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# "It's Like We Were Being Watched ... Like There Were Only 3 Walls, And Not a Fourth Wall": Manifestations of Metafiction in Buffy the Vampire Slayer

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“IT’S LIKE WE WERE BEING WATCHED ... LIKE THERE WERE ONLY 3 WALLS, AND NOT A FOURTH WALL’: MANIFESTATIONS OF METAFICTION IN BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER

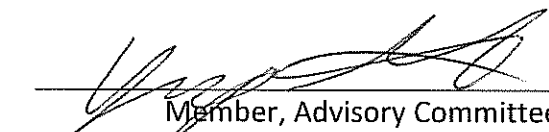
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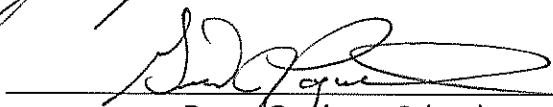
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“IT’S LIKE WE WERE BEING WATCHED ... LIKE THERE WERE ONLY 3  
WALLS, AND NOT A FOURTH WALL’: MANIFESTATIONS OF METAFICTION  
IN BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER”

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the four most important women in my life: Marie, Maura,  
Vera, & Lisa.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis director, Dr. Gerald Nachtwey, both for his constant professionalism and for his insightful classes. I would also like to express my thanks to my other committee members, Dr. Rick Mott and Dr. Young Smith, for their input and assistance regarding the project. Additionally I would also like to express my thanks to Matthew Loyd Spencer for being a sounding board as the scope of this project took shape and finally became real. And lastly, I would like to thank Joss Whedon in particular for his originality of vision and his commitment to mining emotional depths, both of which have consistently been the source of the greatest cultural influence upon my life.

## ABSTRACT

Despite the extensive collection of works related to both Joss Whedon and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, relatively little critical attention has so far dealt with the subject of metafiction. This study aims to make use of narratological analyses as well as drawing upon relevant theorists (e.g., Patricia Waugh, Fredric Jameson) to illustrate the various different ways Whedon has consciously constructed metafiction as an integral part of his most influential television series. Additionally, the project also endeavors to show how textual self-consciousness can be housed outside of the traditional space of the diegesis in favor of a paratextual element instead. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* serves here as the primary example of this paratextual application towards television with regards to metafictional conflation.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 2012, the online magazine *Slate* published an article inquiring “Which Pop Culture Property Do Academics Study the Most?” The piece looked at both television and movie series which have established themselves prominently within the American cultural landscape (the *Alien* quadrilogy, *The Wire*, the *Matrix* trilogy, *The Simpsons*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). The authors of this article quickly concluded that it was “*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* by a mile” (Lametti et al). In fact, the article’s authors contend that there were so many “papers, essays, and books [which] have been devoted to the vampire drama ... that we stopped counting when we hit 200” (Lametti et al). For assessment of this one program’s abundance of scholastic treatments, they turned to Gary Handman, the then longtime-director of the Media Resources Center at UC Berkeley, who’s own summation concludes, “[t]here is so much written about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ... it’s bone-breakingly weird”; continuing, the piece explains that, “[w]hile not a fan of the show himself, Handman speculated that academics were intrigued by the devotion of its fans” (Lametti et al). Handman is right in saying that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a show about devotion. It has engendered much devotion on the part of its viewers despite having only ever been a cult hit instead of a ratings juggernaut. Yet its status of being both much loved but also existing on the margins aligns very nearly with what Joss Whedon, the series creator and executive-producer, is himself purported to have said about his desire regarding public reception of the program: “I’d rather make a show 100 people need to

see, than a show that 1000 people want to see” (“Joss Whedon: Quotes”). Elsewhere Whedon explains how this element of fan fervor was intentionally built into his conception of the series titular heroine:

I wanted her to be a hero that existed in people's minds the way Wonder Woman or Spider-Man does, you know? I wanted her to be a doll or an action figure. I wanted Barbie with Kung Fu grip! I wanted her to enter the mass consciousness and the imaginations of growing kids because I think she's a cool character, and that was always the plan. I wanted Buffy to be a cultural phenomenon, period. (“Interviews: Joss Whedon”)

Robert Moore, an author and editor for *PopMatters*—an online magazine providing cultural criticism—affirms the scholastic primacy of the series in much the same way *Slate* does when he says that Joss Whedon, “has been the most intensely studied TV creator in popular culture, with dozens of books and thousands of essays covering and recovering every aspect of his television series, movies, and comics. . . . [O]ne should also keep in mind that *Buffy* remains the most intensely studied television series by television critics and scholars in the history of television” (11). Where Moore differs in his critique from Handman though is his claim that the series’ status as a pop culture object worthy of academic study derives not from the plurality of extant analyses about it but is rather due instead to analyses of thematic material occurring within the series itself: “[u]nlike many other series targeted by TV scholars, such as the shows making up the *Star Trek* franchise, studies of *Buffy* are almost entirely textual analyses of the show’s content instead of studies of the show’s fandom” (11). Moore’s observation about the nature of “Whedon Studies,” that it is more rigorously detailed than the typical science-fiction or

fantasy work of cult appraisal, relates specifically to a point that Handman was remiss to consider: that academics themselves may prove to be among the most devoted Whedon fans. And the sweeping number of these essays, articles, and books run the very gamut of academic subject analysis, hence the prodigious outpouring of material related to his various series and filmic works. Unlike almost any other television series to have preceded or followed it, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Buffy)* has been uniquely capable of amassing so much critical attention as a direct result of its broad receptiveness across numerous scholastic channels.

Dr. Rhonda V. Wilcox describes that the focus and amount of critical academic attention being directed towards the show was so great even during its original television run that a need existed to codify the quality of these various writings as well as to streamline their accessibility:

In January of 2001, *Buffy* gained its own journal, *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* [the title having since been amended to *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*]. . . . *Slayage* is a refereed quarterly which uses double blind review; the reviews are all done by members of the editorial board, an international collection of scholars who have published in a variety of fields including literature, linguistics, philosophy, film and television studies, religion, communications, gender studies, music, and sociology—*all of which* fields are represented by various essays in *Slayage*. (my emphasis)

These preceding disciplines which Wilcox names (alongside others which are not) all help contribute to what makes *Buffy* a hot topic both within and outside academe.

Overall, the entirety of *Buffy* as a series comprises 144 episodes, yet no two of them are alike in terms of content and craftsmanship. Part of Whedon's innovation with the series is that he created a program which, on one hand, functions as a procedural (i.e., every episode contains either the currently relevant "Big Bad" or a one-note villain), yet also relentlessly progresses the narrative as well, thereby allowing thematic content to alter and evolve across the span of the series. So a viewer tuning in every week would be familiar and expectant of any given episode's most basic recurring structure (i.e., Buffy must confront some form of supernatural obstacle and defeat it either alone or with her friends' help); that same viewer, with the skeletal thematic frame already in place, is thereby freed to immerse within the narrative itself and confront the unfolding events as he or she subjectively will. And across the show's seven seasons, a relatively small number of plotlines and narrative features are responsible for generating the greatest amount of critical attention that these viewers absorbed and internalized, particularly those which concerned sexual orientation and gender identity, alongside the numerous commentaries about a given supernatural plot thread or character. It is the dynamic of feminism and female agency though which has always been the chief focal point of *Buffy* with respect to its status as an object of academic concern.

"Of all the ways that *Buffy* has influenced television," Moore notes, "the most important is unquestionably making the female hero an indelible part of television. Previous decades had seen female heroes in movies ... and a significant number in comic books, but on television, at least, they remained disturbingly rare" (141). Prior to the

emergence of *Buffy*, if one considers female characters that were capable of being superheroes and/or kickass heroines, as well as headlining their own series, the roster is woefully low. *Wonder Woman* and *The Bionic Woman* spring to mind via their similarities. The titular heroine of each show was capable of physical feats beyond realistic human endurance and was the driving force of the narrative's events, as opposed to the then more common convention of the narrative enacting itself upon women and making them secondary features to the purpose of the storyline. Both series also aired on one of the original three networks, and while that might be a mark of distinction now there was no alternative at that point in time because each aired in the late 1970s when there was as of yet no alternatives (e.g., basic and premium cable). It is also the fact of the Carter era itself which tends to render them hermetically sealed in terms of datedness and alignment with camp. Their closest spiritual successor did not appear for fully another decade and a half, until *Xena: Warrior Princess* premiered in 1995. The chief protagonist of *Xena* was the self-named character, a fighter aiming to do right in an ill world (and who herself had spent years on the wrong side of the tracks). Like *Buffy*, this show contained supernatural and otherworldly elements. Dissimilarly though, *Xena* aired in syndication, not on one of the network channels, and it was very much in the vein of a sword-and-sandals epic, fully complete with sexual licentiousness and scantily-clad female characters who doubled as eye candy for the primarily male audience. *Buffy* debuted two years after *Xena* and did not, in the beginning, delve much into overtly gender-centric storylines. The show began evolving though, as did its treatment of culturally relevant themes.

While *Time* magazine asked in a June 1998 cover story “Is Feminism Dead?” (its cover depicting the quartet of Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and fictional Ally McBeal), *Buffy* was already establishing itself as a prime depiction of female identity for the late 1990s and beyond. A unique element pertaining to this depiction of feminism involves the main character’s endowed abilities. It is not just that Buffy is a woman with powers like superhuman strength, though that becomes a recurring plot feature for Whedon as “he consistently places heroic women in his every project” (Moore 20). Rather, it is the treatment of this element which allows the narrative to establish its stance of pro-femininity. Buffy already has these powers from the series’ debut, yet it is through her growth and honing that she develops agency. As it stands, a majority of scholarly material being produced about *Buffy* is still concerned with these aspects of the series which continue to explore how feminism, and female identity and agency intersect and manifest on the series. A very recent issue of *Slayage* (9.2, Fall 2012) implicitly stresses this state of research with articles entitled “Harmony: The Lonely Life of a Modern Woman” and “The ‘Faith Goes Dark’ Storyline and Viewers: Interpretation of Gendered Roles.” Interestingly, the icon of female identity which Whedon established in one visual medium can trace its roots to the denigration against the very same identity in another one. Buffy was inspired as a counterpart to the rote horror staple of “the little blonde girl who goes into a dark alley and gets killed in every horror film” (Billson 24-25). And yet, if the overwhelming amount of material produced about *Buffy* has been concerned with some aspect of what it textually does or does not say (which is indeed the case), only a marginal amount of the literature has been produced thus far with an aim focusing upon *how* it says what it does. This, then, constitutes the

purpose of this present study: my aim is to help redress the lack of narratological attention that has been concerned with such a seminal cultural text.

Mieke Bal, in her volume *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, describes this theoretical lens as being, “the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story.’ Such a theory helps to understand, analyse, and evaluate narratives” (3). Resultantly, narratological criticisms traditionally place a premium upon formal features of a text, features like diegetic construction, manipulations of temporality, and degrees of fictionality. This prioritization necessarily has the effect of subsuming narrative content itself to a secondary position, one of aiding narrative analyses as opposed to merely relaying a given text’s story. With regards to *Buffy* then, several authors and critics have touched upon this theoretical lens as it might be paired with the series. David Lavery, professor and co-founder of *Slayage*, comments that, “[o]f course, given *BtVS*’ complex plotting and attenuated story arcs, narratologists ... would find the series a powerfully attractive test case.” Elsewhere Lavery echoes the same line of thought when talking about the series’ creator: “Whedon may well represent yet a new career path: the film studies auteur, just as likely to be familiar with critical schools and *narratological theory* as with lenses and filters and aspect ratios” (my emphasis). Matthew Pateman, in his article *Restless Readings—Involution, Aesthetics, and Buffy*, agrees with Lavery’s claims, but he also goes further in his explication about narratological treatments of the series by making a double-edged statement:

[*Buffy*] is so far in excess of many of the categories of classical narratology. This is in large part because narratology was at its inception a



literary exercise, though it is still possible to see the ways in which its claims are transferable to films, one-off television shows and other media. It is far less capable of offering a theoretical model that will account for what *Buffy* is.... While any one scene in *Buffy*, or even a whole episode, may be amenable to narratological analysis (to very interesting ends), the relation between one episode and another is less easily counted for, still less the relationship between one season and another.

