; Millen, 1997; Opie, 1992; Press, 1991, Radway, 1984). However, this paradox seems to construct a Gordian knot, as participants and researcher do not necessarily share the same relationship to the data (Opie, 1992), and the interpretative process often highlights this divide. Part of the researcher's 'work' is precisely the process of teasing out some of the tacit or covert meanings that are intertwined with the subjects' conscious statements and observable activities (Radway, 1984). The interpretation of others experiences therefore necessarily builds upon and surpasses the local sense-making narratives of the participants.

One traditional solution to this problem has been to use the notion of false consciousness as an interpretative instrument that can be applied to women's voices, whereby 'they' don't understand their own experiences and need to have them translated back in critical terms in order to 'raise their consciousness' of the 'truth' of their lives. Kitzinger and Wilkinson argue that this interpretive problem is endemic in feminist research, and yet rarely discussed (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997). While it is often the case that research participants are not fully aware of larger fields of influence, it is facetious and demeaning to assume that their experiences of their own lives are necessarily falsely understood. Rather than highlighting the tendency of all people to have an imperfect and situated understanding of their condition, this perspective places the researcher in a god-like subject position. Gorelick states that this position falsely assumes that there is "a true consciousness that is known and complete, and

[that] the researcher-activist knows it and the participant does not” (1991, p. 468).

Additionally, this viewpoint often constructs an artificial unity of ‘oneness’ among women, such as a shared sense of oppression or pleasure (McRobbie, 1982; Millen 1997; Percy, 1995). Discussing this dilemma, Andrea Press understood that her theorizing meant, “...from the very beginning, [that] as [a] researcher and observer I was grouping...and summarizing individual responses according to...criteria [which was]...glossing over the individuality of my informants, which paradoxically I had to respect and appreciate in order to conduct the interviews at all” (1991, p. 124).

Attempting to negotiate this challenge, Radway oscillates back and forth between the conscious statements and beliefs of her participants and her own understandings of the unseen cultural ground through which they are constructed. She argues that this allows her to “...posit additional desires, fears, or concerns that complement rather than contradict those beliefs and assertions” (Radway, 1984, p. 10). This allows for a hypothesis that goes beyond the explanations offered by the women she has worked with, yet attempts to remain grounded in these explanations ²⁶. The productive tensions between explanations offered by the participants and those constructed by the researcher allow for the complex signification of experience to be interpreted for others not in or of that culture (Radway, 1984). I contend that the theoretical and interpretive views I have presented here stand alongside the participants’ own, rather than dominating them, while providing an interpretation perhaps not otherwise available either to the participants or to those outside of that culture.

However, this position can be particularly troubling in regard to feminist research undertaken with non-feminist or anti-feminist women. This problematic is particularly

salient to the work undertaken here, as many of my participants voiced strong ambivalence towards feminism and its perceived goals, while simultaneously asserting feminist concerns. There are at least three potential interpretative solutions to this: 1) reliance on the concept of false consciousness, which I have already rejected, 2) a redefinition of feminism to include my participant's views as feminist, or 3) understanding that it not necessary to achieve consensus between researcher and participant, but rather to "highlight points of difference and tensions between competing accounts as well as shared interpretation[s]" (Opie, 1992, p. 5). While the second point has merit, there is often a tendency to use participants as authenticators; this shift of labour then magically leaves the researcher as the beneficiary of 'the truth' without the responsibility required in tracing the complex and often contradictory fields of influence (Lury, 2001). Hence, in working with participants who do not fully share my interpretive framework, rather than attempting to create a 'transparent' document that only admits either the purity of the participants voices or the authority of the researcher's interpretation, I believe that it is exactly these discrepancies and deviations that have enriched my research. I have attempted to listen carefully to what these women have told me and each other, and it is my hope that my interpretation of their experiences and words co-exists with, rather than dominates, their understandings. In addition, highlighting the often contradictory interests of maintaining or challenging oppressive influences respects the participants' respective intellectual capacities and does "not equate contradictory subjectivity with a false or inferior consciousness" (Roman & Apple, 1990, p. 62), and thus illuminates the fluid and fragmented experience of self. This perspective of respect, which allows both for the validation of voice as well as for the right to provide an interpretation that may not be the participants' own, also forces me to be willing to be informed and transformed by their words, just as they may be by mine.

Discussing the importance of negotiation, Christine Gledhill states that an individual (or theoretical) position, by its very nature, must temporarily assume a fixed identity; however, what should be critiqued here is not the necessity of having an identity as such, but rather its construction as total, unchanging and uncontradictory (1988). Going further, she argues that knowledge of the instability of identity should alert those engaged in a hermeneutic process to the fact that the desire to find final and achieved modes of representation and recognition is not only futile, but also a product of the very methodologies under question. As specialists, scholars of audience studies should be aware that our readings are part and parcel with the cycle of meaning production and negotiation; we participate in the social negotiation of identity, definition and meaning.

The complete reading...that arises from repeated viewings and close analysis is the product of the critical profession and does not replicate the 'raw' reading/viewing of audiences. The notion that the last word of the text is also the final memory of the audience...derives more from the exigencies of the critical essay than from the experience...which has no such neat boundaries. It is this haphazard, unsystematic viewing experience, and its aftermath that the cultural analyst must investigate if she/he wants to determine the political effects of textual ideologies. The text [or experience] alone does not provide sufficient evidence for conclusions on such questions, but requires the researches of the anthropologist or ethnographer (Gledhill, 1988, p.73).

Merely re-stating participants' experience says nothing about how those experiences come to be. To know why people do what they do, it is necessary not only to explore their interpretive constructions, but also to examine, however partially, the cultural ground upon which they stand.

Fieldwork

In my desire to better understand how women use and negotiate televisual texts to inform their sense-making narratives of femininity, and how they use these pre-existing narratives to interpret televisual texts, I decided to explore some of these narratives of their experiences in engaging with BtVS. While the extensive body of theoretical work in the field of cultural, audience, and gender studies has been critical in shaping my interests and concerns, it needed to be complemented with a field study that would help to inform, and transform, my pre-existing knowledge. To accomplish this, I worked with a group of ten young women, between the ages of 21-30. The demographics of the women are quite varied – other than being fans of BtVS the main thing they all have in common is post-secondary education. Some come from self-described middle class backgrounds, others from working class families, and their ethnicities are quite diverse²⁷. While the majority identify as heterosexual, a large minority define themselves as “queer friendly”²⁸, and one participant is gay. Some work as well as attending school, others subsist off student loans. Several still live at home, though the majority live on their own or with roommates. None were married; only two women live with their partners. Other than Ava, none of the women had children. Further details will be discussed in the findings of chapters four, five and six, as they become relevant.

I solicited my participants by means of snowball sampling – I found women wanting to participate through fan groups, past students I had worked with, friends of friends, and colleagues. With first contact, I asked several informal preliminary questions to gauge the interest-level of these women, and then arranged a convenient time and place to conduct the first interview. I gave a general overview of what I was interested in asking them: what place

the program had in their lives, why they enjoyed watching it, and what meanings about femininity, if any, they generated through the experience of viewing, thinking and talking about it (Heide, 1995; Radway, 1984). Over roughly four weeks, I met with these ten women in a variety of settings: coffee houses, school, places of work, and in their homes.

The interviews were semi-structured; while I had a number of questions, they were open-ended, and participants were encouraged to discuss personal interests, concerns and stories not addressed by the questions (see Appendix Two for interview questions). The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to two hours, with the average lasting an hour and fifteen minutes. After these interviews, I was able to further refine the discussion questions for the focus groups. I constructed two participant observation/focus groups, or what I informally called “Buffy Parties”; gatherings to watch two episodes, eat pizza and get to know each other a bit better, followed by a more formal discussion period regarding the show and some broader issues that were implicitly connected (see Appendix Three for focus group questions). These gatherings lasted approximately five hours. Within the next few days, this activity was followed up by a final interview; approximately fifteen minutes in length, which I used to ask about issues raised in the focus groups, and also to offer the participants a space to discuss their feelings about the participatory process (see Appendix Four). At this point, I provided an honorarium of fifty dollars to each participant in return for their time ²⁹.

Criteria of Soundness

The previous section addressed the epistemological implications of my research, as well as a brief description of the fieldwork I undertook. This section will present the applied qualitative criteria which ground my study, i.e., what in quantitative studies is known as

'validity'. Having forcefully argued the impossibility of a researcher's position of value-free objectivity, it is nonetheless important to locate the logics and judgments in use in a project, as well as the values which make up the research activities themselves. So while traditional constructions of validity are dismissed, notions of generalizability or credibility remain important (Wolcott, 1990). These concerns are deeply rooted in the consciousness of a researcher's subjectivity, forwarding a perspective not based on the 'discovery' of a pre-existing truth of the world, but are used instead to "understand a social world we are continuously in the process of constructing" both as observers and participants (Wolcott, 1990, p.146). The criteria of soundness I have used to construct my data and its analysis were: 1) credibility, to address whether the subject is accurately identified and described, 2) transferability, the demonstration of applicability of one set of findings to another context, 3) dependability, which accounts for the changing conditions of study and design, and 4) confirmability, which tries to provide sufficient information so that the study can be confirmed by another researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall, 1989).

The goal in constructing credibility, according to Marshall, is to "demonstrate [that] the inquiry was constructed in such a manner as to ensure that the subject was accurately identified and described" (Marshall, 19889, p. 145). More simply, credibility is the attempt, always partial, to forward a descriptive understanding of the research and its participants in a way that is credible to all involved (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990). As Lincoln and Guba argue, the engagement with the notion of credibility is to show that the researcher "...has represented those multiple construction[s] accurately, that is that the reconstructions...that have been arrived at via the inquiry are credible to the constructors of the original multiple realities" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). This two-fold focus of credibility – by both

researcher and participant – has been achieved through a triangulation of methods, sources and theory, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, prolonged engagement, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall, 1989; Maxwell, 1992). However, in the end, it is important to understand that I am not trying to mimic the ‘objective’ notion of quantitative validity, as no amount of engagement in these activities can *prove* credibility; the best they can do is to *persuade* one of it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Triangulation – the use of multiple sources for information gathering – is a well established practice in both quantitative and qualitative methods. According to Schwandt, “...triangulation is a means of checking the integrity of the inferences one draws and helps to examine single social phenomena from more than one vantage point” (1997, p. 6). In my work, I use triangulation not only in my theoretical constructs, but also in my methods. Through the use of methodological triangulation, which has included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus groups, I was able to gather information from a variety of settings.

The initial interviews were used to elicit basic information concerning the participants’ understandings and beliefs about the show, as well as about broader issues that grounded these particular concerns. It gave the women a chance to discuss themselves and their relationship to the show in a private setting, and the open-ended nature of the questions allowed them to move the conversation into the areas that most interested them. Marianne Paget (1983), in the course of her own research into how experience constitutes knowledge, states that searching, hesitancy and openness in the interview process allows for both the respondent and the researcher to be mutually engaged in building their understandings. The

construction of credibility in an interview requires that the interviewer be aware that the process is a joint production between researcher and participant, and that subsequent analysis on the part of the researcher will reveal underlying theoretical assumptions and presuppositions (Mischler, 1986). Moreover, a methodological focus on the interview process allows me to highlight how individual participants construct and share their sense-making narratives, which are grounded in larger fields of influence. As Anderson argues, “the analyst is not looking for the answer but for discourse which on subsequent analysis may prove to be a repository of social meanings” (Anderson, 1987, p. 330).

The observation of the participants was the most informal part of the research; while I took field notes, it was mostly my goal to use the information gathered from the interaction to generate further dialogue regarding their interest in the show. Their verbal and embodied engagement with the show, as well as their comments to each other, allowed me to better understand how they find pleasure in this text in ways they may not have consciously expressed (Maxwell, 1992; Morley, 1992). Furthermore, I felt that this process was an important part of the research design, as my own engagement with both the show and the participants helped to create an environment of openness and comfort. Through group discussion, the focus groups allowed the women to share their thoughts with others, and to hear other perspectives, which both matched and differed from their own. I found it particularly interesting to observe how the women discussed the issues in a group setting, and to see how group dynamics may have had a shaping influence on some of their responses. These kind of insights are particularly important in relation to one’s understanding of how individuals’ expressed beliefs are shaped, at least partially, through public discourses. I will further discuss this shared process of negotiating meaning within the

groups in chapters four, five, and six. The focus groups were tremendously successful – even after three solid hours of discussion, the women still had much to share, and several asked if we could continue to gather even after the research process was complete. I conducted the follow-up interviews in order to ask any last minute questions generated and not addressed through the focus groups, as well as to provide the opportunity for the women to discuss how they felt about their participation in my research. This form of methodological triangulation – interviews, participant observation and focus groups – allowed for a wide variety of responses.

Negative case analysis is a second criterion of credibility. This practice entails addressing all parts of the research data that do not initially support the working hypothesis (Marshall, 1989; Miles, 1984). In the work undertaken for this thesis, I have undertaken a negative case analysis through the application of alternative frameworks, as well as by allowing for some ambiguity and contradiction. Thirdly, I maintained referential adequacy by submitting drafts of this work to the participants in order to ensure they felt that their voices and experiences were represented in a way they agreed with, even if they did not agree with my overall theoretical interpretation. I respected the fourth concern, prolonged engagement as a marker of credibility, by spending up to eight hours over a period of four weeks with each of the women. Time constraints were an issue; as a Master's student engaged in my own research, I had to balance the amount of time in the field with the amount of time available to transcribe and analyze my data, being the sole researcher on this project. Given that much previous research has been generated from single instances of formal interaction with participants, I believe that while I may not have reached the point of saturation and redundancy that is a hallmark of traditional ethnographic work, I was able to build

relationships with my participants and to gather voluminous amounts of data, culminating in a ‘thick’ description of their relationship with BtVS ³⁰.

Finally, I have employed member checking as a construct of quantitative validity. I accomplished this process in two different ways. During the interviews and focus groups, I ensured when paraphrasing their words at the end of each question that they agreed with my interpretation. Often, I would use active listening phrases such as “What I hear you saying is...,” “Am I correct in saying that you feel...,” “Do you feel comfortable with the way I’m interpreting your comments?” While largely the women felt that I had understood what they were saying, I found this exercise to be extremely useful, as it gave many participants the chance to refine or modify their statements when they didn’t fully agree. Secondly, I sent out a draft of this thesis to all participants for their feedback. The purpose of this move was to enable the women to understand how I interpretively built on their voices and experiences. As Lincoln and Guba argue, member checking is a critical technique for establishing credibility. “If the investigator is able to purport that his or her reconstructions are recognizable to audience members as adequate representations of their own (and multiple) realities, it is essential that they be given the opportunity to react to them” (1985, p. 314). While I did not expect them to fully agree with my interpretation, I wanted to ensure that their experiences had not been rendered unintelligible by my own theoretical framework. Taken together, triangulation, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, prolonged engagement and member checking help to construct a degree of situated credibility.

The second core concept under the rubric of credibility is transferability. Transferability is described by Marshall as “...demonstrating the applicability of one set of findings to another

context...to show how data collection and analysis will be guided by concepts and models” (Marshall, 1989, p.146). Simply put, transferability is the stated theoretical parameters of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I have endeavoured to do just this, through a clear description of my methodological stance in this chapter and a detailed description of my theoretical ground. Taken together, this joint form of self- and text-reflexivity enable other readers to trace my position. A clear description of my research techniques, which are addressed in the following section, will also help to construct the transferability of my findings.

As stated previously, I collected data through interviews, participant observation, and focus groups. All components were audio taped; the participant observation and focus groups segments were also video taped, resulting in roughly twenty-six hours of audio tape and ten hours of video tape. Transcription of the data was verbatim, with self-constructed markers placed in sections of the interview where the participants used verbal emphasis, repetition or hesitancy, in a partial attempt to mimic the natural tempo of spoken words. Once the data had been transcribed, it was transferred to NVivo, a qualitative research software program. The main purpose of using the software was to generate emergent coding categories from the data, as well as to match the data to preexisting codes from previous published research.

My data analysis moved through five phases: organizing the data, generating categories, themes and patterns, testing the emergent hypothesis against the data and pre-existing hypothesis, searching for alternative explanations of the data, and finally, recording the results (Marshall, 1989). All stages of data analysis were informed by grounded theory, inductive and deductive sorts, and by constant comparison coding. I used grounded theory

in order to construct theory that followed from the data rather than only using preconceived theoretical frameworks in which the data was forced to fit. Using grounded theory posits multiple realities and makes transferability contextual, dependent on local, ‘thick’ descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This perspective also works against the reification of the participants’ voices and experiences on the researcher’s part, which would otherwise inevitably lead to a hermeneutically sealed theoretical stance of false consciousness (Radway, 1984). Grounded theory was an important aspect of my data analysis, allowing categories of interest, commonality and difference to be generated from the participants themselves. I used grounded theory through random word, phrase and idea searches, and sorted them into generalized codes for further theoretical analysis. This follows what Marshall terms ‘indigenous typologies’, whereby codes and their connections to each other are constructed from the expressions of the participants (Marshall, 1989, p. 114). As part of grounded theory, I used inductive data analysis, which is a process aimed at uncovering embedded information. The data was unitized to create categories that provide “descriptive or inferential information about the context or setting from which these units were derived” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 203). Constant comparison coding was also an important aspect of my data analysis, which I used in order to combine inductive category coding with a comparison of all the social events I observed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, as I began my initial observations and hypothesis generation, I also took into consideration all accounts across the categories. This technique has some similarity to pattern modelling, which attempts to both describe and explain the data by means of a description of the relations that various parts have to each other (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

However, it is necessary to move beyond the grounded approach in order to build an interpretation that connects to the larger social influences in these women's lives. Otherwise, analysis remains at the level whereby their experiences are seen as individualistic, and refuses to evolve further, toward a situated understanding of the tacit importance of the participants' words and experiences (Maxwell, 1992; Morely, 1992; Radway, 1984; Roman & Apple, 1990). As Press so eloquently argues, preexisting theoretical categories are necessary to move "... from a humanitarian appreciation of [a] subjects' uniqueness to a coherent social-scientific and critical perspective on the way this uniqueness has been hindered, crippled, but also produced in part by the social conditions that both entrap, but also facilitate... women's lives" (Press, 1996, p. 124). Therefore I also used deductive data analysis, which allowed for a productive tension between larger fields of influence and the multiplicity of ways that they are understood, lived and expressed on a local level (Miles, 1984).

For the purpose of this thesis, the last two points which work to construct credibility, dependability, and confirmability are combined. Generally, dependability attempts to account for changes that occur during the research process. Confirmability is the qualitative equivalent of 'objectivity', whereby the researcher structures her work to ensure clarity, in the event that another researcher wishes to confirm the findings with another study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall, 1989). I have attempted to incorporate both of these guidelines in my own work through the use of a reflexive journal, as well as providing, in my appendices, all the questions that I asked.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the methodological perspectives that ground this thesis. I have discussed the importance of feminist methodology through concerns of epistemology and ethnography. Finally, I offered an overview of my fieldwork and an argument for a set of soundness criteria. In the next chapter, I will delve further into the specifics of BtVS, providing a detailed discussion as to how it shapes, and is shaped by genre and gender conventions, as well as some of the social, economic and political forces which have influenced both genre and gender.

CHAPTER THREE: BUFFY AND THE HISTORICAL SYMBIOSIS OF GENRE AND GENDER

Introduction and chapter overview

Having discussed the theoretical and methodological grounds of this thesis, and having provided an overview of BtVS, the goal of this chapter is to highlight the complex interconnection and symbiosis between genre and gender, and to do so in the context of two specific episodes of BtVS. This chapter provides a textual analysis that serves to contextualize the remaining chapters' focus on contextual interpretations. After a more extensive overview of the program's main ideological problematic, I undertake an examination of the ideological importance of genres, while tracing some of the contemporary influences which have led to the evolution of feminine genres. I argue that the importance of specific genres used by BtVS are potentially powerful hailing devices for female viewers, in that the genres meaningfully, if fantastically, address the viewers' everyday experiences. The chapter concludes with a relatively in-depth examination of "Bad Girls" (season three) and "Seeing Red" (season six), as both episodes are extraordinarily popular and are particularly emblematic of the following discussion; in addition, these episodes serve to ground my textual analysis in specific examples.

Plot characteristics

The first five seasons of BtVS have a tendency to fall into one of three categories: the 'one-offs', where the Scooby Gang tracks down and destroys the bad-guy-of-the-week (while

these episodes include ongoing concerns of the characters, these episodes can largely be understood as more of a series than a serial); the ‘big bads’, where the gang continuously tries to figure out how to destroy the super-villain of the season (these form the serial backbone of each season arc), and episodes that focus mainly on the relationships of Buffy and/or the rest of the Scooby Gang (these subplots are also crucial to the season arc). The use of metaphor, irony and excess is a staple in the construction of the plot lines and characters in all of these episodes. Largely, the first five seasons focused on external monsters that drove each season arc, and while the internal and emotional experiences of the group constituted an essential part of the narrative flow, Buffy and the Scooby Gang did not descend into a dark, nihilistic emotional space. However, in seasons six and seven, the monsters that Buffy and the Scooby Gang face are largely internal demons. After Buffy’s mother dies in season five, she goes into a deep depression, and the season culminates in Buffy sacrificing herself to save both humanity and her sister Dawn (who is really a magical key in the shape of a person, and is only introduced in season five. In seasons six and seven, Dawn’s role continues to be fairly minor, with a few exceptions). After being wrenched out of heaven by Willow’s magic at the beginning of season six, Buffy continues to struggle with depression and her dark, sexual desires – self-inflicted pain seems to be the only way that she can feel, and she begins an unhealthy relationship with the vampire Spike, one that is based largely on sexual violence. Willow struggles with an addiction to magic, which turns her into the ‘big bad’ of season six. When her partner, Tara, is accidentally killed in an attempt on Buffy’s life, Willow tracks down, tortures and kills the man responsible. In an attempt to stop her, Giles ‘gifts’ her with a more holistic type of Wicca, allowing her to feel all the pain in the world, triggering her attempt to destroy the source of all the pain – humanity itself. Season six ends with Xander saving the planet through his undying affection for his best

friend Willow – he literally stands in the way of her destruction until she breaks down and cries. Xander himself is unhappy, having left his ex-vengeance demon bride Anya at the alter, afraid that he will replicate his abusive and alcoholic father's actions toward his mother. The last two seasons place much less emphasis on humour, metaphor, or campy demons; instead, the episodes become self-reflexive melodramatic ruminations on emotional darkness and unhealthy desires, particularly as these relate to sexuality and sexual relationships.

Sunnydale as Sexual-dale

While the show engages with a myriad of post-adolescent concerns, the central ideological problematic throughout the seasons of BtVS is the experience of living in a body inscribed with femininity, and negotiating these gendered experiences in a contemporary (if fictionalized) world filled with ambivalence and danger. The show constructs and represents an ambivalent and highly sexualized world and focuses on how Buffy negotiates her body, its desires, and her responsibilities within this highly sexualized environment. Heinecken argues that,

[t]he complex narrative of BtVS is a coming of age tale focused on relationships and the realm of the body, particularly sexuality...Buffy's representation of sexuality and desire as dangerous express Buffy's often contradictory relationship to her own body...Unlike the heroine of traditional romances, Buffy is a physically powerful figure, but her power is necessary because she is physically endangered, existing in a dangerous environment pervaded by threatening male masculinity(2003, p.97).

Within the show, vampires are common representations of sexuality and sexual danger; they are almost all male and they prey almost exclusively on women, lurking not only at the margins, but also in ordinary spaces where women are exposed to urban threats in their daily lives: shopping malls, clubs, house parties, and the street. Buffy's ongoing battle to slay them can be read metaphorically as articulating the real-life struggles many women face with the

on-going potential for sexual violence in their daily lives (Early and Kennedy, 2003; Marinucci, 2003; Wilcox, 2002). However, as much as the dangers and ambivalences of sexuality are highlighted, heteronormative sexuality is also constructed as something to be desired, part of a larger discourse of Buffy's own actively sexual body and its desires. While the larger environment of BtVS is sexually dangerous and contradictory, Buffy and the Scooby Gang willingly engage in it, and find their bodies and their sexual urges a source of deep pleasure and inspiration.

All You Need is the Love of a Good Man...No, Wait, Vampire

Throughout the seasons, Buffy and the gang have various love interests, which guide the concerns and self-development of the characters: Angel, Reilly and Spike constitute the triad of sexual male archetypes that Buffy desires. Buffy is attracted to the 'wrong' sort of man - Angel is a two hundred and forty-four year old vampire who possesses a soul (most of the time), and the tensions of being both monster/man mark him as dark, dangerous, and troubled; yet he continuously attempts to redeem his past deeds of horror, making him worthy of Buffy's love. However, after season three, Angel leaves Sunnydale and Buffy's life; at this point he has fallen under a gypsy curse that will result in the loss of his soul if he experiences a single moment of true happiness, and since Buffy makes him happy, he is continuously in danger of reverting to his base vampiric nature. After swearing off bad guys, in season four, Buffy meets Reilly, ostensibly a normal corn-fed Iowa boy, who turns out to be a head commando for an elite squad of government militia called "The Initiative," which has been created to track down, experiment on, and destroy vampires, monsters and demons. Not surprisingly, their relationship doesn't last long; although Reilly is

ultramasculine, Buffy is unable to commit to him because he does not have the darkness she desires and, after visiting vampire “prostitutes” in an attempt to see what she is drawn to, Reilly leaves the show heart-broken in season five. In seasons six and seven, Buffy becomes sexually involved with Spike, another vampire who was initially introduced as a bad guy in season three, and who has appeared regularly since season four ³¹ as a tangential but important part of the Scooby Gang. Unlike Angel, Spike enjoyed being evil; his redemption was initially involuntary; a computer chip was inserted into his brain after he was captured by the Initiative, keeping him from harming other humans. However, he can still harm other vampires and monsters, giving him an outlet for his violence, and thus providing the Scooby Gang with a powerful ally who slowly becomes an important, if never fully trusted, colleague. After Spike’s chip is removed, Buffy and Spike consummate a relationship that is based on an unhealthy sexual attraction and mutual sexual violence, and, after repeated attempts at it, Buffy ends their relationship in the sixth season after admitting that she was just using him as a way to forget all her problems.

The previous section discussed some of the key aspects of the show, specifically its main plotlines and characters. The topic of the following section will have to do with how these features, which essentially create the show, encode preferred readings from these plots and characters. I will broach these issues through a discussion of how genres and metaphors work to create a tragic structure of feeling, with the resulting effect of emotional realism and experiential identification. It is important to understand that the agency and consciousness of the producers themselves are shaped by larger social, political, and economic forces, and that the textual forms they use in creating the show are not solely reflective of their own interests and understandings of femininity, a topic that is also addressed in this chapter.

The Importance of Genres

One of the textual strengths of BtVS is its ability to blend so many genres; as I have noted previously, it borrows heavily from horror, romantic melodrama, comedy, and action genres. The show combines both masculine and feminine genre characteristics: its rapid switching from plot to plot, its sense that the characters live between episodes, its memory from episode to episode combine many feminine genre elements of melodrama and soap operas with the action and public issues of achievement characteristic of masculine narratives. While genre combining or genre 'hybridity' has become increasingly common in the creation of televisual texts, BtVS was one of the first commercially viable shows to successfully blend so many genres. The use of genres as means of hailing and interpellating viewers should not be underestimated. Genres are part of textual strategies by which producers of televisual texts attempt to control the potential polysemy of the texts; that is, genres serve to predetermine, or at least to confine or influence the meanings generated from texts (Ang, 1985 and 1991; Fiske 1987; Fiske and Hartley, 2003; Morley, 1992; Jensen; 1996; White, 1992). As Fiske argues, genres are not so much textual codifications as "...systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject" (1987, p. 111). He goes on to state that the meanings that viewers generate are,

... influenced, even manipulated, by the genres they are fitted into...genres are intertextual or even pre-textual, for they form the network of industrial, ideological, and institutional conventions that are common to both the producer and audiences out of which arise both the producer's program and the audiences' readings (1987, p.111).

Genres are textual and social matrices within which both producers and consumers of televisual texts encode and decode preferred, negotiated and oppositional readings. However, genres also regulate the production of difference, and therefore limit the

interpretative play, or polysemy, that viewers can generate; in short, genres are ideologically active (Feuer, 1992; Morley, 1992). For programs like *BtVS*, which attempt to problematize or at least to highlight some of the contradictions in normative ideologies of gender, this process requires that the producers mix genres as a way of more visibly rendering these contradictions (White, 1992). However, if genres encourage pre-determined meanings and attempt to suture ideological gaps, genre combining as a way of problematizing generic conventions of gender representations and their ideological ramifications is a double-edged sword. Because of these textual constraints, some theorists argue that televisual texts are not polysemic so much as semivalent or polyvalent; for example, Cloud argues (1992) that many mainstream texts are most appropriately regarded as only ambivalent because "...they offer limited choices for interpretation that do not necessarily subvert dominant ideology, but rather are complementary parts of the system's overall hegemonic design" (qtd in Rockler, 1999, p. 75).

One reason for these concerns regarding the hegemonic functions of television is that television genres labour to construct viewers as gendered subjects (Ang, 1995; Dow, 1996; Fiske, 1987; Morley 1992; Press, 1991). Although it can be argued that traditionally gendered genres have undergone a metamorphosis and that much contemporary television is geared towards a more 'gender neutral' audience, I argue that television genres are still a crucial orienting device for the gendering of audiences. As Morley states, "...the competences necessary for reading [feminine genres] are most likely to have been acquired by those persons culturally constructed through discourses of femininity" (1992, p.129). There are still distinct masculine and feminine genres, with contrasting defining characteristics, even if they are used at times simultaneously within a program. How do genres, as orientation devices

which encompass and encourage normative ideologies of gender, work to position and inscribe their viewers as gendered beings? Genre theorists argue that feminine genres include characteristics such as a lack of narrative closure, disruption, deferment, excess, a focus on relationships, and a multiplicity of plots (Ang, 1985, Fiske and Hartley, 2003; Modleski, 1982; White, 1992). Male genres focus on action and achievement, and contain minimal dialogue, single plots, and narrative closure (Fiske and Hartley, 2003; Morley, 1992). These gendered characteristics of genres follow the seemingly ‘natural’, yet socially constructed, characteristics of female and male viewers (Fiske, 1987; Fiske and Hartley, 2003; Modleski, 1982; White 1992). Whether or not these characteristics are inherent in how females and males interpret the world, televisual genres are important mechanisms of hailing viewers as, and interpellating them into, feminine and masculine subjects. Genres themselves do not only construct, but also reflect shifting social, political and economic expectations of gendered subjects. However, before going further into the integral connection between genre and gender, it is necessary to further discuss the textual characteristics of genres, in order to more fully understand how both gender and genre labour to reflect and construct each other in engagements with televisual texts.

Genre Characteristics

The characteristically feminine genres of BtVS, romantic melodrama and soap opera, allow for a lack of narrative closure – a formal narrative point at which ideological closure can be said to be most powerfully exerted (Fiske, 1987; Fiske and Hartley, 2003; Morley, 1992; White, 1992). Like the traditionally feminine genre of soap operas, this characteristic of an infinitely extended middle means that BtVS is never in a state of equilibrium; rather, this world is one of perpetual disturbance and threat of disruption. Buffy’s feminized body,

mannerisms, and sexual relationships are not points of narrative and ideological closure, since the show interrogates them as representations of normative femininity while simultaneously celebrating traditional understandings of being feminine, and feminized constructions of love and sexuality. While exploring the boundaries of feminine roles and sexual relationships may work to clarify socially acceptable boundaries, it may also work to challenge them and the system that establishes them (Fiske, 1987; Radway, 1984; White, 1992). The ideal of a happy and stable relationship may never be explicitly attacked, but the show does bring into question the apparent impossibility of achieving it, as is attested to by the following conversation between Buffy and Giles:

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. ("The Watching")

In addition, the multiplicity of plots contained within the show allow for multiple pleasures and identifications for a variety of viewers. While it cannot be denied that this openness also works in the economic favour of the producers who are attempting to garner as large an audience as possible ³², this "narrative plentitude does not prevent the resulting polysemy and openness being activated in the cultural interests of the reader" (Fiske, 1987, p.195). However, it can also be argued that the combination of a lack of narrative closure and a multiplicity of plots works to reinscribe the female viewer as one who must be content with the small emotional pleasures that are the only reward of being largely socially powerless. That is, BtVS's lack of narrative closure and multiplicity of plots may highlight and call into question normative social constructions of femininity and its tenets of relationships,

marriage, and stability, yet it also leaves the actual status of women unchanged. Furthermore, a multiplicity of plots may allow for multiple points of identification; however, this plurality may also reinscribe traditional constructions of femininity in that it encourages female viewers to adopt an understanding that requires incorporating all perspectives in order to be legitimate, as well as encouraging a subject position of feminine caring – the viewer understands all of the feelings and perspectives of all the characters in order to make sense of the text ³³.

As part of the traditional masculine action genres, Buffy's superpowers also work with and against feminine genre characteristics to polysemically address seemingly mythic, yet contested narratives of gender. Buffy's fantasy superhero status may be popular among female viewers whose bodies are not 'appropriate' to grant them social and/or physical power, and who live in a hierarchal world that equates their social worth with either masculine characteristics or masculine desire (Morley, 1992). This is particularly true for women whose bodies may not fit the strict requirements of the conventional dictates of beauty to which women must adhere in order to gain not only social acceptance, but also social power. Action genres, which demonstrate the ability of their characters to break free, are metaphors for the desires of females (and males) to break through the laws and social constraints with which society tries to constrain them, using their bodies, which may be physical powerful regardless of their conventional standards of beauty. However, these potentially emancipatory sites within genre combining also simultaneously work to reinscribe normative ideologies of femininity. Once again, if females choose to incorporate non-traditional gender characteristics within their potential roles, their only popular culture alternative method of signifying strength is to follow a masculine model of achievement

while continuing to be the object of male sexual desire, still firmly locating gender as a binary construct.

