"You can't beat evil by doing evil": Buffy, Discursive Challenges, and Nuclear Weapons

Lee-Anne Broadhead

"You're standing at the mouth of Hell and it's about to open"[1]: An Introduction to *Buffy* in the Nuclear Age

Having long delighted in the richness of academic writing inspired by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), I find myself increasingly drawn to the potential for such quality television to open minds to fresh perspectives on the operation of power in the world. Joss Whedon's oft-quoted invitation for viewers to "BYOSubext" (bring your own subtext) (Whedon qtd. in Richardson and Rabb 174) was made possible by the quality of the scripts themselves. Michael P. Levine and Steven Jay Schneider's claim that scholars who engage with the show in an academic manner are "repressing, projecting, and 'acting out' their own fantasies in relation to the program" (299) seems ironic given that their own Freudian reading leads them to identify Buffy's sex life as "the show's predominant focal point" (306). Far from "acting out" fantasies, it is important to note, as

Lee-Anne Broadhead is a Professor of Political Studies in the Department of L'nu, Political, and Social Studies at Cape Breton University in Canada. She has published widely on environmental justice, issues of peace and security as well as on the social and political consequences of economic globalization. Recent work has focused on the linkages between knowledge and power and the impact of instrumental rationality on humans and the natural world. She is the co-author (with Dr. Sean Howard) of a number of papers exploring the importance of Indigenous perspectives on science and knowledge.

Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery do, that the writers' use of symbolism "invites the viewer to join in the construction of meaning for the series," and indeed the "struggle to reach meaning" matches Buffy's own efforts: they are surely correct when they argue "the mediation is the message" (xix). Far from revolving around sex, the series offers profoundly important feminist insights that can assist those who might be open to working toward the development of a deeper understanding of the operation of power, thereby challenging ongoing practices that lead to human *in*security.

Everyone is obviously entitled to their own subtext, but far from those critical reflections of the series that contend that *BtVS* can be seen to represent US imperialism and militarism (Pender), colonialism (Hautsch), even fascism (King), it is arguably the case that *Buffy*'s radical reconceptualization of power in fact challenges the retrogressive politics suggested by such critics. Indeed, where Patricia Pender views the arc of the final series as a "celebration of what is effectively an international military alliance under ostensibly altruistic American leadership" (82), a radical critique of the very nature of the power/hierarchy nexus that underpins both "sides" in the battle the Shadow Men/Watchers Council and the First Evil can instead be seen. Furthermore, it seems clear that the series offers a profoundly important critique of both Big Science (with its seemingly inevitable military applications) as well as the widely accepted belief in top-down power structures. This latter critique, as deepened and extended by the final season's dramatic conclusion, serves to highlight what happens when the limitations of the structures of power are recognized for what they are: social constructions designed in the interests of a few, at the expense of the majority. As it happens, a similar effort to shift understandings of power and security is underway

in the "real world" a concerted effort on the part of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) to expose the empty logic of state security based on the threat of use of nuclear weapons, weapons sometimes celebrated as the biggest success of Big Science. Focusing instead on shared *human security*, ICAN recipient of the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize utilizes feminist analysis to expose the gendering of the discourse around nuclear weapons and in so doing challenges the "discursive equation of nuclear weapons with masculine strength and power" (Acheson 6). ICAN has worked diligently to recast the debate over nuclear weapons in such a way that feminist views of power come to the fore and the militaristic patriarchal structures that have so long been accepted become untenable. ICAN's views are mirrored in Buffy's wise comment "you can't beat evil by doing evil" ("First Date" 7.14, 4:42-43) and her recognition that the similarities of the two "sides" she has been conditioned to see as antitheses are in actuality similarly structured (hierarchical, patriarchal) with the goal of acquiring and maintaining power for its own sake. This provides fertile intellectual ground for scholars of global politics to consider important discursive shifts in the understanding of power and its operation.

It is my belief that we should strive for a better understanding of the ways that intelligent and thought-provoking popular culture can work in tandem with those (especially feminist) scholars and activists who propose alternative notions of "security." It is crucial, in my view, to recognize that, far from keeping us safe, nuclear weapons pose an existential threat to life on Earth: that they are, in a sense, the *Big Bad* threatening Apocalypse. From the first season onward, the threat of apocalypse is ever-present and provides echoes of the threat of nuclear annihilation that has been a

central focus of international security studies since the dawn of the nuclear age. Giles's description of what would happen if the gates separating dimensions were to be successfully opened by Glory is a pretty good description of an all-out nuclear war: "Reality as we know it will be destroyed, and chaos will reign on Earth" ("The Weight of the World" 5.21 41:08-12). And *is* that a mushroom cloud rising in the distance as Dawn's blood drips down and starts to open the gates? Perhaps such a reflection can lead us to re-think the parameters of security just as Buffy was forced into a reconsideration of them in the fictional realm of Sunnydale.

Buffy's breakthrough comes when she realizes that allowing calcified, hierarchical, and patriarchal institutions to continue to define the parameters of her own power has radically constrained her ability to confront the challenges and violence generated by those same structures. Popular culture can indeed share in the important tasks of re-thinking our society in important ways. As James South argues, "the audience can come to recognize forgotten possibilities for change and action as well as develop a better understanding of the social attitudes and forces that limit our conception of what the world can be and what role the individual can play" (93).