In part, Pateman is claiming that this series and a specific theoretical frame are combining in new, historically untested ways. Indeed, the intersection of this text and theory occurs on the periphery of material relating to the show and on a medial landscape mostly foreign to its origin in literary studies. The transference of narratological approaches to different forms of text though has become quite readily established by this current point in time though, and Bal herself showcases the theory's application towards *Schindler's List* in her book to help showcase the inherent crossover potential it carries. The main point that Pateman is attempting to make in this passage is the improbability of maintaining narratological focus upon *Buffy* when doing so at the level of consideration of season or series itself. Indeed his claims, after only a cursory search, would appear to be uniformly true. A decent number of critics have incorporated narratological criticism and elements into their scholarship of *Buffy*, but initially no examples I was able to turn up gave the series an overarching narratological treatment. Instead, each used the theoretical precepts of narratology on a piecemeal basis. Discouraged, I wondered if it was possible to sustain (and in opposition to Pateman's assertion) an expansive

narratological examination of this series. Ultimately though, further digging unearthed several collegiate examples of fully realized narratological analyses about the series.

In 2007, Marilda Oviedo produced “A Qualitative Study of Typology in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Fanfiction” for her Masters of Arts degree in Mass Communication from Texas Tech University. Specific to this theoretical approach, she explains that, “I also use narratology as a way to guide and structure my research....In this study, each fanfiction narrative is examined for basic structure, narrator, character, point-of-view, and setting. It is also placed in relation to the primary narrative” (12). Three years later, Cynthia Burkhead completed her dissertation, and it is entitled *Dancing Dwarfs and Talking Fish: The Narrative Functions of Television Dreams*. In it, Burkhead comments that, “no studies have sought to analyze the purpose that dream sequences have in the narratives that are arguably the most popular and frequently ‘read’ stories in our culture”; she also devotes a large portion of her own study to *Buffy* and the many, many dreams which factor prominently into the program. Another dissertation, this one titled *The Long View: Three Levels of Narration in "Buffy the Vampire Slayer,"* was written by Frederick Allen Holliday II for the completion of his Ph.D. at the University of Kansas. “This study,” Holliday explains, “examines the seven season run of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997 - 2003) to demonstrate how narrative techniques ... have been adapted to articulate these three levels of narration for television audiences,” these three levels being “the individual episode, the season, and the run of the entire series” (4). These scholar-students, particularly Holliday, help serve as a valid rebuttal to Pateman’s assertion about the series as being ill-fitted for expansive narratological treatments. Additionally, their projects have provided context for this present study, the content of which endeavors to highlight

a narratological component of the series for which no academically rigorous analysis is extant—the repeated occurrences and numerous ways in which *Buffy* self-consciously asserts its status as cultural construct.

Metafiction, as these displays of self-conscious fiction are more commonly called, has always resonated strongly with me and has become a favored topic of study too. The term itself was first coined by novelist William Gass in a 1970 essay. Gass, alongside the likes of John Barth, John Fowles, and Christine Brooke-Rose among others engaged in experimental forms of writing. These new avant-garde texts became strongly identified with the shift in literature from those forms favored in the high modernism; they instead helped demarcate the new era of postmodernism proper. Thus, metafictional texts became a tenet of postmodern literature, and the early hallmarks it assumed were of a self-reflexive conversation between text, author, and the negotiations of boundary employed between the two. Yet, as the concept grew and matured, the subject of metafiction inspired some theoretical wrangling during the 1980s. This had the result of establishing different camps which favored separate treatments for regarding the literary device. Critic-theorists like Mark Currie and Patricia Hutcheon busied themselves with devising and solidifying the notion of “historiographic metafiction” (an example of which would be Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*). On a separate plane though is situated the work of English theorist Patricia Waugh. And it is Waugh whose influence is instrumental to the shaping of this project, particularly her contextualizing metafiction as an offshoot branch of postmodernism. This has relevance for my treatment of *Buffy* because I readily view, and thus have attempted to describe, the postmodern composition and attitudes of the series beyond just those of a metafictional nature. Indeed, it is Fredric

Jameson's espousal of postmodern pastiche ("pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs"), in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, that finds a footing alongside Waugh's assessment of metafiction's humorous and jovial elements with regard to the textual DNA of the series' self-reflexive occurrences (17). More than just endeavoring to provide a catalog of metafictional instances though, this project's in-depth treatment of *Buffy*'s self-conscious instances concerns itself with those occupying a liminal location, that of the paratext.

French theorist Gerard Genette, a pioneer in the field of narratology, devised and codified the idea of the paratext. Essentially, it is those elements which belong to the text and structure it but which are not a part of the narrative itself. In the introduction to Genette's eponymous volume about the subject they are described as, "the borderlands of a text, the neglected region" (Richard Macksey xx). Traditionally and historically, paratexts have remained a neglected region and garnered little scholastic attention. This has readily changed though since the translation of Genette's key work was first published into English in the 1990s. Since then, the subject has received considerable narratological focus and has been refashioned for the purpose of adaptation towards a wide array of differing mediums beyond just that of books. Georg Stanitzek has been particularly groundbreaking in this capacity with his article "Texts and Paratexts in Media." Stanitzek's repositioning of paratexts for applicability to television and movies provides a great contribution to the analysis which I have endeavored to employ and aim to expand upon in an original manner with this thesis.

Concerning *Buffy*, this paratextual transference and splintering of parts (e.g., cold open, opening titles, closing titles) is necessitated by the numerous ways in which

Whedon manipulates the show's various paratextual elements in a self-conscious manner. In some cases their alteration is a more-or-less overt textual echo of the narrative's proceedings. However, in other instances their manipulation directly conflates with the diegesis of the show's fictional world itself, thus breaching a boundary which is, almost without conscious thought, considered inviolable (at least concerning the conventions of scripted television programming). This narrative transgression thereby allows Whedon the space to make personal use of commonly disregarded marginalia, which he readily does. In doing this he also wields metafictionality, I contend, in a manner unlike any television creator before him, and which would prove an influence upon later show-runners like Seth McFarlane.

It becomes necessary to note here, at this project's outset, I do not contend that the manner in which Whedon utilizes paratextuality on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is an origination of such overlap with textual diegesis. Rather, it means that such an assessment and textual exploration through the near limitless contents of television shows lies beyond the scope of this project. I have restricted myself to one specific text only, one which I have witnessed in full repeatedly. Most importantly yet, given the limited space and resources available for this present study, I will provide an examination of one key aspect with which metafictionality and paratextuality unite, a feature titled "the please-insert." This examination of it will obviously be chiefly concerned with *Buffy*, but it will also touch upon other relevant programs of the past twenty years.

The present study ultimately aims in yielding a two-fold benefit then. First, it is pioneering a paratextual aspect that has never before been giving consideration in a medium other than that of the book. As such, it can serve as a prototype for further

academic inquiry and alignment towards textual objects. Secondly, it offers a narratological analysis of Whedon's groundbreaking series in a manner previous lacking in critical attention, but one that is wholly worthwhile of it all the same.

## CHAPTER 2

### CONSTRUCTS OF POSTMODERNISM AND METAFICTION

Waugh, the author of *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, defines her book's given subject matter as, "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). Waugh goes on to then state how this narrative feature is an outgrowth of the "singularly uncertain, insecure, self-questioning and culturally pluralistic" modern era which first wrought postmodernism (6). She allows for metafiction to not only be an outpouring of postmodernism but specifically requires it within her framework of the concept. Waugh's placement of it within this larger cultural category aligns with the majority of treatments on the subject, despite Mark Currie's disassociation of the two: "[Metafiction] is neither a paradigm nor a subset of postmodernism....Terms like 'metafiction' and 'postmodernism' are not sustained by any common essence among their referents" (15). Yet just as Waugh describes the modern era as a time period adrift without certainty, so too does the postmodern movement which succeeded it yield a rash of like-minded fragmentary statements.

M. Keith Booker, from his volume *Postmodern Hollywood*, describes that, "postmodernism participates in a general crisis of belief," one inspired in part by a suspicion of "totalizing metanarratives" (XIV). Continuing this line of commentary, he states later that, "[d]isengagement from reality is, after all, a central subjective experience

of the postmodern era” (182). This undermining of personal and societal established perceptions of status, seemingly a hallmark of the postmodern age, necessarily has consequences for the artistic movements of the period. A postmodern narrative is therefore “concerned with problems of objectivity. It ... problematizes the notion of *reality*. It, too, is resistant to definition” (Pike 10). Yet if postmodernity is amorphous with note to its overall bearing, “[r]eflexive postmodern nature, on the other hand, is about representation. It plays up its discursive nature” (Pike 11). Postmodern products may be freewheeling in their identities, but Booker also notes that, “the aesthetic realm often leads to the production of works that participate in multiple genres and styles within a single work” (XIV). This sampling and recombining of disparate pieces and materials into something new, yet utterly familiar, is the principal of Jameson’s notion of pastiche, which is a hallmark of postmodernism. This recycling of the old does not necessarily have a negative cultural impact though, and in fact “[o]ne should ... expect a great deal of artistic creativity in postmodern art, even in forms (such as film) that are dominated by economics in particularly obvious ways” (Booker 187).

The primary subject of Booker’s study is cinema, so it is not particularly surprising when he states that, “some of the most successful films of the postmodern era have belonged to genres that are specifically distanced from contemporary reality” (182). He extrapolates beyond just film though and also touches upon that other main source of visual entertainment: “[o]f all media other than film itself, television has been the most important source of cinematic material, including explorations of the postmodern blurring of reality boundaries” (156). This blurring of boundaries, and its ramifications for meaning towards such a television program, will be discussed at some length elsewhere.



Suffice it to say, every medium capable of producing an artistic text in this age of postmodernism has already yielded countless examples of product which utilize pastiche.

Drawing from the work of Brian McHale, Booker comments about literature that:

a common technique used by postmodern writers involves the blurring of boundaries between different levels of reality, as when fictional characters enter the worlds of their authors or vice versa....[O]ne can see this blurring of the separation between fiction and reality as part of a more general withering of boundaries (between genres, between high and low culture, and so on) that is typical of postmodern culture. (154)

Here Booker's language seem to convey a negative sentiment, but this withering of boundaries also results in the growth of ontological mutability, a muddling that first allowed for the lessening of realms in both text and identity to expand in new directions. This in turn birthed one of the now key traits of postmodernism: metafiction.

A pioneer of the metafictional novel, John Barth details his reasoning for why he chose to work with fiction in an overtly self-conscious manner: “[n]ow, personally, being of the temper that chooses to ‘rebel against traditional lines’, I’m inclined to prefer the kind of art that not many people can do: the kind that requires expertise and artistry as well as bright aesthetic ideas and/or inspiration” (163). This authorial finesse which Barth is commenting about relates to the specificity which accompanies a textual example of self-consciousness. Richard Walsh, a scholar of rhetoric and fictionality, explains that, “[i]n general, self-consciousness in fiction is awareness of narrative artifice (insistent upon its celebration of it, perhaps ironic despair at it), but beyond that it is also necessarily the incorporation of such artifice within the purview of its own rhetoric, as

grist to its own mill” (113). In turn, Currie defines metafiction as, “a borderline discourse, as a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism and which takes that border as its subject” (2). So, akin to Waugh’s description, metafiction bears an innate reflexivity in that it tows the boundary line between textual transmission and public reception. Currie though goes on to describe postmodern fiction as bearing a “deep involvement with its own past, the constant dialogue with its own conventions, which projects any self-analysis backwards in time” (1). This temporally linked “form of contemporary fiction ... has attracted [the] most interest from theoretical enthusiasts of narrativity,” Walsh relays, and it “now generally goes under the name of ‘historiographic metafiction’” (112). It was Hutcheon who coined the term historiographic metafiction, and in doing so she has “redefined the relationship between literature and history, specifically by challenging the separability of the two discourses” (Currie 71). Despite its prominence, there are two main considerations which dislodge historiographic metafiction from a position of relevance for this present study.