The Meeting of Genre and Gender, and the Social Construction of Both

As I have argued previously, genres are complex matrices of orientations, expectations and conventions that labour to construct meanings within texts and which help to direct the viewer toward preferred understandings. As ways to categorize expectations, genres pre-exist the texts and orient viewers in their everyday lives. One of the most important genres that humans seem to use on a fundamental level is the genre of gender. Previously I have argued that the social construction of gender is a central organizing discourse that gives meanings to personal and public experiences in our society, and that femininity and masculinity are learned processes of a necessarily ongoing and unfinished character. This tension between fluid and essential categories of gender creates a paradox: while these constructions are continuously evolving, there is also the desire to establish gendered identities and their boundaries – to secure knowledge of what makes someone feminine or masculine, which leads to the essentialization and naturalization of these categories; gender itself becomes a type of genre. Intons-Peterson reflects on why gender categories are important:

They serve a procreational purpose...but...gender distinctions surely pervade most contacts between males and females, even when these distinctions are not motivated by sexual desire. A “master” role is a central or major classifier of people within a culture. Concepts of gender, then, are used to divide individuals into two groups, the male and female...Additionally concepts of gender reflect beliefs about the two...These concepts thus shape expectations for each...These concepts do more than govern perceptions of self; they direct self-expectations, comparison of self with others of both [genders]; they channel our attention to our environment focusing on certain gender related information, at the expense of others. Gender concepts govern perception of self and others; they also mold or form perception of others (1988, p.2).

The desire to fix a final and uncontested meaning to experience seems to be an inherent desire for sense-making narratives among humans; however, as famously argued by Foucault, meanings are always part of larger discourses of power (Foucault, 1972). As I discussed in chapter two, in our attempts to find underlying ‘truths’ about the world, the danger is that we are often forced to use pre-existing sense-making narratives, which are never ideologically neutral. Discourse is a complex interplay of knowledges and power, in that cultural power operates through discourse, and the appropriate boundaries of gender are socially policed through dominant discourses, of which televisual texts are an integral part. Kaplan argues that “feminist television critics use this concept of the discursive constitution of cultural objects for analyzing the ways in which television...construct[s] cultural discourses that become pervasive – that function as power” (1992, p. 262). This argument is particularly salient in regard to experiences of gender, in that our society is tightly organized around masculine forms of power, which are normalized as ‘common sense’. In this hierarchy, there is only room for one gender, the genre of masculinity, which is the central narrative of organizing knowledge, and women have traditionally been relegated to the margins as man’s ‘other’ (Grosz; 1993; Harding, 1993; Radway, 1994) ³⁴.

However, dominant and ‘common sense’ understandings of gender under current capitalism, while reified, continue to change in ways that are based on social and political concerns, as well as the dictates of the market economy. As Press argues,

our culture’s representations of the female gender have changed along with our consensual ideas, in a complicated relationship of a response to, and influence upon, our changing cultural notions about female roles and identity...against a background of radically fluctuating ideas about gender identity, shifting representations of gender, and actual concrete changes in the social, economic and cultural roles women play in our society (1991, p.5).

With the advent of the women's liberation movement in the sixties, itself a result of the complex interplay of social, economic and political changes, women's roles in the public sphere began to expand from earlier middle-class social constructions of women as merely objects for masculine desire and/or family caretakers domesticated through marriage (Dow, 1996; Heide, 1995; Press, 1991). During the 1960's, women and their concerns became increasingly visible and politicized in mass media, and this inclusion was an important step in constructing women as having social power, in that women have traditionally not had the same access to public space or representation as men have (Dow, 1996; Heineken, 2003; Press, 1991). The women's movement addressed some of the significant disparities in social, economic, political, sexual and cultural power that existed between the genders, and it won considerable legal changes (Byars and Meehan, 2000). However, feminist concerns, which were widely divergent, became hegemonically normalized in popular media discourse as the desire to be included as equals in both private and public realms of social interaction – what is now termed liberal feminism – and this understanding began to reconfigure what were considered appropriately feminine roles (Faludi, 1991). As traditional divisions of gendered labour in the public and private spheres changed, through both the social concerns of feminism, and the increasing economic need for workers, women began to be encouraged to work in previously masculine forms of labour³⁵. Additionally, economic changes began to challenge traditional femininity as 'idle', in that many households began to require two incomes in order to achieve the same spending power that men had traditionally achieved in order to remain in the middle class (Byars and Meehan, 2000).

Under the discourses of capitalism, work, in both the public and private spheres, plays a central role in the production of gendered identities. The socially acceptable roles of

femininity in public labour (as required by contemporary capitalism) have become broader, and have been able to incorporate traditionally masculine characteristics, which had previously defined these forms of public work, as more women attempt to engage in the upper echelons of management, government and education, previously bastions of the masculine domain.

At the same time, private labour, such as the reproduction of the family, has also changed, with a drastic increase in the number of single-parent households led by women, once again creating changes to what is considered appropriate femininity. These women became both feminine and masculine caregivers, both the nurturing mother and the masculine 'breadwinner' of the family, being forced into the public sphere of labour practices that has been historically constructed through public discourse as the realm of traditionally masculine labour and therefore masculine roles.

Additionally, consumption practices, themselves a form of gendered labour, have shifted.

Combined economic, political and social changes have not only reconfigured women's social rights and obligations, but also their desirability to advertisers.

The result of the women's movement was not only a deluge of upscale women into the workplace, but also an 'empowerment' of women as 'high quality' consumers. Responding to advertisers' demands for measures of this new audience, the Nielsen Company began reporting on working women, both upscale and downscale, in 1976 (Byars and Meehan, 2000, p.162).

Television began to recognize women not only as stay-at-home audiences for daytime soap operas, but also as an important and lucrative audience that needed to be catered towards during primetime programming, and certain shows began to reflect the changing social,

economic and political roles of contemporary, middle-class white female audiences who were responsible for purchasing mundane and feminized household goods, but were also powerful consumers of traditionally non-feminine purchases. Commodities that were previously marketed to one gender, such as electronics or cars, have been considered masculine purchases, have now expanded their markets to include women who have the economic power to make these purchases. Furthermore, previously feminine commodities such as fashion and beauty products are increasingly marketed towards males. This gender blurring in consumption practices is a product of both social and economic changes, and it in turn drives marketing tactics of gender address and interpellation.

For both women and men, the changing roles of appropriate gender labour in production and consumption also serves to blur their identities, creating both a public and private space within which to challenge normative constructions of gender, but this blurring is also a site of continued ambivalence and panic over 'proper' gender behaviour. While it has become socially acceptable, and even socially expected for women to have prestigious careers and be active in public life, those of us who have been willingly and unwillingly inscribed by the social dictates of normative constructions of femininity are still required to embody traditional understandings of feminine characteristics in addition to those that are more contemporary. The gendered world has not been reconfigured; instead, it is merely the case that females are allowed and even strongly encouraged to work in a masculine world, and if females choose or are forced to engage in the masculine workplace, their social source of power will come from meeting the male standard for males as well as the male standard for females. In short, while women have been unevenly incorporated into public life, and carry the social responsibilities of being public citizens, they must do so under a double burden of

progressive normative changes of gender; they can embody some masculine characteristics, but only to the extent that they do not dominate normative feminine characteristics, such as that of being an object of masculine sexuality or the ability to be nurturing. This social anxiety concerning the gain of women's power created a new way to represent appropriate femininity on mainstream television. As Helford argues (2000), while the domesticated middle-class woman remained a staple, "as televisual restrictions relaxed in alignment with cultural norms of the late '60s and '70s, sexual objectification became another strategy for portraying 'proper' femininity" (p. 1-2). Therefore, while the 'opening' of public spaces and the concomitant opening of gender variations have undeniably been positive changes, there remains the real issue of how to adequately negotiate these changing roles of femininity. Addressing the time period when these social changes were first being broached on mainstream television, Helford asks,

How could television producers of the era address the changing role of women in America - as more and more white, middle-class women joined the employed masses of working-class white women and women of colour - without risking a reduced viewership among conservative, white, middle class viewers or making plain that the culture was losing faith in the post-World War II American Dream? (2000, p.2).

Genre combining is a contemporary way in which this signification takes place, paradoxically allowing for the complexities and dissonances of the fantasies and realities of women's experience to meet in a single text. However, the social tension surrounding appropriate femininity that is both addressed and created by genre combining also works to contain genre combining's radical potential of rendering visible the ideological contradictions in the discourse of femininity. Fantasy shows have been a particularly popular way of attempting to suture this dissonance between the real experiences and the fantasies of women's power, representing women in a strong, but ultimately fantastical and unreal way. "We see that while television fantasy can be used to challenge the boundaries of lived experience through

speculative metaphors, to display female potentialities, and/or to address patriarchal structures that oppress women, such strategies may simultaneously labour to contain the radicalness of the challenge” (Helford, 2000, p.4).

Certain genre conventions, of which genre combining is itself becoming an increasingly standard practice, are popular at certain times, depending on the close relationships they bear to the dominant ideologies of the time (Fiske, 1987, White, 1992). While normative ideologies of femininity (and the dominant genres that support them) can be put into contradiction by “imbuing [them] with a form which highlights [their] hidden limits, [thrusting them] up against [their] own boundaries and reveal[ing their] gaps and elisions, thus forcing [their] necessary silences to ‘speak’” (Eagleton, 1991, p.46), genre combining in BtVS also reflects the ideological contradiction between the celebration of femininity and the rise of feminism on the one hand and the backlash that registers the fear of feminine power on the other. Buffy kicks some serious ass, and this breaks with the normative traditions of feminine and masculine genres--which traditionally code female bodies as less physically powerful--and the boundaries of proper femininity, which renders her power as socially acceptable and even desirable. However, genre combining does not *necessarily* contradict other genres, which renders visible the gaps and elisions between them; for while BtVS may incorporate both feminine and masculine genres, Buffy and her power are contained within a body that is a walking billboard for traditional, dominant constructions of femininity. As an action hero, she may be powerful, and powerful because she is *female*; however, through the dominant use of genre conventions such as soap opera and romantic melodrama, she is also an object of masculine sexual desire, with the majority of the men on the show desiring to possess her, and she is constructed as being focused on gaining this male attention and

approval. Each season is driven by her desire to eliminate the horror-driven ‘big bads’, however her emotional and physical relationships with her boyfriends are her true focus, and these provide her with most of her opportunities for reflection and self-development. Even many of the comic elements, which challenge the textual constraints of the other genres, work to strengthen Buffy as being focused, first and foremost, on the small, mundane, and traditionally constructed concerns of femininity, such as fashion sense. It can therefore be argued that while the use of action creates a new, strong, feminine superhero, and therefore challenges previous textual conventions, her obsession with romance, sex and relationships, as well as with her conventionally feminine appearance, work together to signify that her body is still not her own, in that its inscribed femininity is oriented towards patriarchal dictates of females as objects, rather than the subjects of their own femininity. Consider the following remarks from Xander, in the midst of a pep talk to Buffy:

Xander: Let me tell you something – when it’s dark and I’m all alone and I’m scared or freaked out or whatever, I always think “What would Buffy do?” You’re my hero. Okay, sometimes when it’s dark and I’m all alone I think “What is Buffy wearing?” (“The Freshman”)

The contradiction, highlighted by Xander’s statement, is that Buffy is both a potentially radical representation of femininity, and a conservative, patriarchal construction. The way in which the text self-consciously negotiates, interrogates and at times reinscribes these parameters is one of the main reasons female viewers find the show so enjoyable to engage with, and to take meaning from, as will be discussed by the participants themselves in chapter four. As I have argued previously, popular television genres and their narratives both construct and reflect the dominant ideologies of their, and representations of femininity on BtVS are no exception. As the main storytelling tool, Buffy struggles with many of the same concerns and desires as the female viewers do: how to live within a body inscribed by

ambivalent yet pleasurable narratives of femininity, and how to make sense of its contradictory social constraints, desires and experiences. Buffy is able to highlight and explore some of these ambivalences and pleasures that exist in the experiences of being gendered feminine, and she does so on both a private and a public level.

However, along with the explicit questioning of popular culture representations of progressive femininity, producers of these texts still work within the confines of larger social, economic and political influences. One of the most pervasive of these influences is the 'backlash' against the contemporary roles of femininity in society. During cycles of change where women have gained more social, economic and political power, diverse social narratives of the dangers of these gendered changes also tend to gain more power. As D'Acci points out,

[it] is, of course, no accident that these [overtly sexualized] representations coincided with the ever-mounting backlash over the concerns and demands of the women's movement...it introduced a 'spectacle' aspect to the representation of female bodies – that is, a more explicit sexual dimension to the traditionally more domesticated woman, revealing her as sex and beauty object (2000, p.104).

As a public form of the cultural imaginary, popular culture is an important forum that shapes and reflects conflicting and ambivalent concerns of socially appropriate gender representation. Popular culture discourses of gender encompass narratives of the potential personal and public dangers that come from embodying some of the more socially threatening aspects of these roles, and these dangers are a particularly favourite topic of mass mediated popular culture³⁶. Not only is this because mass media entertainment is shaped by larger social influences, and therefore reflects the social, economic and political concerns of the time, but also because televisual texts are usually geared towards the largest possible audience, and therefore they attempt to walk a paradoxical ideological tightrope: to be as

pleasurable and non-threatening as possible, while engaging the audience's desires and concerns (Fiske and Hartley, 2003; Morley, 1992). In the words of a prominent female television executive,

[t]elevision must be constantly attuned and alert to life-style changes...so that it can accurately and responsibly portray them at a point in time when the public will neither be bored because they are too outdated, nor outraged because they are too far out on the fringes. Instead, television's portrayal of societal change can insure that the public be stimulated, informed, sensitised, reassured about what is happening in their own personal lives and the lives of other people in the world at large (qtd in Gitlin, 1987, p. 223).

Producers of televisual texts understand the need to mediate between making money and articulating interests, and melodramatic fantasy programming with a heavy emphasis on genre blending and strong central female characters is one of the most important media results of this arbitration. Advocating radical social change in how gender is constructed is a difficult task, and attempts to threaten or restructure dominant economic, political and social institutions that have a vested interest in patriarchal dominance (or are just 'used' to this structure) face a great deal of resistance. Therefore, economic, political and social processes of hegemony will attempt to incorporate these changes without fundamentally restructuring society, and if this is not possible, will ridicule and marginalize threats to these vested interests, while at the same time slowly working to colonize and incorporate these changes. This certainly has been the case with the vast majority of televisual texts that have constructed and represented the 'new woman'.

The "New Woman" in Media

In the previous section, I argued that the changes to a patriarchal social structure that have been demanded by many feminists have been re-worked by the mass media. However, by the 1970's, mainstream media was stating that women were now equal and no longer seeking

new rights, just new lifestyles, and by the early 1980's, the media constructed feminism as a dead political project (Faludi, 1991). In entertainment television, 70's representations of femininity, in shows such as *Mary Tyler Moore*, *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* and *Rhoda*³⁷, which showed strong, independent, yet humanly flawed women dealing with issues of career, reproduction rights and gender equality, were replaced in the 80's by *Dallas*, *The Love Boat* and *Beverly Hills 90210*, which focused on females who were concerned with only one thing: finding and keeping a man³⁸. Equality became 'lifestyle' – changing roles of feminism in mass media no longer focused on equality in the public sphere, with such rights as universal child care and wage parity, so much as the ability to peruse private 'lifestyle' choices and the consumption of commodities. The 'new woman' became part of mainstream culture; she was constructed by the media as a sexy young professional until she 'put away' her ambitions in order to fall in love and become a mother, and was so busy creating a lifestyle for herself that she didn't need to worry about universal equality, because she was able to make 'choices' for herself. As constructed by Mayne (1989) and Dow (1996), this understanding became 'primetime' feminism, and they argue that television has made these particular aspects of feminism ubiquitous, by drawing

...on the ideals of equality, inclusion and 'free' choice to define contemporary moments in which women have achieved various feminist goals and in which feminist activism is supposedly no longer necessary. From this critical perspective, feminism is absorbed and supplanted by 'postfeminism', in such a way that the complexity of contemporary feminist theories and activism is lost (Projansky and Berg, 2000, p.15).

Gender democracy and liberation as *individuality* became the dominant narrative, which fit in nicely with the pre-existing discourses of capitalism and patriarchy. If real women chose not to follow this narrative, there were clear and repeated warnings that this was not appropriate

feminine behaviour and they would be punished accordingly: they would grow old alone and bitter³⁹.

These stories served a political agenda while telling women that what was happening to them had nothing to do with political events or social pressures...women's conflict is no longer with her society and culture, but only with herself (Faludi, 1991, p.81).

Additionally, narratives of femininity in the public sphere remained centred on the necessity of self-policing the body in order to be desirable to men, even when they addressed concerns in regard to engaging in the public sphere⁴⁰. Even through attempts to construct females as once again having the desire to return to the private realm by choice, with only tangential and/or temporary forays into the public sphere⁴¹ while remaining subject to, and object of, masculine desire, these media representations were not entirely representative of the lived experiences of women who had to work to support themselves, who chose to peruse graduate degrees and careers, those who were forced to work full-time and raise children, single parent households or alternative lifestyle and sexuality choices. This dissonance between public mass mediated discourses and the experiences of many women ensured that while representations of femininity were changing – and at times meaningfully signifying changing social roles – that engaging in popular culture discourse of femininity remained a highly negotiated process.

The ways in which the producers of BtVS construct the feminine body, its experiences, pleasures, and responsibilities, work to address some of these complexities and felt ambivalences of contemporary women; Buffy is a strong representation of the ‘new woman’, which has become so prevalent in popular culture – she embodies both the pleasures and the constraints afforded to females in Western society. This hegemonic process of negotiating

mass mediated representations of progressive femininity and the felt experiences of living in a body inscribed with femininity is particularly clear in BtVS; while the show is able to meaningfully incorporate some of the diverse concerns and desires of females as they are experienced outside the text, the program still constructs appropriate femininity as a kind of traditional femininity. And Buffy, as a representation of these contradictions, is forced to walk this tightrope herself, as much as the producers and viewers of the show. So while she is emotionally and physically powerful, she is also a sex object extraordinaire for men; she is a powerful woman who not only still *desires* men, but also spends a vast amount of that same emotional and physical energy in obsessing over them. She may be the Slayer, but she is still, first and foremost a mass mediated image of appropriate femininity. In this sense, BtVS can also be understood as both reflecting and constructing social understandings of femininity within and against the resurgence of established masculine power.

Women are expected, much like Buffy, to be superwomen, to provide not only a safe domestic space and well-cleaned home, as well as providing primary care for their children (as Buffy does by keeping her own welcoming home as a sanctuary for her friends, taking care of her sister Dawn, and continuously saving the ‘unknowing’ and therefore childlike humanity from destruction), but also to function as sexual ingénues, providing a fulfilling and exotic sex life for their men, all the while maintaining a career or at least labouring outside of the home. As Byars and Meehan argue in their work on televisual representations of femininity,

[t]he emerging ideology of ‘having it all’ – working outside the home as a professional, marrying and having children, and shouldering responsibility for domestic labour in the household...these [types of programs] address lived experience in its frustrations and rewards, but only in terms of the personal,

the emotional and the domestic. By not challenging the assumptions about labour, sexuality and power that underlie the model of 'having it all', [these programs] remain commercially viable, presenting television that provides role models for a way of life made possible by second wave feminism, but which...[is] defined as feminine, never feminist (Byars and Meehan, 2000, p.164).

Women, under the auspices of dominant contemporary ideologies of femininity, must be both object and subject of commodity culture. The need to negotiate social roles of gender is of fundamental importance; as I have argued previously, it is one of the main organizing categories of how we understand the world around us and our experiences within it. For those in our culture who are inscribed with femininity in terms of the body and its mannerisms, negotiating these gendered roles can be extremely difficult, as these roles are not all equally socially inhabitable – there can be real negative effects, both privately and publicly, if the self-policed gendered body exceeds these normative constraints of appropriate femininity and masculinity. However, most females also find great pleasure in engaging with traditional roles of femininity, in that “there is considerable social and cultural pleasure to invest in stereotypes, given the social dominance of gender discourses based upon the naturalness of sexual difference...Therefore the constructions of gender identity and relations are a constant achievement in which the subjects themselves are complicit” (Ang, 1995, p.121). The ability to negotiate signifiers and roles of femininity does allow women a sense of relative power, and there is an ambivalent pleasure in the negotiation process itself, as well as in the occupation of the many available roles.

However, because gender is a social construction, it is always under revision and change; there is not static state of femininity to be reached. Being feminine is an ongoing process that requires continuous feedback from the surrounding social environment, of which

media, and television in particular, is of fundamental importance (Ang, 1995, Dow, 1996; Morley, 1992; Press, 1996).

Work patterns, narrative form, and the meanings given to gender difference are all constructs of the same patriarchal structure, so it is not surprising that they are based on the same structural play of similarity and difference. Their affectivity in gender politics derives from their relative autonomy within an overdetermined system: that is, work, narrative, and sexuality appear to be separate cultural domains, but in fact they are all subject to the same patriarchal overdetermination so that they all tell the same story (Fiske, 1987, p.215).

Television images are not neutral, but often reflect competing interests as to how social life should be organized. Televisual texts thus serve as sites of contestation, reflecting contemporary struggles over a variety of issues, including gender. Televisual texts as social narratives of gender have both use-value (as sense-making narratives informing larger cognitive maps of shifting and ambivalent gender roles) and exchange-value (as sense-making narratives both ideological and material, which become sellable commodities that signify femininity and are sold to audiences in order to bring them to advertisers and commodities). *BtVS* draws on these contemporary anxieties and concerns of gender, which touch an affluent and desirable market – young adult women – and in this process, the show itself became a cultural site where questions of women’s changing social roles are posed in a public format. As Ang argues, “It is in and through the very practices of media consumption - and the positionings and identifications they solicit - that gender identities are recursively shaped, while those practices themselves in turn undergo a process of gendering along the way” (1995, p.122). The effect of this process is that social constructions of gender in popular culture reflect this ongoing and inherently ambivalent negotiation on the parts of consumers and producers of television programs, as well as the impossibility of determining how to meaningfully signify the continuously changing gender roles without fully

relinquishing traditional ideologies of the properly coded feminine body and its behaviors. A further examination of genre combining shows how this practice provides one avenue through which these concerns are both highlighted and masked.

BtVS as Genre Bricolage

As I have argued previously, genre combining both contests and supports each genre's pre-orientations. BtVS champions and challenges a traditional social, and does so in both form and content. The use of horror, soap opera, romantic melodrama and fantasy genres⁴² ensure, through their conflict, heightened emotions, and excess, that viewers have the textual space to construct meanings that supercede the literal, denoted meanings. The generous use of comedy as a genre foregrounds metaphor and irony, encouraging viewers to hold two or more meanings simultaneously. As a Slayer, Buffy is a female superhero extraordinaire, and she challenges the masculine convention of the action genre. The elements of horror create an environment of affect, where amorphous feelings, rather than rationality, become important. Soap opera elements allow viewers to identify with multiple perspectives, and the melodramatic content ensures that the excess of emotion creates a space for multiple interpretations. However, as much as blending these genres create a complex interplay of potentially radical or at least 'open' meanings; they also work to constrain those meanings, as I have previously discussed. The ability for viewers to negotiate these textual tensions is one of the main reasons why BtVS is so pleasurable; yet this ability also causes deep ambivalences in that, at least among the participants that I worked with, viewers were highly cognizant that certain contradictions worked to reinscribe constricting and non-enjoyable norms of appropriate femininity.

The producers of many contemporary televisual texts, including BtVS, understand that as feminine and masculine gender roles have become increasingly complex and overlapping, single genres are no longer as powerful, or enjoyable, as they once were; in short, they fail to speak to viewers' own current experiences and desires (Jenkins and Cassell, 1998). If genres work to reflect and construct categories of feminine and masculine subjects, then through genre combining, BtVS can both construct and challenge traditional social understandings of gender for both females and males. In short, if genres work to construct viewers into feminine and masculine subjects, genre bricolage (or hybridity) should allow for a form of gender bricolage (or hybridity) as well. Additionally, since genres position the reader of a text, genre blending allows for many possible viewing positions through which viewers may switch during the show, as well as for the possibility of addressing contradictory subject positions of gender representation. For example, Buffy, after defeating yet another demon, says to Giles, "I'm putting my life on the line battling the undead. Look, I broke a nail, okay? I'm wearing a press-on. The least you could do is exhibit some casual interest" ("Prophecy Girl"). The ability to understand Buffy as a strong action superhero is mixed with comedy, which highlights the absurdity of her hyper-feminized statement, forcing the two genres into an uncomfortable juxtaposition, if not outright contradiction, which creates for viewers the textual space in which to choose and even construct their own personally relevant meanings of femininity. However, the comedic elements also work to reinforce the fact that Buffy is only concerned about her traditionally feminine appearance, and therefore her superhero status and power is something that even she doesn't take seriously, and therefore the viewers are not required to either.

In yet another episode (“Halloween”) where this juxtapositioning of genres allows for a potential gender bricolage in the subject positions that the viewers inhabit, all of Sunnydale is demonically transformed into the characters of their Halloween costumes; this is particularly problematic for Buffy, who has chosen to dress as a 18th century noble woman, which she thinks is the type of woman that Angel prefers. Buffy turns into a helpless old-fashioned maiden who expects men to do all the fighting⁴³; interestingly, Xander also turns into his gendered opposite, an ultra competent soldier who takes command not only of Buffy, but of the whole situation.

Buffy: I was brought up a proper lady. I wasn't meant to understand things. I'm just meant to look pretty, and then someone nice will marry me. Possibly a Baron.

Xander: This ain't no tea party, princess. Sooner or later you're gonna have to fight!

Buffy: Fight these low creatures? I'd sooner die.

Xander: Then you'll die. (“Halloween”)

This episode is particularly conscious of its construction of the various gender roles the characters, and therefore, viewers can explore. As a fantasy genre, Buffy and the Scooby Gang are able to occupy and experience hyper-stereotypical gender roles – and to experience the pleasure and problems associated with them – and this blends and yet contrasts with the more ‘realistic’ romantic melodrama aspects of Buffy’s focus on her relationship and her quest to find ways to ‘please’ her man, and this combination highlights how those desires can ultimately cause females to lose their respective senses of self, and therefore their power. The intersection of these genres will create semantic space which viewers can exploit in order to challenge and make sense of their own pleasures and constraints of occupying stereotyped gender roles. And yet, at the end of the episode, when all are returned to their ‘normal’ gender roles, and Buffy states, “You know what? It's good to be me,” she still turns for reassurance to Angel’s validating desire, stating that she just wanted to be a ‘real’ girl for

once; instead of recognizing her own experiences of femininity as real, she uses a traditional masculine normative framework to define her femininity. These examples show that there are structural limitations within each genre. While these limitations ‘push’ against each other to highlight some of the contradictions and ideological gaps of gendered genres, and to help construct viewers’ textual negotiations as particularly pleasurable in that this negotiation reflects the negotiations taken by the viewer in making sense of her own gendered experiences, genre combining also works to reinscribe normative ideologies of appropriate femininity.

Metaphor, Irony and Excess

For viewers of *BtVS*, these subject positions become even more complex, as the show’s self-conscious use of metaphor, irony and excess, layers the text to such a degree that multiple sites of interpretation are not only possible, but openly encouraged. As Whedon says, “Bring your own sub-text” (Blanchet-Fricke, no date, para. 6). Metaphors, as descriptions of one thing in terms of another, are rhetorical devices that encourage polysemy and are always open to alternative readings, because they invariably juxtapose two (or more) meanings. As a trope, irony works in the same way, i.e., as a statement that appears to say one thing while actually meaning another. Because meanings generated through metaphor and irony are polysemic, they can never be totally controlled by the structure of the text or the normative ideologies from which they may spring; they always leave space for some viewers to exploit. As Fiske argues, “the collision of discourses in irony and metaphor produces an explosion of meaning that can never be totally controlled...and forced into a unified and singular position for the reading subject” (1987, p.87). The textual spaces opened by these tropes are an arena, as has been articulated by Hall, where dominant norms, including femininity, can be resisted,

accommodated or negotiated by socially situated readers who themselves resist, accommodate and negotiate the same gender norms outside the text. The majority of metaphors used on BtVS are based on imagery drawn from cultural debate and consensus, and the importance of most of these metaphors lie not in their literal denotations, but rather in their affect in soliciting a highly charged, emotional impact (Ang, 1995; Heinecken, 2003).

An example of how this process works with respect to gender concerns of femininity and metaphors is provided in the episode in which Buffy loses her virginity to Angel (“Surprise”, “Innocence”); the result is that he literally reverts to his monstrous vampiric and masculine nature, a metaphor that is easily read as addressing the real life sexual fears of women – that sex leads to violence, that a man will cease to value a woman after sex, and that the act itself is much less important to him than it is to her. Angel clearly articulates these contemporary feminine fears of sexuality when he becomes violent, and says that Buffy was not adequate as a lover and that their relationship is unimportant. While these metaphors made literal can be understood as a morality story proscribing women from initiating sexual activity, they can also be seen as an engagement with the difficulties of women initiating sexual enjoyment in a culture that both fears and denigrates women’s sexual power. For viewers who find BtVS an enjoyable text, the imagery used may be particularly resonant on a personal and social level, in that the metaphors are “...both shaped by and extend upon an existing cultural imaginary in which viewers already participate” (Heinecken, 2003, p.96).

As the fears and threats in society change, so does the way we represent such fears and threats as a culture...Thus metaphor serves as a way to discuss topics for which we do not yet have a language, or for which our vocabulary cannot reach in a one-dimensional way (Little, 2003, p.283).

The use of metaphor made literal – vampires, monsters and demons – make internal feelings concrete, and allow for multiple interpretations, providing the viewer the agency with which to interact with the show on a deeply personal level (Little, 2003). Again, these representations may be particularly meaningful to those viewers whose feelings and experiences of femininity and sexuality remain largely unarticulated, due to their complexity. Buffy’s ongoing struggle with vampire lovers can be read as a metaphor that comments on the potentially monstrous capabilities of masculine desire; Xander’s magical morphing into a commando in “Halloween,” as well as his ongoing attraction to women who want to change or literally consume him (“Preying Mantis,” “Inca Mummy Girl”) can be understood as representing the uneasiness of the changing roles and expectations of masculinity, and Willow’s ongoing struggle with her addiction to magic can be read as a metaphor for plain-old-fashioned drug addiction, as well as a debate on the moral responsibilities of power. Metaphors allow for the representation of feelings and emotions as a way to communicate experience and meaning. As Whedon states, “It was never about the monsters. It was about the emotion. The monster came from that” (Angel and Buffy News, 2003, para.2). The importance of metaphors on BtVS as a way of representing social concerns and desires is not to be underestimated; the episode “Earshot”⁴⁴ was pulled in the wake of the Columbine shootings as the metaphors used were seen as reflecting too closely the current events.

Metaphor and irony, along with self-conscious parody, all create excess within the text. As Fiske argues, excess is “...hyperbole, a form of exaggeration, self-parody and camp. Excess allows for the carrying of contradictory meanings, and carries both ideology and a critique of it” (1987, p.90). And while excess is not necessarily subversive and the space it creates only means that viewers have access to alternative readings and may not activate these meanings,

nonetheless, viewers do have the potential space to occupy contradictory subject positions by appealing to this excess. Melodrama also crease excess within the text, “open[ing] space to explore the psychological and emotional drama and the journey of identity” (Heinecken, 2003, p.143). The construction of excess in BtVS creates a focus that is more interested in emotional rather than action-driven narratives, and plot is less important than affect. The creation of excess is particularly relevant in melodramatic genres, which labour to construct a tragic structure of feeling, which articulates with the viewers’ melodramatic imagination and evokes a feeling of emotional realism and experiential identification.

Realism, the Tragic Structure of Feeling and the Melodramatic Imagination

Within the field of film and television studies, the definition of realism has traditionally been constructed through an appeal to empirical reality in both content and form. In regards to content, televisual representations are held to a standard of 'real' life - in other words, how faithfully they are constructed to reflect a reality outside and independent of the text. That entertainment television rarely engages in this form of 'transparent' representation is the most common complaint of critics who deem television to be problematic, believing that these representations should somehow 'truthfully' reflect the outside world. This understanding of realism is also connected to a second concern with form; where realism is classified as being constructed through production codes, such as lighting, camera angles and continuity – often culminating in an attempt to minimize the visibility of production or alternatively, to render visible the ‘constructedness’ of the text. While both of these constructions are important, there is a third, emerging, understanding of realism that does not necessarily depend on a close correlation to empirical standards, but rather with how televisual texts construct a ‘feeling’ or affect of reality.

Television texts are often constructed as realistic by viewers not based on a litmus test that compares them to an empirically verifiable standard of realism, but rather based on an internal, and personalized test of the feeling of the show's 'reality'. These feelings of reality occur when the text uses pre-existing narratives embodying the collective 'common sense', in that, "television is realistic not because it replicates familiar situations, but because it replicates common sense ideological assumptions about reality... realism is not a matter of fidelity to an empirical reality, but of the discursive conventions by which and for which a sense of reality is constructed" (Fiske qtd in Rockler, 1999, p.76). Realism then is defined by the *way* it makes sense of the real, rather than what the real consists of, and in BtVS, realism is invoked by locating the viewer through pre-existing social narratives and experiences, of which gendered understandings of femininity are key. These pre-existing social narratives are used by viewers to make sense of the personal experiences of femininity and are an integral aspect of the social, political and economic hegemonic negotiations undertaken in, and familiarized by, daily life. Therefore, the use of these narratives in BtVS works to both construct and reflect dominant narratives of the appropriate and inappropriate feminine body and its actions in society, while simultaneously evoking feelings of realism for the audience who negotiate these 'realistic' narratives in daily life.

The audience identification presumed by television's narratives presupposes a textual 'mirroring' of the viewer's life-style, his or her roles, relationships, and recipes for existence within an (actual or imagined) life-world. For identification is a function of familiarity, of an audience's already knowing what is to be known on screen (Wilson, 1999, p.153).