Most importantly, those who advocate for historiographic metafiction seem to place curiously little attention upon the idea of fictionality’s barrier being the main determinant of metafiction (i.e., that suspension of disbelief is willfully broken by a text). Additionally, this historiographic bent which has gained so much currency in fact loses steam when the idea of textual medium is taken into consideration. Hutcheon, Currie, and those like-minded only really address books as texts with any specificity. Resultantly, the long literary path of self-consciousness, from *Don Quixote* to *Tristram Shandy*, fades into the distance alongside the two distinctly visual modes of twentieth century mass cultural entertainment, film and television. Doubtlessly though each medium can, and often has,

cast a knowingly referential look back upon itself. But movies and television have a more truncated timespan from which to pull out of. This has the effect of allowing for greater opportunities and more virgin terrain concerning self-conscious expansion. This role of pioneer is essentially what Whedon chose to do with *Buffy*, aiding in the creation and expansion of new aesthetic trends by not being bound by previous historical precedent.

There exist a number of forms in which self-conscious fiction can assert an identity (and which the next chapter concerning *Buffy* will showcase in greater detail). Only some of these metafictional instances though are as direct as to crash through the fictional world of the narrative's text (e.g., breaking the fourth wall). Other constructs of metafiction indicate their presence but do so while leaving the world of the story intact. This divide of narrative intrusion gains greater weight when textual medium is also considered. An author simply has to write himself into the story, or a character out of it, to simply, yet completely, alert to the extreme narrative self-consciousness which is on display. The explicitness of such metafictional usage is more problematic for the visual mediums of film and television; however, such rigidity of form can be circumvented by making use of comedic devices.

Discussing the humorous nature of metafiction, Waugh says that: “[t]he metacommentary provided by self-conscious fiction carries the more or less explicit message: ‘this is make-believe’ and ‘this is play’. The most important feature shared by fiction and play is the construction of an alternative reality by manipulating the relation between a set of signs ... as ‘message’ and the context or frame of that message” (35). Metafiction, therefore, “aims to discover how we each ‘play’ our own realities” (Waugh 36). It is also capable of displaying a lighthearted touch instead of merely a recursive

bent, and when doing so it manages to derive its agency and status from the explicitness of the act itself, by stretching the semiotic boundaries of what is “text” or “art.” In the process of doing this, it has also worked to force a broadening reconceptualization of postmodernism and what may be constituent of it. Additionally, when the role of humor inflects metafiction and alters its constitution, it will essentially always do so with a knowing wink. “Parody,” Waugh states, “in metafiction can equally be regarded as another lever of positive literary change....The problem arises because parody is double-edged. A [text] that uses parody can be seen either as destructive or as critically evaluative and breaking out into new creative possibilities....[It] *deliberately sets itself up to break norms that have become conventionalized* (my emphasis, 64-65).

To an extent in excess of Waugh, Hutcheon has made the subject of parody one of her most well-known scholastic interests. Yet her analysis of its coupling with metafiction is markedly different, thus ensuring minimal overlap in terms of their theoretical approaches. According to her, “[p]ostmodernist metafiction’s parody and the ironic rhetorical strategies it deploys are perhaps the clearest modern examples of the Bakhtinian ‘double-voiced’ word. Their dual textual and semantic orientation makes them central to Bakhtin’s concept of ‘reported speech’ as discourse *within* and *about* discourse—not a bad definition of metafiction” (72). Again, it must be noted that such a conception of metafiction operates on a recursive alignment, engaged more with considerations of the textual self than with the ways in which the boundaries of fictionality can be breached. Even more distanced from this present study’s approach though is Hutcheon’s take on how parody and self-consciousness function together: “Metafiction today subverts formalist notions of closure by its self-referential reveling in

parodic arbitrariness” (109). By describing instances of parodying metafiction as being devoid of explicit structure and purpose Hutcheon all but omits that they can craftily, and to great effect, be deployed within a text. This stands in stark contrast to Waugh’s assertion that metafiction “*systematically* draws attention to its status as an artifact” (my emphasis, 2). Therefore, any inclusion of metafiction, even comedic kinds, is always specifically constructed with relation to a given text; it does not traffic in arbitrary randomness. Despite working with the same raw literary toolset, these influential critics all seem to have ended up in different places with their analyses and own original theorizing concerning postmodernism and metafiction. Juani Guerra, in the article “Metatext as Cognitive Metonymy: An Experientialist Approach to Metafiction,” reviews this spectrum and goes so far as to construct:

a swift survey of the most relevant literary criticism on Metafiction of the 80s and 90s....The only apparent agreement among all critics seems to be, in Waugh’s words, that metafiction shows evidence of ‘a self-reflexivity’....And this is the main reason why, in bringing together their different critical views, metafiction cannot be classified as a genre and cannot be considered the ‘definitive’ mode of postmodern fiction. (212-13)

Truly, for metafiction to be considered a definitive mode of postmodernism all parties would first have to first be in some kind of agreement that it even *is* a facet of this currently defined cultural era, one which has encompassed the past several decades. Yet though they are not, it feels theoretically sound with respect to this project to treat postmodernity as the tree trunk for which metafiction is an offshoot branch. More so, the

lax structure metafiction gains by being paired with comedic devices, as put forth by Waugh, creates the expanse in application necessary for the present narratological review of *Buffy*.

Beyond its relationship with just metafiction, there is also a line of commentary which asserts that the broader category of postmodernism itself makes use of satire and related comedic traits: “[t]he postmodernist questioning of traditional standards of aesthetic judgment leads to a general mode of playfulness and satire in which postmodern art, often resorting to campy self-parody, seems to have difficulty taking itself seriously” (Booker XVI). Karen Pike is the author of an article exploring the intersection of parody and the fantastical in cinema, and in it she affirms that tongue-in-cheek affect is readily apparent within these postmodern texts: “[c]onventional wisdom has always deemed parody to be fatal to the traditional fantastic text. This is because the fantastic relies on an emotional, or at least visceral, involvement while parody has an intellectually distancing effect. Yet, parody is precisely what is entailed in this postmodern process of recontextualization” (11). So specific is the scope of her research that Pike splinters parody as a comedic device for the purposes of her analysis. She states that, “I have decided to treat Camp as a separate category from parody, rather than a subspecies, though the overlap between the two categories is considerable” (11). This is done because “[c]amp sets up new meanings by synthesizing an *original* text or cultural artifact and its recontextualized version. In other words, it works parodically” (13). Related to this is Waugh’s description that, “[o]stentatious use of literary and mythic allusion reinforces the notion of fictionality, and the reader’s awareness of the construction of alternative worlds” (113). Respective of these precepts then, Whedon and his team display a flair for

referencing popular media throughout the series, and they hit the self-conscious sweet spot when some transparently self-conscious statements transpire alongside some blatant camp-style shtick. An example of such an alignment occurs in season five's "Buffy vs. Dracula," which indicates as brazenly and satirically as possible in the title alone what this episode will entail.

Near the episode's beginning, the Slayer is out on a typical cemetery patrol when she encounters a cloaked, accented man. When he introduces himself to her she goes wide-eyed and exclaims her surprise. Importantly, this detail immediately makes clear that Dracula is an iconic entity within the world of the show, just as he is in ours. However, her doubts regarding him quickly set in, and she attempts to dispel his stature by parodying him:

Buffy: So let me get this straight. You're...Dracula, the guy, the count.

Dracula: I am.

Buffy: And you're sure this just isn't some fanboy thing? 'Cause I've fought more than a couple pimply, overweight vamps that called themselves Lestat.

Dracula: You know who I am. As I would know without question that you are Buffy Summers.

Buffy: You've heard of me?

Dracula: Naturally. You're known throughout the world.

Buffy: Nah. Really? (5001)

Buffy's disbelief and pleasure at hearing that she is world-renowned is humorously metafictional because she actually is famous throughout the planet, but only as a

character, a fictional construct. More so, that a legend of fiction like Dracula is the one to tell her that *she* is a known personage helps keenly deconstruct the gradations of fictionality on display here. Also, throwing an Ann Rice line into the thick of things is just the referential cherry to top off this potent cultural mixture. Near the episode's conclusion Buffy gets in a few verbal barbs in about the cinematic clichés that have built up around the Prince of Darkness. She stakes him but, unique amongst any other vampire ever shown in the series, he solidifies into life again from fog. Then, the Slayer's arm appears onscreen and stakes him for the second time, as she quips, "[y]ou think I don't watch your movies? You always come back" (5001). And as Dracula starts to reform, again, Buffy says exasperatedly, "I'm standing right here" (5001). This causes the fog to wisely dissipate and head elsewhere. Buffy, both the character and the show, make sure that when the Slayer crosses paths with the original vampire of lore it will be the latter whose traditional cultural dominance must now stand aside, yet not before the program manages to self-consciously critique all of his conventions which have long since become culturally staid. Additionally to its self-conscious bearing, such referential reappropriation of a known textual commodity (i.e., Dracula) is an example of what Jameson terms pastiche. And despite the fact that this specific postmodern element is denoted by a sincerity of intention, "pastiche is not incompatible with a certain humor" (18). Ultimately then, both self-conscious parody and postmodern pastiche allow for a series like *Buffy* to create heightened moments of narrative artifice. However, there is a darker aspect which resides in the show's narrative and serves as the counterpoint to comedic self-consciousness or earnest cultural pastiche.



“[T]he fantastic text,” Pike states, “is a synthesis of a supernatural text and a realist text. The result is a visceral reaction of horror, uneasiness, or uncertainty” (21). This thematic joining of un-similar elements within a given narrative can therefore be seen as imbuing the diegesis with a greater amount of tension. Speaking to this tension, Booker writes that, “[t]he unstable boundary between fiction and reality is a key element of ... a general postmodern confusion of ontological levels and boundaries” (XVI). The dynamic tension which exists between *Buffy*'s dramaturgical sensibilities and its comedic flair are nearly always in contention with each other. So if one were to pan out to regard the series on the macro level of its entirety it would be accurate and fair to label the show a “dramedy,” albeit a supernatural one. But if one zooms into the episodic level, this back-and-forth interplay is apparent both within and across episodes. Personally, I have generally eschewed comedic broadcasts in film and television preferring instead the tone of dramatic ones. My reasoning for this is that I believe any successful drama will include well-timed comedic moments to break an accruing mood of tension. Overwhelmingly, this is the way *Buffy* operates as a text. Despite this, a finely split balance is not often maintained.

One episode of the series might skew towards the darker side of narrative while the very next installment can prove to be downright farcical. One such instance is the tonal shift which occurs between “Ted” (2011) and “Bad Eggs” (2012). In the former, Buffy's mother Joyce has begun dating the episode's titular Ted, played by special guest star John Ritter. After he is both emotionally and physically abusive towards Buffy she fights back and mistakenly kills him. The human ramifications of this event are depicted as being both large and overwhelming, and they begin devouring both Buffy and the

audience with their dramatic consequences. However, all is later made right upon the revelation that Ted had been a robot all along. Contrastingly, the latter episode is a comedic look at the dangers of teen parenthood and the mishaps which might resultantly occur, all told through the metaphor of teenagers caring for eggs. At the midrange of focus, the seasonal level, the exchange between destiny-anointed heroics and the sublimely silly bear greater capacity for resulting in a more insoluble mixture, especially towards the latter part of the series' run. Moore surmises that, "[s]easons 2, 3, and 5 ... [are] some of the most compelling seasons of any show in the history of TV.... The final two seasons are generally not felt to be *Buffy*'s finest. Both seasons were dark and featured too many weak episodes" (27-28). While it is true that what constitutes a weak episode is necessarily subjective, season six has often been a point of division (and derision) for the fans and critics alike, resulting from a perceived imbalance in the tone of the series whereby it turned too melancholic and lost the long-standing pleasant tenor it had maintained in balancing. In a case of interesting reversals though, one of the series' most prominent episodes, "The Body," faced a bit of reverse criticism for playing its pathos too true to form.