In this way realism encourages viewers to experience and identify with the representations as though they were real, because they feel real and resonate with their own experiences, and

the reward for identification is pleasure (Ang, 1985; Dow, 1996; Fiske, 1987; Press, 1991; Rockler, 1999).

As traditional hierarchies and metanarratives have eroded under the onslaught of the economic and cultural fragmentation of current capitalism, subjects are forced to generate meaning within a destabilized cultural matrix, one that is shifting, temporary and contingent. These factors have deep and intimate implications in that they further encourage a destabilization of identity, serving to reinforce the understanding that subjectivity is not coherent or fixed but in a process of continuous flux (Lury, 2001, p.3). Experience, Alcott argues (1988), then becomes a main way of expressing an identity and constructing meaning. Therefore, the concept of experience is an important starting point from which to describe the features of human subjectivity; de Lauretis also states that habits and practices are critical in the construction of meaning. It is here that incorporating, validating and generating pleasure based on hailing and interpellating a viewer's previous experiences becomes particularly relevant. De Lauretis defines experience as

a complex of meaning effects, habits, dispositions, associations, and perceptions resulting from the semiotic interaction of self and outer world. The constellation or configuration of meaning effects which I call experience shifts and is reformed continually, for each subject, with her or his continuous engagement in social reality, a reality that includes – and for women centrally – the social relations of gender (1987, p.18).

She continues, arguing that the experience of gender is central in organizing subjectivity, as well as technologies of gender such as television. In relation to melodrama, the triumvirate of gender, genre and experience bear a close discursive connection.

For the viewers with whom I worked, there was an explicit understanding that the text was not realistic in the sense that they were quite articulate in their discussions of both its lack of empirical reality, as well as its constructedness. What is of importance here is that the viewers did not appeal to either of these definitions when discussing their enjoyment of BtVS, but seemed to construe their sense of realism (and unrealism) by a different standard. The standard invoked by them was one based on *emotional* realism - that the show was realistic if it 'spoke' to them and their emotions, experiences and desires. There was a clear awareness that the show was often largely metaphorical, and yet the use of metaphors was one of the reasons they argued that the show felt emotionally real, showing that any attempts to make a rigid distinction between denotated and connotated meanings does not speak to the understandings constructed by the viewers themselves; instead, they focus on the pleasure they derive from what meanings they can construct - or are allowed to construct - through this emotional connection. Thus, for these women, at least, emotional realism seems to, at least temporarily, supersede other forms of realism⁴⁵.

Melodrama is a genre that highlights romantic sentiment, conflict and emotionally agonizing situations, and works to construct heightened emotions in the viewer. Thornburn argues that in current and academic usage, melodrama is a pejorative term, “denoting a sentimental, artificially plotted drama that sacrifices characterisation to extravagant incident, makes sensational appeals to the emotions of its audience, and ends on a happy or at least morally reassuring note” (2000, p.595). Unlike drama, melodrama has traditionally been a woman’s genre, and has, therefore, been categorized as a lower form of artistic expression. Melodrama labours to construct a ‘tragic structure of feeling’, by focusing on the excessive dramatic

elements of life, centering on conflicts and emotions, an endless fluctuation between happiness and unhappiness. As Angel states,

Passion is the source of our finest moments. It is the joy of love, the clarity of hatred and the ecstasy of grief. Passion is the source of hope and the cause of despair. It is the source of life and the cause of death. If we could live without passion, then maybe we'd know some kind of peace, but we'd be hollow. Empty rooms shuttered and dark. Without passion, we'd truly be dead. ("Passion")

In representing the importance of passion and the precariousness of emotions, these concerns come to occupy a central place, and drive the narrative structure of the text. However, the tragic structure of feeling is not only about problems, but also their possible solutions; the continuing hope of better times, as well as the cherishing of the good moments that occur (Ang, 1985). While BtVS combines many different genres, it can be argued that the central genre is the melodrama, with which the other genres work both to support and to contest the preferred meanings and understandings generated by the dominant melodramatic genre, particularly after the first two seasons. Buffy's sense of self is intricately bound up with introspection, her relationships, and her continuing struggles to find her place and the meaning of being female in a contemporary (if fictionalized) world, all of which are central organizing features of the text (Early and Kennedy, 2003; Heinecken, 2003; Miller, 2003). In short, Buffy, as the main story-telling tool of BtVS, can be understood as a tragic character in the sense that she suffers from isolation, depression, darkness, helplessness and grief as much as she celebrates strength, friendship and the small daily pleasures of being alive.

The importance of the melodramatic imagination hinges on its sense-making ability vis-à-vis the tragic structure of feeling. Tragic feelings constructed by the text are only that; abstract

textual constructions that need to be informed by pre-existing perspectives on the part of the viewer. The tragic structure of feeling makes sense only if the viewer assumes a reading position that is grounded in the melodramatic imagination. While the tragic structure of feeling is a formal characteristic of the text, a subject position that occupies the melodramatic imagination is necessary for the viewers to occupy in order to gain pleasure from the text. It is not only the recognition of the tragic structure of feeling, but also its acceptance as an emotionally realistic sense-making narrative by viewers that leads to their enjoyment, engagement and identification with the text (Ang, 1985, p.87). This recognition of the tragic structure of feeling stems from what Brooks (1973) and Ang call the melodramatic imagination of viewers, which they define as "...the expression of a refusal, or inability, to accept insignificant everyday life as banal and meaningless, and is born of a vague, inarticulate dissatisfaction with existence here and now" (1985, p.79). The tragic structure of feeling as constructed through the formal textual features of BtVS is foundational to the participants' enjoyment of and involvement with the show. At its most basic, this structure of feeling evokes the half-conscious realization that, inherently, life is fraught with uncertainty and pain. This connects to the viewing positions inscribed by the melodramatic imagination, which highlights one's knowledge that happiness cannot last forever; there is a never-ending emotional dance between happiness and sorrow, and the existence of one necessitates that of the other. However, this construction of tragedy is not the emotional tragedy of the epic; its topic is the mundane aspects of daily life (Ang, 1985; Newcomb, 1974). And it is precisely this valorization of the emotionally important within the emotionally ordinary that appeals to these viewers of BtVS, allowing them to feel both a sense of realism and of identification. This emotional interpellation occurs as participants identify with the emotional excess of the text and connect it to their feelings and

understandings of their own lived experiences. This is the important point: the tragic structure of feeling engages viewers' emotions at the same time as it validates these emotions as they *exist outside the text itself*. Melodrama, states Thornburn, "still must instruct us, with whatever obliqueness, concerning the nature of that reality from which escape or respite has been sought" (2000, p.596).

The melodramatic imagination, as a psychological vehicle, attempts to surpass the banality of everyday existence. Its function is to inscribe ordinary and daily experiences with larger meaning – to construct a narrative that connects these routine and habitual moments to "the higher drama of moral forces" (Brooks, 1973, p.218). All the emotionally mundane material of daily life and interpersonal relationships are treated as if they were vitally important. The textual construction of the tragic structure of feeling works to evoke this melodramatic imagination, and if the engagement is successful, results in a feeling of emotional realism that is the main source of pleasure and connection for viewers. As Williams has stated, television can be understood to form part of the structure of feeling that is experience by individuals in their everyday lives (1992). Further, as Lury argues, "[t]his means that television has to be a material factor in the way that people behave, remember, or simply feel themselves to be a part of contemporary life" (2000, p.134).

Melodrama produces two texts: the main text of the preferred meanings informed by dominant discourses, and a second, more open text, which is made available by excess (Ang, 1995; Feuer, 1992; Fiske, 1987; Morley, 1992; White, 1992). It is the interplay between the two that can encourage a negotiated viewing position that reflects the needs, desires and pleasures of the viewers. This may be particularly true for female viewers who have to

negotiate the complex, and at times contradictory, dominant discourses of femininity. As Ang argues, “[t]he act of surrendering to the melodramatic imagination may signify a recognition of the complexity and conflict fundamental to living in the modern world” (1995, 88). The importance of occupying a subject position of the melodramatic imagination may signify a way that females are at least able to fantasize about finding unrealistic solutions to the seemingly eternal contradictions of the experiences of being psychically and socially inscribed as female. Pleasure comes not from living ‘happily ever after’, but from living with, and negotiating the crisis itself.

The reoccurring features of melodrama can be perceived as the enabling conditions for an encounter with forbidden or deeply disturbing materials: not an escape into blindness or easy reassurance, but an instrument for seeing. And from this angle, melodrama becomes a peculiarly significant public forum, complicated and immensely enriched because its discourse is aesthetic and broadly popular: a forum or arena in which traditional ways of feeling and thinking are brought into continuous, strained relations with powerful intuitions of change and contingency (Thornburn, 2000, p.597).

This can be an inherently contradictory experience in regards to representations of gender, as the defining characteristics of appropriate femininity are simultaneously shifting and reified, leaving many wondering how to adequately signify and make meaning from their experiences of being female. The contradictions within the televisual ideologies of femininity allow for another meaning to be generated from melodramatic identifications, so that there [are] both, “feelings of powerlessness [that] echo real life and social constraints, and identification because a viewer can let herself 'go', and there is no need to work to suture contradictions” (Ang, 1995, p.95).

Thornburn argues that melodrama is a popular form precisely because it is so pleasurable for the audience, and because it attempts to insist on the importance of the ordinary world of

the viewer herself. “Melodrama is thus always in conflict with itself, gesturing simultaneously toward ordinary reality and toward a moral and emotional heightening that is rarely encountered in the ‘real’ world” (2000, p.603). The importance of the melodramatic imagination in relation to the female participants and their pleasure in engaging with BtVS will be more fully explored in the following chapter. As I have argued previously, this engagement with the complexity of the show is an emotional engagement; the producers of the show are able to construct a text by means of the tragic structure of feeling that not only encourages, but requires, emotional involvement, and this emotional involvement has ideological implications that both challenge and reinscribe dominant understandings of appropriate femininity.

Genres as Ideological Conventions

Through these textual conventions, the show self-consciously poses more questions than it can answer. By design, BtVS is meant to interrogate normative gender constructions and the psychological and physical morass of femininity. Filled with inter- and extra- textual references, irony, metaphor and excess, the show can be compared to what Peter Sloterdijk calls “enlightened false consciousness.” As argued by Eagleton, this concept states that,

[i]n the cynical milieu of postmodernism we are much too fly, astute and street-wise to be convinced for a moment by our own official rhetoric...the endless self-ironizing or wide-awake bad faith of a society which has seen through its own pretentious rationalizations...first a disparity sets in between what society does and what it says; then this performative contradiction is rationalized; next the rationalization is made ironically self-conscious; and finally this self-ironizing itself comes to serve ideological ends. The new kind of ideological subject is no hapless victim of false consciousness, but knows exactly what [s]he is doing; it is just that [s]he continues to do it even so (1991, p.39).

This is often a self-conscious position that contemporary viewers use to engage with televisual representations. A ‘distanced’ viewing position is a common one for many; it

allows for a separation between viewer and text, and is a way that viewers negotiate complex and contradictory representations, narratives and genres. This may especially hold true for female viewers who are continuously bombarded with representations of appropriate femininity that are extremely difficult, if not completely impossible to emulate. By means of their distancing, viewers can still gain pleasure from a televisual text without having to identify fully. However, the reverse may also be true. As Žižek argues, the implied distance between the viewer and the text may actually be a way of ideologically binding the viewer to the text (1991). This is a particularly relevant point; under current capitalism, self-conscious irony and cynicism are integral components in consuming mass culture products. Moreover, addressing the importance of distancing once again brings to the fore how televisual texts are able to incorporate contradictions in subjectivity and experience, in that

...the viewer can be (re)enchanted as self-reflexivity allows the programme to incorporate, without contradiction, and without a loss of coherence, various and even apparently conflicting sites for engagement (or ways of engaging) for the viewers. In fact, the self-reflexive aspects of the programme allow the viewer to oscillate between these different levels of investment (Lury, 2000, p.130).

The use of genre combining, camp, metaphor and excess in BtVS is done in a way that is at times quite openly self-parodic; hence, these tropes work together to reactivate the pleasures of the familiar embedded within them. BtVS works to “re-enchanted” viewers by means of this self-parody (Lury, 130).

It can be argued that this is may be a type of progress, where viewers are not treated as passive culture dupes, in that “...hyperconscious irony [is] emblematic of the hyperconsciousness...[of] popular culture, a hyperawareness of the part of the text itself of its cultural status, function and history, as well as the conditions of its circulation and

reception” (Collins, 1992, p.335). However, viewers, as astute consumers of self-conscious irony can also be powerfully inverted by dominant interests. Normative and restrictive constructions of femininity may be interrogated within the show, as Buffy successfully kicks butt and unabashedly initiates sexual enjoyment; however, while its mainly female audience may use these self-conscious parodic genres and signifiers to inform their own interrogations of dominant ideologies of appropriate femininity, the audience also knows that BtVS is a fantasy – in the real world, women do have to be afraid to walk down the street, they do have to be afraid of violence, and they do have to worry about self-policing their bodies and sexual desires. The fantasy of BtVS is certainly ironic; while Buffy may be a sign of possibility, she is also clearly understood as a sign of impossibility. Constructing and consuming her image, both producers and viewers are aware that the dominant ideology of proper femininity is being challenged; and yet they may also be consciously self-aware that this interrogation itself is part of the hegemonic process.

From sitcoms to primetime, television narrative has relied centrally on principles of multiple identification of narrative structure in which there is a fine line, if any line at all, between irony and rhetoric, between critique and celebration. Indeed one of the most distinctive characteristics of contemporary television narrative might well be the breaking down of familiar boundaries - between fiction and non-fiction, between transparency and self-reflexivity, between progressive and reactionary vantage points (Mayne, 1988, p. 87).

As Žižek observes, “in contemporary societies...cynical distance, laughter, irony, are so to speak, part of the game. The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally” (qtd in Eagleton, 1991, p.40). Hegemonic constructions of femininity do not necessarily have to be ‘silent’; on the contrary, “[they] can rise from time to time to ‘metalinguistic’ status and name [themselves], at least partially, without abandoning [their] position. And such partial ‘self-reflectiveness may tighten rather than loosen its grip” (Eagleton, 1991, p.61).

So far, I have argued that in a society composed of different and even conflicting gender constructions, genre combining allows a text such as BtVS to be open and polysemic to a diversity of gendered readings. However, I have also argued that genres work to predetermine texts and readings, attempting to constrain this polysemic potential; therefore it may be more accurate to describe them as polyvalent, semivalent or ambivalent rather than polysemic. Mercer speaks clearly to this point when he states that, “discourse produces within one domain of thought another domain of thought as if this other domain had already been introduced. The subject is held vicariously within this field of meaning” (1986, p.57). Further, according to Wollacott, this pre-orientation of genres allows the viewer to know that in the end, everything will cohere, everything will be made ‘right’, where any threat or danger in the narrative process itself will always be contained (1986, p. 197). While Adorno and Horkheimer’s monolithic notion of the cultural industry is problematic, their work ought not be dismissed, as they grapple with this same issue. Speaking to the idea of classification, they argue that,

[n]ot only are the hit songs, stars and soap operas cyclically recurrent and rigidly invariable types, but the specific content of the entertainment itself is derived from them and only appears to change. The details are interchangeable...they never do anything more than fulfill the purpose allotted them in the overall plan. Their whole *raison d’être* is to confirm it by being its constituent parts (1972, p. 125).

The practice of genre combining may serve to challenge and problematize normative ideologies of gender representation within television texts; however, it may also leave the actual status of women unchanged. The tension between the dual aspects of challenges to and valorizations of representations of femininity is not necessarily emancipatory. Yet, rather than arguing that the viewers who take pleasure and meaning from BtVS are still

merely cultural dupes constructed through ironic self-awareness of their ideological bondage, I argue that both the conscious and unconscious construction of appropriate femininity encoded in BtVS serves to simultaneously address and paper-over the contradictions of its position.

For every television series, the original version grows within a press of forces – both social and artistic expectations, conventions of the business and the art. Bad television – predictable, commercial, exploitative – simply yields to the forces. Good television, like the character of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, fights those forces – even while it partakes of them as part of its nature: again, like the Slayer, whose strength incorporates the Shadow (Wilcox and Lavery, 2002, p.xvii).

The important proviso here is that rather than constructing the dominant ideologies of femininity as a monolith from whence there is no resistance or escape, no negotiation or internal contradiction, popular culture as a purveyor of these understandings of gender, of which BtVS is but one example, can be understood as a continual process of hegemonic negotiation, in that it is

...internally complex, [with] differentiated formations, with conflicts between their various elements which need to be continually renegotiated and resolved...indeed it can be claimed that part of the strength of bourgeois ideology lies in the fact that it 'speaks' from a multiplicity of sites, and in this subtle diffuseness presents no single target (Eagleton, 1991, p.45).

BtVS is popular precisely because of the fact that it simultaneously problematizes dominant constructions of gender ideology while showing viewers how to live gracefully under its naturalized yoke. Buffy may be constructed as a character who 'blurs' traditional constructions of femininity and masculinity; however, she is also reinscribed within the dominant gendered framework as being properly obsessed with relationships, nurturing, and fashion. With the social changes introduced by first and second wave feminism, television producers, as part of larger cultural institutions, began to make partial revisions to their

representations of femininity in their texts as a way of generating relevant meaning, pleasure and identity for female viewers. However, deep social ambivalence as to what changes were to be represented ensured that women's intellectual, technical and/or physical skills paled in comparison to the superficial applause for liberal tolerance. Even Buffy, as a powerful post-feminist icon, expresses deep and conflicting concerns about what is properly feminine, and this desire to be a 'real' girl is as much a part of her character as is her role as a slayer. Buffy's challenge to the traditional female stereotype may be evident to fans and cultural critics alike; however, she continues to comply with the visible constraints of conventional femininity and is oriented towards the satisfaction of masculine desire. While the show consciously champions the subversion of traditional constructions of gender, it does so under the continuing auspices of an inclusion that is both within and against normative ideologies of appropriate femininity. For many female viewers, this negotiation of the text is a dialectic of contradiction and ambivalent pleasure. Additionally, as I have mentioned previously, this process is also deeply enjoyable because the negotiation undertaken in the construction of meaning from the subject positions offered by the text mimics the negotiations undertaken by the viewer on a daily basis outside the text itself. However, these pleasures are necessarily informed by the normative and contradictory parameters of gender also offered by the text, which causes a degree of ambivalence among female viewers.

The multiplicity of subject positions created by texts, in combination with their textual constraints, can be understood through a Gramscian approach; he argues that ideology can only become hegemonic to the degree that it is able to accommodate opposing values (Bennett, 1986a, p.xv). In short, consensus as to what constitutes appropriate femininity is secured not through ignoring possible perspectives of difference, but through their inclusion.

Popular culture is not merely a realm of the undiluted ideology of the ruling class; and yet, neither is it an unmitigated site for 'the people' and their authentic grassroots culture and resistance, as many argue. BtVS, as an exemplar of popular culture, shows that televisual texts are an intersection of contradictory pressures and tendencies, consisting,

...not simply of imposed mass culture that is coincident with dominant ideology, nor simply of spontaneously oppositional cultures, but is rather an area of negotiation between the two within which – in different types of popular culture – dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural and ideological values and elements are 'mixed' in different permutations (Bennett, 1986a, p.xvi).

Constituting a discursive field, ideologies only exist in relation to other ideologies. Through a continued process of negotiation, an ongoing struggle for consensus, ideologies can never achieve permanent dominance; rather, "...what makes a dominant ideology powerful – its ability to intervene in the consciousness of those it subjects, appropriating and reflecting their experiences – is also what tends to make it internally heterogeneous and inconsistent" (Eagleton, 1991, p.45). An ideology, to be successful, must engage with genuine wants, needs and desires; however, this position is also forced to acknowledge other ideologies, and inscribes this otherness as a potentially disruptive force (Eagleton, 1991). Ideology, in its efforts to work out the contradictions between its subjects' real and imaginary social relations, is forced to do so within a field of competing, and even oppositional ideologies. Therefore, the consciousnesses of both the producers and consumers of BtVS are not homogenous receptacles that merely absorb and reflect what is given as 'common sense'. Rather, like ideologies themselves, they are constituted by subject positions that encompass contradiction, fragmentation, and internal normative hierarchies.

To examine this concern regarding ideologies of appropriate femininity and how they are represented through the more focused textual lens of BtVS, I have undertaken genre and ideological examination of two particular episodes that both challenge and reinscribe traditional normative constructions of femininity. While there are many episodes from which it is possible to address concerns about femininity and feminine expressions of sexual desire, I chose two, “Bad Girls” (Season three) and “Seeing Red” (Season six) for several reasons. While these episodes represent two different eras of BtVS, they are both fairly seminal nexus points for the evolution of how femininity is represented on the show; in “Bad Girls,” Buffy begins to explore the darker side of her gendered body, its powers and social obligations, and “Seeing Red” is a highly contentious episode that addresses the dark desires of sexuality, and culminates in an attempted rape. There are two important provisos to the following examination: 1) While my ‘reading’ of the two episodes is one that ultimately highlights the reinscription of normative femininity, I also attempt to address the ambivalence and complexity of these representations rather than merely to condemn them. 2) The deconstruction that I provide is based on my personal interpretation informed by the preceding theoretical framework and, as will be seen in the following chapters, it is not one that the participants unproblematically endorse. It is precisely these differences in interpretation amongst the participants that work to both challenge and validate my theoretical foundations.

Bad Girls

The ‘one-off’ plot of this episode from 1998 focuses on Buffy and Faith’s attempts to track down and destroy a cadre of vampires who are searching for a talisman that will reanimate their leader, Balthazar. Faith’s influence on Buffy continues to grow, and as they try to find

and slay the vampires, Buffy follows Faith's examples of 'bad girl' behaviour, as evidenced when Buffy starts dressing like Faith, sneaks out of an exam, dances provocatively with a group of boys, breaks into a sporting goods store and steals weapons with Faith, for which they are arrested and consequently have to break out of a cop car causing an accident, all under Faith's dictum of "Want, Take, Have." However, after Faith accidentally kills a human and shows little remorse, stating that "on the balance, it still puts me in the plus side," Buffy sees the moral and social errors of Faith's ways, and returns to her usual, conservative self.

What makes this episode particularly interesting is how the writers and producers construct Buffy and Faith as polar opposites of femininity. From the episode title alone, normative proscriptions of femininity are being constructed by the text. The episode opens with Faith asking Buffy if she's ever 'done it' with Xander, establishing both a sexualized and moral tone, in that Buffy does not consider Xander a morally appropriate sexual partner, because he's 'a friend', whereas Faith has no such sexual boundaries, and has used Xander for sexual gratification.

Faith: So? What are friends for? I mean, I'm sorry, (smiles sexily) it's just, all this sweating-nightly, side-by-side action, and you never put in for a little after-hours (thrusts her pelvis forward and grunts)?

In this opening dialogue of "Bad Girls," Faith is once again constructed as much more sexually promiscuous, reminding viewers of her difference from Buffy. As a continuation from previous episodes, Faith here is constructed as Buffy's 'other'; where Buffy is blonde, petite, dresses in traditionally feminine clothing (complete with matching purses and barrettes) and is sexually restrained, Faith is dark, voluptuous, wears tight leather pants and heavy makeup, and is sexually promiscuous. While Buffy tries to define her slaying through appeals to social responsibility, Faith connects it to raw physical power and sexual desires.

Unlike Buffy's stable and middle-class status, Faith is visibly coded as a member of the working class; when she sits her legs sprawl open like a man's⁴⁶, she lives in a shabby motel and washes her clothing by hand – these signs not only mark her as a member of the lower class, they also mark her as outside the realm and constraints of 'proper' actions and responsibilities (Tjardes, 2003). However, at least initially, Buffy is clearly drawn to Faith's perspective on the powers offered by being a Slayer.

Faith: We're Slayers, girlfriend, the Chosen Two. Why should we let them take all the fun out of it?

Buffy: Oh, that would be tragic, taking the fun out of slaying, stabbing, beheading.

Faith: Oh, like you don't dig it.

Buffy: (shrugs) I don't.

Faith: You're a liar. I've *seen* you. Tell me staking a vamp doesn't get you a little bit juiced. Come on, say it. (She stops and folds her arms, waiting for Buffy's answer. Buffy can't help but smile, and looks down to hide it).

Faith: (laughs) You can't fool me. The look in your eyes right after a kill? You just get hungry for more.

As Whedon states, "We wanted to explore being a Slayer - the power of it, the fun it could be, how intoxicating it could be. We used Faith as a vessel" (qtd in Tjardes, 2003, p.70). This quotation suggests that Whedon felt that he could not explore these concerns through Buffy; she has to remain in control of her body, its power and its urges at all times if she is to retain her proper femininity and her superhero status. While Buffy is allowed to vicariously experiment with the socially liminal and primal power that is an inherent part of Slaying, the creators of the text ultimately cannot allow her that social freedom without moralizing; to do so would signify that the powerful female body is not only capable of being beyond control, but that society itself may not possess the moral strictures by which it can be contained. This adherence to an external code of appropriate femininity, generated through stringent self-policing, problematizes Buffy as a feminist icon. Not only is she responsible for saving the

world on a daily basis, she is also responsible for using her body and its powers only in appropriately feminine ways.

The body is a powerful metaphor for self, and our bodies are the basis for social judgement (Grosz, 1993; Heinecken, 2003). The body is both a product and a process, in that, “[i]t is a product...[of] a material embodiment of ethnic, racial, and gender identities as well as a performance of personal identity. It is a process in that it is a way of knowing and marking the world, as well as a way of knowing and marking a ‘self’” (Heinecken, 2003, p.6).

Therefore, as I have argued previously, bodies are connected to both epistemological and ontological concerns, and carry philosophical as well as political implications (Grosz, 1993; Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1993). Furthermore, contemporary consumer culture has resulted in a new conception of the self, based on the signs of the body. Bodies, and particularly feminine bodies, have become contemporary cultural maps of capitalism and patriarchy, embodied projections of the larger social contradictions expressed through the bodies of women. Perhaps one of the reason for the relatively small number of female heroes is that the “female body so well represents a totalizing view of oppressive social forces which constrict the individual” (Heinecken, 2003, p.137). Buffy and Faith are prime examples of these social contradictions in play, and specifically, of how Western society attempts to construct and reflect ambivalent and contradictory, yet pleasurable and important meanings of femininity through representations of the body.

For Buffy, her powerful body is not one that she willingly chose, and its abilities are carefully self-policed by means of appeals to social responsibility, through maternal motivating factors directed not only towards her friends and family, but to the whole world. Not only is her

power not freely chosen, throughout the series it is made clear that she does not want it⁴⁷, and is deeply uncomfortable with it, and she only acquiesces to her powers if they are used to 'help' others. As Heineken argues, "Buffy relies on feminine stereotypes to justify her use of violence... female strength tends to be maternal" (2003, p.139). When not only for Buffy, but all female characters on the show do not control their bodies and their powers⁴⁸, and therefore their femininity and the desires that can arise from these powers, they slip into darkness. Female power is socially dangerous; it threatens the social order and must be carefully monitored, and only used in ways that are appropriately feminine. And power for females, at least in this society, continues to be signified through their bodies; their youth, beauty, thinness are all primary signifiers of women's cultural worth. Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, as women gain a modicum of social power, their bodies are required to take up less space, where physical fitness becomes the demand for physical perfection, and the decreasing size of females correlates to a focus on the female body as a way of re-establishing a sense of patriarchal social order and control. However, returning to Grosz's notion of corporeality, bodies are both simultaneously marked by society (inscribed bodies) and actively in tension with, or in, struggle against society (desiring, inscribing bodies) (Grosz, 1993; see also Early & Kennedy, 2003). This embodied duality can be a contradictory one, of which Buffy and Faith are both representatives.

In a scene from "Bad Girls" between Buffy and Willow, Buffy tries to describe the deep pleasure of 'letting go' while she slays, forgetting her place and her social restraints, and revelling in power for power's sake. "It was intense. It was like I just... let go and became this force. I just didn't care anymore." This power, and its potential dangers, are explicitly connected to her sexuality, as a later scene shows her dancing provocatively with Faith, as

well as behaving with unusual sexual abandonment towards a large group of men in the club. However, for Faith, in her potentially subversive celebration of the desires and powers of the female body, refuses to acquiesce to the normative social constraints of appropriate femininity⁴⁹, and therefore these transgressions must be disciplined. Since she is constructed as a female who chooses not to self-police her body according to normative conventions, her bodily desires, her power, sexuality and femininity are coded as monstrous. This monstrous femininity culminates in the scene wherein she accidentally kills a man and seems to feel little remorse. For a power harnessed for maternal good, this is the ultimate betrayal. It is worth quoting the dialogue from this scene at length, to see how both Buffy and Faith are constructed as moral agents of femininity:

Buffy: It's just, look at you, Faith. Less than twenty-four hours ago, you killed a man. A-and now it's all zip-a-dee-doo-dah? It's not *your* real face, and I know it. Look, I know what you're feeling because I'm feeling it, too.

Faith: (insolently) Do you? So fill me in 'cause I'd like to hear this.

Buffy: Dirty. Like something sick crept inside you and you can't get it out. And you keep hoping that it was just some nightmare, but it wasn't. And we are gonna have to figure out...

Faith: (interrupts) Is there gonna be an intermission in this?

...

Buffy: (in disbelief) And that's it? You just live with it? You see the dead guy in your head every day for the rest of your life?

Faith: (steps closer) Buffy, I'm not gonna *see* anything. I missed the mark last night and I'm sorry about the guy. I really am! But it happens! Anyway, how many people do you think we've saved by now, thousands? And didn't you stop the world from ending? Because in my book, that puts you and me in the plus column.

Buffy: We help people! It doesn't mean we can do whatever we want.

Faith: Why not? The guy I offed was no Gandhi. I mean, we just saw he was mixed up in dirty dealings.

Buffy: Maybe, but what if he was coming to us for help?

Faith: What if he was? You're still not seeing the big picture, B. Something made us different. We're warriors. We're built to kill.

Buffy: To kill demons! But it does *not* mean that we get to pass judgment on people like we're better than everybody else!

Faith: We *are* better!

Buffy is taken aback.

Faith: (exhilarated) That's right, better. People need us to survive. In the balance, nobody's gonna cry over some random bystander who got caught in the crossfire.

Buffy: (sadly) I am.

Faith: (disdainfully) Well, that's your loss. ("Consequences")

As Tjardes argues (2003), Faith is constructed as being unable to respond appropriately through stereotypically feminized dialogue and emotionality. "She pre-empts Buffy's attempt at reflective listening... Faith has rejected feminised, therapeutic talk" (p.71). Faith is constructed as being outside the bounds of appropriate femininity in her unwillingness or inability to engage in 'proper' feminine dialogue, and, as I have argued previously, this connects closely to her dangerous sexuality. For Faith, slaying is fun; it provides a sexual charge. The text explicitly makes this visceral connection in the first episode where Faith is introduced, where she rhetorically asks Buffy, "Isn't it funny how slaying always makes you hungry and horny?" ("Faith, Hope and Trick"). If she cannot control her slaying abilities, her sexuality, which is so closely linked with them, must necessarily also be out of control, and thus constitutes a danger to men. She becomes the archetypal 'black widow', potentially capable, and gaining enjoyment from, consuming her lovers through, or after, the act of sex⁵⁰. This connection is made all the more obvious when, in an extreme scene, Faith attempts to strangle Xander after having sex with him. While he survives, it is not due to his own actions – he is without power in the face of her monstrous femininity. This construction of monstrous femininity is importantly informed by the occupation of masculine roles for, despite being female, Faith embodies an ideal of masculine autonomy and sexuality, and is therefore punished for this gender transgression (Miller, 2003, p. 47). The boundaries that Faith crosses are marked in order to restrain Buffy's powers and desires. Since the character of Buffy is about essential goodness, she cannot incorporate the alternative aspects without losing herself to them, as Faith does. The show suggests that

choosing the 'good', properly feminine path necessitates the suppression and rejection of desires that fall outside of the social boundaries of the appropriate female, including sexual desire that is not geared towards satisfying masculine desires and fantasies of feminine sexuality (Heinecken, 2003).

Fiske argues that characters are an embodied ideology, that they are the main agents for hailing and then interpellating the audience (1987, p.162). And while the characters of Buffy and Faith are not role models so much as textual constructions of possible modes of femininity, they are social representations that viewers not only identify with in fantasy, but also use in order to inform their own understandings of the daily experiences and consequences of being gendered female. As Tjardes states, "[t]he creators' experiment concludes with the lesson that the power of a slayer must be positioned within not just a code of warrior justice, but one of feminised responsibilities and restraint" (2003, p.74). However, it would be an egregious oversight to assume that the preferred meanings encoded by the text, while complex, merely work to reinscribe normative ideologies of gender. One of the main reasons the texts is so deeply pleasurable to negotiate is that these conflicting representations open a semantic space wherein the contradictions of femininity are foregrounded; Buffy finds deep pleasure in slaying and in the powers that come with being a Slayer, just as Faith does. This conscious interplay between differing constructions of femininity highlights the introduction of women's concerns and experiences as a meaningful narrative.

The show endorses the 'feminine' - connections to others, caring, emotions and experiences of the body. While perhaps promoting an essentialist perspective, this perspective is also relatively revolutionary when viewed against the context of a culture, not to mention a genre, which has tended to

repress the feminine. As well Buffy can be seen as introducing private 'feminine' concerns into the public sphere (Heinecken, 2003, p.140).

Viewers of BtVS, in making meanings from the textual interplay of Buffy and Faith, may choose to 'read' them not as individuals, or as merely representing the prescriptive or proscriptive ideologies of femininity, but rather as two structurally related points along a potentially infinite continuum of gender⁵¹. This certainly seems to be the case with the participants I interviewed; many felt a deep affection for, and even identification with Faith's experiences and actions, even while they condemned her. Additionally, Buffy herself continues to evolve from a somewhat ultra-feminine caricature towards a more complex, divided character that both initiates and explores the full depths of her body, its desires and powers. To return once more to Grosz, Buffy is an inscribed body, but in the last two seasons, she also comes to represent a desiring, inscribing body, particularly in regards to her sexuality. Paradoxically, while Buffy's and Faith's sexualized female bodies and their powers and desires are potentially disruptive and dangerous, the continued inscription of their bodies *as* sexual is necessary in order to adequately represent their appropriate femininity. "The representation of sexuality suggests that the body is untrustworthy, threatening to erupt out of control and thus in need of taming, and yet this reinscribes the sexual body as a necessary component of female identity" (Heinecken, 2003, p.121). While Buffy celebrates female physical power, her body and desires are presented as dangerous – at the same time as her body and its desire give her power, they threaten to betray her. "Seeing Red" examines some of the ramifications of this exploration and this episode both problematizes and champions the feminine body, its sexual desires and expressions.

Seeing Red

There is no 'one-off' plot in this episode from 2002; it is an amalgamation of ongoing plots, with several crucial season developments. Other than Willow, the 'Troika' are the 'big bads' for season six; ironically, they are three unpopular and nerdy former classmates of Buffy and the Scooby Gang. Buffy successfully stops them from gaining demon power; Warren, the leader of the gang attempts to kill Buffy at the end of the episode by shooting her; he is successful in wounding her, and Tara accidentally dies in the hail of bullets, triggering Willow's vengeance. Buffy, at this point, has called it quits with Spike; he then turns to a spurned Anya for comfort. Unbeknownst to them, they are video-recorded by a device planted by the trio, with the result that the whole Scooby Gang watches as Spike and Anya have sex. Spike tries to reconcile with Buffy, but she rebuffs his attempts, and in desperation Spike tries to kiss her. Buffy keeps pushing him away, things become more physical and ultimately violent, culminating in a contentious scene that is easily read (and was by most fans) as attempted rape.

"Seeing Red" generated a great deal of controversy amongst the fans, and many viewers had a difficult time reconciling their enjoyment of Spike with his actions. This episode, as a representative of season six, constructs a much more ambivalent and dark world of sexualized experiences of femininity. Issues of appropriate sexual roles and desires for females and their implications are once again at the fore; here, however, both feminine and masculine roles are under scrutiny.

Many television critics argue that one of the main reasons that Buffy is a positive representation of femininity is that she is constructed as a strong female who is unafraid to

initiate sex, and to explore her sexuality (Early, 2001; Wilcox and Lavery, 2002). Further, these critics argue that these progressive representations created by the production crew of BtVS are an active and conscious subversion of the restrictive patriarchal dictates of feminine sexuality, where females are merely seen as the object of masculine desire, rather than as subjects with their own desires and the agency to act on them (Early, 2001; Heinecken, 2003; Marranucci, 2003; Miller, 2003; Wilcox, 1999). Buffy, and the rest of the Scooby Gang find a great deal of physical and emotional pleasure in exploring their sexual urges and initiating sexual relations. However, as previously argued, the highly sexualized environment of the show is not one that unabashedly celebrates the sexual powers and desires of females; it is also a world of sexual danger and one that constructs as normal the need to continuously self-police these powers and desires. These ideas are particularly clear in regards to how feminine and male sexuality are represented on the show, through Buffy and her love interests.

Buffy is constructed as an actively desiring, and desirable female, who transgresses many socially repressive and conservative boundaries of acceptable feminine sexuality. Her involvements with Angel, Reilly and Spike all highlight her ability to initiate, enjoy and terminate sexual relationships as she chooses. However, the show constructs the results of the female characters acting on their desires to be largely negative; sex between women and men generally leads to disastrous consequences: transformation, betrayal or revelation, and often, ultimately, to violence (Heinecken, 2003). Buffy's larger environment is one of highly sexualized danger; and the show constructs her personal life as saturated by the same sexual ambivalences. As observed by Radway (1984) and Modleski (1982), romances often contain social critiques that reveal the dangers of patriarchy, particularly the lack of domestic safety.

Here, the representation of vampires as a metaphor for the darkness of sexual desires and the ever present possibility of sexual violence becomes explicit in her relationships (Early, 2001; Marannuci, 2003; Wilcox, 1999).

In season two, Buffy loses her virginity to Angel; the consequence of her acting on her desires is that he loses his soul, literally becoming a monster and sexual predator – killing a prostitute, stalking Buffy, threatening, torturing, and ultimately killing one of her friends (not surprisingly, the friend is female). These scenes where Buffy must face the ramifications of having sex with Angel metaphorically echo the fears of many women who worry that acting on their sexual desires will turn men into monsters as well; at best, this fear is of a man insensitively not returning a woman's calls, at worst the man may believe that this is a license to stalk her and/or force his sexual desires on her whenever he wants because "she obviously wants it." With Reilly's unproblematic (if somewhat stereotypical) masculinity, Buffy is never fully satisfied, which is rendered obvious by her preoccupied looks during their love scenes together and her tendency to slip out of bed after sex to slay a few demons; only in these experiences of danger and sadomasochism does she find fulfillment. Not surprisingly, their relationship never 'feels' right to Buffy, and does not last long. However, it is in the last two seasons where Buffy's representation as a desiring female becomes the darkest and most problematic.

In "Seeing Red," the scene that culminates in Spike's attempt to force Buffy to have sex is complex, especially based on their previous sexual history. Spike had been in love with Buffy for quite some time; even going to such disturbing lengths as stalking her and having a sex robot made in her image. However much of these scenes are shown in a comic or

sympathetic light, allowing viewers to sidestep the implications of identifying with, or enjoying, his character and actions.

Spike's love is grounded in an intense, messy and psychologically believable history of painful collisions with love and hate and desire...Spike blunders through his emotional change and it is clear that he is not always prepared for his own feelings...Spike's love, for all its obsessiveness and perversity and kinkiness, is disturbingly recognisable. (Korsmeyer, 2003, p. 169).

Spike's actions are considered a 'normal' part of obsessive love, and both females and males may feel that his actions are admirable, in that these representations and actions are constructed as a way of showing *how much* Spike cares for Buffy, and that unhealthy and violent obsession are actually deep signs of love and respect. His literal inability to control himself, either physically or emotionally, is constructed by the show as part of a larger social understanding that women, once again, are responsible for triggering the monstrous desires of males. Again, with reference to both Radway's (1984) and Modleski's (1982) work, this viewing position is similar to the one constructed within popular romance novels, in that they note romances' obsession with a semiotics of masculinity, with their need to read men's often repressed emotional states from the subtle or even hostile signs of outward gestures and expressions. However, Buffy is not constructed as being outside the emotional and physical desire for pain and humiliation; she is the one who initiates the relationship and makes it clear that she is 'using' him sexually without consideration for caring, safety or trust, making her potentially monstrous herself.

Spike: Do you even like me?

Buffy: Sometimes.

Spike: But you like what I do to you. Do you trust me?

Buffy: Never.

Buffy's sexualized body and its actions are part of a complex textual narrative of feminine desire; in this relationship, she is not only seen as desiring a monstrous masculinity but as

also crossing the social boundaries of acceptable female desire and its expression. Buffy comes to represent a form of masculine sexuality, which marks her as a dangerous and aberrant female, and at the same time she is constructed as desiring this same monstrous masculinity from her partners. As Marti Noxon, the executive director for seasons six and seven states, "...what we've seen is Buffy attracted to her own darkness. To her own aggression, to sex without love, to sex where love is really subdued, all of the things that she can't permit, *because she is a hero*" (emphasis added, Noxon, 2003, para. 5). However, it is impossible to fully separate her gendered status from her superhero status; as I argued in the last section, what makes her a responsible superhero is also what makes her a responsible *female* superhero. Her descent into the darker sides of power and sadomasochism mark her as an aberrant superhero and an aberrant female; she ignores social constraints and responsibilities, thinking only of herself and her pleasures – she physically uses and abuses Spike without caring for him, she uses sex as a way to forget about her problems and she enjoys the sexual powers her body has to such a degree that she becomes a danger both to herself and to others around her. While these representations of her sexuality can mark out a space for feminist concerns and interpretations, Buffy is still constructed by a male model of sexuality and desire, either desiring monstrous masculinity or occupying that position herself, and therefore having to be punished for it. She is marked as morally aberrant in her desires, and in occupying a masculine subject position; as Calhoun-French argues, "it is usually characters' sexual attitudes and conduct which locate them on the continuum of good and evil" (1990, p.118).

Buffy and Spike's sex life is filled with graphic physical violence, which functions as foreplay, and while she is disgusted with herself for continuing to see him, they are both aware that it fills a need for her.

Buffy: You're in love with pain. Admit it. You like me ... because you enjoy getting beat down. So really, who's screwed up?
Spike: Hello! Vampire! I'm supposed to be treading on the dark side. What's your excuse?

The masculinity represented as desirable by Buffy is one in which violence, both literal and figurative, plays a foundational part. Buffy's sexual desires are constructed as deeply problematic, in that she is only attracted to vampires who have a violent past, to sexual partners who are physically powerful, emotionally unstable, and inherently unknowable. She seems to only be satisfied if her relationships are unhappy, unbalanced and emotionally and/or physically abusive, and dominated by a form of masculinity that is literally monstrous. "The series suggests that most men are intrinsically dangerous and wild and that this...quality is to be desirable" (Heinecken, 2003, p.106). And yet, while the show constructs this form of masculinity as problematic but inherently desirable for Buffy, for many of us, if we had a friend like this, we would suggest immediate and continuous counseling.

As Buffy begins to explore her sexual desires for Spike, their relationship is clearly constructed as one where both participants are willing – in fact, the reason that Buffy is so drawn to Spike is that she feels no remorse in using him for sexual and emotional release. She does not have to treat him as human, and her physically violent and emotionally abusive actions towards him only seem to inflame Spike's adoration; he sees in her a deep desire to transgress her embodied normative boundaries of femininity and morality, and the

narcissistic pleasure that comes from crossing those boundaries to embodying raw power and desire without social restraints of femininity. In her shame for finding this path appealing, in her sexual desire and in Spike's monstrous masculinity, she continues to treat him as less than human, as a release valve by means of which to release her pent up rage at having to live in the world – her violence towards Spike is prodigious and serves as foreplay. In spite of the ability of the producers of BtVS to meaningfully construct the inherent ambivalence of power within relationships, and therefore to display a type of 'feminist consciousness', what remains problematic is that in the rape scene of "Seeing Red" Buffy is once again held responsible for not only her actions but Spike's as well. In the time-worn phrase, "she asked for it."

The attempted rape scene takes place in Buffy's bathroom, and the use of location is itself important as this is a room that is associated with privacy and vulnerability, and is rarely used as a scene location for the show. As well, Buffy is in a state of undress, wearing only a bathrobe, and its large size engulfs her, further working to emphasize her petite stature. During their struggle, Spike seems to think that Buffy is resisting because it follows the form of their previous sexual encounters – one where she felt divided, and often only had sex with him after a physical or emotional battle. In their struggle, Buffy, using a voice filled with vulnerability keeps repeating "Stop it!" and "No!"; yet Spike does not stop his assault, and Buffy, for all of her strength is not able to get him to stop until she hits the side of the tub which gives her leverage, and even though she is hurt, she finally manages to violently push Spike off of her. In this scene, Spike dominates Buffy not only physically, but visually; he is on top of her, blocking the viewer from seeing much of her except her hands, feet and hair. While Buffy has faced intense physical and emotional pain throughout the series largely

without tears, after fending off Spike she is clearly tearful, and obviously in pain while she clutches her robe fearfully around her, highlighting her emotional (tears) and physical (barely dressed) vulnerability. Spike seems deeply confused about the whole situation, apologizing profusely, and tries to tell her that he didn't intend to force her, only to show her how passionate he is about her. While the producers argue that one of the main reasons for including this scene is that Spike was becoming too popular among viewers, and they wanted to remind the audience that Spike is inherently evil, his actions are still constructed as understandable. There are two deeply problematic issues with constructing Spike so sympathetically: 1) it implicitly validates the notion that when women say no, they often mean yes, and that if a man gets confused, he is not really to blame, and 2) it constructs Spike as a character who is both sympathetic and desirable, his actions open to interpretation in that his passion for Buffy is so overwhelming that he cannot control himself. Once again a woman is held responsible for a man's actions. The problematic aspects of this incident are masked, and these ideas are reinforced, when Buffy turns to him for help soon after this scene, thereby showing that she is not overly traumatized by his actions. Buffy's sexual exploration is seen to have a proscriptive effect; that unless women stringently self-police their bodies and their sexual desires in a way that fits the normative boundaries of appropriate feminine behaviour, then they are culpable for men's behaviours toward them. This works to reinscribe masculine sexual violence as, if not an unproblematically acceptable expression of love, at least one that is inherently forgivable, and may work to perpetuate the implicit social narrative that rape is women's fault.

While Buffy may have superhuman physical abilities, in this scene it takes all of her might to push Spike away, and works to show that, for all of her powers, she is still vulnerable to

attack. As Marinucci argues, “[f]amiliar representation[s] of women as actual or potential victims of violence reinforce the link between the feminine and passivity, particularly when such representations are sexualised” (2003, p.75). Further, although Buffy is a physically powerful figure, her power is constructed as necessary, “...because she is physically endangered, existing in a dangerous environment pervaded by threatening male masculinity” (Heineken, 2003, p.108). While Buffy’s feminized body and sexual desires are constructed as powerful, they are also a source of ambivalence and danger. She may have the ability to act both in, and on, a sexualized world; however, her abilities are necessary if she is to survive in the dangerous, ambivalent and sexualized world constructed by BtVS.

Interestingly, Spike’s is not the only construction of masculinity and masculine desire that is interrogated in this episode. The two other main male characters in “Seeing Red” are Xander and Warren; between the three of them, Spike, Xander and Warren⁵² create a triptych of possible contemporary masculine models. In one scene, Warren (who has become invincible through the demon power gained from the Orbs of Nezzla’khan – a not so subtle reference to masculine sexual power in that the Orbs are shaped exactly like testicles) robs a nightclub where Xander is trying to have a quiet drink. Warren also attempts to pick up several women, using outdated and sexually condescending phrases like “Don’t worry, your daddy’s going to take care of you”, clearly marking him as expressing and embodying a stereotyped and inappropriate male sexuality in comparison to the thoughtful Xander, who tries to stop him. Xander had been talking with a woman who was trying to pick him up, and his refusal shows his sensitive and respectful sexuality towards women, since he is still trying to make sense of his past relationship with Anya, as well as his ongoing desire for Buffy. While Spike’s monstrous masculinity is rendered desirable, or at least can be read ambivalently,

Warren's own masculinity and its sexual desires are constructed as childish and only about the power to dominate sexually⁵³; he becomes a caricature of the expectations and rage felt by many young, disenfranchised men who live in a society that values women only as sexual objects, and who do not have the social power to acquire these women's affections. This construction of his masculinity and of his desire only to dominate mark him also as monstrously masculine, yet outside the realm of acceptability, and – unlike Spike, who is also monstrously masculine – unredeemable. Xander, who refutes both these constructions of masculinity, is never seen as a viable sexual partner for Buffy. However, for all the discussion of potential roles of masculinity, the show renders traditional masculinity as desirable, and suggests that in order to earn forgiveness, all that is required of even the most monstrous acts is the male's incorporation of values that, as Hanke argues, are more traditionally feminine.

One way in which conflicts in gender relations may be handled and defused is through the construction of a social definition of masculinity (sensitive, nurturing, emotionally expressive) that is more...accommodating of traditionally feminine connotations and values. Hegemonic masculinity is a construct that takes into account feminist critiques of traditional masculinity, incorporating them into a new hybrid version but leaving the traditional version intact and simply overlaying new traits (1992: 72).

This is apparent in Spike's behaviour, which can be read as both feminine and hyper-masculine. Therefore, apparent modifications in representations of masculinity often occur without any social shifts outside of televisual texts, and work hegemonically to ensure that traditional patriarchal ideology regarding normative representations of gender are rendered more adaptable to current concerns over gender issues and are thus able to accommodate feminist concerns.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to provide an overview of the importance of genres as locating devices and to engage in a detailed discussion regarding the close social relation between genres and gender. I have also addressed how viewers were hailed and interpellated through generic conventions. Additionally, it has included a brief overview of some of the major social, economic and political changes wrought by the feminist movement, in order to better understand the changing social construction of both genres and gender, as well as those of 'primetime' feminism and televisual representations of the 'new woman'. Finally, I have led a whirlwind tour of the show and its main ideological problematic – the pleasures, responsibilities and ambivalences of living within a fantastical yet 'realistic' body inscribed with femininity – through a fairly close reading of two episodes and many textual examples in order to better assess how complex, ambivalent and contradictory representations of femininity were signified on BtVS. The purpose of these examples has been to explore how features of the text and its combined genres allow for an ambivalent (rather than unproblematically polysemic) interpretive experience for viewers, and to highlight some of the limitations of this polyvalence. Having constructed my theoretical framework, it now time to turn the participants themselves, to see their own interpretations of how femininity is represented on the show, as well as their particular negotiations, pleasures, ambivalences and even contradictions that arise from engaging with BtVS.

CHAPTER FOUR: VIEWERS DISCUSS BUFFY

Introduction and chapter overview

In chapter three, I argued that the innovative use of textual conventions in BtVS constructs a diversity of viewing positions from which viewers may be able to negotiate personally relevant meanings of femininity that both challenge and reinscribe socially normative discourses of femininity. Further, I argued that these textual negotiations generated a sense of relative power and pleasure, in that they both reflect and are constitutive of negotiations that female viewers undertake in constructing sense-making narratives of gendered experiences outside the text, and that representations of femininity in BtVS may be used to inform these lived experiences of femininity. However, while I outlined how a diversity of potential viewing positions could be constructed, the previous chapter did not engage with how viewers actually confront such interpellations. Since abstract audiences cannot be conflated with actual viewers, responses cannot be deducted solely from textual positions (Ang, 1995; Fiske and Hartley, 2003; Morley, 1992, Radway, 1984). Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to address how the participants themselves discussed their diverse enjoyment and negotiations of these textual characteristics. This chapter also seeks to explore the ways in which the participants made emotional and experiential connections between BtVS and their own lives, as social subjects inscribed with femininity, and through what Victor Turner calls the 'liminal aspect of the world of television', which invites viewers to attain insights into themselves, their society (Katz, et al., 1992, p.58).

Genre Combining: "Its twists and turns are amazing"

In the previous chapter, I made the argument that genre combining provided textual pathways for viewers to actively negotiate the text of BtVS. Here, the participants speak about their response to genre combining in BtVS.

Sharon: He's [Whedon] really out there, like he's not afraid to push the limit... I read newspapers or magazines, they say "oh yeah, Buffy's just another show". They don't get Emmy nominations, they don't get awards, and stuff, because it's all about vampires and ghouls and stuff. And I think that's what different about it, and that's what's interesting... I love the writing. It's drama, but Josh Whedon, he mixes the comedy in there, and it's so funny sometimes.

Helen: I appreciate the science fiction element of it... I like the way how it pulls in other things, that it ties in so many other things, there are so many other popular culture references.

Eryka: I am glad to see shows like Buffy that mix up fantasy and mix up reality as well. And it does try to do something totally different. It doesn't always succeed, but it does try, and I think that in itself is admirable.

These participants all highlighted different genres to discuss their enjoyment of this textual bricolage: horror, science fiction, self-reflexive camp and realism. However, while the diversity of subject positions offered through genre combining encourages a pleasurable negotiation that allows the viewers to construct personally relevant meanings, genre blending also seemed to labour under its own internal difficulties, with the result that at least some of the viewers felt a distancing from the text.

Eryka: ...It's getting kind of convoluted (laugh), so sometimes it's hard to keep things straight plot wise. And... for the new episodes, it gets really confusing... So plot wise, I think that's something... that it's so convoluted, and it's too much work almost.

Helen: I think that some of them [plot twists on the show] are just... I write some of them off as being... plot. Some are just kind of strange, and some you

just go with, you have to suspend your disbelief and know that it's just a television show.

The use of a diversity of genres seem to a powerful way of hailing and interpellating the viewers, yet several of the participants also discussed the cognitive dissonance that at times occurred when the complexity generated by genre combining became too demanding or bizarre. However, all of the women clearly articulated their deep pleasure in the way that the production staff of BtVS created characters and plots that evolved and had emotional depth, and made continuing comparisons between the characters and plots and their own personal experiences.

Evolution and Complexity: “Because that’s what happens with life too, right?”

The characters and events represented on BtVS feel emotionally real to the participants because of the textually constructed tragic structure of feeling, which evokes a connection to their lives via the melodramatic imagination. This feeling of emotional realism and experiential identification is defined by the participants as partially the result of how the show is constructed by the producers, i.e., through the seemingly ‘natural’ evolution of the show, as well as the complexity of the characters and the plots. These two aspects of the text serve to echo the inherent evolution and complexity of the viewer’s experiences outside the text, a position that is not lost on the viewers.

Eryka:...I like that the characters are not perfect, and they're not infallible. I like that they're dealing with a whole bunch of different issues all at once, which is very realistic because we all do that, and you juggle...you actually see them dealing with things.

White argues that feminine genres construct a narrative focus that “centres on people's feelings and reactions as they live through a constant series of disruptions and difficulties”

(1992, p.183), and it is clear that the use of melodrama and soap opera conventions is a source of pleasure for these viewers. It is possible that Rory accurately sums up the main reason these women enjoyed the show, stating that the show never “talks down to you.” What seemed to be the most important aspect in regards to the women’s perspective of the writing and production of BtVS was the level of respect towards the viewers that the writers’ offered them through the show, an attitude that several of them stated that was rare in television. This respect seemed to be constructed through the complex, paradoxically fantastical, yet realistic life world in BtVS, which resonated with the experiences, fears and desires of the participants’ life worlds. Buffy and the Scooby Gang are clearly seen as fictional; nonetheless, their personal lives are the core problematic of the narrative. They are integrally constituted through emotionally realistic personal relationships. The textual structure of BtVS is one of excessive plot structure, and a lack of teleological narrative progress, and while the ‘big bads’ of each season may be defeated, there is no end or completion to the task of keeping the world safe from evil. Therefore, regardless of the fantastical elements in BtVS, the textual characteristics are experienced as realistic, because they highlight how these experiences and concerns ‘feel’, and evoke emotions that are similar to the feelings generated by similar emotional experiences of the participants outside the text (Ang, 1985; Feuer, 1992; White, 1992). As Heinecken states, “[t]he soap like narrative allows viewers to become emotionally invested...the emotional world is realistic” (2003, p.94).

However, the participants were aware that as realistic as the show ‘felt’, it was a piece of artfully crafted fiction. When asked what they liked best about the plots of the show, the response of many of the women showed a clear awareness of the ‘constructedness’ of the show, giving credit to the creators and writers for consciously and painstakingly constructing

multiple layers in which they could engage. After further questioning, the women articulated this pleasure of engaging in a rich and complex televisual text through a discussion of the evolution of the show. The participants discussed the enjoyment they derived from watching the characters grow from teenagers to adults over the course of the seven year run of BtVS.

Bianca: I like the fact that there's been a lot of growth. You see...the characters are not the same as when they first started the show and that's very true to life...I mean they've grown up, you see that. And think about it: actually on the show I think they're the same age as me (laugh), so it's kind of interesting in that sense.

Maya: I like seeing how the characters have developed over time, because they're much more three-dimensional than they were when they first came out...And I kind of like that, I like having that...progression, where you feel like "yeah, I need to watch what happens next week"...Because that what happens with life, too, right? I like the fact that they're more complex.

These statements were echoed by most of the participants, which may indicate that their enjoyment is predicated on the characters developing in the same way as real people outside of the show – as the participants themselves have grown. The textual reproduction of the passage of time mimics reality for many participants, as they are roughly the same age as the characters, further encouraging a complicated form of similarity and identification. “The constant repetition of a character means that characters 'live' in similar time scales to their audiences, inviting to relate to them in terms of familiarity and identification” (Fiske, 1987, p.150).

There was also a clear understanding for the vast majority of the participants that the show's complexity was a major factor in their enjoyment, and that this connected with their own complex feelings and experiences of self – again, an emotional resonance between their own lives and the text renders it realistic.

Eryka: I think the show has matured, and they're actually dealing with some really important issues. Issues of identity, issues of your purpose and sense of self, and relationships... I think that's realistic, because our lives are intricate... So on an entertainment level it's suspenseful, but on a more personal level about what attracts me intellectually is that realism, about links and intricacy and the relationships and how things aren't always up front.

The focus on the never-ending process of negotiating emotions and experience, which BtVS highlights, constructs the process of life itself as the narrative concern, rather than on the end goal or achievement of the characters; what matters and brings pleasure to the viewers is the process people have to go through (Brundson, 2000; Fiske, 1987; White, 1992). While the bad guys are overwhelmed by the Scooby Gang each season, there are always more, waiting to emerge from the Hellmouth, and the narrative continuity is not based on the external successes of killing the monsters, but the internal concerns and emotions of the characters in their daily negotiations of self, love interests and each other.

Metaphors and More: "It's basically an analogy for issues you're dealing with"

As the previous quotation highlights, the text of BtVS is considered, by many of the viewers, a pleasurable source with which to engage and negotiate, due to the different layers of accessible character and plot development. The participants were very aware that their primary enjoyment of the show is not necessarily gained through a literal, denotative engagement; rather, it is their ability to construct meaning by means of the act of negotiating simultaneously *between* the two levels of denotated and connotated meaning.

Alia: So...you know, [BtVS] it's basically an analogy for...the issues you're dealing with. At the end of the day, there are things that are much more important... You know, it's self-acceptance and things like that...you can look at on a much deeper level, but you can also accept it purely, a superficial enjoyment at the same...

MK: So you're kind of saying that's there's different levels that you can dip in and out of.

Alia: Yeah.

Ava:... Underneath all the humour and campiness there's a lot of complexity is there, and that is rare... I'm starting to notice it's more a metaphor than it is actually about vampires, you know. It's more about basics like good and evil and... sort of fighting the evil within as well.

The generous use of metaphors on BtVS allow for a complex and layered reading informed by the viewers' own experiences and desires. Metaphor, as a representation of one thing in terms of another, allows the consumers of metaphor some agency in constructing, or at least choosing among, many potential meanings. Further, these meanings can, and are, based upon a form of affective and emotional realism rather than a subject position concerned with empirical reality.

Separation between text and viewer is broken down through camp [and] metaphors made literal... they are rhetorical devices which urge the viewer to relate to the text in specific ways... fantasy text doesn't tell us what the world is 'really' like, but urges us to recognise the text as highly 'realistic' because Buffy offers an impression of what the world feels like (Heineken, 2003, p.100).

This engagement of the participants is deeply pleasurable in that they are active in constructing their own personally relevant meanings within the perceived polysemic and complex nature of the text. The participants' sense-making narratives are both informed by and reflected in the use of metaphor. As Macdonald has argued, "[i]magery is by no means a purely superficial phenomenon, but rather the means through which we articulate and define the social order and nature" (qtd in Early and Kennedy, 2003, p. 56). Therefore, the participants gain pleasure through understanding the text by using the same sense-making narratives that guide the meaning generated from their own lives outside the text; it is the apparent similarities between the show and their own lives that result in the pleasure of viewing, and the more involved they are, the more pleasure gained.

Rory: I really like the ones that reference the past, because I think it's really cool how they do that. They bring things back, they bring characters that they're talking about or referring to. ...there's stuff that goes on that people [non-fans] have no idea about what it's referring to, because they talk about stuff that happened back in high school, they can't understand the references. It makes it so much fun.

Maya: Well, the thing I like about the plots is that it progresses kind of, in a way life would. Like things that happened in the first season... wind up on later seasons, so there's that kind of continuity. Just like your life; one thing that happens to you early on in your life, you can, it's an experience you always recall...So I like how the plot weaves them all together like that.

However, this engagement is not without its drawbacks. As Eryka previously stated, it is 'work' to continuously remain engaged with such a complex narrative, and it is not always possible, or pleasurable, to do so. Several of the other participants also discussed their feelings concerning how the show failed to hail them, which culminated in a sense of distance from the text, and reduced their pleasure. Ava, Murray and Tara felt that at times the show did not remain true to its characters, in that certain developments only happened because they were 'plot devices' to move the narrative forward, rather than a result of an inherent logic of the characters. This distancing from the text can be understood as a distinction between the narrative structure of the show and the characters' actions, which usually formed a conscious, yet seamless unit in their discussions. As Heinecken argues, a sense of history emerges from watching the show regularly, and "the interpretation of the text becomes highly dependant upon the viewer's previous knowledge of the characters and motivations" (2003, p.141). When the producers of the show fail to incorporate, or at least leave interpretative room for, these previous knowledges, a type of cognitive distancing occurs where the participants are, unlike those whose distancing is consciously ironic, unwillingly reminded of the constructedness of the text, and their relative positions, which

are constrained. This distancing may also remind participants of their own limited abilities to control meaning and representation in their own lives.

The Importance of Characters: “They’re messed up, just like you and me”

When asked to discuss which characters they enjoyed and why, the participants spontaneously addressed the question in terms of realism and identification. The women stated how Buffy, Faith and Willow were largely believable, and identified with their life circumstances, as well as the character’s emotional reactions to these circumstances.

Ava: Well, I mean even powerful women have shortcomings, faults, make poor choices sometimes. And hurt themselves, and do things like that, and just so, you don’t have to be perfect, because these characters aren’t perfect even. They’re good and they’re strong, but they’re not perfect, they’re messed up just like you and me.

Bianca:... although obviously in real life you’re not slaying vampires or anything, you can identify with hardships that she [Buffy] might be going through, that kind of thing. So in that sense, I can identify with Buffy, her sadness sometimes or her happiness.

Helen: I identify more with what’s going on with her [Buffy] than with what’s going on with other people. It’s just a question of identification. Whereas when I first started watching the show, my life, my social network and how I associated with other people was very close to Willow.

The fact that these women discussed their enjoyment through a framework of believability based on personal experience and identification highlights once again the importance of creating a sense of emotional realism in order to hail and interpellate viewers, and to allow them to generate pleasure from engaging with the show. However, the connection between emotional realism and identification needs to be developed further.

The process of pleasure stemming from a situational identification between texts and readers has been fairly well developed (Ang, 1985, 1991 and 1995; Fiske and Hartley, 2003; Heide, 1995; Katz et al., 1992; Press, 1996; Radway, 1984; Rockler 1999). In particular, these feminist authors have argued that the emotional connection between viewer and textual character encourages the viewer to symbolically adopt the various subject positions offered by the text. This bond then allows the characters to become textual vehicles for the viewer's projection "...simultaneously in both positive and negative ways, their own lives. These projections [are] experienced as moments of peace, of truth, of redemption, a moment in which the complexity of the task of being a woman is fully recognized and accepted" (Heide, 1995, p.11). Here, once again, the everyday lived experience of femininity as a paradox of complexity and monotony is rendered visible and valorized. Ava speaks most clearly to this understanding of textual identification.

Ava:... I like Buffy because she has the sort of sense of responsibility that I can relate to. She's kind of, she's got all the burdens of everyday life, and she's got the responsibility of the Slayer, and I mean even like just the struggles, daily struggles that she has, and have to be the leader and the Slayer on top of all that, is really, I can relate to that in the sense that maybe I'm not a slayer, but I'm a parent, and I'm a student and I have a lot of responsibilities, so...

As Bourdieu (1980) has forcefully argued, pleasure in the popular is grounded in the immediate emotional or sensual involvement of the object of pleasure – in this case how characters and plots are represented textually. The participants enjoy watching BtVS because they recognize and identify with the experiences represented on the show, and this pleasure of recognition is predicated on a combination of emotional realism and experiential identification. "What matters is the possibility of identifying oneself with it [the televisual text] in some way or another, to integrate it into everyday life. In other words, popular

pleasure is first and foremost a pleasure of recognition” (Ang, 1985, p.20). Murrey clearly speaks to this identification.

MK: Has Willow always been your favourite, would you say?

Murray: I think in a lot of ways, yes. They started her out as a really shy quiet nerdy type. The very first outfit she wore in the opening series, you know that little smock and tights, right? I can remember going to school like that in high school, just because I was a pretty shy person, didn't have a big social group, wasn't terribly, wasn't popular period, and my mom would pull things out and I'd be like "OK, why not? I'll try it" (laugh). I could relate to that, right?

Many of the women stated that they identified more strongly with Willow than with Buffy.

This identification seems to stem from Willow's representation as somewhat awkward, nerdy and shy, something the participants themselves experienced.

Alia: ...I like Willow; you know it's kind of the characters that you associate with. Like I was never Buffy in high school. I was...very few people were Buffy in high school; let's face it (laugh).

Rory: I think Willow and the way she was at the beginning, just, how she...dealt with school, and life... Well, she was just kind of, she was totally an outsider, and she was just ostracized... I can relate to.

This construction of 'relatability', or believability, is integral to the enjoyment these participants gained from engaging with the show. And this evaluative criterion seems to be based on connections with pre-existing experiences that the participants themselves have undergone, or imagine themselves as having gone through. "TV realism locates the viewer through pre-existing social experiences" (Fiske, 1987, p.24), so it can be argued that the pleasurable involvement felt by the viewers is through the combination of *both* emotional realism and personal identification.

There must be an 'investment', an emotional commitment, involved in the taking up of certain subject positions by concrete subjects...Investment suggests that people have an - often unconscious - stake in identifying with certain subject positions, many such investments made all the time, these sometimes conflict and need to be negotiated (Ang, 1995, p.120).

As the previous participant quotations highlight, the majority of those who expressed character or plot preferences based their choices on the similarities between themselves and the shared social experiences of the characters and plots. However, emotional and experiential identification seemed to be fluid, as several of the women stated that they could identify with 'bits and pieces' of each character and their plot lines.

Rory: There's bits of characters that I kind of appreciate, but I don't know if that's necessarily meaning relating to them... I think that there are parts of Buffy that I definitely can't understand, but those bits of her that I do relate to...Same thing with Willow...

Bianca:...I think there are different things that the characters have experienced that I've identified with...there are...certain emotions that she [Buffy] might be feeling in an episode, or certain emotions that Xander or Willow might be feeling that I...I kinda splice all of them, or take a little bit...