Over the years, some complaints have been leveraged against the vampire who appears near the episode's end, ostensibly because it is perceived as an unnecessary intrusion into the narrative's proceedings. Whedon, in the episode's audio commentary, addresses the questioning and explains his reasoning: "Now, some people were like, 'Why a vampire in this episode?' But I was very specific about it. I wanted a vampire.... And here's young Dawn confronted by, not only a vampire but a naked man. It's an intrusion. It's offensive. And completely physical ... the idea of the vampire was

partially that it is an intrusion, it doesn't belong here” (5016). Whedon’s decisions for the vampire’s inclusion are thematically sound, and he is right about its intrusiveness and the discomfort it creates. But there is perhaps an additional reason for its intrusive inclusion also. If the vampire had not appeared, and if Buffy had not fought and staked it, then “The Body” would have been completely free of any supernatural elements and become the first such episode of the series’ run. Such exclusion would have narratively caused the program to cease functioning as *Buffy*, and the episode would simply have been the harrowing tale of a young woman whose mother has just died. Such an occurrence would maybe have been a bit too true to the form of real life. An element of slaying was needed because it reaffirms the supernatural, the fantastical. This fight scene is played straight and completely devoid of humor (though they typically function as one of the show’s main veins for humorous moments and exchanges), but its inclusion constitutes the core of *Buffy*’s lifeblood, both in terms of nomenclature and narrative. Its generic unevenness and unease is the culminating result of these disparate materials being sutured together into a single narrative. Since the series was his creation and functioned under his aegis, Whedon would have been responsible for alleviating the consistent tension stemming from the dramaturgy’s bipolarity. Sometimes he did this explicitly through the narrative’s content, as with the instance just noted above. However, after detailed analysis which has taken the whole of *Buffy* into consideration, this study contends that he sometimes made use of metafiction to stabilize a thematic imbalance which otherwise may have tilted the text, at least temporarily, too far in one direction.

In the fourth season premiere, “The Freshman,” which Whedon wrote and directed, Buffy and Willow are beginning college together. In the campus bookstore the

Slayer cringes and says, “[b]oy I can’t wait until mom gets the bill for these books. I hope it’s a funny *aneurysm*” (my emphasis, 4001). Initially, the line is funny, with its parents freaking out implication to which everyone can be expected to relate. That is also how I related to it, and after its initial moment the cast-off joke was never given another thought. However, while rewatching the series at a later date, and after having seen *Buffy* in its entirety, this line now seemed jarring and eerily macabre. This no doubt stems solely from the fact that Buffy’s mother, Joyce, does in fact die a year and a half later in episode 16 of season five, “The Body.” Buffy’s cavalier joke about her mother’s mortality is not, I would maintain, an incident of intentional foreshadowing but rather is meant to function self-consciously.

The series, at times, is known to play the slow burn of a major plot reveal or setup for a coming season, as happens in the last story arc of season two. As tensions simmer towards a boil between Buffy and the de-souled Angel, the peripheral, rodent-like Principal Snyder seems embroiled in a shadowy matter of his own:

Police Officer: The city council was told you could handle this job. If you feel that you can’t, perhaps you’d like to take that up with the mayor.

Principal Snyder: I’ll handle it. I will. (“I Only Have Eyes For You,” 2019)

A second mention of Sunnydale’s top city official crops up in that season’s finale when Snyder, after having expelled Buffy, makes a call and, speaking to an unknown recipient, says to, “[t]ell the mayor I have good news” (“Becoming, Part 2” 2022). This narrative thread is left untouched for the episode’s remainder, but an observant viewer will notice it. It is meant to pique one’s interest and curiosity about what lies ahead. In fact,

Sunnydale's mayor, Richard Wilkins III, is introduced in season three of *Buffy* and becomes the central villain for that year. The foreshadowing of the mayor mirrors, albeit to a lesser extent, the arrival of Buffy's sister Dawn at the start of season five, she having been alluded to in several episodes stretching all the way back to season three's finale. The slow reveal of these game-changing plotlines is different from what transpires with Buffy's mother though because they are meant to draw attention to themselves. They want to stand out as narrative red herrings. Yet, when it occurs, the demise of Joyce is altogether unexpected, despite her having undergone treatment for a tumor earlier in the season. This is because she had battled through it and recovered only to then be struck down later by an aneurysm. Recalling the wording from "The Freshman," Buffy makes a joke about her mother expiring from an aneurysm. This is curious, not for the hyperbolic sentiment but rather due to the choice of phrasing. It is much more generically casual, across all media and in real life, to say that so-and-so will have a heart attack as a sentiment for expressing frustration; it is rather the standard convention. Here though, a different cause of death is named, a quite specific one at that. What this means, by implication of the evidence, is that this was intentionally done.

Kristine Sutherland, the actress who portrays Joyce Summers on the show, reveals in an interview that Whedon had longstanding foreknowledge of what was in store for her character. She relates her experience concerning the matter:

A tremendous opportunity came up that required I be out of the country for a year....I loved the show and the last thing I wanted was to leave. I wrestled with the decision for a long time but I finally realized that I had to seize this opportunity because it wouldn't come again. Once I made up

my mind I immediately told Joss.... When I told Joss he said, “Oh, my God, but you are coming back at the end of the year, right?” I said, “Definitely,” and he told me, “OK, well, you really have to come back because I’m going to kill off Joyce.” He went on to tell me his plans and I immediately understood where he was going with this. (Eramo)

Sutherland here is referencing her greatly reduced role in season four of *Buffy*, in which she appears in only five episodes. This is in stark contrast with the seasons on either side in which her character is in roughly three times as many episodes. This therefore necessitates that Sutherland and Whedon would have discussed the looming absence while season three was still in production. Additionally, he seems to have already had details of the death planned out at this early stage. Couple this with the fact that he was the sole writer and director for both “The Freshman” and “The Body” and a link can be seen which indicates the directional follow through of Whedon’s intentions.

The aneurysm comment discreetly placed in *Buffy*’s fourth season opener is nakedly overt only after the dramatic death episode has first been seen. Whedon manages to stick in a reference to a major turning point in the series, but he does so by doing it in an off-the-cuff manner. Also, it is a reference that would almost certainly have been only for his benefit, at least for well over a year. But this is ultimately a true indicator of his bearing as an auteur and indicative of his reach for tangling with metafiction. Whedon manipulates the circumstances of the show, both because he is clever and because he can; he is interested in playing with its form and structure. It would be fair to even go so far as labeling him a postmodern comedian because his employment of metafiction, while

generally humorous, rests on stretching the generic conventions of the medium he is working with into a self-conscious statement.

One hopes that the composition of these two theoretical terms—postmodernism and metafiction—is now usefully understood as being built upon angles and opinions, not just a monolith of literary and cultural studies. However, “[w]hether one criticizes the technique as pastiche (Jameson), mourns the loss of truth in the non-distinction of the simulacrum (Baudrillard), or recognizes the transformative potential of parody (Hutcheon),” there remains one key tenet at work, and, “it is . . . that postmodern discourse is very much about a reflexive recontextualizing of words and images” (Pike 10-11). Booker, turning his attention to the constant flux and restructuring that occurs within postmodern production and textuality, tells of visual media that, “many postmodern films are so self-conscious about their formal fragmentation that this fragmentation itself becomes a metafictional commentary on postmodern conventions of film editing and narrative” (6). Regarding *Buffy* then, this is certainly a substantial aspect of its own metafictional shaping. This also begs the question though, how has a frequently studied text like this series managed, by and large, to remain off the radar screen as it pertains to *Buffy*’s self-conscious instances? Roy Sommer, in his article “Beyond (Classical) Narratology: New Approaches to Narrative Theory,” provides a sound reasoning for an answer when he states that, “analyses show that despite (or rather, because of) the undeniable differences between verbal and pictorial storytelling, the representation of stories in media other than literary texts poses new challenges to a narratology which transcends generic and disciplinary boundaries” (11). Currie also remarks on the broadening shift of focus which necessitated narratology’s application

across the historically newer realms of media: “If narrative self-consciousness found its first extended expression in the so-called high culture of literary modernism, it soon flowed out into the more demotic realms of film, television, comic strips and advertising”

(2). Narratology, one may surmise, could then seemingly fit right alongside postmodernism and metafiction as another theoretical concept whose identity may alter depending on its context and application.



## CHAPTER 3

### “ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING” AND DIEGETIC METAFICTION

So far this project has in part shown that parody can prove beneficial to the crafting of self-conscious instances. More specifically though, “[p]arody in metafiction may operate at the level of style or structure” (Waugh 72). In fact, this is the manner in which it most often manifests throughout the course of the series. A preponderance of metafictional styles and affectations in *Buffy* might partially be accounted for because of its innate overlap with the reappropriation of historical cultural elements, and which is a primary trait of postmodernism. “[P]ostmodern nostalgia is more mediated by culture than are earlier forms of nostalgia,” Booker notes, adding that, “...[A]ddition[ally], postmodern nostalgia is a primary stylistic movement...[P]ostmodern nostalgia films tend to draw upon the recordings, popular music of earlier eras” (51, 54). Concerning postmodern pastiche and nostalgia then, there is no episode of *Buffy* more explicitly steeped in cultural aspects from the past half-century than “Once More, with Feeling.” This is the well-known musical installment of the series in which all of the cast members sing. Relatedly, it is also the single most self-consciously filled episode of the show’s entire network run too. Of the analyses detailing episodic metafiction in *Buffy*, the majority run towards this one. With that in mind, and aware of the great number of metafictional occurrences that transpire across all of *Buffy*, I have chosen to implement a system of groups and subgroups which will thereby aid in the categorization and separation of all the series’ main types of self-conscious display, as I have seen fit to

classify them within this present study. Not every occurrence of metafiction appearing across the show's 144 episodes will be discerned herein or commented upon, as the specificity of doing so would be outside this project's reach or goals. Instead, various groups will be outlined and have been titled by me with respect to the metafictional characteristics which I have observed of each.

Most importantly in terms of textual consideration, the instances of metafiction in *Buffy* the series have been divided into two broadly distinct classes: those occurring within the narrative's diegesis, and those ones which occupy a specific facet of the text's paratextuality. The diegetic half of metafictional instances shall be discussed more throughout the remainder of this chapter while self-consciousness which shares its textual space with the paratext will be detailed in this project's following chapter. The splitting of metafictional instances across various units, and their designated placement, is meant to serve as a rough scale which notes both the features of the given type of metafiction as well as if it is a latent form of metafiction, a more overt form of metafiction akin to breaking the fourth wall, or if it exists somewhere on the spectrum between the two. The most minimally intrusive types of metafiction are detailed first, and they proceed in ascending order towards the more overt metafictional instances. Additionally, since "Once More, with Feeling" spans most of these categorical designations due to the number of metafictional forms appearing in the episode, it therefore by default serves as the prime example for the narratological analyses of the various groups.

### Mild-to-Midrange Metafiction

The mild-to-midrange metafiction on *Buffy* generally involves a character saying something, and/or directing a look, that brushes up against the boundary line of fictionality, the agreement we as viewers or readers make to willfully suspend our disbelief in exchange for being entertained. While a case could certainly be made for some of these occurrences seeming rather overt, I have kept them in this grouping if it can be construed that someone other than the audience is the intended recipient of a glance or statement.

#### *Ila – Temporal Parody*

Season one's "Out of Mind, Out of Sight" is unique among every episode of *Buffy* for one reason, and it is relating to this special distinction that a self-conscious statement is uttered (and which also serves as one of the series' first). The end of the cold open reveals an athlete who is apparently alone and changing in the men's locker room. Suddenly, he hears noises and looks around startled. He reaches for his baseball bat, but then it levitates seemingly of its own accord and proceeds to bludgeon him. Several minutes later his beaten-up form is found, and as soon as his mortality is called into question Principal Snyder appears on the scene to dispense of such talk: "Dead? Of course not. Dead. What are you, ghouls? There are no dead students here...*this week*" (my emphasis, 1011). The surface significance here is that Snyder is right: not only are there no students who die, but there is in fact no creature or human who expires in this episode.

Hence, it is the only one spanning the course of the series which can validly make that claim. More so though, Snyder's mention of the week at hand creates a temporal overlap for what would have been the original viewing audience. With no creature being slayed, or Sunnydale student falling victim to said creature, a viewer would literally have had to wait until the next week's installment rolled around, and with it a fresh episode containing the regular default mode of both a beast and a body count.

The second season premiere, "When She Was Bad," employs a similarly metafictional stance about chronology, but does so in a more transparent fashion. The episode opens with Willow and Xander loitering in a cemetery when they are attacked by a vampire. It has already been established that the Slayer is visiting her father in Los Angeles for the summer; they are alone and unarmed. Necessarily then, that is the very moment Buffy appears to give the vampire a warranted dusting. While the fight is still underway though, there is one shot when the camera's point-of-view switches from observing Willow and Xander watch the fight on the sidelines to highlighting Buffy instead. In this moment her head whips around after delivering a blow, her eyes look outside of the audience's range of visibility, and she says with a smile, "Hi guys" (2001). In this brief shot Buffy is centrally located within the camera's visible range of focus with no addressee visible. However, because of the editing right beforehand one must necessarily assume she is talking to her friends. (And it is this preceding observation which clarifies any mistake which could be made in construing the episode's metafiction as that of an overt type.) Recurring in the same vein, it is right after the vampire is impaled upon a tree branch that the camera cuts again to a shot of the Slayer. Now she is staring straight into it, in effect out towards us the viewers. Smirking, she asks, "Miss

me?” (2001). Once again, the temporal counterpart for the original viewing audience is created. *Buffy* was always a show that Whedon chose to align chronologically alongside the real world, meaning that when Buffy returns from her summer vacation on the show three-plus months have passed, just as they have in fact for the real world too. Her entreating about being missed is funny (and metafictional) because yes, her return must have been a welcome one for those original viewers, as it is for the characters that she has just saved. Why else would they have tuned in to reacquaint themselves with her after that lengthy of a hiatus?

Season six’s “Once More, with Feeling,” takes on the temporal parody in an even more forthright way than the two previously mentioned examples. A major plotline of the episode centers on the kidnapping of Buffy’s sister Dawn by that week’s one-turn villain. One of the demon’s marionette-like henchmen shows up at the Magic Box to inform the Slayer about her sister’s kidnapping. Buffy responds to this news in a deadpan, lackluster manner: “[s]o, Dawn’s in trouble. Must be Tuesday” (6007). This is parodying temporality because, for all but the first one-and-a-half seasons of its network run, *Buffy* aired on Tuesday evenings; the traditional timeslot was even maintained when the show switched channels from the WB to UPN. A viewer watching the initial airing would therefore have been doing so on a Tuesday. I believe Whedon, who served as this episode’s writer and director, was employing another narrative feature at his disposal which could thereby prick at our unconscious distance from the fiction at hand. Here, as with the other examples grouped into this section, the temporal parody is created for what would have been the original viewing audience, not someone catching it later on syndication, DVD, or streaming via the web. The datedness and specificity

accompanying such metafictional instances may effectively render them moot at this current point in time. However, the validity of what Whedon engaged in here deserves to be beyond either rebuke or dismissal. He very pointedly created a fictional echo of an original viewer's actual timeframe, and each one's moment of occurrence would have likely been functioning with the goal of creating a doubling, a temporal déjà vu from a fictional world.

### *11b – Meta-Irony*

The previous chapter's analysis aimed at highlighting the connection between the episodes "The Freshman" and "The Body" also belongs here as an example of what I consider "meta-irony," or those self-conscious instances which only become ironic with knowledge gained from placement alongside the show's constituent parts. Hence, Buffy's quip about Joyce suffering an aneurysm is dramatically ironic, but only after the full range of events the following season has first been witnessed and can subsequently be taken into account. Besides this possible siphoning of excessive dramaturgy, there are other examples of the meta-ironic which occur on *Buffy*.

In "Out of My Mind," Buffy is recapping the pressures of college to Willow, who sympathetically cracks-wise. The Slayer though responds with a rather fanciful notion: "I thought it was gonna be like in the movies—you know, inspirational music, *a montage*, me sharpening my pencils, me reading, writing, falling asleep on a big pile of books with my glasses all crooked, 'cause in my montage, I have glasses, but real life is slow, and it's starting to hurt my occipital lobe" (my emphasis, 5004). Despite its run-on status, this

sentence is a rather illuminating piece of meta-irony. Buffy envisions herself in an academic montage yet bemoans that her real life cannot be like that. However, the series' heroine does in fact appear in a number of montages over the course of seven seasons. Her commentary is dramatically ironic and self-conscious because it belies the fictional nature of how the viewer perceives her beyond how she sees herself, a character trapped within a diegetically fictional world. Additionally, it is also ironic that Buffy's imagined montage is a harmless, semi-productive one because the majority of times a montage actually takes place within *Buffy* it is almost invariably dramatic and/or depressing.

Interestingly, a subsequent mention of montage later in the series provides Buffy with yet another instance of this metafictional form. In "Once More, with Feeling," Buffy is seen training with her Watcher, Giles. They engage in some light-hearted banter about the problems of living in a musical:

Buffy: I'm just worried this whole session's gonna turn into some training montage from an eighties movie.

Giles: If we hear any inspirational power chords, we'll just blind them until they go away. (6007)

Without warning though, as Giles turns away to retrieve weapons for their training session, he begins singing to his charge: "You're not ready for the world outside/ you keep pretending, but you just can't hide" (6007). From these first notes of the song onward, meta-irony becomes apparent within the episode. The song's start signals a shift whereby Buffy *is* in a montage of the stereotypical sort with regard to several respects. First, she is engaged in strenuous physical activity (e.g., deflecting knives, numerous forward flips), which doubles as a proto-typical training montage. Second, she is moving

in slow motion; this can be deduced because Giles, shown standing physically right next to her, moves at normal speed. Third, Buffy is completely ignorant of the fact that she is even in a montage, and the show does not indicate one way or another if her Watcher is aware that she was either. As soon as the tune ends though she seems to shake of a sort of daze and asks him, “[d]id you just say something?” (6007). There is also distinct meta-irony related to Giles’s performance because, unlike the traditional cliché, the song he sings that accompanies the montage is not a rousing piece of hair-metal but rather a forlorn ballad detailing Buffy’s inadequacies and her emotional overdependence upon him.

### *IIC – Meta-Referentiality*

Metafiction, in Waugh’s critical estimation, does not necessarily always stem just from the mind of a text’s creator. Rather, an author or artist might choose to make use of *objets trouvés*, which Waugh designates as “metafictional collage” (143). As with Marcel Duchamp’s original idea for the “found art” aesthetic, here *objets trouvés* is the appropriation and interweaving of a known cultural commodity, and though it predates the postmodernist notion of pastiche, the two concepts are not dissimilar.

In “Once More, with Feeling,” a wide variety of musical styles are on display as nearly every major character is given a solo feature and performs during the course of the episode. For engaged couple Anya and Xander, this bewitchment comes in the form of a zippy Broadway style song called “I’ll Never Tell,” and which then relates the doubts and fears each houses about their upcoming nuptials. The lines they sing are backhandedly



rat-a-tat and reminiscent of Hollywood screwball classics. Additionally, the couple engages in a soft-shoe routine, a la Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Notably, it is not the allusions which are of any specific metafictional thought because postmodern pastiche essentially functions like Whedon's raison d'être for the structuring of this episode. Instead, the meta-referentiality derives from a reflection on Anya's part. She is unhappy that "[c]learly our number is a retro-pastiche that's never going to be a breakaway pop hit" (6007). This critical review recurs later in the episode when the group is informed that Spike, typically the group's most sardonic member, has sung a song too. Curious, Anya asks him, "[w]ould you say it was a breakaway pop hit or more of a book number?" It is this questioning, with its attention toward designation of genre and style, which denotes how this metafictional marker takes form within the narrative.

In the convention of classic movie musicals, characters break into song without facing any reprisal or questioning for their actions. This renders these narratives at such a proximal distance from ours that there is essentially no concern of these fictional worlds overlapping with the reality of our own in any fashion more meaningful than an echo. (A notable cinematic exception in the twenty-first century is *Chicago*, which positions all of the musical performances as being the internal fantasies of Roxie Hart.) Also, before the advent of *Glee* singing in scripted television shows was a rare phenomenon. "Once More, with Feeling" has been credited with inspiring other television programs to stage stand-alone musical episodes, the most notable examples of which that followed are *Scrubs* and *Grey's Anatomy*. However, the narrative of the musical episode for both of these series unfolds in a hospital environment. This therefore creates the necessary agency for the shows to experiment in a previously untested way, but then at the end of the day to still

discount the plot device (and likely ratings gimmick) because the singing in each series is framed as originating from a character's health: the afflicted man or woman sees everyone as breaking into song, but nobody else does as it is only their subjective experience, not a true portrayal of things. *Buffy*, however, takes a wholly different stance on the ontological framework for the singing which occurs in its musical episode. True, a spell has been cast, but the key features to note are that *everyone* is aware of the phenomenon taking place and *everyone* takes part in said event; there is no opting out from the singing. And it is this awareness on the part of the characters which distinguishes this episode from its visual forebears as well as successors. Only on *Buffy* do the characters actively discuss the genre of what it is that they are singing.

The episode "Life Serial" takes a different approach towards meta-referentiality, one framed more in terms of visual display than verbal description. Buffy, only having recently been resurrected by her friends, is now faced with the challenge of traditional employment to help stave off the many bills which have been accruing in her absence. Giles and Anya offer to help her out with a job at The Magic Box, which seems ideal. What she is unaware of though is that she is being tested by "the Trio," the triumvirate of human nerds wanting to assess the strength and ingenuity of the Slayer. Their present challenge takes the form of a continuous loop, as trio-member Jonathan details: "I made it so she had to satisfy a customer with a task that resists solving" (6005). For Buffy, this task becomes the challenge of retrieving a disgruntled mummy hand from the store's basement for a customer. What follows is a montage in which Buffy repeatedly fails to retrieve the mummy hand according to desired specifications (i.e., not having already been stabbed by her, it not attempting to choke its purchaser). At some point the Slayer

gives in to her frustrations and can variously be seen crying, breaking items, and hurling insults. Every time she does so the loop begins anew. Any viewer watching this scene who has also seen *Groundhog Day* will immediately pair them together because that film contains a montage sequence in which Bill Murray's character repeatedly tries to engage in petty rebellion against his own loop, including by killing himself (more than once). Buffy is essentially playing out a milder version of that very same loop, and there is essentially no doubt as to its filmic indebtedness. Beyond even the overt allusion of this montage though, the Trio witnesses her cyclically-natured trap, via a hidden camera, and then talk about other television series which have used the same plotline:

Andrew: I just hope she solves it faster than Data did on the ep of *TNG* where the Enterprise kept blowing up.