This ability to accept some parts and reject other pieces of both plot and characters supports the argument that viewers are active in negotiating the constraints of the text in order to construct what is relevant to their own needs, desires and pleasures. As Katz et al. found in their study of audience identification with respect to characters of *Dallas*, "[a] more frequent type of [televisual] identification presents the self as juggling different, often competing, attitudes or identities. Being playful, these are less constrained by the rules of cognitive consistency, but the strain is evident in at least some of our participants" (1992, p.163).

However, those that did not like certain characters or plot lines used the same evaluative criteria of believability; that the characters or plot did not seem believable in that the

representation did not stay 'true' to the character's personality. For others, the criterion of believability was also invoked for those participants who did not feel a connection to certain characters – this discourse of realism was a crucial evaluative tool from which they judged their pleasure and involvement⁵⁴. While there are textual constraints as to how characters can be understood, they are also somewhat polysemic. This means that some viewers will identify with their problems, where others will not. As Ang found with viewers of *Dallas*, the believability seems to be a prerequisite of pleasure (1985). As Murray continues to describe her connection to Willow, she contrasts it to her understanding of Buffy, stating that, "I could not relate to Buffy in a lot of ways, as, you know... the blonde, you know this and that, and it can be very difficult to relate to that at times," identifying a lack of emotional and personal connection based on a discrepancy between her own and Buffy's experiences. Murray's stated distance from Buffy was echoed by the other participants throughout my fieldwork. Through the various discussions of character preferences, it became clear that most of the women, while stating qualified emotional and experiential connections to Buffy, and using her as a connecting point to discuss the show, often felt much more ambivalent about her than any of the other characters.

Terri: Maybe Buffy is my least favourite character because she's the most feminine, although that's not, why would I think that way? And I think the thing that's bothered me about Willow in the last year is that it started... she's started to get... way more like Buffy. More femme.

Murray: Buffy is all about being powerful, but still being feminine, right? Which makes me wonder what the hell is the problem, can't she be powerful, can't the power come with the femininity itself? It's like she's trying to balance these two halves. But it's also something I can relate to...

As these quotations demonstrate, many of the participants felt divided in their enjoyment of Buffy; they had simultaneous feelings of pleasure and ambivalence with regard to her

embodiment of femininity. The hyper-femininity of Buffy is a powerful semantic representation which works to hail and interpellate female viewers, and yet it also produces a dissonance that echoes the participants' own unease with the pleasurable engagement in stereotypes of femininity. As Fiske argues,

[a] character is a paradigmatic set of values that are related through structures of similarity and difference to other characters: character is a conjuncture of social discourses held in a metaphorical relationship to notions of individuality and embodied in the appearance and mannerisms of an individual actor or actress. Character, then, is embodied ideology, and is used to make sense of the world by the relations of discourses and ideology that it embodies (Fiske, 1987, p.160).

The character of Buffy, as the main story-telling tool of BtVS, is an integral hinge through which participants' sense-making narratives of femininity are informed, both within the text as well as within larger social relations and experience of gender. As a consciously constructed post feminist icon, Buffy is understood by the participants to both challenge and reinscribe normative conventions of femininity through her relationships to other characters, both female and male. Further, these relationships form the backbone of the issues addressed in the show.

Representation of Issues: Gender Roles and Sexual Relationships

BtVS, like most melodramatic prime time serials, has taken on a breath-taking array of issues during its seven year run; death, morality, betrayal, addiction, sexual violence and orientation, to name just a few. However, as a result of its producers' self-conscious position of constructing BtVS as a feminist show, the concerns that are given the most importance are gender, relationships and sexuality. "Buffy's success lies in its abilities to entertain and engage viewers... [by] evok[ing] emotions and fantasies about love and desire, along with other aspects of sexuality" (Levine and Schneider, 2003, p.298). The participants' discussions

provided a wide variety of concerns in regards to representations of femininity on BtVS; however, gender characteristics and sexual relationships were the two that seemed to be the most engaging for these women. In this, as in all representations, the women had a diversity of opinions, often negotiating this ambivalent terrain with contradiction and uncertainty, but always with humor. A general overview of the participants' discussion of these topics will precede a more detailed discussion of their responses to the two episodes of *Bad Girls* and *Seeing Red* discussed in chapter three.

Buffy as Feminine Superhero: "It's more how she develops herself as a person"

All the women agreed that Buffy is a somewhat contradictory character in regards to her representation of feminine sexuality. While she is seen as sexually liberated, she also embodies conflicting and even deeply conservative traits. Particularly in reference to early episodes, the participants felt that Buffy was constructed as overtly sexualized in her clothing⁵⁵. However, most of the women did not initially speak of Buffy in sexualized terms, and largely felt that she had 'grown' away from these extreme representations. For the majority of the women, Buffy was discussed more generally in terms of femininity. Her gendered status as a woman was signified for the participants both physically and emotionally, and the main reason that Buffy is such a pleasurable character, and worthy of superhero status, is that she embodies both stereotypical male and female characteristics. Again the concept of 'realism' was evoked as these women discussed Buffy's realistic gender; her ability to blend diverse gendered characteristics is something with which they themselves both struggle and identify.

Maya: With Buffy, it's more...how she develops herself as person...the mixing of masculinity and femininity...I mean we've kind of been pushed in this mode to...blend and become a bit more masculine and feminine, and just

kind of scrap these constructions that we've been put into. So sometimes when they come together they blend, and sometimes when they come together they explode. And I think that part of Buffy is pretty realistic, because we're always trying to balance, when can we be a bit more assertive here, when should we not, when is it going to get us through?

...

Alia: The twelve inch heels, you know, because, it's, I guess, it's an overt attempt to blend the masculine and the feminine sides of her, by kicking ass with Louis Vitton shoes, but...you can't ignore that, because that's part of what Buffy is. She's got this strength, but she also has the femininity, and sometimes they merge and sometimes they explode when they merge, and sometimes...

Maya: They blend well.

Alia: They blend well.

Bianca: I think she does. I think she does represent...a lot of women. I think a lot of people can identify with the stuff she's going through, or has gone through in different episodes.

The ability of the production staff to meaningfully represent the public and personal experiences of gender bricolage culminates in a pleasurable sense of emotional realism and experiential identification for the participants. This definition of realism is particularly relevant in that it admits room for fantasy – even though Buffy is a hero infused with supernatural powers, she is still believable because “the way we make sense of a realistic text is through the same broad ideological frame as the way we make sense of our social experience in the industrialized west...and both involve the way we make sense of ourselves, or rather, the way we are made sense of by the discourses of culture” (Fiske, 1987, p.24-5). Therefore, what is important for the participants here is not whether Buffy is a believable or unbelievable superhero, but whether she is a believable or unbelievable representation of femininity, as based on their own complex gendered experiences and desires, which are constituted through the same social discourses of appropriate femininity that have constructed Buffy.

However, this balancing act between traditional masculine and feminine aspects does not always work. While Buffy's embodiment of normative femininity is a necessary textual construction that is used to encourage the emotional and experiential identification of female viewers, it often verges, and even crosses, the border into true stereotype, at which point she becomes an object of derision. Helen's response to Buffy highlights the contradictions of gender representations in the text and the ideological gap that can become apparent when this occurs.

Helen:... it [Seeing Red] showed so many different male roles, and so many different female roles in the first one [Bad Girls], but it doesn't say which ones are right and which ones are wrong...[however] She's all good, Jackie O like [Buffy]... with her little flowers and skirts, and she's all dainty and pretty and that sort of thing and it's really pigeon-holed.

Here, the strain of negotiation that is necessary if one is to retain the polysemic pleasure of the text shows its inability to fully overcome the contradictions of the text. While Buffy may blend traditionally feminine and masculine characteristics, her status as a 'believable' female suffers because she is still bodily inscribed with stereotypical markers that the participants found problematic. Buffy may challenge some traditional televisual construction of appropriate femininity, but she does so with a body that remains acquiescent to patriarchal conventions and the ideological dictates of the medium.

MK: I want to talk specifically about Buffy's femininity. What do you think about Buffy as an image of femininity? Is it believable?

Murray: Nothing that I'll ever be able to live up to (general laughter)...When you're talking about Buffy's image...and what I see is this blonde, really skinny woman -

Ava: She is really skinny.

Murray: Who manages somehow, even when the money runs out, to buy high fashion clothing (general laughter)...So...in that particular way...I have to say that it buys into traditional expectations of female looks and femininity.

Ava: All of television does that. All of television has skinny women who look fabulous.

Murray:...I don't want to knock it too much, or make too much out of it, because we are dealing with issues that are in some ways well beyond the writer's control and that are expectations on part of the network and even what they think their audience is going to want, but...it's a pretty traditional ideas of what women are supposed to look like, and how they're supposed to act.

Terri: I think Buffy's on the extreme of that, I would even say. Because she's super fashionable, she is...And like there are, there are lots of other women who are like, everyone's attractive on television, or most people are generally, and yes, but Buffy is - television pretty, that's what I'm talking about. Buffy is the extreme of that. She scores extremely high on clothing, and she wears...

Eryka: I agree. She has perfect hair.

Interestingly however, when directly questioned as to whether they thought “there is a dominant perspective of femininity on BtVS?”, only Murrey responded in the affirmative. The majority of the other women felt that the show did not endorse an ideological standard of correct femininity, even though some of their statements clearly indicate their belief that the show does put forth certain gender roles as more acceptable than others.

Terri:...I thought there was a message...yeah, very, like this is the real way to have sex [the way Buffy does it], this is meaningful sex as opposed to what Faith does (Ava agrees).

Eryka:...I think, what it comes down to is that it's a plot, it's a story and it's appealing the idea of women's empowerment while at the same time looking pretty, like running around in high heels and kicking ass (laugh).

Their responses quickly became centered on Buffy as a feminist icon, largely affirming that the show portrayed positive feminist and feminine images for women. As well, the women repeated their earlier admiration for a show that portrays a woman who is able to successfully blend traditional masculine and feminine characteristics, although several respondents did mention their ambivalence concerning constructing Buffy as “being able to do everything a man can do, and do it in heels.” The ambivalence stated here became

increasingly clear throughout the discussions, both in the focus groups, as well as in the one-on-one interviews. This uneasiness may stem from their own experiences of women's empowerment in Western society being constructed in a similarly contradictory way, where their ideological negotiations construct an ambivalence, highlighting that "...women actively negotiate with textual constructions and interpellations in such a way that the meanings given to the texts are brought in accordance with the women's social and subjective experiences" (Ang, 1995, p.114).

Faith as Femme Fatale: "She just isn't a traditional female ideal"

The position that there is little or no dominant ideology of appropriate femininity was further complicated when the participants discussed Faith, another popular character, and how her femininity is represented on the show. *Seeing Red* is a particularly important episode in that the women in both focus groups clearly articulated their understanding through this episode that Buffy and Faith are constructed as opposites of femininity by the text, and also in their remarks regarding the way in which both Faith and Buffy are constrained by dichotomous and moralized gender roles of femininity.

Terri: I guess she's [Faith] a sexual aggressor, she's the woman knows what she wants and gets what she wants. I never found it problematic. I found it refreshing, a refreshing change from Buffy, I think the juxtaposition between the two of them, and it was I found refreshing, she was sexy, she was into her body...

Eryka: Well, it's definitely those binaries, right? The whole very proper female, and then the improper female, that I find between the two of them. I don't know if... I think ultimately Faith just isn't a traditional feminine ideal, that's really like, and I think partly that's what the show is trying to do, trying to show this binary, these opposites...

Generally, Faith was a character the vast majority of the women deeply enjoyed. She was seen as much more flamboyant in her representations of gender, both in regards to sexuality and femininity, and the participants used words such as 'sex pot', 'temptress', 'exotic', and 'out of control' to describe her. The participants clearly understood that Faith was constructed as the 'dark' complement of Buffy, representing the dangerous liminal aspects of femininity, sexuality and desire that Buffy has (and by proxy, female viewers have) to fight against and control.

Sharon: When we were talking about the stereotypes...the sex pot type of thing. I was thinking that Faith's put on the screen, and she's kind of everything, or something that a lot of girls want to be, or aren't, or let themselves be. The sex pot. The exoticness, or whatever...

Interestingly, several of the women articulated that Faith is a more approachable and realistic construction of femininity than is Buffy.

Murray:...like Terri, in a lot of ways I've liked her far more than Buffy. To me, she's seemed far more, as in terms of somebody that say...whose femininity or female image I would feel comfortable copying or felt was sort of attainable, to me Faith is far more it than you know, Buffy.

While others did not express this sense of identification, they did express their desire for a textual space within the show to allow Faith to grow emotionally – perhaps a sign that those who did not profess identification actually did feel a desire to identify with her, but were forced from that position by her construction of extremity. Unlike the rest of the women on BtVS, Faith is largely constructed as a caricature; she has no ability to recognize or learn from her mistakes. The show clearly uses Faith as a way to show the implications for women who break with the acceptable norms of femininity and succumb to unregulated desires, which frustrated some of the women, but which others found pleasurable.

Murray: In a lot of ways, Faith is a caricature, if you want to paint morality issues on her, she was destined to take the fall...she was destined to take the fall.

Maya: I like how they put them both together and you can see the differences. If Buffy...kinda steps this way or that way, she would be Faith, in which case she would fail, right?

Regardless of their interpretation of Faith, all the participants clearly understood that she was constructed as Buffy's opposite. As a villainess, Faith *has* to 'take the fall', as Murray argues. However, this structural knowledge that the text cannot allow the villainess to escape without punishment or judgment did not seem to limit the participants' abilities to find her pleasurable. Further, it can be argued that Faith's role as villainess was precisely the reason the participants enjoyed her so much; even temporarily, Faith was able to break free from the social constraints of appropriate femininity. There seemed to be an ongoing negotiation, as the participants struggled "...between feminine pleasure and power on the one hand, and patriarchal control on the other" (Fiske, 1987, p.189)⁵⁶. This understanding is echoed by Seiter et al, who found that female viewers expressed their pleasure in, and admiration for, strong powerful female characters who transgressed "...the boundaries of a traditional pattern of resistance for women within patriarchy" (1987, p.25). Fiske further argues that while ambivalent and socially liminal feminine characteristics are central to the contradictions in both the text and the subject positions that reflect the "...contradictions inherent in the attempt to assert feminine values within and against a patriarchal society" (1987, p.191), neither can the text resolve these contradictions. Modleski agrees, stating that

...if the villainess never succeeds, if, in accordance with the spectators' conflicting desires, she is doomed to eternal repetition, then she obviously never permanently fails either...And if the villainess constantly suffers

because she is always foiled, we should remember that she suffers no more than the good characters (1982, p.98).

While the *Bad Girls* episode can be read as a morality play between Faith and Buffy's femininity, and while the show uses a narrative structure that denies Faith's ultimate success, the participants largely chose to render Faith not only as Buffy's socially unacceptable and structural opposite, but also as a person who needed to be understood based on her own supposed history constructed through each of the viewer's own emotional and experiential understandings.

Maya: I can't help but look at it from a social worker point of view (laugh). I'm like, you know, her pattern and her life is... You see it in people, just around real life, Slayer aside, but you see people make crap choices because something is lacking, that they needed in their life. Like her parents, some form of love, or encouragement or guidance that they've never got (Bianca agrees).

The participants' use of emotional realism connects to their experience and individuality; however, structurally, they also understand that neither Buffy nor Faith are merely individuals, but are also importantly constituted and understood through their relations to other characters; therefore, participants oscillate between realist and structuralist reading strategies (Fiske, 1987). Furthermore, several of the participants constructed Faith and Buffy's femininity not as the result of innate ethics or characteristics, but rather as having been dictated by the available social roles of femininity and how the characters are ascribed, defined and constrained by them.

Bianca: And I think just the whole idea of her [Faith] taking on roles, I think it's easy for her to take on roles because she doesn't have to deal with herself (Maya agrees) and her issues, and all those sorts of things. It's like, "I'm the [bad] Slayer, Buffy's the good Slayer." She already kind of had that kick ass bad chick, but being around Buffy kind of elevates that side, even more (general group agreement).

Helen: Yeah, because that role is being occupied by somebody else (general group agreement).

Maya: She keeps having to redefine herself because she doesn't know who she is.

Helen: She's not like Buffy (sarcastic general laughter)

Sharon: I was thinking about how you guys were saying that Faith was the bad ass chick, and Buffy was the really proper, not innocent, but the proper one. And when you said that "Oh, that role's already occupied by Buffy so she can't take that role," but then I also see it as that she doesn't want that role because Buffy... Whatever Buffy is, she doesn't want to be.

Helen: But Buffy is also forced into it too (general group agreement).

Within the main structures of femininity constructed by the text⁵⁷, Willow is the last main female character discussed in relation to concerns of gender representation.

Willow as Alternative Femininity: "She's not trying to be like a man"

The participants' main interest in this regard was Willow's lesbian relationship. Willow's emerging sexuality was late-blooming. As a 'geek' she was seen as relatively innocent and sexless, even after she became involved with her first boyfriend. It was not until she fell in love with a woman that Willow became a fully sexualized character. The overwhelming majority of the women felt that the issue of Willow's lesbianism was tastefully addressed – however, only Terri, who is gay herself, made any explicit comment about the idealized nature of their relationship. However, several other participants also stated they felt that the fairly explicit representations of lesbian sexuality could be understood as a masculine fantasy, as opposed to the representations of potential male homosexuality.

Alia: The thing I found interesting about the episode [Seeing Red], and it was the first time it occurred to me... the whole Andrew being in love with Warren thing, [yet] they so fully embrace the lesbian aspect. [However] everything that is homo-erotic in the masculine sense is all innuendo and subtlety.

Helen: It's underplayed.

Maya: That's a really good point.

Alia: So, you realise that there's a guy behind this because he's may not be comfortable with male homosexuality, but whooo, let's film that baby [re Willow and Tara].

Helen: Yeah, don't stop (sarcastically).

Eryka: Sometimes it's stereotypical, in the sense that, Willow... developing her sexual identity, and her lesbianism, and stuff like that. Because it's not safe [male homosexuality]. It's [lesbianism] safer because... their audience, right? Women and men are more likely to accept other women being sexual with each other than to accept men being sexual with each other. Because then it would be a gay show. See what I mean, it wouldn't be a mainstream show anymore. And it's more pleasing to the eye to see two women kissing, you know? And they don't necessarily explore... they don't actually explore what it's actually like to have a lesbian relationship, you know what I mean?

Therefore, while it could be argued that having one of the main character's involved in an alternative sexual relationship is yet another example of the progressive representations of femininity of BtVS, it can also be understood as a masculine fantasy of lesbianism. The women are both young and beautiful, and present no public sexualized politics – difference remains purely an individual and private phenomenon. It is important to keep in mind that BtVS is a commercial text as much as an artistic one and the creators are constrained by the understanding that both advertisers and mainstream audiences may be more comfortable with feminized lesbian sex scenes than masculine gay ones, something that the participants themselves clearly understood.

The three main characters discussed here – Buffy, Faith and Willow – form a heteronormative trinity of acceptable femininity. In short, they textually represent the three positions open to women constituted within the normative parameters of gender within a patriarchal society. Buffy is the feminine hero, as she is able to embody masculine characteristics while remaining unthreatening to male order; Faith is the threatening 'other' whose unregulated sexual excess ensures her doom, and Willow represents the non-

threatening and therefore acceptable gender variation. However, these representations were deeply meaningful and pleasurable for the participants, and the negotiation necessary to construct both specific textual as well as more general personally relevant meanings of femininity ensured that these representations were both accepted and challenged. This construction of the meanings of appropriate femininity both within and against the text is further addressed through their discussion of Buffy's relationships.

Relationships: "I love good portrayals of relationships"

Both independently and as a group, the women unanimously agreed that it has been the focus on relationships from which they gained the most pleasure. In the responses generated from my questioning as to whether the show dealt with 'realistic' relationship issues, the majority of the participants answered with a qualified affirmative.

Ava: I would say the emotional experience of the show is very representative of things how they happen. Like these characters go through the same things, like any of us do, and that's how we can relate to them instantly. We feel, and get all emotional about it, because it touches us, and we feel with these characters. We're happy when they're happy, we're sad when they're sad, we're scared when they're scared, like it really, yeah, the emotional life of the show is definitely representative of the everyday. The situations obviously not, but the characters themselves.

Through the use of melodramatic and soap opera conventions, relationships in BtVS are central to both individual episodes and to the metanarrative, and romantic love is foundational to the characters' motivations and to the plot structure (Heinecken, 2003; Korsmeyer, 2003; Marranucci, 2003). The participants all stated that the various romantic relationships represented on BtVS connected to their own lived experiences, as well as to their un-lived and/or unmet desires⁵⁸.

Rory: Just the relationships, I think it is really real, and just...I mean they're obviously more dramatic than (laugh), but then at the root of the issues they're real, I mean her [Buffy's] relationships, how, what happens with those, and how they affect her, I think so.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the melodramatic imagination seems particularly active here, in that many of the women stated that it was the unbalanced aspects of Buffy's relationships that appealed to them the most; they stated they could understand and identify with these types of emotionally difficult relationships, having gone through similar situations themselves. As Ang found in her *Dallas* viewers, "...the position from which...fans seemed to give meaning to, and derive pleasure from...seems to be rather the melancholic and sentimental structure of feeling which stresses the down-side of life rather than its happy highlights" (1996, p.87). Additionally, it is the emotional excess of these relationships, rather than just their representation, that appeals to these viewers. The women, regardless of their affection for Buffy's various sexual partners, found them appealing not necessarily because of their personalities or looks (although these were both important), but due to the fact that these men were willing to invest such a great deal of their emotional resources in their relationships, and to make them their primary concern. This feminization of the masculine desire and sexuality was also borne out in Radway's research with female readers and their involvement in romance novels. She argues that,

[t]he point of the experience is the sense of exquisite tension, anticipation, and excitement created within the reader as she imagines the possible resolutions and consequences for a women of an encounter with a member of the opposite sex, and then observes that once again, the heroine in question has avoided the ever present potential disaster because the hero has fallen helplessly in love with her (1984, p.65).

However, the difference between the romance readers and the participants who watch BtVS is the latter's awareness of the impossibility of a happy ending. Buffy's relationships are

always emotionally tortuous, albeit with moments of transcendent happiness; they are always in a state of disequilibrium, but she feels drawn towards these tumultuous moments in relationships.

Buffy: I have to get away from that bad boy thing. There's no good there... But I can't help thinking - isn't that where the fire comes from? Can a nice, safe relationship be that intense?... Part of me believes that real love and passion have to go hand in hand with fighting and pain ("Something Blue").

It is this tension between the desire for the ultimate romance and the understanding of its impossibility that draws such an emotional reaction from these viewers, highlighting their own fantasies and difficulties of achieving the same emotional fulfillment in their lives.

Eryka:... I would say I like the relationship she has with Spike the most. Because, the reason I'm so drawn to that one is, because I relate to it to some extent. It's like the guy that you know you should just get away from. And the guy that you know is just so bad for you, but, he cares so much about you and you care so much about him, and you just can't.

Ava:... well the relationship with Spike, that's a very dark relationship, I can relate to that... when she and Spike got together, it was more of an outlet for her, and I've done that, I've had the outlet relationships, you know, using someone, or being used... Buffy's relationship problems, I think are realistic as well, trying to find a good, honest, healthy relationship, I can relate to that. Definitely. And... Buffy's resistance to being in a relationship with anyone, or her inability to have a healthy relationship, is really, definitely speaks to me.

This connection to the characters' relationships through emotional realism and experiential identification is not only lived; here, the melodramatic imagination also functions to address ever-present potentialities. Radway's discussion of how the romance novel functions to simultaneously highlight and resolve the danger present to women in heterosexual relationships under a patriarchy that constructs monstrous masculinity as desirable is particularly salient, since the majority of Buffy's lovers provide a fairly overt metaphor for the danger that women face in heterosexual relationships; Angel and Spike have been

threatening to her not only emotionally, but also physically – they are vampires with supernatural physical powers who often take a sexual thrill in killing⁵⁹. Both Angel and Spike have repeatedly tried to capture and kill Buffy, not only because she is the Slayer, but also because she evokes their sexualized masculine desires. While Buffy is an active agent in celebrating her sexual desires and initiating intimacy, the text also serves to highlight the dangers of doing so, which face both women and society. BtVS begins to break down the seemingly naturalized opposition for females between sexual safety and sexual freedom; however, Buffy's desires and sexuality are still structured by the ideal romance, where she is still being "...confined] by the expression of female desires within the limits of a permanent, loving relationship" (Radway, 1984, p.169), at least in her first two 'meaningful' relationships. "Such stories suggest that womanly desire is acceptable to men, but they also perpetuate the usual connection between sex and love" (Ibid, p.169). Females' fear of reprisal and punishment for sexual activity has not yet abated in either private or public discourses of femininity. Vance argues that popular culture texts are an important site from which to examine "the subtle connection between how patriarchy interferes with female desire and how females experience their own passion as dangerous" (Vance, 1984, p. 4). As discussed in the previous chapter, this repressed danger breaks through the surface in "Seeing Red", where Spike's attempt to have sex with Buffy degenerates into sexual violence and his monstrous masculinity once again comes to the forefront, and this is at least partially constructed as Buffy's fault, insofar as she has transgressed the normative connection between femininity sexuality and love.

To Rape with Love: "He's so desperate for her affection"

This episode was deeply problematic for all of the women, and generated a great deal of conflicting perspectives. What I found most interesting in this discussion is how many of the women struggled to simultaneously both condemn and contextualize Spike's actions. The following excerpt from the first focus group highlights the attempt to negotiate through this highly ambivalent textual terrain.

Maya: ...when you look at the motives behind what each of them [Spike vs. Warren] did, like what place were they coming from? Because yeah, Spike is a vampire, but he's doing it out of love, he's doing it out of passion, and whatever else-

Helen: And she's not understanding.

Maya: Yeah.

Helen: Like it's horrible to watch that, because your brain is thinking, OK, there's a guy and he's trying to rape a girl, but at the same time you sympathize. Like I sympathize for Spike in that episode.

Alia: Because he's so desperate for her affection (Helen agrees).

Obviously, the women are uneasy in their sympathy for Spike, but they are aware that if they condemn his actions entirely, they will no longer be able to gain pleasure from connecting emotionally with his character. Therefore, in order to salvage that connection, they may be attempting to inscribe their desires on his emotional intent, choosing to understand it as being generated from a place of desperate love, which can be constructed much more sympathetically, rather than focusing solely on his actions, which are much more problematic.

The group also compared the masculine aggression portrayed by Warren with that of Spike. Spike's monstrous masculinity, which culminated in his actions, however 'misguided', were seen to be coming from a place of intense love for Buffy. Contextualized in terms of care,

his actions continued to be read somewhat problematically, yet also sympathetically. This is in direct contrast to Warren's monstrous masculinity in the episode, which was read by the viewers' as mundanely, and yet ultimately and unforgivably, evil. As one participant stated, Warren does not have the 'excuse' of love, which is in implicit contrast with Spike's forgivable aggression, which is the logical extension of his frustration. As Braun argues, "[t]he show's moral ambiguity often seems to intersect with themes related to gender and sexuality as character's behaviours and traits are linked both overtly and subtly with their gender identities or sexual histories" (Braun, 2000, p. 89).

This ambivalent, yet ultimately sympathetic understanding of Spike's violent actions was also echoed, at least initially, by the second focus group. However this perspective was severely censured by Eryka as she quickly and firmly denounced Spike's actions as being unacceptable and made a clear connection between the representation of sexual violence on the show to sexual violence in real life, claiming that the show had a responsibility to portray the consequences in a realistic light.

Eryka:... I think that in dealing with something like that, you can't just show it, and then not deal with it afterwards... Rape is always a power issue, it's always a control issues, and I think those messages need to be... like told. If you're going to do something like, if you're going to handle an issue like that, you need to have, you need to consult with people, and you need to have those very important messages out there, and included in it. And I think that, it made me uncomfortable to watch it, because the message wasn't getting out there. And it was perpetuating these stereotypes, it was perpetuating that men who do those kinds of things, are violent, are because the woman is the one who is responsible.

This appeal to television's necessary role as an educator for viewers was quickly echoed by the rest of the group⁶⁰, and her moral certainty pushed the conversation toward a much more negative stance in regard to Spike's actions. Eryka was clearly the opinion leader here,

and by the end of the discussion the other women of this group, even though they initially felt more ambivalent about the images, were willing to change their viewpoints to reflect her moral stance. This interpretive fluidity evidenced by the second group may merely indicate the participants' unwillingness to refute Eryka's overtly moralized statement rather than signifying an underlying agreement; however, the group felt comfortable enough disagreeing in many other aspects that were equally sensitive. A more compelling interpretation is that their agreement indicates their underlying ambivalence towards the show's use of sexual violence as a way of punishing Buffy's transgressions of using Spike for sex without love, and that Eryka's statement merely highlighted the ideological rupture of the pro-feminist text, a rupture that the first group attempted to suture with their explanatory narratives of Spike's care and love.

Further, several of the women addressed the fact that Buffy had been given all this superhuman strength, and yet was still vulnerable in the face of sexual aggression. This echoes arguments made by scholars examining BtVS that while Buffy is physically powerful, her body is situated in a world of male dominance and dangerous masculine sexuality; that at the same time as her body and desires give her power, they are dangerous, threatening and in need of regulation (Heinecken, 2003; Marranuci, 2003). "Visual and narrative strategies can undercut or contradict progressive orientation (i.e. rape scenes)...producing an impression of weakness and helplessness of strong female characters" (White, 1992, p.181). The participants' concerns about Buffy's inherent vulnerability can be understood as an awareness that while the text positions Buffy as having supernatural strength, this still leaves her open to fear and violence of male sexuality and aggression. This concern for Buffy's

limitations may echo these women's own experiences of vulnerability, even in the face of the increase in female social power generally, which they discuss further in the next chapter.

This chapter has examined the participants' discussion of the genres, characters, plots and the representations of gender and sexual relationships in order to more fully access how they negotiate constructions of femininity in BtVS. It is clear that the participants' are active in negotiating between preferred and oppositional viewing positions, at times simultaneously, and they are able to clearly articulate some of their pleasures and ambivalences in doing so. Having explored how the participants make sense of textual representations of femininity, I now move to a broader discussion of how the participants articulate their social and personal experiences of being inscribed as feminine subjects. The overall purpose of the next chapter is to locate some of the discourses of femininity as articulated by the participants as meaningful and how BtVS may both reflect and construct these narratives in order to pleurably hail and interpellate female viewers, as well as to provide them with a sense of relative power by informing these larger-sense-making narratives of femininity that exist outside the text. Furthermore, examining the participants' understanding of femininity as both an inherent state and as a complex bundle of roles contextualizes BtVS within the historical and cultural period in which the text emerges and is watched, and allows for analysis of the text within wider cultural discourses of gender.

CHAPTER FIVE: WOMEN TALK ABOUT FEMININITY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Introduction and chapter overview

I have argued that the emotional realism and experiential identification felt by these viewers is constructed through the text's representations of simultaneously subversive yet constrained images of appropriate femininity as signified through the ambivalently sexualized female bodies of the characters on BtVS – their desires, dangers and obligations – in a contemporary, if fictionalized manner. This textual interpellation is successful because it resonates emotionally with the experiences, fears and desires felt by the female participants. Having focused on how the women discuss these aspects within the show itself, it is now time to address how the women discuss their own experiences in regards to the same issues of femininity outside the text. While the previous chapter addressed the participants' discussion of their enjoyment and understanding of the gendered female body in BtVS, this chapter changes the focus to their understanding of their own experiences of being gendered female. This contextualization will engender a broader understanding of how the participants' personal narratives and experiences of femininity are constructed, reflected and circulated by larger social discourses of femininity, in which the text of BtVS takes part, as well as how these ideologies of appropriate gender 'fit' into the participants' larger understandings of themselves as females. This discussion is one that encompasses both the private sphere (their own personal understanding) as well as the public sphere (their interpretation and negotiation of society's understanding of them) in order to show the

necessary interconnectedness between the two with regard to generating context and meaning. Throughout my fieldwork, when asking questions and generating discussion among the participants, the term that I chose to use was “feminine,” in an attempt to differentiate it from the seemingly deterministic biological characteristics of “woman.” My desire here was to explore how these women understood and explained themselves as gendered subjects to themselves, as well as within larger social contexts, and ultimately to explore how their understandings may be both constructed and reflected in BtVS. Chapter three examined some of the textual mechanisms through which preferred yet ambivalent meanings were determined, both denotatively and connotatively. The last chapter provided an examination of the participants’ negotiations of the potential meanings encoded in BtVS and argued for their interpretative competencies; it is now necessary to turn to an examination of the participants’ positions on the social formation of gender, for the purpose of establishing the connection “...between [the] television texts positioning of a viewer, and the viewer’s states as ‘subject’ to broader social, cultural, and discursive formations” (Hay, 1992, p. 361).

Any discussion of the textual features that work to engage viewers needs to be grounded in larger socio-cultural understandings. The melodramatic imagination is not a subject position that occurs spontaneously, but is a product of discrete social and historical forces. Viewers do not come to a text free from experience or bias; instead, it is exactly these pre-existing perspectives that will construct a specific imaginative experience as rich and rewarding. As Ang argues, researchers “...also need to look at concrete, practical living situations of people which demand psychological assimilation and which form the raw material for imagination and fantasy” (1985, p.80), in particular the imaginative resolutions of real contradictions. In

chapter three, I briefly discussed some details of the social, political and economic changes of gender representation which in turn influenced, and was influenced by, televisual representations of femininity.

Brooks argues that one socio-historical root of the melodramatic imagination is the fragmentation of society (1973). Within Western culture, late (or as some people argue post-) modernity is characterized by a dissolution of certainty and the loss of teleological metanarratives. Traditional beliefs are seen as collapsing underneath the ever-increasing onslaught of rapid changes to the foundations of self, home, work, community and relationships. Without these bastions of certainty, many of us need to be reassured that our lives do have meaning, that we are important, and that there are reasons for the pain and suffering we have experienced, in spite of all evidence to the contrary (Ang, 1985, p.90). Therefore, television melodrama such as BtVS provides viewers with

...models of clear resolution for highly personalized, intensely enacted conflict. Television melodrama may be considered a contemporary substitute for traditional forms of social control--the rituals of organized religion and, before that, of primitive mythologies - that provided easily understandable models of 'primal, intense, polarized forces'. It is thus a powerfully conservative social artefact--a public ceremonial ritual, repositioned in politics and economics, drawing us into both the prescriptions and proscriptions of mainstream cultural values (Himmelstien, 2004, para.3).