Warren: Or Mulder in that *X-Files* where the bank kept exploding. (6005)

Their exchange merely serves to stress even further the point of how intentionally derivative this entire sequence is. It goes so far as to be a kind of metafictional double-dose because the episode stylistically and blatantly confirms the previous cultural sources from which it is cribbing, all while at the same time maintaining the diegetic barrier which prevents the Trio's conception that their analyses of television loops unwittingly feeds into the one which they, in turn, now partially constitute. Eventually Buffy does find an outside-the-box solution which allows the task to be completed and the spell to be broken. Yet this self-conscious instance stands out as one of the parodic highlights of the series.

### *11d – Manipulation of Diegetic Presentation*

There are several instances across the series in which the display of an episode, its visual presentation, is changed from that of the standard norm. These infrequent occurrences though can be deemed metafictional because their very appearance is an alteration resulting from some element occurring within the diegesis, or constructed world, of the show. None of the characters on *Buffy* has any conception that this occurs even though the viewing audience does, thus excluding it from the realm of overt metafiction.

“Once More, with Feeling” is the only installment of *Buffy* to have originally aired in widescreen format. This can partially be construed as a bid on Whedon’s part to both replicate and reference the grandeur associated with classic types of projection, such as Cinemascope. Additionally, his decision here serves to more fully highlight the musicality of the episode. And while that proves to be aesthetically effective in contributing to Whedon’s aims, the manipulation of an episode’s visual delivery is more readily apparent in season seven’s “Selfless.” This episode contains two flashbacks to Anya’s mortal life before she first became a vengeance demon. Having lost that status in the third season and been returned to mortality, references are repeatedly made by Buffy and the others to Anya’s age being in excess of a millennium. Appropriately enough then, Swedish is the language that she and everyone else can be heard speaking in these sequences which serves as a testament to her origin from Viking culture. However, the episode’s rendering of these scenes within the chronological past is realized by the narrative’s crossover to sepia tones and hues, an affectation on the text’s part readily

intended to summon images of old movies being played on a projector. In the episode, these scenes also present lines and flash burns that appear over the unfolding narrative in a repeating style. The viewer's mind is then inescapably drawn to celluloid wear-and-tear. These cinematic signifiers which manifest within *Buffy* work directly on two levels of receptivity. First, they denote by association the other, more expansive medium of visuals texts: the movies. Whedon is an ardent fan of the movies, and it is also the only textual medium which could rival his close association with television. Also, it is this association with movies that then creates another meaning implicit within the episode's presentation, the second being related to datedness. After all, scratchy film footage almost by necessity conjures up a timeframe several decades past. With this instance, the series manages to evoke agedness in a direction completely foreign to the narrative events unfolding on screen, yet the association complements the temporality being depicted. *Buffy* manages to direct viewer thinking processes in such a subtle way with this device that one may never be aware at all that he is being positioned towards a more nuanced engagement with the series by a process seemingly independent of the text's explicitly unfolding narrative.

### Overt Metafiction

As the preceding examples of self-consciousness highlighted thus far are designated "mild-to-midrange" metafiction, then what follows next are those instances on *Buffy* whereby the series' diegesis seems to be broken outright with some kind of discourse aimed squarely towards the viewing audience.

## *12a – Self-Referential Deconstruction*

In season four's penultimate episode, "Primeval," Buffy and her friends invoke an ancient spell which magically combines their essences and allows the (temporarily) mystically endowed Slayer to defeat Adam, the Frankenstein-like cyborg who narratively functions as the season's primary villain. However, in that season's finale Buffy and company face the aftermath of what they have done, namely in the form of a mental attack from the First Slayer who stalks each in his or her dreams and is seeking retribution for their blatant disregard of the magical order. The main plotline involving dreams is what endows Whedon, the episode's writer and director, to engage in both stylistic and narrative flights of fancy, the like of which (with the possible exception of "Once More, with Feeling") are unrivalled anywhere else over the course of the series. It is therefore that unchecked creative risk-taking which allows "Restless" (4022) to overtly and literally showcase the artifice of *Buffy* the series as a fictional construct.

The self-conscious instance which occurs inside Xander's dream is the rare diegetic circumstance of metafiction occurring not with dialogue but rather through visual reveal. Xander, in an attempt to escape the primal First Slayer, is shown moving from Giles's apartment terrace into Buffy's house, and from there out into the UC Sunnydale dorm where Buffy and Willow reside together as roommates. Proceeding down the hallway, he enters their room then quickly ducks into a closet which houses a winding, tight corridor that empties back out into his own basement, and which he has been trying to escape all along (to no avail though, as his dream self is immediately killed). Xander's journey though does not unfold as it logically would have to otherwise

(i.e., getting in a car and then driving from location to location). Instead, Whedon makes use here of a prolonged camera sequence, the duration of which is approximately a forty-five second continuous shot. As this is unfolding, Whedon and his camera trace Xander's hurried movements across the numerous locations familiar to any viewer acquainted with the series. What is new, however, is the absence of any cuts or edits in this scene that, through the omission of editing, serves to lay bare the metafiction so nakedly by drawing attention to the artifice of these locations as interconnected sets housed on a sound stage. The utilization of their interconnectedness in the narrative itself is a boldly original way to break the fourth wall. Yet because the diegesis is presenting a dream, it makes sense how the character just rushes on through these areas where he spends a majority of his life in a matter-of-fact fashion, still firmly housed within the fictional world itself.

Like "Restless," the episode "Fool for Love" can be labeled as overtly metafictional, but in a markedly different way. Speaking broadly though, it also asserts its self-consciousness by deconstructing the show. This episode centrally revolves around Buffy and Spike, with her demanding that he recount his run-ins with the two Slayers he had previously fought and killed in the hopes that she will learn something useful to stave off the same fate. The narrative quickly relocates Spike into the past and half a world away, as he is shown fighting, and then defeating, a Slayer against the backdrop of the Boxer Rebellion. However, it is his encounter with another Slayer in New York City during the 1970s that comprises this episode's metafictionality. Initially, Spike recalls the former battle—which took place on a deserted subway car—as Buffy and he combat one another in the alley outside of the Bronze nightclub. This is also where the separate narrative frames on display begin to breakdown.

Despite the thirty-odd year time lapse, the story showcases the fight scenes between Spike and these two Slayers as being synchronous; the moves in one fight directly find their consequence in the other one, as indicated by precise and rapid editing. All the while present-day Spike continues talking to the current Slayer. The distinct spheres maintaining a separation of the two scenes breaks down though when the vampire finally gains the upper hand in the 1970s fight. Astride the Slayer from an earlier era, his hands wrapped around her throat, Spike looks up. His gaze is askance, not aimed centrally towards the camera. He begins speaking to Buffy, who is of this narrative's then present era—Sunnydale, California in the year 2000:

Death is your art. You make it with your hands day after day...that final gasp, that look of peace. Part of you is desperate to know, what's it like? Where does it lead you? And now you see, that's the secret. Not the punch you didn't through or the kicks you didn't land. She merely wanted it. Every Slayer...has a death wish. Even you. The only reason you've lasted as long as you have is you've got ties to the world...your mum. Your brat kid sister. The Scoobies. They don't tie you here, but you're just putting off the inevitable. Sooner or later...you're gonna want it. And the second—the second that happens, you know I'll be there. I'll slip in...have myself a real good day. Here endeth the lesson. (5007)

As this monologue unfolds, the story rapidly cuts back and forth between the two Spikes until the past version completes his task at hand by killing the 1970s Slayer.

Douglas Petrie was the scriptwriter for “Fool for Love,” and in the episode's commentary track he describes his feelings about crafting this sequence and what it



meant with regards to the narrative structure itself: “here [Spike] starts talking to the camera, and this was *a big creative risk*. We had no idea if it was gonna work or not and I think it worked beautifully. Its...you never know until you actually try stuff if it’s gonna work or not” (my emphasis, 5007). In the most basic way, this creative gambit pays dividends in the sense of being dramatically fulfilling. It also pays off as a metafictional exercise because the breakdown of ontological levels within the narrative forces an immediate reorientation of a viewer’s perception about the proceedings being witnessed. Additionally, the undermining of the series’ normal state of being allows for Spike to assert control of the show’s narrative himself. Now, both “Restless” and “Fool for Love” are overtly metafictional because each one dismantles some aspect of the show which had otherwise always been taken as a given, and each positions that textual component within a new orientation of reception. Yet no episode of *Buffy* is more metafictionally explicitly in deconstructing the series and shining a light back upon itself than “Storyteller,” which is also, speaking diegetically, the last greatly metafictional episode of *Buffy* in terms of sequential order.

The cold open for “Storyteller” immediately confronts the acquainted viewer with a scene that is completely stripped of any familiar narrative elements for which he or she would likely be expecting. Genteel string music can be heard, and a bookshelf filled with classic volumes is on full display. A stately montage unfolds before finally revealing the character Andrew adorned in a smoking jacket sitting next to a crackling fireplace, the very embodiment of Masterpiece Theater caricature. Radically though, he punctures through the frilly surroundings by looking squarely at the camera and entreating the audience to join him in Buffy’s adventures: “[c]ome with me now, if you will, gentle

viewers. Join me on a new voyage of the mind, a little tale I like to call *Buffy: A Slayer of the Vampires*” (7016). These lines affirm that parodying metafiction is on full display here, but it also shows that the episode is brazenly self-conscious, what with the medium of textual reception (“gentle *viewers*”) being announced by a character and the title of the show itself being spoken, albeit in a slightly different syntactical form.

A viewer is already narratively unmoored by this juncture, and the story has barely begun. However, by the end of the cold open it is revealed that Andrew has merely been locking himself in the Summers’ household bathroom and speaking into his camcorder; the opulence first witnessed is merely his dream of being a teller of tales, a matter for which the audience is granted access to the envisioning of. The reveal though does not, initially, hinder or halt his videographic pursuits; Andrew is instead given a number of ways in which to project his documentary style fantasies. One way this occurs is in the cold open. Before the big reveal, he narrates Buffy’s previous patrol outing: “[i]t was cold last night, and the wind was cruel. But the Slayer had a job to do” (7016). His lines take the form of a voiceover which is paired with the visual element of Buffy fending off several vampires in a cemetery. As the fighting continues the narration drops off, luring the viewer into a lull in which he becomes engrossed in the action momentarily forgetting all else. But then the voice-over narration resumes after Buffy is dealt a punishing blow. The scene immediately shifts back to Andrew’s internal daydream with him saying, “[o]uch. My goodness! Things look bad for the Slayer, don’t they? She didn’t see that second vampire, concealed by cover of darkness” (7016). While the audience at any given moment might have like-minded thoughts, it is unprecedented

in the scope of *Buffy* for a character within the story world itself to deliver a blow-by-blow commentary in a manner akin to ESPN's *SportsCenter*.

In a separate instance, Andrew's filmic aggrandizing momentarily shies away from himself to put a gloss upon those who surround him. Dramatically, in a tone aimed towards a documentary affectation, he narrates: "[y]ou've already met Buffy. She's beautiful, with a lion's heart and—and the face of an angel. She's never afraid because she knows her side will always win" (7016). As he is saying this the Slayer appears on screen with windswept hair and a suggestive look straight towards the camera and out to the audience, all while pouring herself a bowl of cereal. The overall impression conveyed is of those overwrought perfume commercials, except here it features Buffy and breakfast. Andrew continues on in a similar manner, floridly detailing Spike and Anya until his fantasy is burst by an unnamed, unknown girl who enters the frame of view. This interrupts his heightened descriptive recording and brings *Buffy* back to its normal televisual portrayal.

This unceremonious step back to reality can be discerned as resulting from how Andrew sees the group and his dynamic within it. He regards the main characters of the series as not only more important than himself but also as being better than him as well. Granted, he commits some truly heinous crimes earlier in season seven and throughout season six, but none of the main group still remaining by this late-date of the series is innocent of major transgressions, with several having committed outright murder. Coupled with this is the fact that Andrew actually does become an important character, despite his first appearance not being until the sixth season ("Flooded," 6004). However, it is that last point alone which renders the other factors inconsequential because the

group comprised of Buffy and her friends has already been lionized and mythologized by the point in time when he first arrives at the Slayer's household and begins to acquaint himself on a personal level with the group. All of which helps explain why Andrew, in part, serves the purpose of being an avatar for the audience. He is the outsider witnessing their heroic exploits, much as we do; the difference is that he is doing so within the fictionally constructed world of the show. Towards the end of "Storyteller" the events take a dramatic turn away from the comedic but in fact help bring the episode's metafictional status full circle. Buffy brandishes a knife at the purported documentarian and threatens his life. Upset, she says, "[t]his isn't some story where good triumphs because good triumphs. Good people are going to die" (7016). Thematically it stands that Buffy will not kill Andrew, and she does not. Rather, Buffy is attempting to goad a certain truth from him, one which will defuse a dangerous spell. Yet the Slayer's words ring out truthful to the viewer, more so anyways than all of what Andrew has said thus far in the episode. Given the previous events which have transpired on *Buffy* by this late date in the series' narrative (including the heroine dying *twice*), there is no reason to assume that the series finale will be an easy cross to burden. This final admonishment Buffy delivers is also intended for us the audience, to brace ourselves for loss.

### *12b – Characters Addressing the Audience*

Unlike every other form of self-conscious manifestation mentioned thusly, there are only two episodes of the show which conform to the classic notion of metafiction as being explicitly similar to that of the theater (i.e., breaking the fourth wall). Therefore,

these are also the most overt examples involving what is self-consciously possible with regards to the narrative's diegesis and textual structure.

In "Once More, with Feeling," immediately after the so-labeled "retro-pastiche" song, Anya can be seen walking down the street with Xander and Giles, and though all three are speaking at the same time she appears to be speaking offhandedly while the other two are overlapping with one another. What she states, and what no one apparently hears, can serve as a metafictional commentary not just for this one episode, but for Whedon's self-conscious shaping and experimentations which span the entirety of the series too: "[i]t's like we're being watched. Like there was a wall missing from our apartment. Like there were only 3 walls, and not a fourth wall..." (6007). That one of the main characters speaks this as essentially an aside shows just how straightforward the series creator is truly willing to be in terms of his regard for the inclusion of metafiction within this series.

Whedon though, being the comedic auteur that he is, would necessarily decide that an episode filled with singing would also provide the perfect moment to introduce metafiction of a kind that will break through the narrative's barrier and directly address the audience viewing the episode. Perhaps Whedon decided to pair *Buffy*'s apex-level metafiction right alongside the brave decision of enacting a musical episode because, possibly in his mind, the generic allowance which musicals demand is already a complete dismantling of the default ontological modes of discourse within the series. In a regular episode, characters are always either speaking to themselves or to others, but now in "Once More, with Feeling," that same familiar character dispenses with his or her normal

means of fictional conveyance and instead gains the capacity to directly address the viewing audience...but only while doing so through song.

During her big solo number, “Something to Sing About,” Buffy looks directly into the camera and croons, “[a]nd you can sing along.” This is literally an entreating on behalf of the series’ main protagonist for viewers to join in with the production number existing inside the text’s diegesis. This straight-to-camera glance from other primary characters, but also a number of one-shot townspeople and villains, is a visual hallmark of this episode, if one cares to notice it. Early in the episode, Buffy confronts a trio of enemies (two vampires and a demon). Singing the line, “[c]rawl out of your grave, you’ll find this fight just doesn’t mean a thing,” she proceeds to punch one of the vampires in the face (6007). As his head then spins around he looks directly into the camera and retorts, “[s]he ain’t got that swing” (6007). Anya and Xander engage in breaking the fourth wall repeatedly throughout their song number, and their numerous gazes directly into the camera tell the viewers as much as each other the secrets and doubts they had been bottling up inside. Additionally, even two of the programs co-executive producers (Marti Noxon and David Fury) make cameo appearances and join in on the metafictional action, playing, respectively, forlorn and cheerful Sunnydale residents who, indeed, do make eye contact square and center with the camera.

The only other installment of the series which so forcefully transcends the traditional boundaries of fictionality is the Anya-centric episode “Selfless.” Having rejoined the vengeance demon fold, Anya has perpetrated a slaughter and then faces Buffy head-on in combat. The Slayer seems to have gained the upper hand in a dramatic moment when she pierces her opponent completely through with a sword, pinning her to

a wall. The scene cuts to black, and when the episode resumes the scene is completely different. Anya and Xander are shown together, he dozing off while she reads a magazine. This circumstance is completely counterintuitive to the preceding instance just presented in the episode, what with Xander having left her at the wedding alter the previous season as well as Anya's hair now being a totally different color (blonde instead of brunette). Then, a title card appears over the scene which states, "Sunnydale, 2001"; this therefore confirms what is being witnessed is a flashback. Its placement within the *Buffy* continuum is almost immediately framed though when Anya asks Xander, "Honey, was that weird? That thing earlier with the singing and the coconuts?" (7005).

While he falls asleep she then begins to sing a tune in which she idealizes her prospective future alongside Xander. As the number continues she inquires, "[w]hat's the point of loving?" (7005). The question might first be taken as a rhetorical one, at least until Anya next looks straight at the camera and sings in a manner of fact fashion, "I mean, except for the sweaty part" (7005). With this instance she has made the viewer an unwitting accomplice in her comedic sexual suggestiveness. After this single moment, there occurs a more pronounced and prolonged metafictional instance. Anya, sitting atop the sleeping Xander in his recliner (which is spinning cyclically for no apparent reason) looks straight up at the camera, it occupying the vantage point of the ceiling, for a full nine seconds as she sings about being, "Mrs. Anya lame-ass made-up-maiden-name Harris" (7005). This sequence serves as the series' longest uninterrupted breach of the narrative's fictionally constructed world out into the realm of those viewing it; the song also has the additional benefit of being bracingly funny and touching. These feelings are completely underscored when Anya, now clothed in a wedding dress, sings climatically

that, “I will be—,” and the scene cuts immediately back to her unconscious form with a sword protruding out of it (7005). The editing is so rapid, and the tonal shift in narrative content so jarring, as to yield momentary whiplash on the part of the viewer. And this arguably serves as the finest moment for highlighting that dramaturgical bipolarity spanning across the series, that mixture of heightened comedy and deepest drama. If that sequence involving Anya manages to say anything outside of the contexts of the narrative’s plot, I contend that it illustrates the masterful fashion with which Whedon uses self-consciousness to heighten the viewers’ involvement with the fiction occurring inside of *Buffy*.



## CHAPTER 4

### PARATEXTUAL CONFLATION AND THE PLEASE-INSERT

The remainder of this project's metafictional analysis of content and form is primarily concerned with Gerard Genette's definitive study of the so-named subject at hand, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Numerous articles through the years have dissected and expanded the scope of the paratext, but the vast majority has done so with an eye only towards its original orientation, the novel. Yet those fewer writings that have applied the paratext to other mediums seem to cherry-pick from it without establishing a solid framework with which to work in beforehand. Using this seminal text though, I will employ, and adapt, a convention that Genette first established for books towards application for a television show, specifically *Buffy*. Now, my interest concerning *Buffy* and the theoretical fringe is the manner to which paratextuality has, and can, overlap with this given text's diegesis, thereby creating interesting and numerous cases of metafiction which have as yet not been considered in terms of scholarly interest. First though, I have to try and establish a brief poetics of the paratextual feature this study is giving consideration to with concern to the medium of television. It will neither be broad nor exhaustive, yet it rather purports to erect a working framework for this given project. Other television series will however be addressed where warranted, and the initial scope I am devising could have much larger implications for those interested in continuing exploration of this narratological sliver.

In the forward for *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Richard Macksey explains the significance of this author's study: "Other scholars have studied the literary use of individual paratextual elements, but Genette seems to be the first to present a global view of liminal mediations and the logic of their relation to the reading public" (xx). Genette handedly does this, frequently in details of exacting minutiae. It is in the introduction though that he states most matter-of-factly what the paratext entails and consists of: "The paratext, then, is empirically made up of a heterogeneous group of practices and discourses of all kinds and dating from all periods which I federate under the term 'paratext' in the name of a common interest, or a convergence of effects, that seems to me more important than their diversity of aspect" (2). Additionally he adds that, "this fringe ... [is] a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that—whether well or poorly understood and achieved—is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies)" (2). So, beyond its divisible parts, Genette sees the paratext's existence as illuminating the text itself, and he most clearly espouses that belief in the following manner: "Whatever aesthetic or ideological investment the author makes in a paratextual element ... the paratextual element is always subordinate to 'its' text, and this functionality determines the essence of its appeal and its existence" (12). Before engaging with an individual paratextual element, here is where I must chiefly divert in opinion from Genette. I contend that aspects of paratext can be transformed, by authorial intention, from merely the casing of a text to a corollary of it, which therefore results in a conflation of diegesis and thus achieves a metafictional standing. Such a conception seems completely removed from Genette's realm of thought

however. In fact, he briefly effaces the scope of his endeavor, and it is through such limitations that I am able to extricate unengaged possibilities for further expansion.

Genette partially addresses the limitations of his (admittedly exhaustive) project when he states in a footnote, “the need for a paratext is thrust on every kind of book, with or without aesthetic ambition, even if this study is limited to the paratext of literary works” (3-4). So while recognizing its reach across an entire medium, his inquiry is rooted to those literary works which are esteemed and canonical, and primarily French moreover. More forthright still he clarifies that, “almost all the paratexts I consider will themselves be of a *textual*, or at least verbal, kind: titles, prefaces, interviews, all of them utterances that, varying greatly in scope, nonetheless share the linguistic status of the text. Most often, then, the paratext is itself a text: if it is still not *the* text, it is already some text” (7). This sounds straightforward enough because Genette confirms he is working with regard to literature. However, a passage further in the book yields interesting implications: “It would be more correct, it seems to me, to say that with respect to the cover and title page, it is the publisher who *presents* the author, somewhat as certain film producers present both the film and its director. If the author is the guarantor of the text (*auctor*), this guarantor himself has a guarantor – the publisher – who ‘introduces’ him and names him” (46). This is one of a handful of examples where Genette directly employs reference to another artistic medium, and while it may be in passing, it is still situated squarely within the theoretical thicket of things. He is obviously conscious of other realms of textual existence but only makes use of them in detailed explication, never on the macroscopic scale. Macksey himself affirms that, “[a]ny book of this magnitude inevitably casts the shadow of what it does not propose to do. Genette is

explicit about this...[He] is not concerned with the evolution of forms but with their functions, defined with as much precision” (xx-xxi). Therefore, this critical undertaking of the paratext makes note of all its varied facets but not their evolving forms, which most surely includes advancement of text itself beyond the textual medium of the book. To begin the molding of paratextuality from novelistic constraints towards relevance for television one must turn to an issue regarding the nomenclature of the subject itself.

Genette, in his introduction, devised the following: “for those who are keen on formulae, *paratext* = *peritext*+*epitext*” (5). This unification for the term encompasses two distinct semantic spheres. Concerning the former half, he describes it thusly:

A paratextual element ... necessarily has a *location* that can be situated in relation to the location of the text itself: around the text and either within the same volume or at a more respectful (or more prudent) distance. Within the same volume are such elements as the title or the preface and sometimes elements inserted into the interstices of the texts, such as chapter titles and certain notes. I will give the name *peritext* to this first spatial category. (4-5) Regarding the second category, *epitext*, it is “all those messages that, at least originally, are located outside the book, generally with the help of the media (interview, conversations) or under cover of private communications (letters, diaries, and others)” (5). Now, for the purposes of this present study I find epitext (e.g., the physical packaging of a series, an editorial blurb) to be extraneous. My interest lies in a feature which binds the actual diegesis of the text itself because that is where the possibility for metafictional overlaps resides. A letter a showrunner writes may illuminate some plot or technical aspect of a series, but it does not provide the necessary traction to cleave directly onto the show itself because of its proximity removed from the text; it is ancillary

to whatever diegetic elements are in play. All of which means that, as this present study has chosen to define it, *peritext* = *paratext*. With this clarification established attention can now turn towards highlighting a paratextual element as it seems fit to appear with a serialized television program.