One of the main ideological problematics of contemporary televisual melodrama, with its attendant prescriptions and proscriptions, is the personal experience and feeling of being inscribed with femininity – the constraints, pleasures, and ambivalences that are generated from negotiating a sense of self and social relationships which are fragmented, fluid and complex. It is important to discuss the understandings of femininity the participants bring to this viewing position as constituted by the melodramatic imagination, as televisual texts are

already always situated by and take part in pre-existing discourses of femininity. By means of an examination of the participants' discussion of their understandings and feelings of 'being' female, some of the social pleasures and anxieties concerning the roles of femininity can be connected to larger discourses of power, particularly the viewers' ambivalent relationship that is generated by engaging in, and being constituted by, a patriarchal system that provides both deep pleasure and deep concern.

Characteristics of Femininity

In order to better understand the women's own experiences and understandings of femininity, I asked two different, but related, questions regarding their perspectives on the issue. First, I asked what qualities or characteristics they thought society *generally* regarded as being feminine, and then asked the same question again, but this time from a personal perspective, asking what they *personally* thought made someone a feminine person. While many of the women easily answered the first question, the participants unanimously had more difficulties answering the second question, and responses were filled with long pauses, hesitations and uncertainty. Several of the women flatly stated they did not know. This may indicate a paradox in their understanding of what is feminine; that this trait, or set of traits, are so socialized that they rarely breach our consciousness and, at the same time, definitions of femininity are constantly in a state of flux, and hence women are always somewhat unsure as to what it might constitute. In order to facilitate the conversation, I broke the question down further, into emotional and physical aspects. When asked what some of the general social constructions of femininity were, the women answered in two distinct, but related ways.

Physical markers were seen as the most obvious and common signs of femininity. Social signification of the feminine body was focused on the areas commonly hyper-sexualized in the media, particularly the breasts. Alia states this common sense understanding when she says, “[t]echnically, it's boobs (laugh), you know?” These physical requirements were commonly connected to historical stereotypes of desirability – in short, the necessity of attracting the sexualized male gaze in order to qualify as appropriately female. Sharon further argued that it wasn't just that you had to have the sexualized features, you also had to have them in the 'correct' proportions as portrayed by the media – a standard she called the “Maxim Girl,” after a popular men's magazine that puts a scantily clad woman on the front cover of each issue. Other women also clearly articulated the position that in order to meet perceived social requirements of femininity, one requires some sort of awareness of and acquiescence to 'objective' social standards of beauty and sexual objectification. As previously mentioned, many of the women made a clear connection to the stringent standards prevalent in the media.

Maya: In wider society I would like to say they've changed, but I don't think they really have...to be physically pleasing in a certain way, from pages of a magazine. That's feminine.

Bianca:...I think sort of fitting the ideal, the stereotypical ideal of femininity often...I guess there are issues about beauty, sort of beauty ideals that creep into femininity, that society has this type of women that is considered attractive, beautiful that sort of thing, and in a way Buffy kinds fits into that, she's...white (laugh) with blonde hair, you know, petite, that kind of thing.

Bianca uses the representations of femininity portrayed on the show as an example of the social standards commonly thought of as ideal⁶¹. All of the women felt that the body itself was a primary site for normative inscriptions of femininity. In regards to the sexualized feminine body, Ava discusses social expectations as only having ideological space for a

binary construction; as she states, “[a] lot of times females, sexually, are objectified, or shouldn't be sexual at all.” Further, the participants’ comments underscored their awareness that bodies serve as a primary form of communication regarding the self-policing necessary to produce appropriate manifestations of femaleness. This is particularly relevant in their discussions of their own unruly bodies and the attempts made to contain them in order to gain social acceptance. Half of the women openly shared their previous struggles with disordered eating, and all the women freely discussed their frustration at social expectations of femininity that were largely seen as unrealistic.

Terri: I think I still have issues; I go through phases of knowing intellectually like how insanely stupid it is, and then I'll go shopping for clothes with my mom, and she's like "Hmmm" (general laughter and agreement), so you, it's unreal, right? And so, it's -

Eryka: You look good darling (mocking mother voice).

Terri: And I'm like "you know what, people don't see you go and say, you know what, you look great!", like you look happy, you look healthy, you look, you know, people like... and so I go between, but then falling into the trap of trying to please that, so I've just been thinking about it constantly, and it's driving me crazy.

Ava: It drives me -

Terri: I'm like twenty nine, and I've done women studies, you know, and you think you would have gotten out of that, but you don't, and it just pisses me off.

Eryka: There's an intellectual awareness that we all have, all of us here in the room -

Ava: We all know that those people in the magazines aren't real, right?

Eryka: And they get paid to look that way, and they work out, you know, they get paid to work out.

Many feminist theorists have argued that as females gain some modicum of social power, their bodies are physically required to shrink and take up less space in order to compensate (Bordo, 1993; Row, 1995; Spitzack, 1990). As Heineken argues, “[w]omen’s bodies are valued for the spectacle they provide, but at the same time women’s bodies must be small and unthreatening” (2003, p.3). In addition, the language of female liberation and power,

which stresses choice and strength, can promote an even more rigid standard of bodily maintenance in order to be acceptably feminine. This incredible shrinking woman syndrome was addressed by the participants who discussed how female media stars, including the actress who plays Buffy “shrank” as they became more famous. When questioned why they thought this was, their responses showed an awareness of social requirements placed on the stars, what they called “Hollywoodism.” In regards to the show, they felt both that Buffy’s decreasing size was unrealistic, and that it was potentially ideologically harmful for other viewers⁶².

Murray: Tying this back to something like the show, Buffy being so thin and so tiny, a lot of people could construe that is the reason why she's a strong, or as powerful as she's supposed to be.

Bianca: She's almost gaunt. Like she looks, she looked stronger, I thought in the first years, now she doesn't look as strong, and kind of fits more into the, you know, women must be thin role, that's what I think anyhow.

Eryka: It's weird, she's very fragile looking, and yet she can fight like the devil, and it's weird, because...that's kind of unrealistic.

However, the body also served as a marker in less fleshy ways – another common answer in regards to physical representations of femininity centred on clothing.

Rory: Sigh... (laugh)... (pause) I guess, I think a lot of it [femininity] is actually tied to...material things. Exactly, like what you wear, sort of, and how you construct yourself as...a woman I guess, but it's kind of weird...Clothes, I guess, and just the way I choose my clothes, sort of thing, and how I construct, like what I look like, sort of thing, as far as what...type girl I am, if that makes sense.

Again, this has a close connection to the show; in that many of the women’s responses as to what materially marked Buffy as feminine centred on her clothing, especially her footwear. I have argued in chapter three that part of what coded Faith as outside the constraints of

appropriate femininity and therefore morally inferior was her clothing, while Buffy's traditionally feminine clothing marked her as the acceptable feminine superhero who does not threaten the patriarchal social order. Terri makes this connection explicit when she states that,

Terri: I was watching Faith the whole time and basically...how Buffy is like the white WASPy upper class, and Faith, you know, she's wearing the white tank top, and she's the lower class sort of thing.

Emotional markers were also commonly invoked by participants in their efforts to describe the general social construction of femininity. The majority of the descriptive terms were negative stereotypes, including "passive," "weak," "emotional" and "dependant," as well as less explicitly negative but still ambivalent constructions of femininity, such as "caring" and "nurturing," and a few qualified positive characteristics including "more self-aware" and "emotionally strong." Both explicitly and implicitly, the women used constricting binary descriptors in order to locate feminine emotional characteristics. Their understanding of the social requirements of femininity have been constructed here against a masculine standard. While it can be argued that the dichotomy of female = not-male is the common organizing narrative when attempting to explain feminine characteristics, and that the participants are merely using socially given categories to construct their discourse of feminine characteristics, this understanding does not negate, and indeed seems to support the fact that the women's responses were shaped by what discursive tools they had access to; even in their attempts to signify differences that did not include the standard of masculinity suffered from lack of the language necessary to render them intelligible. However, we must also take into consideration that the women may not actually fully believe their responses, choosing to use pre-existing discourses in order to answer a difficult question more easily. However, there

are many other social discourses of femininity available, as will be shown in their conversation regarding feminism; these same women who here implicitly highlight the subordinate status of femininity in social discourses of gender will later argue that equality has largely won the day, and will phrase their concerns as largely having been met by the goals of liberal feminism. Therefore, their use of terms grounded in stereotypes indicates their awareness and acceptance of at least some of the core explanatory narratives generated by this framework. Taken together, their statements regarding social standards of femininity suggest that the women feel that society still values women mainly as man's 'other' and subordinate. As bodies, they are to be sexually pleasing, based on their physical appeal to men, and their emotional characteristics are constructed as the anemic opposite of men's. This echoes the women's own understanding of femininity; within the context of this question, the participants felt that femininity as constructed in larger social discourses was constrained by stereotypes.

While many of the women argued for the opening of previously gendered roles, many also concluded that this came at a price – the myth of the superwoman, the woman who has to do it all: look perfect, be nurturing, have a career and be successful in other traditionally public masculine pursuits.

Ava: Because women have to do it all...It feels like I have to be wearing so many different hats all the time. I have to be the scholar, the student, and be doing that thing which is my own thing, and working hard at that, and being creative, be a creative person, and then I have to be a mother which is a full-time job, and I still have to make a living somehow. And I feel sort of conflicted...yeah it's too much sometimes, being a woman.

Eryka: This whole idea that...you can be just like a man, you know? And that's what we should be striving for, is to be just like a man. To do everything that a man can do, but then also do what women are doing. I think that is a

very strong message in our time, I know that when I was growing up that's what I was told, and I'm still being told that. It's not be whatever you want, it's you can be whatever you want in this context and in these confines of striving to be like a man.

So while the participants celebrated the diversity of the available roles of femininity, they also addressed the personal difficulties inherent in negotiating this social freedom, clearly signifying their ambivalent relationships with social constructions of femininity. These pleasures and constraints generated by engaging in the roles of femininity will be discussed further in the section on masquerade.

Personal understandings of Femininity: "To me it's innate"

To further contextualize the participants' understanding of femininity, I also asked how they constructed personal identifications of femininity. This helped me to assess the intersection of public and private discourses of gender in their responses. In their attempts to answer this much more personal question of what they themselves understood to be feminine, the way they chose to speak about femininity was initially very different from their discussions of social identifications. While their responses relied on a much more internalized standard, they again largely spoke of the importance of bodies. Here the participants used their bodies and their experiences as a source of knowledge rather than as an external standard. The main difference here is that their bodies were no longer only the object of a public discourse but rather the space and subject from which to generate a more private experiential narrative.

Murrey: For me...it's sort of my femininity, no matter what I do, to me is innate.

Eryka:... (pause) I know I'm...I feel feminine all the time. I really can't get away from that. Like I...I don't really think I could be butch or masculine and only feel that way. Any time I'm doing anything that's remotely masculine, at

work say, I'm dealing with firing somebody, I still know I'm very feminine, just because... yeah.

Filled with hesitancy and qualified statements, their responses evoke an amorphous understanding that is embodied and largely expressed through the felt experiences of their bodies, rather than any discrete physical or emotional markers. This was not the case for all the participants; several were unable to articulate what, if anything made them feminine.

Bianca:... That's something I kind of struggle with, I don't... because it seems quite broad, it could be anything you want. It could be wearing pants, it can also be (laugh) wearing a skirt too... I don't have a sort of definitive answer for that, I'm still trying to figure that out for myself.

However, when answering the question “What do you do to *feel* feminine?”, the women uniformly responded that they engaged in stereotypical social practices of femininity, most often “dressing up,” “looking sexy,” “wearing makeup” and “doing things to feel pretty.” Feeling feminine was largely tied to their use of commodities as material signifiers to inscribe gender on their bodies: makeup, clothing and hair products. Buffy also engages in this common form of signifying femininity through material markers, as when she asks Xander to help her choose a dress, saying “Okay, do I want to appear shy, coy and naive or unrestrained, insatiable and aggressive?” (“Never Kill a Boy on The First Date”). Many of the women also made explicit references to sexuality, stating that this was an important part of signifying femininity, both to themselves and others. Once again, gendering the body through sexual desirability becomes a key signifier for both public and private understandings of femininity.

Alia: If I want to feel ‘girlier’... I'll put on makeup, but sometimes it's just the matter of how you walk (laugh). There's a sexuality to it.

Feeling feminine often seemed to necessitate creating and signifying the feminine body through external social markers of gender, where *being* feminine was often constructed as an unalterable and basic state that did not necessarily incorporate normative social standards. The personal state of femininity – being feminine – seemed to be generated from an innate, and largely taken for granted, sense of self that was defined as feminine based on personal, often unarticulable understandings of their bodies. While this understanding may be powerfully informed by social discourses of essentialism, it was also clearly expressed by the participants as being outside of these normative discourses of femininity; they stated they were feminine because that was their innate experience, not only the social expectation. However, many of the same women also responded with appeals to the biological when questioned about their personal beliefs as to what makes a person feminine; in particular, the possession of reproductive abilities was felt by many to be key. The uncertainty evidenced in the initial responses show that while private understandings of femininity have at least partially become disconnected from biology, there was still a strong appeal to essentialism and stereotypes in responding to the question. This became particularly clear when I questioned the women about their personal beliefs of emotional markers of femininity.

For the majority of the women, emotional signs of personal femininity included sociability, compassion (also described as caretaking and nurturing), and emotional strength. These personal understandings of femininity were seen as more positive than those characteristics of femininity discussed within the larger public.

Eryka: I guess one thing that I would say is a key characteristic of somebody who I would say is feminine is the ability to be caring, and compassionate, regardless of the situation actually is. I find that is a common thread between

anybody who I actually identify as being feminine, male or female, is that compassionate streak runs through everything.

However, there was also a clear awareness that these positive emotional characteristics often spring from socially traditional women's roles that are often socially invalidated, if not denigrated.

Bianca: I think maybe sort of the care-taker, sort of...sacrificing for others (laugh). I think that's often very much a female trait.

Murray:...I'd say strength because I look at the way my mother held the family together...I think a lot of women, women have always had to do that. Hold things together in a way that's never been recognised. And there's this kind of, it's more social strength than I'd say physical strength, but to me that's the chief characteristic of what it means to be, to be female, to be feminine, to be a woman... I would say sociability would be another...which in part comes...I don't know whether this is good or bad, but it comes from women's traditional role, trying to hold together the family...To me, those sorts of things are tied together, to me a lot of women's strength comes from a lot of traditional stuff they've had to do. Which in a lot of ways has been the unappreciated grunt work that nobody really realizes what it takes to do it.

The women generally had a difficult time discussing their own perceptions of femininity, both physically and emotionally, in many cases eventually engaging in the same public discourse they used to answer the question of social understandings and expectations. While many of the women attempted at least initially to discuss their personal understandings outside of pre-existing social discourses of gender, the pauses, gaps, sighs and statements of "I don't know" clearly articulate the frustration they felt at their inability to express their thoughts. The personal characteristics of femininity stated by the participants show an ambivalent desire towards both valorizing and problematizing any definitions based on the pre-existing public discourses, as well as an awareness that some parts of those discourses are important to their private understandings of the matter. This complex interrelationship between the public and private understandings of one's self as a gendered being is not often

addressed in mainstream popular culture texts, and may be a reason why BtVS is so popular. The show's focus on the pleasurable, yet ambivalent, negotiated social relationships necessary to the constitution of sense-making discourses of the gendered self and its experiences resonates clearly with these women's own understandings and experiences.

Several of the women mentioned they received the most positive attention when they played the stereotyped and expected roles of objectified sexuality, and while they felt this was somewhat problematic, they also received real pleasure from engaging in these roles. This tension was further confirmed when I asked if they felt that the social worth of women was located in their bodies – and got a resounding yes from the women in both focus groups.

Maya: You're not female, you're the female body.

Helen: You're not really a person, you're the female body, you are an object, you are not an actual human being.

Alia: The problem is, it's not just men doing it.

Helen: No, women are doing it too (general agreement)⁶³.

Ava: Oh no, not at all! (sarcastically)

Murrey: Sadly, the social worth of women is still very much tied to the body.

Ava: Absolutely.

Terri: Aye (general laughter and agreement).

These responses highlight the ambivalence that women feel regarding the social roles of femininity available to them from public and personal discourses. It also supports the argument that these women are at times forced to access pre-existing social discourses, regardless of their stereotyped, constricting and unsatisfying nature. As the previous discussions have shown, these public discourses are at least partially accessed and circulated through popular culture texts, such as BtVS. Therefore, the show both highlights and papers-over these concerns, becoming implicated as both a frustrating source of, as well as a

pleasurable response to, public and private discourses of femininity. Some may argue that this point is not an important point, in that by necessity we must access public narratives for self-understanding as we are social creatures and must learn from pre-existing frames of knowledge; however, when these ideologies are so often unsatisfying, and users continue to engage with them as a primary way to define the private self, they become highly problematic.

Conversely, while these appeals to traditional understandings of femininity can be read as a form of colonized thinking and action, insofar as these women are often only able to signify femininity by means of concepts legitimized through patriarchy, this can be read more radically. In this view, their statements can be understood as an awareness that femininity is an innate state *and* a performance, a role and a masquerade (albeit an uneasy and necessary one), both an essential and temporary part of their self-identity. What is interesting here is that the participants seemed most articulate when discussing their femininity in terms of the concept of roles.

The Pleasures and Constraints of Masquerade

I asked about social and personal constructions of femininity in the one-on-one interviews, and in order to better understand the complexity and ambivalence stated by the women in their conversations regarding femininity, I asked both focus groups what they most enjoyed and disliked about being feminine. I wanted to both clarify their previous statements, as well as to determine whether there was a consensus regarding the pleasures and drawbacks of living within a body inscribed by the public and private discourses of femininity.

Pleasures

The participants were clear that they felt a profound sense of pleasure in their femininity, and that the availability of roles was a major component to this enjoyment.

Maya: Thirty or forty years ago, I would not be in the Army, but I think that's great, that I have the opportunity, to be...you know, everything a woman has been stereotyped to be, as well as whatever else I want to make myself be...I think it's great that I can sit here, and define being female to me as being...an emotional wreck, being a bitch, being strong like a man, and being a leader, and having all those things, and saying "that's female," because that's a person...As opposed to that's female because it's a woman, you know.

Maya's statements here indicate that what she likes best about being feminine is the ability to be both the stereotype and everything 'else' that she wants to be; an evocative way of framing the issue, since this shows that for her the stereotypes haven't disappeared or been replaced; instead, alongside these stereotypes, there are now opportunities to go beyond the ideal roles of femininity historically allowed by patriarchy.

All of the participants stated their belief that there has been a positive shift in society regarding the acceptability of female roles, and that their opportunities to engage in non-traditional feminine activities signified that what society deemed feminine or not-feminine has shifted dramatically. Further, the participants argued that this shift has allowed them to 'play' with different roles, even while they understand that there continue to be many problematic constraints on this 'freedom'. Interestingly, in both focus groups, conversation regarding the pleasures of feminine roles was constructed largely through a comparison to men – in this case a more positive comparison, in that the women felt that they had more flexibility in their choices of roles within femininity than do men within masculinity.

Eryka: . . . I think that's the biggest thing, I think that's the biggest characteristic of being a woman is that you're allowed to be fluid and play all of these different roles. As much as you're expected to as well, you're allowed to as well, and I think that that allows you a freedom that men don't get.

Bianca: I think sometimes when you look at, yeah, despite oppression and all those things, I'm still happy to be a woman. In the sense that there is, there seems to be much more room, in terms of identity and stuff, whereas for men, I think it is, like there's still that box much more, like -

Helen: Doctor, accountant, lawyer (laugh), no.

Maya: You're not allowed to cry! If you're sensitive you're a pansy.

The overwhelming position that came from this part of the focus group discussions was a sense of deep pleasure and relative power in having a fluid approach to the roles available to them. This reintroduces the notion of the masquerade, where women occupy and play with their roles for pleasure, rather than feeling constrained by them. However, in the ensuing discussion of the difficulties, a more contextualized position emerges, showing once again their need to negotiate an ambivalent terrain of available roles.

Drawbacks

While the diversity of roles and the ability to play with them in different social situations provided a deep sense of pleasure and relative power for the participants, they also clearly stated that there were real constraints. The main difficulty felt by the women in regard to feminine roles is the expectation, or “pressure” as Sharon puts it, to be all things at all times – to be able to engage with all the roles simultaneously and with equal expertise. These personal concerns anticipate their forthcoming commentary on media representations of women. One of the main themes of their concern centered on the social expectation to be both feminine and masculine, and that the inability to incorporate both gender stereotypes set them up for social condemnation and even persecution. The following excerpt highlights some of these concerns about what they enjoy least about being feminine.

Sharon: The pressure.

Bianca: It depends on context.

MK: It's the pressure?

Sharon: The pressure... the pressure to be different things, or to be...

MK: All things?

Sharon: All things at the same time (general agreement).

MK: OK, different contexts?

Bianca: Yeah, because sometimes like the gentle quality often associated with femininity, like I feel that at times... that it's a burden. Either to be gentle or to have that gentility used against you.

Helen: To be always polite and tactful.

The importance of context continued in the conversation as the women agreed that what frustrated them most in regards to roles of femininity was not only their availability or lack thereof, but rather the lack of power they felt at times, which was based on their acquiescence to social demands. The women agreed that it wasn't so much that they preferred some contemporary roles to others, rather that they disliked having the roles imposed upon them; in short, they disliked social expectations. Additionally, there were other serious constraints to the notion of masquerade, including not knowing how to 'use' the roles, as well as feelings of cross-cultural constraint⁶⁴.

Sharon: So I think I'm pretty much constrained by others who see me in those types of roles. The availability of roles, I don't know how to use them, or when to use them. I'm glad they're all there, but I don't think I can use them all, because I'm constrained by...the criticisms of other people.

Furthermore, the continuing use of stereotypes to construct femininity was understood as both problematic and pleasurable.

Bianca: I am aware that, just walking down the street, people have a certain perception of who I might be, so I have to fight against that, I have to disprove stereotypes, and all those sorts of things. I think stereotypes for me, that's probably the biggest thing. I feel like I have to you know, really sort of break, break all those and be...in one sense be the opposite of all of those,

but at the same time, there's certain stereotypes, or... a certain stereotype and norms that I don't mind, that are OK, but if I embrace them, what does that... there's that type of conflict, like can I do both? Can I be opposite -

Maya: Have your cake and eat it too.

Bianca: Because there are certain stereotypes, often there's a whole bunch of stereotypes tied together. And so I want to break, like take a couple of these, and then leave that one out, and then do what I'm doing.

The participants clearly enjoyed engaging in some stereotypical roles of femininity, and yet also clearly expressed not only a sense of ambivalence toward their ability to do so, but also of frustration that these roles seem to come in representational 'packages' – are part of a larger discourse of femininity – of which they often have little control.

Taken together, the pleasures and constraints of the roles of femininity discussed by the women show that the necessary level of negotiation often results in a sense of ambivalence, and even outright contradiction. Because the women responded so powerfully to this issue of contradiction and femininity, their responses are worth quoting here at length.

Eryka:...it's hard, and I feel like I'm being pulled in many, many different directions because everybody has different expectations of how I am as a woman, and then I have my own world view and my own expectations to live up to as well... Often times, I feel so confined, because I feel like I can't really be, I can't just be, I have to be whatever everybody else wants me to be, and then once I take care of everybody else and their expectations of me, then I can just be.

Bianca: I think so at times, because it, you want to be powerful and... sort of in command, and then you kind of wonder if wearing a skirt or on a particular day wearing make-up or something isn't compromising that, so... Yeah, it can be kind of a struggle to fit the two together... I think that whole thing of can you have it all, I think that's, I kind of wonder about that... I suppose maybe shatter the old stuff and try and come up with something new, but there are obviously things that we carry, so we can't necessarily give them up entirely, just kind of like reconcile ourselves with them...

Sharon: Yeah, because you're pulled in different directions, right?... Well, let's just say ... I think there's always, I think it's the patriarchy thing, it's the whole society thing, where you're supposed to do this, but you don't know what

you're supposed to do. I think you're stuck into a little box. That's what the values or, or what the patriarchy is, or something like that. Sometimes it lets you out, sometimes it...you're not allowed out. Sometimes the definition of femininity and the definition of what woman is changes, and that's why sometimes it lets you out, you can go beyond it "oh, you can go out."

All of the women were conscious of the traditional social signifiers of femininity, and spoke often of a real feeling of pleasure in engaging with them. For the participants, the difficulty here seems to stem from their attempts to negotiate a terrain where pleasure is gained from engaging in something that is potentially dangerous and limiting to identity and self-expression, and to successfully navigate this terrain requires a great deal of fluidity. This understanding of femininity removes it from the discourses of essentialism, and shows that many of these women are actively attempting to negotiate between public discourses of femininity and their private beliefs, both within and against the larger discourses, using them to stitch together a collage of identity and experience for themselves. Therefore, popular culture texts such as *BtVS* which also, at least superficially, struggle with these same uncertainties will be particularly appealing to these viewers. As I have argued previously, the media has a powerful influence on how both women and men learn about gender roles, how to use them, and how to understand some of the social constraints of their acceptability.

Popular Social Discourses of Feminism

I felt it was important to ask the women about their views on feminism for several reasons. First and foremost, I wanted to explore how public discourses of feminism informed their own perspectives and experiences of being inscribed as feminine subjects. Second, since the show self-consciously positions itself as a feminist text, the participants' discussion of feminism can help us to better understand how the show works to hail and interpellate these viewers by engaging in some of these popular discourses of feminism, and particularly liberal

and/or post feminism, the most common form of media and social discourse in terms of publicly represented feminist concerns.

When answering the question “what does feminism mean to you?” the women’s responses were highly conflicted and ambivalent. Their relationship to both the term and the concept contained positive and negative elements. Discussing the positive elements of feminism, the women engaged in the discourse of liberal feminism, using such words as equality, individuality and choice. The positive aspects of feminism were largely all equated with personal choice.

Rory: Being valued as just as important as a male, like, and that's basically it.

Eryka: It means...it means that women have choices.

Sharon: I think it's fighting for your individual right...That's how I would categorise it.

While there was some discussion of feminism also working to address oppression among all genders and races, those who used this terminology did not define what they meant by oppression, and if it stemmed from individual or systemic actions. All of the women felt that feminism had worked to bring about positive and necessary changes, and there was general agreement, at least among the women of the first focus group, that the goals of second-wave feminism had largely been met, so that “at least it’s better than it was forty years ago.” While this was also echoed in the second focus group, Murrey and Eryka positioned themselves much more strongly as feminists, and problematized some of these social gains. Murrey in particular addressed the fact that women are tired of fighting, and while they may be aware of the gendered power dichotomy, they choose to sacrifice some feminist ideals in order to engage in the constitutive pleasures of being mothers, wives, and other ‘traditional’ feminine

activities. Eryka went on to argue that feminism is seen as a threat to systemic power differentials, and that was one of the main reasons why the term has such a negative connotation in popular public discourses. However, even these women felt some trepidation in publicly identifying as feminist, echoing the majority of the participants who felt a great deal of personal and social alienation about engaging with feminism, clearly understanding the social marginalization that results from publicly identifying with the concept⁶⁵. Here, Murray and Eryka, who most strongly identify with the term, share their fears and negative experiences of 'outing' themselves as feminist, addressing the loss of social status that can occur as a result.

Murray: For somebody, my own experience has been that it's taken quite a while for me to be able to say that I'm a feminist, because I'm very scared of how people would react to that particular statement.

Eryka:...if you say you're a feminist, see I won't necessarily say I'm, identify as a feminist...and I find I get further if I don't announce it, because people don't de-value what you have to say, but as soon as you say "I am a feminist," and you announce that, what you have to say is no longer as valid as if you hadn't said it.

This ambivalence quickly became outright rejection of many of the perceived negative tenets of feminism. Here the term 'radical feminism' was often used as a short-hand for the seemingly boundless aspects of anger, man-hating and anti-choice within feminist perspectives.

Ava: I think radical feminism has brought about a connection of the word to this image of this...

Eryka: Man-hating.

Ava: Yeah, man-hating, or castrating, lesbian psycho-bitch, right (laugh), basically.

Rory: It's true.

This discussion seems to convey a complex bundle of concerns: the women seemed to be uncomfortable with personally labeling feminism with these negative descriptors, uncomfortable that other people would label them that if they did identify as feminist, as well as highlighting the negative social stereotypes that are used against women who do identify as feminist. All of the women strongly agreed that there has been a backlash against feminism, and many of the participants identified much more strongly with the backlash than with feminism itself. The stated reason for this was they felt that militant or radical feminism was a rigid framework whereby they were once again constrained by expectations of a single, unified, legitimate form of feminist behaviour.

Maya: It's like the women who... feminism can't encompass you can't be a housewife, right? And [it frowned down] about women who actually chose that, it suddenly became not about choices anymore, which is what it was all about, your ability to have choice, and somewhere along the line, it morphed into, even women were overpowering them [other women], so that's where the backlash comes from, and people want to disassociate from that, because feminism became so radical.

While many of the women clearly understood that there were many possible discourses of feminism, they largely identified the concept within a negative framework of extremism, which they stated turned them off from identifying with or further exploring more moderate discourses of feminism. I argue that the reason for this reticence is based on how larger social discourses of feminism have narrowed the plurality of meanings to two dichotomous definitions: liberal feminism and/or post feminism, which is socially acceptable, and radical feminism, which is not. Liberal and post feminism, in the media, is largely a privatization of political and therefore public discourses of feminism; since women's issues have largely been constructed by Western society as 'solved', feminism is now about personal choice. Radical feminism on the other hand cannot be discursively re-framed by appeals to individuality, as it

challenges the very way society is organized by the governing interests of patriarchy and capitalism, and those interests that are served by the system. Therefore, feminist perspectives that challenge this power hierarchy and its vested interests become demonized through the same media forms that champion the seeming success of feminist gains.

What is clear from the previous quotations is that radical feminism is rejected through an appeal to heterosexual norms and expectations, and in this way, disguises itself as a private discourse of traditional gender expectations, sexual orientations and desires. The women's use of terms such as 'man-hating', 'lesbian' and 'castrating' show the success of this agenda; there was no discussion of how radical feminism contained concerns beyond oppressing men, and suppressing women's desires to be with men. However, in both focus groups, as the conversation continued, the participants' frustration with media and 'common sense' ideologies of feminism became increasingly apparent. The following excerpt of Eryka, Ava and Murrey is worth quoting at length, as they discuss their frustrations in regard to what choice means, showing deep ambivalence and concern that the socially acceptable discourse of feminism as 'choice' often winds up reinscribing responsibility and traditional understandings of the danger of female sexuality, and the continuing need to self-police their bodies and desires.

Eryka: If I put on something that I feel really sexy in, I have to think about the context, like 'where am I going, who is going to see me, is it going to be appropriate and are people going to accept that?' , you know? Whereas, damn it, I kind of would just like to wear what I want to wear sometimes, and damn it if it's appropriate or not and not worry about it. And I don't as a woman, I feel confined in terms of safety and security of my person, and there are things that I'm constantly told "You shouldn't do, you shouldn't walk out late at night," and I struggle with that, because I struggle with being a woman and being responsible for somebody else's actions towards me -

Ava: Yeah, so I'm not allowed to go for a walk because it's after dark because there's some psycho out there.

Eryka: And then there's that blaming out there, I find that society also blames women for what happens to them -

Ava: What were you doing out there tonight?

Eryka: That are detrimental, and that comes down to responsibility, right? Women are responsible for everything, and men simply are not. It's very confining, and it's very constraining, and I find that if I wasn't a woman, those are not things I would have to deal with. Having said that, though I enjoy being a woman, so...

Murray: The contradiction is being told that we can have it all, and if you start looking at what that means, that being that you shouldn't be walking on the street after nine at night, after dark, and you should pay attention to what you wear because some men may not be able to control themselves...

Eryka: Because ultimately it's your fault.

Murray: Ultimately it's your fault.

Eryka: You're just so ravishing (laugh).

While displaying an overt public anger towards a patriarchal system that privileges men was seen as alienating for these women, and was termed 'radical' feminism, the preceding quotation highlights the frustration and even anger that these women feel about the contradictory social discourses of femininity. This anger may be a reason that BtVS is such a powerfully enjoyable text for the participants; while Buffy remains a construct of acceptable feminism, the show can be understood by viewers as implicitly addressing some of these 'radical' frustrations and emotions, and the difficulty of living in a world that is dangerous for women, their desires and their bodies. The emotional realism and identification these women feel for Buffy is often ground in her dangerous and liminal experiences of femininity that occur through systematic indifference and even misogyny: that females do have to watch their backs when they walk down the street late at night, they do have to fear sexual violence, that their sexuality is still often blamed for sexual violence, and that their most trusted male partners can, and do, become monsters when women are at their most vulnerable. However, because the producers of the show must work within, and are shaped by, the current cultural climate of ambivalence towards addressing women's social fears and

their potential social power, this ambivalence is coded into the preferred meanings of the characters and plots, allowing for participants to negotiate different levels of meaning that can simultaneously challenge and reassert traditional social norms. While the show, and Buffy in particular, repeatedly depict the risks that threaten women, the program also promotes the idea that strong women are responsible for controlling themselves. In this narrative, men are not held responsible for their actions, another way of blaming the victim. The participants received real pleasure from engaging with the show, yet narratives that affirm a woman's responsibility for self-policing her sexuality are clearly also one of their deepest frustrations. Hence, the show both addresses and reinscribes the participants' concerns regarding their experiences, desires and fears of being feminine. Following Green's argument regarding the potential subversiveness of the post feminist superhero, Heinecken argues that

...ideologically, at least, most mainstream female heroes replicate traditional concerns with individualistic success and do not alter the basic American epistemology in any constructive 'feminist' way...while traditional heroic texts foreground the establishment of control over others...female centred texts primarily articulate concerns and tensions with autonomy (2003, p.152).