The paratextual component under discussion here is that which can be called the “please-insert.” That Genette relegates analysis of it to chapter five in his volume, but I give it a primary consideration, only serves to help highlight what will be seen in part as a growing division between paratextuality with regard to books and television.

Unaccustomed as Americans may be to this term, Genette initially details that, “The classic definition of the please-insert – the one given, for example, in the *Petit Robert* dictionary – is narrow and describes only one of the stages, the one that was typical in the first half of the twentieth century: ‘A printed insert that contains information about a work and is attached to the copies addressed to critics’” (104). Yet while it was initially akin to an advance copy given to reviewers it did not remain overly long in that predefined role: “economics inevitably brought this practice to an end: it is unnecessarily expensive to insert by hand texts that could, more cheaply and effectively, be imprinted someplace else, most often on the back cover” (Genette 109). Beyond merely its textual relocation, Genette provides a working definition for its updated use when he says, “[i]n other words (in my words), the please-insert is a short text (generally between a half page and a full page) describing, by means of a summary or in some other way, and most often in a value-enhancing manner, the work to which it refers” (104-05). This indicates that the please-insert evolved beyond its primary reception towards the literati and achieved a more universal form in which it extols, in some fashion, the appeal of the text housed

within. Recalling the mention of its updated location, this commentary from Genette ably encapsulates the situation: “On the whole, the back cover is a highly appropriate – and strategically highly effective – place for a sort of brief preface, one that ... can be read without much trouble by someone who hangs around bookstalls and finds such brevity quite sufficient” (113). Here then is where the significance of the please-insert manifests itself for the purposes of this thesis: in its utilitarian function. Just as someone browsing in a bookstore will inevitably read the informative text on the back cover to help influence their decision towards buying said volume, so too might a television series employ some introductory, (seemingly) non-diegetic clip with which to stop a viewer’s random perusal of channels and entice them to commit to the program at hand.

As a television device, the please-insert is by no means universal, and in all likelihood it is an infrequently deployed one. Yet it is a unique paratextual element that serves a definitive function. Currently, I am unaware of any modern comedy series which have used it though. Its absence from half-hour sitcoms is almost undoubtedly tied to the generic nature of these shows. Historically speaking, American sitcoms are stand-alone affairs; the same characters crop up in every episode, but there is little-to-no plot carryover among them. The lack of narrative continuity for comedies is precisely what makes them more lucrative for syndication. A person who is randomly channel flicking and stumbles across an old episode of *Friends* need only possess general acquaintance with the characters to become immersed, and the unknown plot will not daunt the viewer because it is generally a trivial matter. This system necessarily supposes then that the natural home of the please-insert on television is the drama series.

To reiterate, most serialized programs do not make use of the please-insert, and, in fact, some that have done so truly had no necessary reason for doing so. The original *Law & Order* series premiered with this booming announcement: “In the criminal justice system the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups, the police who investigate crime and the district attorneys who prosecute the offenders. These are their stories.” A quick search of the eight seasons available on Netflix instant streaming reveals that it is the first textual element to appear on screen for episode one, season one as well as episode twenty-four, season eight. (That the spoken synopsis appears concurrently with the show’s title card is not of relevance for this present discussion). The please-insert is redundant appearing in this program because *Law & Order* is considered a (formulaic) procedural: differing circumstances occur in each episode, but the events always seemingly happen in the same sequence of events. The series does not need an opening explicator because, regardless of the season or the cast members, a person tuning in is watching the same story play out on a continuous loop across the span of the series. However, certain drama series employ a narrative complexity that makes legitimately worthwhile use of the please-insert, of which two will be treated herein.

*Buffy* and *Battlestar Galactica* are both widely considered groundbreaking shows; another feature that both series share is the please-insert. Why each one has it seems easy enough to deduce. Overarching narratives and ambitious circumventing of standard generic classification are hallmarks of each program. A result of this however is that it may fail to render them user-friendly towards audiences. To return to the example of our sedate channel surfer, if his remote clicking coincides with the onset of any given

*Battlestar Galactica* episode (and even accounting for the “Previously On...” recap) he would be perfectly likely to get lost in the narrative underway with no easy orientation at hand. Thankfully though, the show possesses a life-preserver in the form of its please-insert. Starting with episode two of the first season (and which succeeded the miniseries) this explanatory snippet appears: “The Cylons were created by man. They rebelled. They evolved. They look and feel human. Some are programmed to think they are human. There are many copies. And they have a plan” (1002). The please-insert consists of graphic typeface on screen, not spoken words, over images of the series. With aplomb, and in the briefest way possible, it provides a context for the series and allows the viewer to delve in or vacate the narrative at hand. This is only half of the matter though due to the fact that *Battlestar Galactica*’s please-insert alters and evolves over the show’s run.

By season two the line “Some are programmed to think they are human.” Has been removed as that unfolding plot thread had played itself out. The lines remain the same throughout seasons two and three but get an overhaul near the start of the fourth season: “Twelve Cylon models. Seven are known. Four live in secret. One will be revealed” (4003). This serves to highlight the radical reveal of the third season’s finale that four key characters were in fact enemies, and had been all alone (though they are only made aware of that information in the cliffhanger episode). The please-insert also gains the new purpose of enticing the audience, whetting their appetite because they have been promised one more great expectation of a character reveal. It then maintains this holding pattern until after the midseason finale. The line “Four live in secret.” Becomes “Four live in the fleet.” As the quartet has been unmasked (4013). Additionally, this episode in which the please-insert has changed to note the revelation of the four Cylon



models is also the last *Battlestar Galactica* episode to feature the please-insert, not the series finale; this is also the episode in which the final Cylon model is revealed. *The cards are all out on the table now*, the creators seem to be saying, *what more is there to say?* And indeed, only nine episodes follow this one in the run of the series. There could be a reasonable expectation in play, from the producers, that anybody watching it at this late stage is familiar with the narrative semantics and does not need any help with comprehension of the narrative. It is interesting though, and metafictional, that the please-insert does not remain static, but rather it changes form to reflect an overarching summation about the diegesis of the text at given periods in time. This is another trait which it shares with the please-insert of the television text under primary concern to this study.

Regarding *Buffy*, Donald Keller explains that, “In a television programme such as *Buffy*, paratext would include the intoned ‘In every generation [...]’ that appeared before early episodes, ‘Previously on [...]’ reminders of past episodes, commercials with previews of future episodes and so on” (176). Keller’s quote is mainly of relevance because it shows that the terms “paratext” and “*Buffy*” have been unified before, though his joining of them is done so only in a passing manner. Additionally, while Keller correctly identifies various elements related to the show as paratextual, he neglects to specifically label any of them as such by their component parts (i.e., peritexts or epitexts). Regarding the please-insert of *Buffy* then, it is as follows: “In every generation there is a chosen one. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer.” As with *Battlestar Galactica*, the please-insert for *Buffy* does a succinct and appropriate job of introducing a program whose very title is enough

to give some people a nebulous reaction to the whole enterprise (and which had been a box-office flop as a feature film five years prior to its television debut). It differs markedly from its dramatic counterpart though in two significant ways.

*Buffy*'s please-insert does not appear throughout the entire run of the series; rather it only crops up sporadically throughout the first two seasons. As a mid-season replacement the show's first season consisted of only twelve episodes (ten less than the traditional full season), but the please-insert appears in nine of those dozen. This equates to a significant majority of the primary season and was doubtlessly meant to send-up the premise of the show on a television network that had perilously few plumes in its cap, the fledgling WB. In season two the please-insert again appears in nine episodes, but out of a total of twenty-two this accounts for a sharp drop-off in percentage. Indeed, it is in the twentieth episode of that season ("Go Fish") that this particular device, jointly introductory and explanatory, is last utilized over the course of *Buffy*'s seven seasons. Pateman details that, "[t]he usual form for the beginning of episodes from about half way through Season Two is a 'previously on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*' montage of clips from earlier shows that have an influence on the direction that this episode will take." The recap, as it is known, replaced the please-insert as the introductory point of narrative mooring for the show. Why, then, did this paratextual device get the boot? Having found no written record concerning this query I must offer my best reasoning as answer. *Buffy*, like *Battlestar Galactica*, catered to a devoted nerd quotient; unlike *Battlestar Galactica*, *Buffy* slowly exploded over the course of its second season into something of a pop culture phenomenon, and Sarah Michelle Geller, who portrayed the series' heroine, was seemingly everywhere. As a possible consequence of this increased publicity the network

and/or series producers may have felt that it was no longer necessary to divert valuable screen time away from the primary function of the narrative itself. While *Buffy*'s please-insert may have been culled without warning, its significance and dialogue with the series as a whole is notably significant.

While *Battlestar Galactica*'s please-insert may exude a sort-of metafictional reflection of its series, *Buffy*'s is engaged directly with the diegesis of the text itself. The dialogue of the please-insert (uttered by an unknown man for the first season and then Anthony Stewart Head, who played Giles, for that of the second) goes beyond simply introducing the show at hand. It is, in fact, a prophetic credo which defines and shapes the entire agency of the show. In "Welcome to the Hellmouth," the series' first episode, *Buffy*'s designated custodial figure, Giles, approximately echoes the please-insert: "You are the Slayer. Into each generation a Slayer is born, one girl in all the world. A chosen one" (1001). This helps codify any misconception of the please-insert's relation to the world of the show, as those several lines are not a throwaway synopsis but instead truly serve as a legacy and anointed right for the main protagonist. And they continue to reverberate through the years and narrative developments of *Buffy*. In season five's "Fool for Love," *Buffy* comically summons the essence of the long-retired paratextual element when she says, "Slayer called...blah, blah...great protector...blah, blah...scary battles...blah, blah...oops! She's dead. Where are the details?" (5007). In fact, the shadow of the please-insert spans the entire run of this series, often standing just behind the narrative curtain. It is even explicitly restated once more, diegetically, in "Chosen," the series finale, and its presence there serves as the impetus whereby *Buffy* manages to then ultimately devise a plan of victory against The First's army.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

At present, it becomes necessary for this in-depth narratological analysis of *Buffy* to draw to a somewhat anticlimactic conclusion. This is because this current study believes it has achieved its initial two fold aim. Firstly, and perhaps most significantly, this project's treatment of paratextuality with respect to the medium of television may be seen as constituting a valuable step towards the explication of meaning and identity as it relates to this kind of textual form. And while my paratextual work is indebted to Genette's pioneering conceptions upon the subject, the call now goes out for other scholars and academics to continue the paratextual exploration at hand regarding its reconstitution respective of the visual mediums of television and film. Secondly, this thesis sees itself as constituting a worthwhile statement about *Buffy*, enough so to as to engage meaningfully in the polyphonic dialogue that makes up the current field of Whedon studies. This thesis has treated in-depth a narrative circumstance, metafiction, which had not yet received a full-length analysis, despite the fact that, as noted at the outset, *Buffy* is the most heavily studied television text in history. Therefore, the hope is that others will find utility in the endeavor of this work's research and composition, and that they may gain new insight about both Whedon and his seminal work to date. In conclusion, I am reminded of a passage stemming from *Time*'s television critic Lev Grossman, and which appeared in the magazine on the eve of the theatrical release of *The Avengers*: "*Buffy* was a TV show that over seven seasons inverted, transformed,

demolished and otherwise radically altered just about every convention sacred to the genres of horror and fantasy...[It] was smart and moving and exhilarating and challenging—all those things that high art is supposed to be” (46). This, then, is the reasoning for the plurality of *Buffy* and Whedon scholastic productions, and it is also therefore what I have chosen to make my thesis a contribution towards.

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