The show does not overtly engage socially alternative discourses of feminism; instead, a liberal model of choice, individuality and equality implicitly serves as the guideline for constructing the female leads, while the more ideologically sticky topic of the structural issues of female oppression are challenged by using horror and action, leaving it up to the viewer to choose how to interpret this environmental sub-text of affect. The general feminist narrative embedded within BtVS is one where, as several of the participants stated, being progressive means "doing everything a man does, while still having to be a woman." The show both reinforces the socially acceptable discourse of feminism as liberal feminism

and/or post feminism while potentially subverting, or at least complicating its own position through the use of genre, metaphor and excess.

In *Backlash*, Susan Faludi (1992) argues for the importance of the media in shaping popular understandings of feminism, and the following quotations illustrate the ways in which narratives of feminism are ‘borrowed’ and used by my participants.

Helen:...like when people say feminism, the first thing that pops into my head, which is a quotation from somebody else, is that "feminism is a four letter word," and...I don't know who said it, I don't where it came from, I think it was on television actually-

Alia: Yeah, I've heard it.

Bianca: I've heard of it too.

However, as the previous section addressed, the participants’ understanding of feminism are not simply negative, but ambivalent and fluid, able to encompass both positive and negative aspects. *BtVS*, which is also an ambivalent representation of the possibilities of female power, both socially and physically, works to construct televisual subject positions that reflect these same situated understandings, experiences and desires of feminism on the parts of the viewers.

Empowerment

I asked the participants if they felt that *BtVS* was empowering, without defining the term for them⁶⁶. The participants responded diversely. Once again, their perspectives show that they were able to simultaneously accommodate more than one perspective – they were aware of the ideological and representational ‘problems’ as Rory puts it, in how the show represented progressive femininity, and that these constraints could pose difficulties with respect to their enjoyment of the show. However, at the same time, the vast majority of participants argued

that the show offered a tangibly different and positive representation of femininity, one that they enjoyed and felt drawn to.

Rory: I think that there's obviously, there's some problems to the character... And you can poke holes in it, but I mean you can poke holes in everything on television, because I mean it's not, it's television, so... Comparatively speaking, it's one of the most powerful women's roles I think on television. Like I haven't seen anything else that compares to that.

Sharon:... It's great that Buffy can kick ass, but I don't think I can do it (laugh). ... I don't think that it makes me feel empowered per se, but it did open the door for a lot of other characters... It's empowering that some people can do the whole... ass kicking thing, stuff like that, and they're on their own... [but] to me it's all television... in the end you see them and they're too pretty... Somebody's... their hairstyle is... and to dress them up and stuff like that, and they have to watch their weight... So camera angles and stuff, right?

These statements show that Rory and Sharon clearly felt that the representations of femininity on BtVS were empowering in relation to *other televisual representation of femininity*, however, few of the participants argued that these representations were progressive when compared to their own experiences and desires of femininity.

Murray: I think in many ways yes. I think it's a show that shows women in a positive light, because it allows them to be multi-dimensional, it shows both the highs and lows. On the other hand, I've sort of come to the conclusion that if Josh Whedon considers himself a feminist, he's very much a liberal feminist, which means it's in the context of, you can at least do anything a man can do, just as well, and maybe look better doing it, you know? Which to me poses huge problems in terms of how female viewers are supposed to interpret what is going on in this particular universe.

Eryka: I think, again, what it comes down to is that it's a plot, it's a story and it's appealing the idea of women's empowerment while at the same time looking pretty, like running around in high heels and kicking ass (laugh). I mean -

Terri: Push up bra.

Eryka: Yeah, exactly. Like kicking ass is even more empowering than doing it in running shoes (laugh), you know? So, there's tons of mixed messages, I

don't know if the intent of the show is to really show women in a really positive light, or in a different way than other television shows, really.

As Fiske argues, televisual texts can be progressive even when they contain strong elements of dominant ideologies, in that social change occurs through hegemonic processes of negotiation, due to how

...the discourse of feminism is articulated in a constant tension with those of the dominant ideology of patriarchy. The presence of the dominant ideology and the conventional form of realism through which it works are necessary to ensure the program's popularity and accessibility, but do not necessarily deny the progressive, oppositional discourses a space for themselves (Fiske, 1987, p.47).

The use of genre blending and metaphor, as well as the tragic structure of feeling in *BtVS*, attempts to suture the ideological gap between potentially radical and more traditionally conservative representations of femininity. While the dissonance between the two positions was often seen by the participants as a strength of the show, allowing them to pleasurablely engage with characters and plots that were emotionally believable and provided a form of experiential identification, the ideological gap between these two positions was, at times, also too large to be sutured, with the result that several of the participants explicitly questioned the assertion of Josh Whedon's statement that the mission statement of the show was to celebrate "the joy of female power: having it, using it, sharing it" (Miller, 2002, p.35).

However, taking an either/or view of feminist status of a text may be less productive than viewing televisual texts as sites in which cultural negotiations over the meanings like feminism and female power take place (Heinecken, 2003; Vint, 2002). As Mayne argues, "[i]t is not about the authenticity of representations of feminism, but rather with the significance of the fact that increasingly, feminism is being appropriated by various mass cultural forms"

(Mayne, 1988, p.84). Moreover, the participants seem to feel this way themselves, i.e. that BtVS is potentially empowering while working to reinscribe traditional constructions of femininity that constrain their social and physical power, and that what is most pleasurable is that feminine concerns and experiences are highlighted and meaningfully addressed. This 'both/and' rather than 'either/or' understanding may provide the participants with a relative sense of power in constructing sense-making narratives of gender that are both constructed by and reflected in televisual texts. This relative sense of power comes from the complex, ambivalent and shifting representations of femininity, which encourage viewers to occupy televisual subject positions that necessitate the fluid movement between positions, at times a contradictory, but always negotiated, position that mimics their negotiation of daily experiences of being inscribed as female.

However, once again, the participants did not all agree with each other. Several of the women argued that while the show could be understood as empowering, they did not gain pleasure from watching it engage or negotiate with the representations of appropriate femininity; they watched the show because it allowed them a form of escape.

Ava: I don't tend to think of it that way, but I guess it could be seen as that way [as empowering]. More so than most television I'd say...A lot of shows that profess to be more empowering to women, are still more centred on women having to fight against persecution from men, whereas this is more about...women and men fighting evil (laugh), which is, you know, and themselves, and their faults within themselves. And I think because of that, it's feminist in a very modern way.

Alia: Yeah...She [Buffy]...uses both the stereotypical female weaknesses and the stereotypical female strengths, and it combines them into a strong figure...From a purely physical point of view, yes it's feminist, and from other aspects it is as well. So, it doesn't go out of it's way necessarily to be feminist, it just, she's a strong character, ...I'm not coming to it from a strong political thing, I just kind of watch the show and enjoy the show (laugh).

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the participants' personal and social understandings of femininity, and how they are constructed through the body and its actions. I have also attempted to address how the women discussed the pleasures and constraints regarding the roles of femininity, in order to access how these negotiations effect their constructions of personal and public sense-making narratives in terms of their own contemporary experiences of femininity. The last section included an overview of the participants' engagement with feminism, and how representations of feminism in BtVS were seen as empowering in a qualified sense. The purpose of the final chapter is to explicitly reconnect the show to the experiences of the participants' lives, to better understand if they feel that BtVS has personal and/or social relevance through its participation in the discourses of femininity, and also to address their concerns regarding media representations of femininity more generally.

CHAPTER SIX: CONNECTING IT ALL BACK TOGETHER

Introduction and Chapter Overview

In chapter four I discussed how the participants negotiated meanings generated by engaging with the characters, plots and representations of femininity within BtVS. In chapter five I addressed how the participants constructed social and personal definitions of femininity outside the text, as well as some of the pleasures and ambivalences that arose from engaging in these definitions and roles of femininity. The primary purpose of this chapter is to reconnect the show to the participants' everyday lives, to see if they use the text to explicitly inform their larger sense-making narratives of femininity. Having discussed both public and private discourses of femininity through an analysis of the participants' conversations, this section reconnects these narratives of femininity to the show. Secondly, this chapter includes a concluding discussion that will briefly re-examine the main assertions of this thesis, and will address my initial concern regarding the potential for relative power to be generated by and for female participants who engage with BtVS.

Throughout the fieldwork, I asked a series of questions regarding the connections the women consciously made between the show and their daily experiences of being feminine subjects. My decision to explicitly ask these women to explore their lives through the show was not based on the belief that they would provide a transparent window into the complex interplay between text and self, but in order to better understand how the women

themselves spoke about the show in relation to their feminized lives and to see if they either made or resisted these connections.

Personal and Social Relevance of BtVS

The intent of the larger focus groups was to gain information regarding what role the media, and BtVS in particular, plays in constructing the ideals and roles of femininity. Further I was curious to see how the participants discussed the meanings of femininity they constructed and negotiated in relation to the text. As the following section shows, in a group setting, many women stated that they felt that the media played a role when they were younger; however, they all actively resisted the idea that televisual texts, including BtVS, continue to have an influence on them. Once again, however, this position became much less clear cut as they explored the issue further in group conversation and follow-up conversations.

As discussed previously, when asked if the show was trying to ‘say’ anything about women’s roles, the majority of the women initially stated that the show did not favour any dominant construction of femininity. In chapter four, many of the participants stated that it is the polysemic openness of the text, and the construction of the characters with diverse gendered traits, which make the show so enjoyable. The participants argued that BtVS allows, and even actively encourages different readings of what it means to live in a body inscribed by femininity. As Bianca stated, the show leaves interpretations of correct femininity “up to the audience.” Buffy’s embodiment of both stereotypically feminine and masculine characteristics was also understood by the participants as a reflection of the changing social roles of femininity, that the lack of an overtly traditional normative construction of femininity on BtVS was a reflection of changing social expectations wrought by feminism,

and that the show's ability to incorporate diverse gendered characteristics was a response to these social changes, which have resulted in a diversity of feminine roles among which women are increasingly free to choose. This freedom was discussed as one of the reasons engaging with the show was so pleasurable. However, the participants also addressed some of the constraints the show placed on these potentially progressive representations of femininity. Therefore, whether or not the meanings generated were consciously applied and/or seen as empowering the participants outside the text in constructing sense-making narratives of their experiences of femininity was less clear, and this chapter explores this ambivalence further.

Buffy and Everyday Life

I had three somewhat different, yet interrelated questions about the participants' personal connections to the show. First, I asked if any personal experiences drew them to the show; then I turned the question around, and asked if the show was relevant to their personal experiences⁶⁷. Finally I asked them if the show was relevant to their everyday lives. In all questions, I let the women define what meaning they chose to give to the questions and to answer them according to their own understandings.

Once again, the majority of the women answered the question within the framework of emotional realism and identification, and responded with a qualified yes, that the show was relevant in their daily lives as an imaginative explanatory text that connected to their own experiences and desires. While the responses were qualified, the participants seemed willing to state that either some of their personal experiences drew them to the show, and/or that the show addressed some of their personal experiences. When asked if the show had any

relevance to their life experiences, the majority of women spoke of the sense-making role the show had in their lives in terms of BtVS representing real-life issues they had struggled with, or that at least the representations felt realistic, and that they could potentially see themselves struggling with the same issues and concerns.

Embedded in the text and context of the televised tale, both character and viewer resolutely attempt to find meaning; the character seeks to establish sense in, the viewer of, the program. This parallel involvement of audience and textual personae in the processes of manufacturing a coherent tale out of the events of a life, a program, or both, generates a cognitive empathy. A common alignment in hermeneutic (or sense-making) endeavour prompts identification, opening this sharing of perspective to all (Wilson, 1996, p. 50).

Many of the women spoke more generally of the metaphorical aspects of the show, saying that it was through the imaginative aspect that they were able to read a variety of personal concerns through the show, particularly in regards to Buffy's depression and all the characters' struggles to have healthy fulfilling relationships. Again, many of the women chose to highlight their connection, experiential identification, and emotional realism as being constructed through the representation of relationships.

Ava: Yeah, I suppose. I mean...I've seen some dark places in my life, and I really like that the show isn't afraid to explore those places, you know, they're willing to go into... I think it's not afraid to go places emotionally, and a lot of television doesn't do that, like the tragic romance...They deal with some heavy, heavy issues in a way that's not heavy handed or not preachy or judgmental because they deal with characters that we already care about going through these things. And a lot of it is metaphor for life.

Alia sums up most succinctly the identification between the show and her life when she responds to my question if her own personal experiences draw her to the show with, "yes and no. With anything, you're living vicariously through these characters. It's not necessarily the experience, but...It sort of sets a parameter for your expectations, or your lack of

expectations (laugh), I guess.” Her belief that the show influences rather than dictates personal understandings and experiences of being female is echoed in Murrey’s response, a more common response, which simultaneously included a dual subject position that encompasses both emotional closeness and identification with ironic distancing.

Murray:...I don’t know if I would say that I find it directly relevant to my life experiences, because let’s face it, it’s a science fiction fantasy sort of horror show...but I think as a show that makes me think about what is going on in my own life, and why that might be, yes, I do think it’s relevant. Yes, I do think it makes me think, especially with notions of femininity and what it means to be a powerful woman for that matter...It’s a medium to think about those issues, in a way you that you can think about them but also keeps them safely, sort of at a distance, you know, it’s not really real, so...

As Murrey clearly articulates here, for some of the participants, the show becomes a textual ground that, in order for one to gain pleasure from it, simultaneously requires an emotional closeness, as well as an awareness of the text’s constructedness. As Dow argues, “[i]t is possible for television to be acknowledged as fiction and yet be experienced as realistic in its characterisation or treatment of issues” (qtd in Heinecken, 2003, p.15). This duality in viewing position creates a form of ironic distancing from the text, a viewing position that paradoxically necessitates involvement in order for the proper distancing to occur. The show’s generous use of genre combining, metaphor and irony labour to highlight and suture this ideological gap, with the result that the viewer is hailed and interpellated as a self-conscious consumer. As I argue in chapter three, the use of genre combining, metaphor and irony renders visible some of the constructedness of the text while simultaneously using these ideological gaps as a form of meaningful address.

As a third position in regards to the show's relevance as a sense-making narrative that addresses the participants' experiences, an outright rejection of BtVS's meaningful influence on informing these women's interpretative communities was far less common.

Terri: No, and that's pretty funny. It's kind of like this sanctuary where you just go, it's escapism. I guess that's what it is really, it's total escapism because it doesn't relate to my daily life I can, yeah. There you go, it's escapism. And I'd like to keep it that way (laugh), so I try and not to relate it to my daily life (laugh).

While Terri, and to a lesser extent Sharon, clearly articulated their perspective that the show did not resonate on any personal level, both had previously commented that they deeply enjoyed the representation of relationships, and felt that they were at least “somewhat realistic.” Within the focus group setting, this adopted position of extreme and ironic distancing from the text as a sense-making narrative informing their interpretative communities was echoed by some of the other participants who had previously stated in private interviews that they were drawn to the show precisely because of the connection to their life experiences. Rather than attempt to suture this contradiction, I have argued that the participants are able to actively hold *both* positions in a productive tension, each of which can be activated to a different degree, depending on the context, pleasure and position of relative power involved for the viewer.

When they answered the question, “Do you think about the show in relation to your daily life?”, all of the participants replied in the negative, showing an interesting paradox; the women are willing to discuss how they engage and construct meaning from the BtVS based on its ability to connect with their lived concerns and desires, and yet did not connect these meanings and pleasures to their larger, more systematic understandings of their daily lives

and experiences. While this may constitute a semantic difference, and the participants might have answered differently to a different wording of this question, I believe that this dissonance highlights an important ideological gap – that the women chose not to answer in the affirmative not only due to their inability to make the ideological connections, but also based on the fact that generally, they chose to place little ideological importance on how they generate meaning from the show personally. The question of how to explain the participants' dissonance between emotional closeness and identification versus distant is contested in the field of television studies; some theorists continue to argue for labels of false consciousness, others for a uses and gratifications approach. My contention is that the participants' construction of the show as ironic fantasy and their engagement with it as a form of escape is a powerful inscription device that both negates and builds upon conscious connections to daily life.

Fantasy/Escapism

The previous discussion of gender constructions as represented through the body and sexual relationships in BtVS reveals that the participants actively construct and apply external sense-making narratives of femininity to a complex and often ambiguous text. BtVS consciously interpellates the viewers' melodramatic imagination by means of its tragic structure of feeling, genre combining, and use of metaphor, all of which highlight mutual ambivalence of the text and its viewers as regards the social pleasures and constraints of the roles of femininity, feminine bodies, and the corresponding power and sexual desires grounded within those bodies. Both the text and the viewers are primarily concerned with affect – how it feels to live in a gendered world fraught with both pleasure and danger, and how to negotiate that shifting and uncertain social terrain. However, many of the participants

resisted taking the ideological problematic of BtVS seriously, even as they stated that it addressed key issues in their own lives. Rather, they described their enjoyment of televisual texts, including BtVS, as a way of *escaping* the realities of daily life⁶⁸.

Maya: It's good escape. I mean it. I come home, and I'm cranky (laugh). I've had a long day, and it's usually filled with crap, and people I've had to deal with. I don't really want to talk, I just want to go...and I want to watch something that I, that's not my life.

Alia: Television has to be an escape, and I really, I don't need to...I'm trying to get away from my own life, so I don't really need to see the harsh realities of anybody else's (laugh).

The different ways of negotiating and making meaning from the text as discussed previously by the participants are also relevant here. One of the most pleasurable ways that BtVS is understood by these women is in terms of the desire for escape and fantasy, two somewhat different, but interrelated concepts. Watching the show can provide an emotional space for fantasy, allowing the viewers to play with identities and situations that may not be desirable in the real world. For those participants who feel an affective connection to Buffy, this may translate into the exploration of their own desires for both domination of, as well as submission to, forces outside of their normal control. Certainly the women felt this vicarious joy when the majority of them responded that the best thing they liked about Buffy was that she could “kick ass” – obviously a power that they lacked in real life. What seemed equally important to the participants was the emotional focus on relationships, where men were equally, if not more, obsessed with desire and love. This concentration of the emotional and romantic aspects is also an important way that BtVS hails and interpellates viewers through their fantasies, fantasies of romance in which monstrous masculinity can be desired, engaged with and tamed without the viewer having to endanger herself or worry about the political, social and/or economic implications of doing so in real life.

This corresponds with Ang's findings (1985, 1995) that one of the most powerful pleasures of engaging with a tragic structure of feeling is the ability to create a space where the difficulties and ambiguities of daily life can be resolved or surrendered to without threat to the self as it exists outside the text. "Fantasy is important; it offers space in which socially impossible or unacceptable subject positions can be adopted" (Ang, 1995, p.94). However, while this space can be positive, at least in the imaginary, there are also some real and troubling political implications of fantasy and escape with respect to the construction of appropriate femininity, that the participants seemed aware of.

Eryka: As much, yeah, and as much as television is, there's a lot of excuses that people make about entertainment, they're like "Oh it's just entertainment, it's just fantasy, not real," but there are messages that people are getting, especially young people, because young people watch shows like this, you know? And those are the messages that get ingrained, this is why we feel like, you know, that we can't control the fact that when we look at somebody we judge them, because this is ingrained because we learn it every single day watching that, from hearing about it in the news, from hearing about it from people who are around us who watch that.

Maya: Yeah...if you're watching a really strong person on TV, of course there's the appeal to want to be like that strong person, and I think that's really strong...I mean, we may really take it in, and say "Yeah, I can't really be that way, but wouldn't be nice?" And it adds that fantasy element, and really ingrains that fantasy element into us...And I think it has a negative impact when you watch all the, there's a specific type of person who actually gets on TV...You got to be this, you got to be so tall, you got to be pretty, you got to be...You don't see average looking people on TV, because that's just not something to achieve. You're already there, right (laugh)? Like, it has to give you something that is different from your own, something that you want, something that you don't have...so it can fill that in you right? So in that way it's negative.

Ang argues that "[t]he pleasure of fantasy is the ability to move beyond the constraints of everyday life, [and] the appeal of fantasy takes us beyond what is possible, or acceptable in

the real world” (1995, p. 93). However, engaging in fantasy is not a private act; rather, it is informed by, and mutually constituted within, a larger social matrix of desires and fears.

While gender is not the defining discourse at all times, females and males learn to engage in fantasy in the same way that they learn all other actions that constitute a subject, through an articulation of complex, shifting and competing narratives that are constructed both within and against normative ideologies of gender. Fantasy may be a flight from the everyday, but the everyday grounds and shapes the fantasies represented in televisual texts. As the participants clearly articulate, fantasy has ideological implications, not all of which are potentially emancipatory or empowering.

The importance of fantasy to everyday self-consciousness and its presence as an element not just of the private self but of the public and political self too is only just beginning to be recognized in social studies research. The everydayness of television’s pleasures, so widely commented upon...should not lead us to ignore the fact that programs stimulate viewing subjectivities in ways which do not neatly answer to the categories either of knowledge or of pleasure as these are placed within the normative schemes often assumed in studies of TV (Corner, 1998, p. 98).

If public and collective fantasies such as BtVS are necessarily grounded in a sense of realism, this may encourage viewers to occupy (once again) a contradictory viewing position, one that works simultaneously to allow a separation between reality and text, and to reinscribe a sense of reality. Press argues that televisual texts blur fiction and reality, and that television has only the most “...indistinct boundaries between fiction and reality” (1991, p.131-132). In her study of female viewers, Rockler takes Press’ argument further:

Consequently, as fiction and reality merge, elements of realism and escape contradict each other...viewers like the show because it resonated with their own experiences, but at the same time they claimed they liked the show because it allowed them to escape from their everyday lives (1999, p.82-3).

While escape has some similarities to fantasy, insofar as they both provide a cognitive and emotional space outside of the experiences of the self, escape is constructed more as a flight from something, where fantasy is often an escape to something. For the women I interviewed, their engagement with not only BtVS, but with fantastic genres in general has to do with escape, with the ability to leave the daily world and its demands behind. They are clear that it is this temporary escape from the mundane that is the reason for their pleasure. They also enjoy the constructed fantasy of BtVS to which they escape. The tension here is that escape is provided both through an emotional connection to, as well as an emotional distancing from, the characters and their circumstances. If the emotional and identificatory connection between the text and viewers is not there, then escape cannot be achieved – in short, the expectation of a pleasurable release is frustrated.

Watching TV...is frequently prompted by the evasion of duty...the pleasures of 'escapism' for viewers arise paradoxically, from recognising that a textual (or 'programmed') role is similar to one they already inhabit in the life-world, their familiar every day world of lived experience. Televisually, the viewer 'escapes' from a pre-textual life-world into that on screen. Escapism is prompted by, and pursued through, identification (Wilson, 1996, p. 150).

There is also an apparent paradox with respect to fantasy and escape; the participants found BtVS pleasurable due to their sense of its realism and their feelings of identification, but also due to their ability to distance themselves from a viewing position that is too close to these very things that render the text enjoyable in the first place. Once again, the self-conscious use of metaphor, excess and genre combining allows viewers to negotiate different, if constrained, complex viewing positions, which encompass both closeness and distance, both of which seem to be necessary in order for them to fully enjoy the text.

Media generally

I have argued that, as a media device almost solely located in the private sphere, television is an important moderator of our connection to larger public spheres, and is a technology of gender production and reproduction. This is particularly salient in relation to how the participants watch *BtVS*, as each of them primarily watches alone.

As society becomes privatized, the images and ideals we consume in the privacy of our homes become increasingly numerous and influential, particularly with the growth of television as a medium that can bring the outside public world into the privacy of our homes...This reliance on the private realm is particularly salient for women in our society, whose role in the public world is even less legitimated than that of men...Television helps us to bridge the gap between the public and private realms of our lives and to maintain, in our increasingly fragment levies, a feeling of connection – however precarious – with the social world, even if this connection is emotive rather than substantive (Cloud, 1992, p.17).

As television increasingly becomes a constitutive part of the way people in Western society interact with the world, and as it informs their interpretative communities, a more detailed examination of how the participants discussed their relationship to media generally may further an understanding of how they consciously negotiate, incorporate and use televisual narratives to make sense of their daily lives as embodied subjects and objects of normative social discourses of femininity⁶⁹.

In the focus groups, the women largely articulated their feeling that the representation of feminine bodies in mainstream media had little impact on how they construct their own experiences of living within a body inscribed with femininity.

Sharon: I think I agree with what Alia says. If you take it in, if you accept it, or if you actually watch TV and concentrate on what they give you...If you

don't, if you phase out, if you don't think about it, then it doesn't effect you. But if you let it affect you, it will affect you a lot.

Several women stated that the media did affect them when they were younger, yet they all felt this was no longer the case. However, as with all their other responses, this discussion was not as clear-cut as it initially appeared, and this perspective underwent some fairly major revisions in further conversations. When directly asked if watching BtVS ever made them think about their own bodies, the vast majority of the women said no, yet the women also spoke at length about the impossibly small shape and size of the main characters' bodies, indicating that they were at least aware of the discrepancy between their own and other 'real' bodies and those represented on the show. In particular, the discussions focused on the controversy generated by on-line fans about Willow's lover Tara's weight, who many fans have called fat⁷⁰. All of the women from both focus groups stated disbelief and outrage that this occurred, and felt that she was being unfairly compared to her ultra-thin co-stars, which can be constructed as an indirect way of discussing themselves, especially since many of them compared themselves to Tara in this discussion, and all were adamant that she in no way could be construed as overweight.

Terri: I think if I had been reading that stuff at the time about Tara being fat, that would have probably, that would have done me in, like "Holy Shit, Tara's fat?" And then I would have been, that probably would have bothered me on some level; I would have headed to the fridge.

Ava: Well, that ticks me off right now!

As I have mentioned previously, the majority of the participants stated that they either had difficulties previously or continued to do so with accepting their less-than-perfect bodies, and that positive masculine terms such as 'big' or 'strong' were often used and understood as subtly derogatory when directed towards them or other females, and that the words connote

“fat.” There was also an engaged discussion of how thinness has been marketed as “fit” – one woman discussed a prior eating disorder and how she masked it by telling everyone that she wasn’t trying to lose weight, she was just trying to get “fit.” “Dieting is one discipline imposed upon a body subject to the ‘tyranny of slenderness’; exercise is another. Since men as well as women exercise, it is not always easy in the case of women to distinguish what is done for the sake of physical fitness from what is done in obedience to the requirements of femininity” (Bartky, 1988, p.65). This connects to chapter three’s discussion of how physical fitness can easily become a social demand to self-police the potentially threatening female body so that they must always be in a position of striving for an unachievable physical perfection, and will thus have a great influence on the signification of social position and social worth. This dialogue was generated through one woman’s comment that Buffy was thin because she was so fit, showing the participants’ ability to discuss, and make sense of, hegemonic codes of femininity on television through their own experiences. This connection between the appropriate feminine body size and power is explicitly addressed by Murrey, who has already been quoted as saying, “[t]ying this back something like the show, Buffy being so thin and tiny, a lot of people could construe that is the reason why she’s as strong, or as powerful as she’s supposed to be.”

Initially in the focus group discussion, the participants seemed to be willing to discuss potential media effects only in relation to how they might affect others, particularly young women. In this aspect, there was a real and pervasive concern about contemporary representations of the sexualized female body, and that the media was responsible for encouraging both young women and men to fetishize and value the feminine body based solely on its conformity to traditional and overtly sexualized representations grounded in

satisfying the male gaze. However, as conversation continued, several of the participants seemed more willing to publicly state that television, and other mass mediums, not only had an effect on young women, but also impacted the way they themselves understood and structured acceptable female bodies.

Bianca: I think television does have, it does sort of play into what...sort of what ideas of what is acceptable. Because when you do see someone, when I see someone who is a normal weight, or, heavier, I go, it's like, "oh", you notice it (general agreement). And it's like, why should I notice it, why isn't that the norm? Why is it, why does it have to come out so sharply to me?

Specific Media Influences on Women

In an attempt to further address these concerns about representations of normative inscriptions of femininity and televisual texts, in my last extended contact with the participants I asked a series of questions regarding their own beliefs on how the media affects women generally, as well as their own personal relationship to the media. These questions again brought forth a much more ambivalent relationship than previously stated in the focus groups. This shift may be due to the fact that many people are much more comfortable assuming that the media affects others in ways that they are either afraid of admitting also affects them, or genuinely think that media influences are much more powerful on others, as seemed to be the case when the participants talked about the effects of media on youth. Secondly, the women may have felt more comfortable being in a one-on-one situation where they could admit media has a greater influence on them, as well as having had time to think through some of the questions and concerns raised by the focus groups.

When questioned about the effects of media on women generally, the participants unanimously agreed that there was a relationship of affect. All the women stated that the media constructs ideal images of femininity, which women feel pressured to emulate. Several of the women also connected femininity to consumerism, in that the media constructs fantasies of femininity which can only be fulfilled by purchasing commodities. There was a clear belief here that the media does influence common and popular understandings of femininity, as well as giving never-ending instructions on how to attempt the never-fully-achieved state of proper femininity.

Sharon: It gives them that image that they have to look up to. No, not look up to, but portray, like... a thin model... yeah, it's another role; you could say it's like a substitute or role model for women.

Rory: For me it's more of a subtle thing. I don't watch it and I'm like "Oh, that's a female role model". I've never thought about it that way. I mean as far as body image... the problem is that it's so subliminal because you're so exposed to it, and you're always exposed to like how women look, and how do you fight that? It's like, you know what I mean? I think it definitely has impact... I think from your exposure to it over a life span... like body image is a particular one, because I think that you do get this notion of what it's... what women look like, or what guys look like, or anything like that, and that's just... even if you become, even when you start to know that "OK, that's not really real," it's still hard to erase that and it's still in your head, and so...

The women here make a connection between media representations of idealized and fantasized femininity and the inscription of heteronormative markers of femininity on the body. Self-policed bodies of perfect femininity become *the* signifier of femininity in the media, and while the women understood this was an ideal, they also discussed the tensions they felt between the desire to emulate and the desire to resist.

Bianca: I think often it sort of sets... I don't know if ideal is the right word, but it obviously portrays certain images of women, so I think at times you kind of compare yourself to those. Do I like these particular traits that I'm

seeing, do I not? I think at times you see things in the media and you kind of want to fight against them as well, so there's sort of this dual aspect of wanting to emulate something, and at the same time trying to fight against it too.

However, the women also mentioned the less fleshy aspects in media representations of femininity, citing their beliefs that while positive portrayals have become more numerous, they still 'feel' one-dimensional in their attempts to construct a televisual reality where women's public and private lives have become much more progressive than they actually are.

Eryka: By perpetuating stereotypes of women, and perpetuating myths of women... Articles that are written for women, by men. Movies that are made for women but are done for men, like those very traditional love stories... Every guy would love to have a really successful woman, who is really strong, and really independent, and yet has everything but didn't have a man, you know? And its very heterosexist and I find that that... the way the media portrays women influences women because it perpetuates all those like norms, those social norms, that we grow up having instilled in us...

Several of the women further expressed their feelings of relative helplessness in the face of the sheer ubiquity of stereotyped representations of femininity. Taken together, the participants' concerns regarding the general effects of media on women make it clear that they believe the media has a foundational and pervasive influence in constructing and validating certain feminine roles, particularly in regards to proper bodily inscription. The physical markers of femininity are literally fantasized – these bodily inscriptions are both understood as not-real, but also as things to be sought, creating ambivalence in the participants, both desired and denigrated, a source of pleasure and frustration.

The deep pleasures that the women feel when engaging with the mass-produced fantasies of popular culture media texts such as BtVS also involves the same simultaneous emotional connection and distancing that is required of them if they are to engage with society as a

whole in regards to negotiating experiences and roles of femininity outside popular culture texts. This creates the paradoxical subject position of “I know this personal/textual representation of femininity isn’t ‘real’ (and may even be potentially harmful to me), but I will act as if’ it is, in order to both pleurably engage with the text and with larger society. I have argued that this negotiated and ambivalent textual subject position has some residual effect on their own understandings of their physical and emotional experiences of femininity, and further that the simultaneous emotional closeness and ironic distancing arising from negotiating viewing positions of BtVS both mimics and is constitutive of the negotiations undertaken in their daily experiences of being inscribed as feminine subjects with often-conflicting role requirements. This may be one reason why the women were unwilling to identify personally with media effects; to do so would necessitate the deconstruction of the fantasy necessary to gain pleasure from both the text and from daily, both of which are shaped by shifting normative ideologies of gender, which can constrain as much as they liberate.

Therefore, I asked the participants to characterise their own personal relationship with media, in order to see if they would connect their concerns about media generally to their own relationship with it. It is my contention that their pleasures and ambivalences with respect to BtVS will be located within the larger discourse of their emotional connection to the media⁷¹. All the women expressed a strong ambivalence about television and most felt that they were not as critical as they could be.

Ava: I think that I'm much more aware of the media than I used to be. As a result of being educated, and paying attention. I mean, I'm very disturbed by a lot of the media, and I think the messages that they represent... I mean, I try to question it as much as I can, so, I try to maintain an awareness that it's

projected images with a message attached to it. Which is hard when you're just escaping into the world of television.

Sharon: I find myself, even through I'm a...student, and I'm supposed to dissect it, and kind of repel it, not repel it, but you know understand that it's all manipulated, blah, blah, blah. Lately I find myself just watching it and accepting it, because it's easy, it's fodder, right? It's just easy entertainment, and...might as well. The news, I would be sceptical, but just television, yeah, whatever, it's just TV land, it's all good.

Maya: I take what I need from it, but I don't tend to believe everything that's there. And sometimes it's easier just to believe whatever's out there because it's so much easier than forming your own opinion (laugh), but I mean, as you get older and more school you do, the more you actually challenge yourself, and all that joyful stuff (sarcastic voice), then, you know...I just use it for entertainment. That's how I feel about it. I can't take it seriously, because I want to, because it's a great escape!

These quotations highlight the tension between using televisual texts as a source of escapist pleasure and being aware of some of the potentially negative ideological implications of doing so. The women characterised themselves as informed viewers, appealing to their education and maturity levels as analytical 'tools' available to help negotiate between the pleasures and dangers they felt to be inherent in this medium. The fantastical content of television programming, as well as the desire to use these texts as vehicles of escape, is constructed as both the reason for pleasure and as an appeal to the participants ability to distance themselves from the text – it is not real, the participants 'know' it is not real, and therefore they do not want to have to take it seriously.

Relative Power?

Having examined the participants' discussions of the effects of media in representing femininity, as well as their own negotiated relationship to television, the question remains: does their engagement in BtVS provide them with a relative sense of power? I would argue for a qualified yes, on two levels – both at a local level in terms of making sense of the text

itself, and on a macro scale in terms of using the text to beneficially, if ambivalently, inform their larger interpretative communities. The participants' statements evidence an assertion that the discourses of femininity undertaken in BtVS are important to the way they experience, negotiate, contest and shape their understandings of femininity. They clearly argue that Buffy, her friends and their experiences are able to, at least partially, signify the complexities of gendered life in current capitalist society, in all its pleasures and complexities, and that the show allows for an openness of interpretation. Further, the contradictions (constructed by both the preferred readings encoded by the producers, as well as by the negotiated/oppositional readings decoded by the viewers) of femininity that are embodied by Buffy and the other characters are seen as a constitutive part of their pleasure in consuming the text, a reflection of the contradictions that exist outside the text itself. The ability of the program to so effectively use genre blending, emotional realism and experiential identification stemming from the melodramatic imagination/tragic structure of feeling, as well as its conscious construction of ironically distant viewing positions, allowed the participants a relative, if constrained, freedom to move between televisual subject positions in order to generate personally and socially relevant meanings, and therefore to generate a deep sense of pleasure and even empowerment from the show. However, the participants also clearly articulated some of their concerns and ambivalence as to how the show also worked to reinscribe normative discourses of femininity, expressing both a sense of frustration and resignation in their discussions of how the female body and its gendered experiences are constructed and constrained through popular culture and the correlative expectations placed upon their own bodies and the roles of femininity they occupy.

Participant Feedback

One particularly unexpected and important outcome of this research, particularly in the context of the effects of media representations on the participants' interpretative frameworks, was their discussion of their feelings concerning their participation in the research process. All of the women expressed a great deal of enthusiasm stemming from their participation, and clearly articulated that the process had allowed them to understand the program in different ways, and challenged them to think about some of these questions in more systematic ways. Many of the participants also expressed a wish to continue meeting, as a way of continuing to expand upon their thoughts regarding the pleasure they find in engaging with and negotiating popular culture representations of femininity.

Ava: Our discussion yesterday left me with more questions about the show than I realised that I had. You know, I always kind of took it for granted that it's fantasy, that it's television, good writing, good story, and now I'm kind of going, "Yeah, what's going on there, what's it really saying under the surface?". It was a valuable experience for me.

Eryka: And it was interesting just to see how different everybody's relationship to the show is. Like I know when I watch it...those things that we talk about, they just happen in my head. And how unconscious that is. Because I didn't know I thought so much about Buffy, until you started talking about it, and I realised, I was like, "Oh, yeah, and when did all that happen?" And then it was just so obvious that...it's just, it's part of who you are, how you...interpret things. Yeah. You might not even really have to think about it, it's just the way you interpret it, because of your own world view. So I thought that was really interesting.

Helen: I think it's good to do things like this. And I think that the fact that this is the most intellectual discussion in I don't know how long, is sad (laugh). You get caught up in your day to day life, but also...you get isolated in your day to day life too. And to think about things that you don't normally think about, or that I don't normally think about, or that I normally don't think about, I don't normally think about Buffy (laugh), I just watch the show (laugh).

Terri: I think it's really interesting, taking a show that...you do, if you do, watch very religiously, and...when I've analysed the show on my own time, it's been for plot development, character development, but to sit back and look at it from a different perspective, and to think about it, to take the step back and think about what you are learning from the show, or what you might be picking up from the show, has been really interesting, especially talking to other women about it. I found that really fantastic, and of course I didn't want that to be over with. Yeah, it made me realise that I do, that I wish I made more effort to have those kinds of conversations, and it's so funny... I've never actually done it, I've never actually sat down and done it with my own viewing and it a really rewarding process, and it makes you realise, yeah, there should be a lot more active participation in viewing.

The women's pleasure in participating is clear; not only did it provide other fans with whom to discuss a show that they all enjoy, but they also felt that it provided an impetus for them to think critically about how they interact with popular culture representations of femininity and how they are absorbed, reflected and contested in their everyday lives. The participation process was a positive, and to some degree, transforming experience for many of the women; mutually, we created a space where we were able to beneficially inform, empower and challenge each other's subjectivities. As I argued in the second chapter, research undertaken by both participants and researcher is a symbiotic process, and the benefits and outcomes for the participants can never be pre-determined, regardless of the safeguards taken. Since no research leaves the lives of those who are engaged in it untouched, I am deeply gratified that the new knowledge and pleasure I received in getting to know these women and some of their thoughts was also reflected in their discussions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to reconnect the participants' discussion of their experiences of being gendered feminine in their everyday lives to the larger text of BtVS, as well as televisual texts more generally. Additionally, I have discussed the participants' ambivalent relationship with television, and specifically with televisual representations of

femininity, and how this may be mediated through appeals to escape and fantasy. Further, I have offered my conclusion that, for these participants, a relative sense of power was generated from engaging with the program. Finally, by means of a brief discussion of the responses provided by the participants regarding their participation in this research, I have argued that these women articulated a belief that their interpretive frameworks have been positively expanded.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the women who participated in this research actively engaged and negotiated the text of BtVS in order to produce meanings that connect to their own social experiences of being inscribed, willingly and unwillingly, with femininity. Simultaneously, I have argued that this activity is constrained by televisual signifiers, in both form and content, which identify and limit the arena in which meanings may be found. In this sense, I have argued that it is important not to confuse polysemy with pluralism. Through an ideological and genre analysis of the program, a brief historical overview of some of the social, political and economic changes to mass mediated representations of femininity – particularly the female body – in the last thirty years, and through extensive interviews with a specific group of viewers, I have argued that normative ideologies of femininity and feminism in televisual texts are less a fixed set of meanings and beliefs than an ongoing and necessarily negotiated position within a system of contradictory and contestatory meanings that are presented and represented in cultural texts, of which BtVS is but one example. Through discussions with the women who participated in my research, I examined how the program, while a privileged arena in terms of its constructions of preferred readings, is not the only site for closure, in that “the social is also a site for closure - in so far as it is through social positionings that access the cultural codes (which can be mobilised in decodings) is regulated” (Morley, 1992, p.28). The viewing positions so successfully provided by the show – self-conscious irony, emotional realism, experiential identification and fantasy through the articulation of the tragic structure of feeling with the subject position of the melodramatic imagination – ensured that the participants had a diversity of viewing positions through which they were

able to move with relative ease, providing them with a sense of pleasure and power, even as they continued to feel a sense of ideological closure over which they had little control. As Deming asserts, televisual texts such as BtVS are popular precisely because this negotiation is not only encouraged, but required.

There is a tension between (formal/institutional) constraint and (historical/interpretative) play which allows for multiple points of audience entry and identification...[this type of program] offers various types of involvement for its viewers because it's composed of numerous discourses, ideological positions and modes of address, which together form a popular, at times progressive, but not necessarily feminist text (Deming, 1990, p. 156).

I have also attempted to highlight some of the dangers inherent in overgeneralizations, both with regard to the viewing positions occupied by the participants, as well as in the essentializing of ideologies of gender, whereby gender identifications and positionings are always necessary and inherently negative for those who engage with it. I do not believe that my work with these women can be unproblematically transferred to the general viewing audience of BtVS; however, that has not been my intention. The goal here was to examine how this specific group of women discussed their experiences of engaging in some of the representations of femininity in BtVS, and to determine whether the theoretical frameworks of my arguments were reasonable, and I believe that this endeavour was successful. It remains for myself or other researchers to connect these findings to larger concerns and projects; the most that can be said here is that the findings are evocative and persuasive, and hold promise for further explorations.

This thesis addresses but one articulation of the viewing process and the discourse which both constitutes and contests it. I am aware that subjects are always multiply positioned within a whole set of discourses, some of which do not concern gender, and therefore we do

not always live in a prison house of gender. However, it is precisely because gender identity is fluid, multiple, partial, ambiguous, incoherent, and always in the process of (dis)articulation, that examining cultural practices that both challenge and champion common sense ideologies of femininity is important. I have also argued that normative ideologies of appropriate femininity continue to be a key organizing principle for hailing and interpellating those of us who engage in popular culture and have charted some of the pleasurable and ambivalent negotiations undertaken in viewing the televisual text of BtVS. While it is true that the experiences of our selves and of the world around us are not solely constructed through gender, the assumption of the absence of a coherent, if temporary, sense of gendered identity is not as problematic as the ideological essentialization of identities undertaken by dominant cultural forms. To assume that the subject is nothing but fluid movement can easily lead to the assumption that the subject is never influenced by society, that society consists only of momentary articulations from which one can always, and easily, escape. Rather, I have argued that subjects who engage, negotiate and take pleasure from popular culture forms such as BtVS are *both* coherent sites of identity and contradictory positions vis-à-vis the text, and that it is the complex, dynamic and ongoing intersection between these two states wherein the examination of pleasure and relative power is the most rewarding. Even a partial charting, such as this thesis, of the myriad influences, changes and intersections between subjects and social artefacts such as BtVS allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how discourses of femininity and liberal feminism are constructed, circulated and contested by televisual texts and its viewers.

In the end, there really is no conclusion to be tidily summarized here; rather, this thesis has charted but one historical moment among many in relation to how popular culture

discourses of femininity are constructed as necessarily both revolutionary and reactionary in informing the cognitive repertoires of those who engage in, and are inscribed by these discourses. I will resist the desire to reify my findings as the 'truth', knowing that it is the ambivalence, contradiction and fluidity of these representations that will ensure their continuing popularity as a reflection of the experiences viewers themselves undergo on a daily basis of being inscribed with femininity. For the women viewers I interviewed, and for Buffy herself, negotiating popular culture representations of femininity are both constraining and liberatory, required and freely chosen, private narrative and public discourse, in an incessantly ambivalent, yet pleasurable, dialectic that makes sense of what it means and feels like to be simultaneously powerful and powerless women in contemporary capitalist society. Perhaps it is fitting that no one sums up this position more succinctly than Buffy when she responds to "[b]ut you're...you're just a girl," by reminding us, "[t]hat's what I keep saying..."

ENDNOTES

¹ Within a mass mediated context, liberal feminism is defined as a historical moment where the goals of first and second wave feminism have largely been met; it is constructed as women having gender equality within a white, North American, middle-class heteronormative framework. Unlike post feminism, liberal feminism is largely tied to the concerns generated through second wave feminism, and in the media is largely directed towards older women. It accepts American capitalism as a system of economic freedom that only needs to be modified in order to be beneficial.

¹² Grrrl power has neither a definitive spelling nor definition. Originally a construction stemming from the post-punk music scene, it often consists of a defiance of mainstream images of appropriate femininity for girls or young women, championing the power and enjoyment of being a 'strong' female, particularly in the realm of independence and sexuality. While the concept encompasses resistance to male domination, the term has largely been co-opted by ms media as a way to sell commodities to young women under the guise of feminine power. For further discussion, see "Grrrl power and The Structures of Feminism" by Christine Laffer.

³ In 1992, the movie *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* premiered to a poor box-office performance, and while Josh Wedon was the creator of the movie, he felt that he had little artistic control and has distanced himself from it. Although the concept and the title remain in the series, there is no other cross-over.

⁴ For the two-hour season premiere of season six, UPN enjoyed its highest network ratings ever, showing that they made a shrewd business decision in picking up the show for \$2.3 million dollars an episode.

⁵ Interestingly, a significant minority of men also watch. It was the highest rated UPN show for males between 18-34 years of age during its run (*Buffy Chaos Bleeds*).

⁶ An excellent on-line academic site for Buffy studies is *Slayage: The International Journal of Buffy Studies*, which regularly publishes work from scholars all over the world. It can be accessed at: <http://www.slayage.tv/>

⁷ Both of his parents were television writers, including such high-profile shows as *Alice*, *Benson* and *The Golden Girls*.

⁸ In the final episode of the show, this message was given a particularly heavy-handed treatment when every girl in the world becomes empowered with the same supernatural powers as Buffy.

⁹ A good website to explore these ideas further is: All Things Philosophical on Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Existential Scoobies, at: <http://www.atpobtv.com/>

¹⁰ For my purposes here, I will focus on the interpretations and responses, rather than the recognition or comprehension, made by the viewers.

¹¹ That television shapes our cultural understanding of events has become increasingly clear in the wake of the invasion of Iraq, and the use of embedded correspondents.

¹² Even most 'narrowcasters', which have a much more specific audience, largely make the same assumptions.

¹³ Gender here is defined as the social inscription of the binary terms female or male to describe the biological and social characteristics positively correlated with reproductive capacities. Following Butler, I define gender as a "particular and prevailing cultural sign system that involves subjects repeating gender signs as constitutive of a specific gender identity" (qtd in Kaplan, FCT, 272). A more detailed discussion of gender follows in the section on Gender and Bodies.

¹⁴ While there are television characters constructed as male who embody female characteristics, this blending usually marks them as aberrant, while the opposite (females embodying male characteristics) is now becoming increasingly standard.

¹⁵ This is the most common complaint among theorists who argue that televisual representations have a responsibility to 'reflect' reality, and that viewers who are exposed to and consume the seemingly limitless stereotyped images of femininity come to believe that they are 'true' and 'natural' representations of femininity.

¹⁶ The emphasis on 'imaginary relations' is particularly constitutive of my argument, as will become clear in my discussion of gender, femininity and female bodies.

¹⁷ Indeed, my own work here is not exempt from this double bind, as discussed in chapter two.

¹⁸ While this definition is a gloss, in that it does not include transgender concerns, I argue that the binary category of male/female is still the central organizing principle underlying gender in the vast majority of societies, as evidenced by continuing social concern and confusion regarding the social identity of transgender people.

¹⁹ The notion of gender as masquerade which may both empower and constrain those who perform it, is more fully explored in chapter five.

²⁰ This term has been most commonly used in film studies; however it is gaining increasing mainstream usage as gender studies become increasingly popular.

²¹ At this point, because my main theoretical concern is with femininity, I will not be further addressing masculinity, except as it affects constructions of femininity.

²² While outside the purview of this thesis, the connection between appropriate femininity and class is an important point in understanding femininity, and its lack of inclusion here is due to space constraints rather than whim or ignorance.

²³ However, as de Laurentis notes, to discuss gender as a discourse necessitates going beyond Foucault's framework, in that in his critical understanding of the technology of sex he "did not take into account its differential solicitation of male and female subjects, and by ignoring the conflicting investments of men and women in the discourses and practices of sexuality, Foucault's theory, in fact, excludes, though it does not preclude, the consideration of gender" (de Laurentis, 3).

²⁴ There is also a deeply troubling tendency in much primetime television to use sexual assault, sexual mutilation, and the death of young beautiful women as the central narrative device for an increasing number of shows; in short, sexual violence and mutilation of the female body is becoming a central feature of entertainment. See for example, *Law and Order: SVU*, *CSI*, etc.

²⁵ Generally, feminist epistemology argues that social and historical influences are a force in contexts of both discovery (what constitutes knowledge) and justification (how it is used). While feminist questioning of epistemology has been most forcefully articulated in the philosophy of science, I believe that the underlying concerns between this field and audience studies are commensurable. While focusing on science, it can be argued that broadly, science itself is but one form of knowledge; more aptly, it is the pursuit of worldly knowledge gained through observation and experimentation. Science, like other forms of knowledge, is a discourse; it is a way of trying to order and understand our perceptions and experiences (Longino, 1993). Methodologically speaking, both science and audience theory have the same goal, if not the same subject, in mind. Feminists in both areas share the drive to identify the social desires, interests and values that have shaped the objects of their analysis.

²⁶ Even if she is not always fully successful in this endeavour.

²⁷ While the demographic representation was diverse, I am aware that these women reflect a similarity to my own education and therefore potential socio-economic status, and that this works to reflect by own biases; however, as delineated previously, I am not making a general argument about all women, but rather about this specific sample.

²⁸ The participants defined this term as being open to, or having had, sexual experiences with other women.

²⁹ I am aware that there is some contention regarding honorariums; however, I spent up to eight hours with many of these women, and while I do not think they need to be 'paid' for their participation, I do believe that the generosity they showed by enthusiastically sharing their time and energy deserved be recognized. None of the participants knew of the honorarium before agreeing to participate.

³⁰ After transcribing, there are more than three hundred pages of single spaced interview notes.

³¹ The main reason for his continued presence on the show was due to his huge appeal among the viewers of the program, showing that the producers were willing to construct storylines at least partially based on the audiences' desires, and demonstrating the power that viewers sometimes have to shape the stories that they enjoy.

³² It should not be forgotten that as well as producing meaningful pleasure and identification for viewers who negotiate the rocky terrain of representations of femininity in popular culture, genre combining is also a market driven practice. By carefully mixing genres, a large audience can be built, and it can contain the 'right' mix of social groups to be profitably sold to advertisers. Women make up the largest audience of television viewers, and concomitantly, are the largest market.

³³ See Modleski's "Loving with a Vengeance," and Gilligan's "In a Different Voice".

³⁴ This is one reason why genres that both reflect and create the feminine as a gendered category, such as soap opera and melodrama, which concentrate on relationships, emotion and the melodramatic imagination, are seen as a form of 'debased' feminine culture; they are genres that are compared against the standard of masculine genres such as factual programming, current events, action and drama, and are thus found to be 'less than'.

³⁵ While it is true that women had engaged in the public workforce for many years previous to these changes wrought by feminist concerns, this was largely due to economic necessity rather than choice or desire, and there was little social status attached to employment. Ironically enough, economic necessity is still a huge driving force for women entering into the labour market, yet social discourses of women in the work force, while continuing to be ambivalent, are much more public and encouraging, and if women have the luxury to choose not to work, they are now often constructed through social discourse as hopelessly outdated or not properly 'liberated'.

³⁶ Consumers of popular culture don't have far to look for these kinds of narratives; arguably, the latest cycle started with the movie *Fatal Attraction*. These stories focus on the horrifying potential of women to ruin men's lives, not only because they are evil people, but because they are evil *females*; they use their femininity in order to disrupt the patriarchal family and generally create chaos.

³⁷ These shows also struggled with and were constrained by traditional concerns of appropriate femininity as several feminist scholars argue. For a thorough overview of the difference and similarities of these shows to their historical antecedents, see Dow, "Primetime Women."

³⁸ The three shows that had strong female leads during this time, *Cagney and Lacey*, *Rosanne* and *Murphy Brown*, all suffered from network concerns that the leads weren't feminine enough, leading to ongoing movement of timeslots, as well as threatened and repeated cancellations in spite of high audience ratings. The exception was *Murphy Brown*, who had an extremely masculine personality, yet enjoyed solid ratings – perhaps because the show often focused on her humorous 'failings' with respect to her lack of femininity. As is commonly known, her character was publicly chastised by then vice-president Dan Quayle as being "an example of what is wrong with America today," that Murphy was a poor role model for women because she bore a child out of wedlock – a clear indication of the social unease in regard to how proper femininity was to be represented on television.

Again, for an excellent overview of the changes in feminine representation in television history, see Dow, "Primetime Women".

³⁹ Most women over thirty know the old chestnut that they have a better chance of getting kidnapped by terrorists, get in a plane accident, etc. than getting married, a statistic that has been repeated in the media for over thirty years, and still occasionally rears its head, even though it has been thoroughly debunked.

⁴⁰ The underlying influences that culminate in these backlashes are far too complex to address here; however, it is important to keep in mind that both males and females can be perpetrators of these narratives, and can use them as meaningful ways to make sense of their experiences, rather than merely being subjects of false consciousness. For many women, feminism has become a very ambivalent term, and many have rejected it outright, feeling that feminists do not address their own complex experiences, and especially pleasures, of being female.

⁴¹ As with most televisual representations of labour, females who engaged in labour were rarely shown engaging meaningfully with their work.

⁴² As the function and importance of fantasy as a genre has been addressed in the previous section, no further discussion is needed here.

⁴³ While the episode was a clear, and often amusing and innovative, attempt to problematize traditional notions of appropriate femininity, having Buffy uttering such inanities as "Surely the men will save us!" constructs this type of hyper-femininity as so absurd that no woman could identify with her. A more subtle construction of traditional femininity may have been more difficult to negate, showing that the producers of the show themselves are forced into an extreme position in order to generate ridicule – something like shooting fish in a barrel.

⁴⁴ The plot of "Earshot" centres around Buffy, who, after being infected by demon blood, is able to hear everyone's thoughts, and thus overhears a plot to kill all the students in the school. The Scooby Gang believes it is one of the students, Jonathan, who brings a high-powered rifle to school and literally climbs the proverbial clock tower; however, it turns he just wants to find a quiet place to commit suicide (Buffy convinces him not to), and it is really the lunch lady who is the attempted assassin, but who is caught trying to put rat poison in the cafeteria food.

⁴⁵ As I argued in chapter two, I am not attempting to reproduce the binary opposition between emotion and empirical 'truth', especially in regards to women's experiences; instead, I am using this distinction as an attempt to validate the emotional as always already caught up in the generation of truth. That is, in this thesis I am arguing that there is an empirical dimension to the subjective forms of experiences discussed here.

⁴⁶ Faith's body taking up physical space is an important signifier of inappropriate femininity. As Bartky argues, "[w]oman's space is not a field in which her bodily intentionality can be freely realized but an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined. The 'loose woman' violates these norms; her looseness is manifest not only in her morals, but in her manner of speech and quite literally in the free and easy way she moves" (1988, p.66).

⁴⁷ It is only in the last few episodes of season seven that she starts to fully accept her body, its powers and desires in the fullness of their complexities. Interestingly, at this point she physically appears to be almost entirely de-sexualized, wearing long sleeved and/or baggy clothing, perhaps indicating that she still cannot be signified as desiring power without her femininity becoming more abstract, rather than embodied.

⁴⁸ For Willow, her desire to be powerful turns her into a magic addict, where she cannot control herself and destroys the lives of those she loves; for Anya, her pain at being left at the altar returns her to being a vengeance demon and she begins killing men.

⁴⁹ However, this potentiality of feminine subversiveness that can be achieved by celebrating her body and its powers is still constructed as being grounded in masculine desire – she is sexually promiscuous (always heterosexually, though there are some undercurrents that she finds Buffy desirable) and her ‘rebellious’ clothing construct her body as being continuously on display for masculine consumption. While her sexuality, and therefore her power may be uncontrollable, they are still shaped by masculine desire.

⁵⁰ This form of monstrous femininity has ancient Western roots; see the legends of Lilith, first recorded in the “Legend of Gilgamesh” and carried through the Cabbala and the Old Testament.

⁵¹ This fits into Gilligan's famous yet problematic work on the connection between gender and moral orientation, where females are morally oriented towards a care perspective and males towards a justice perspective (also see Miller, B/Phil, 37), in that Buffy is morally oriented towards a more personalized care perspective, which is both desirable and constraining for women, versus Faith who embodies (at least initially) a more abstract justice perspective, which is both attractive and problematic. The complex interplay of the moral orientation within and between the characters may allow viewers to identify with both.

⁵² The other two members of the trio, Jonathan and Andrew are constructed as homoerotic; this orientation is made clear through both dialogue and mannerisms. When Warren escapes, leaving the two of them behind, Andrew plaintively wonders “How could he do this to me? He promised we'd be together, but he was just using me. He never really loved... hanging out with us” (Seeing Red).

⁵³ Warren is first introduced in the show as the creator of the original sex robot; he wanted a girlfriend who will do nothing but worship him and serve him sexually. By the end of the episode he destroys her, stating that she was boring. Later, Warren murders his girlfriend and tries to frame it on another.

⁵⁴ Terri, the only participant who did not feel any of the characters were believable, used the same criteria of believability, but she still stated that she enjoyed the characters’ relationships, signifying that she could still take pleasure from the show; her point of entry and identification were the relationships between the characters, rather than the characters themselves.

⁵⁵ The participants discussed the continuing overt sexualization of Buffy in secondary texts, such as magazines and advertisements. The actress, Sara Michelle Gellar, who plays Buffy, is also a Revlon model, and often Revlon ads featuring her can be seen during commercial breaks of BtVS, further convoluting the boundaries between primary and secondary texts. See Vint’s “Killing Us Softly” for further discussion of the dissonance between Buffy’s feminized sexuality in primary and secondary texts.

⁵⁶ When Faith and Buffy switch bodies, this need to morally self-police femininity comes to the forefront as self hatred when Faith (in Buffy’s body) violently beats on herself (Buffy in Faith’s body), saying “You’re no good, you’re nothing, you’re crap”.

⁵⁷ Cordelia, Anya and Tara are the three other reoccurring female characters on the show, and while they play important roles, they can be considered secondary characters. All three characters are hyper-feminized: Cordelia is the archetypal bitchy yet popular high-school cheerleader who’s self-centred and vapid; Anya is obsessed with sex, money and marriage (even as a vengeance demon, her powers were totally centred around the importance of men), and Tara, while gay – and therefore not traditionally feminine – is soft-spoken, nurturing and shy. In spite of these stereotypes, all these women are more powerful than the vast majority of mortal males on the show, including Xander. Although Faith can also be put in a secondary character category, she has a central role in three season arcs, is the only other Slayer and therefore Buffy’s equal, and Whedon specifically constructed the character of Faith to be Buffy’s opposite in all aspects, including femininity.

⁵⁸ Again, Terri was the only dissenting voice concerning her connection with the representations of relationships in BtVS and her own experiences or desires; paradoxically, she states, “*I think for me what draws me to any program...are the relationships. I love good portrayals of relationships, and so I think the relationships would be one of the top things [I enjoy about BtVS]*”. However, she then seemingly contradicts herself by saying, “*[t]here are some realistic elements to the relationships, but they're so unlike most of what you find in reality that I don't think of it in that way.*” Facing a lack of further contextualization, I contend that the use of the term ‘good’ indicates a value judgement which brought pleasure, and that the value judgement was at least partially based on the relationships being read

through a subject position occupied by the melodramatic imagination, itself a position that mimics a fidelity or echoes the experiences and desires of the viewer's life world. Through this reading, Terri's remarks retain their ambivalence rather than merely being explained away.

⁵⁹ The connection between masculine sexual potency and vampirism is made clear in the episode where Spike attempts to bite Willow; unable to 'perform', due to the chip in his head, Willow asks, "Maybe you're trying too hard. Doesn't this happen to every vampire?" Spike responds, "Not to me, it doesn't!" Willow then ruminates on her lack of sexual appeal, stating, "I know I'm not the kind of girl vamps like to sink their teeth into. It's always like, "Ooh, you're like a sister to me," or, "Oh, you're such a good friend." ("The Initiative")

⁶⁰ This is an interesting contradiction in itself, as these women, including Eryka, will later argue that television largely does not affect them, and that the narratives on BtVS are only fantasy and/or escape, showing how different subject positions within the interview are called forth at different times, and can often be in direct contradiction with each other.

⁶¹ For the women of colour who participated, the lack of ethnic representation was a major issue, and they were all very aware that normative standards of femininity in Western society included the proper skin colour – white. They also stated that there were slightly different standards of femininity which applied to them; they had the binary options of being the exotic sexual creature, or the demure non-sexed domestic.

⁶² Rory here was the main exception in regard to changes to Buffy's body, stating that, "*Honestly, I've never really noticed it. I've never, I do, if I watch some of the older ones, I can see the change, but I don't ever watch it and say "she looks skinny or she looks tiny"*".

⁶³ Bartky argues that the phenomenon of females judging other females is a logical extension of living in contemporary patriarchal culture, in that "a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement. Woman lives her body as seen by another. We are often told that 'women dress for other women'. There is some truth to this: who but someone engaged in a project similar to my own can appreciate this panache with which I bring it off?" (1988, p. 72).

⁶⁴ Non-Caucasian participants all spoke eloquently regarding the dual challenge of navigating social expectations of gender in both North American as well as those originating in their own cultures.

⁶⁵ The only exception to this was Murrey, which may have stemmed from her academic work in feminist theory. However, she stated that even she understood that there were times in a woman's life where a strict adherence to feminist philosophy would eliminate the ability to fulfill desires of motherhood and other desires that required self-sacrifice; Also, she related particular instances where her identification as a feminist brought quick and severe social censure from men.

⁶⁶ I asked this question in the personal interviews, and had not discussed feminism or representations of femininity previous to this question, so their responses were not shaped by these discussions.

⁶⁷ The purpose in changing the wording of what ostensibly seems like the same questions is that the first phrasing constructed the participant's experiences as a reason for watching the show, whereas the second question was concerned more with how the show actively hails and addresses the participant.

⁶⁸ Other reasons included procrastination and boredom; however, I believe these can be subsumed under the category of escapism, as television allows them to escape the duties they are procrastinating, and to escape from boredom, both seemingly constitutive features of daily life.

⁶⁹ With the national average at roughly three hours a day, the participants' estimations of their own viewing habits seem to be fairly close to these numbers; although, they report that the percentage of time they spend viewing dramas and comedies is considerably higher.

⁷⁰ Amber Benson, the actor who plays Tara, posted this response on the official posting board of the Buffy website. It is quite indicative of the concerns the participants themselves felt about representations of the female body on television:

It hurts when someone class you ugly or makes nasty comments about your weight whether or not it is really YOU they are referring to...Yes, I am not a STICK. I am a NORMAL, HEALTHY WOMAN.I have breast and hips and I am very happy that they are a part of me. I weigh 118 and I am 5'4." If you saw me in real life, you would think I was on the thin side. But on TV, next to my very petite costars, I do look heavier. I am PROUD to be NORMAL. A body is a beautiful thing to waste. Believe me, I have seen enough of my friends and peers waste away to NOTHING so that they could work in this industry. So they could perpetuate the LIE that ANOREXIA is beautiful. IT IS NOT. YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL. ALL OF YOU...All you girls and guys out there who think that starving, binging and purging and exercising yourself to DEATH is gonna change how you feel inside -- It's NOT. Don't buy into all that media crap (Unofficial Buffy Guide, 89).

⁷¹ All the women framed their responses in regard to their relationship with television; perhaps unsurprisingly since this had been the focus of the previous two meetings.

APPENDICES

Appendix One

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS



BURNABY, BRITISH COLUMBIA
CANADA V3A 1S6
Telephone: 604-291-3447
FAX: 604-268-6785

June 5, 2003

Ms. Marian Krawczyk
Graduate Student
Department of Communication
Simon Fraser University

Dear Ms. Krawczyk:

**Re: Negotiating the power of pleasure:
Female viewers and Buffy the Vampire Slayer**

The above-titled ethics application has been granted approval by the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board, at its meeting on May 26, 2003 in accordance with Policy R 20.01, "Ethics Review of Research Involving Human Subjects".

Sincerely,

Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director
Office of Research Ethics

* For inclusion in thes/dissertation/extended essays/research project report, as submitted to the university library in fulfillment of final requirements for graduation. Note: correct page number required.

Appendix Two

Personal Interview Questions

1. How long have you watched the show?
2. Do you watch the show, or talk about it, with anyone?
3. What are some other shows that you watch regularly?
4. Do you do anything that would count as a Buffy fan activity?
5. What do you like best about the show?
6. What do you like best about the characters?
7. What are some things you don't like about the show?
8. Do you have any favourite episodes?
9. Do you feel that the show deals with realistic issues?
10. Do any of your own personal experiences draw you to the show?
11. Do you find the show addresses your life experiences?
12. Do you think about the show in relation to your everyday life?
13. Does the show ever make you feel stronger or more empowered as a woman?
14. Do you think the show is feminist?
15. Is the show every contradictory in how it represents the characters or plots?

16. In our society, what do you think makes someone feminine? What do you think the social expectations of femininity are?
17. What does it mean to you personally to be or feel feminine?
18. Do you ever feel that being feminine can be a contradictory experience?
19. What are some things/activities that are important to you?
20. How do you make a living?
21. What is your living arrangement?
22. What is your ethnic background?
23. Education level?
24. Sexual Orientation?
25. Age?

Appendix Three

Focus Group Questions

1. What did you like best about these particular episodes?
2. What did you like least about these particular episodes?
3. Do you think the show is trying to say anything about women's roles?
4. Do you think the show reflects the experiences of most women of our generation?
5. Do you think that Buffy's femininity is believable?
6. What do you think about Faith as an image of femininity?
7. What do you think of Buffy's body?
8. Does watching the characters on the show ever make you think about your own body?
9. How comfortable are you with your own body?
10. Do you ever feel that other women are more comfortable with their bodies than you are with yours?
11. How much influence does the media have in teaching us about femininity?
12. Do you ever feel that the social worth of women is focused in/on the body?
13. Do you ever judge other women on the basis of their bodies?
14. Do you have different feminine roles for social different situations?
15. Are some of these roles more pleasurable than others?

16. What are some of the positive characteristics of femininity?
17. What are some of the negative characteristics of femininity?
18. What does feminism mean to you? Do you see the term as positive or negative?
19. Do you ever feel constrained by the availability and equality of women's roles in our society?
20. Do you think there's a difference between how women are seen and treated in academics and other work environments?

Appendix Four

Follow Up Interview Questions

1. Important female relatives, your relationship to them, and their roles?
2. Important female influences in your life?
3. Why do you watch television?
4. How do you feel about watching television?
5. How much television do you watch in an average week?
6. How would you characterize your relationship to media?
7. How do you think the media influences women generally?
8. What does education mean to you? Why is it important?
9. Is there anything you would like to discuss that I haven't talked about?
10. How do you feel about participating in this project?

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