"I would love to be upstairs watching TV"[2]: The Transformative Potential of Pop Culture

Even if Buffy cannot be upstairs watching TV — because, as she tells her mother, she has to save the world "again" — the rest of us can ("Becoming Part Two" 2.22, 20:07). And the best of TV is important: popular culture matters a great deal. Such a statement is not revelatory to the readers of *Slayage*, but it is

worth reiterating that any fictional depiction of the world can, as Martha Bartter argues, offer a range of possibilities of action. "The very act of considering choices irrevocably alters our assumptions about ways we may act," Bartter says, "and since actions derive from assumptions [...] fiction can indeed endanger the *status quo*" (169).

We can draw here on Antonio Gramsci's notion of *hegemony* to understand the passivity of people in the face of a system that does not operate in their interest. Gramsci understood that those in power use a combination of coercion (police, armed forces) alongside, importantly, consensus (built in civil society) to maintain a position of leadership. It is the latter aspect of power that is most relevant in this consideration of the influence of popular culture. Let us consider hierarchical, militarized, patriarchal systems in the context of the status quo. In order to continue operating unchallenged, the hegemonic forces need to gain support for an *ideology*, a concept which Gramsci saw as being a broad common conception of the world and not narrowly defined in the political/economic context in which it is usually used. For Gramsci, ideology is dispersed through a variety of means and becomes *common sense*,[3] at which point the given reality appears to be inevitable, even desirable, and therefore unchangeable. This shaping of perceived reality is powerful. But when ideas are successfully challenged, possibilities for the articulation of alternatives are presented and another world seems possible. It is my contention that popular culture plays an important role in the struggle over socially acceptable ideas. In this context, competing ideas battle for acceptance, and TV programs can either reinforce the hegemonic ideology or, alternatively, they can seek to destabilize the common sense understanding of the world. When the very idea of *patriarchy* becomes a topic of

reflection, the *common sense* nature of its logic begins to weaken. It is into this space that *BtVS* steps so adroitly.

Making the key point that "adult learning is not bound by educators or institutions," Christine Jarvis and Vivien Burr (166) examine the transformative possibilities of *BtVS*. Transformative education can be, they argue, "an unsettling process that challenges the existing values and beliefs that shape our responses to the world" (167). Their fascinating empirical study provides us with solid evidence that that some TV programs can serve to "jolt people out of their habit of mind" (169). Stephanie Buus posits that popular culture "is in fact capable of inducing change in the audience a change of mindset, a change of behavior, or both when it comes to questions of risk and security" (401).

The transformation of Buffy's understanding of the operation of power through the seven seasons dramatizes a crucial discursive shift encouraging the audience to similarly rethink the standard presentation of what is needed to provide *security* in the face of *evil*. The radical nature of Buffy's "bloody brilliant" plan (Giles in "Chosen" 7.22, 14:51) to share the Slayer's power with others and therefore fundamentally break with the status quo patriarchal definitions of power can be seen as the culmination of a long journey toward a clarity of vision about what is necessary to transform social reality. Along the path of her journey Buffy struggles to understand the operation of power and her own role in providing security to the people of Sunnydale. There are hits and misses before she is able to break through the hegemonic view of the operation of power in pursuit of security in society. But she finally does challenge the *common sense* view of the world she had been imbued with through her immersion in society's institutions both those which we are all influenced by (such as school and media) and

the influence on her worldview by the Watchers Council and her training as the Slayer. As Richelle M. Bernazzoli and Colin Flint argue in relation to the widespread adoption of militaristic values:

> those who do not necessarily have a stake in the well-being of this [militaristic] system must be somehow convinced that its health and viability is of crucial importance to their own well-being. Society as a whole must be acculturated to adopt a particular worldview and set of cultural beliefs that will generate a certain level of acquiescence to whatever it is the military is doing at any time and in any place.[4] (397)

As is the case for all of us, Buffy grew up in a world in which certain ideas appear to be unchallengeable. When the concept of *security* is defined in such a way that people become and remain convinced that there is an evil *other* that must be defeated, then militaristic values are celebrated, and any challenge to them are ridiculed and rejected. In short, *common sense* ideas resist challenge. Buffy's growing recognition of the falsity inherent in the very framing of good vs. evil leads to a profound shift in her understanding of the world and, importantly, a transformation of her view of what is possible for the future.

Perhaps Buffy's challenge to deeply embedded understandings of power and security in her world can inspire us to confront the orthodoxy underpinning that dangerous oxymoron, *nuclear security*, in ours. In his classic 1960 defense of the indefensible, *On Thermonuclear War*, Herman Kahn (an inspiration for Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove) calculated that if need be, albeit "reluctantly," the United States would be "willing to envisage the possibility" as the high but apparently

not Pyrrhic price of victory "of one or two hundred million people (i.e., about five times more than World War II deaths) dying from the immediate effects" (149) of a nuclear exchange. Taken to its psychotic extreme, this illogic led General Thomas Power, Commander of US Strategic Command (SAC) during the Cuban Missile Crisis, to famously declare at a Rand Corporation briefing on nuclear targeting: "Why are you so concerned with saving their lives? The whole idea is to kill the bastards […]. Look. At the end of the war, if there are two Americans and one Russian, we win." "To which," Martin J. Sherwin writes in *Gambling with Armageddon*, "the briefer responded, 'Well, you'd better make sure that they're a man and a woman'" (369).

Both the depravity of the general's statement and the wit of the briefer's response are worthy of *BtVS*'s sustained investigation of the apocalyptic tendencies at work beneath the polished surface of modern society. And while there is no evidence that the women at the forefront of ICAN and associated organizations notably the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) have been inspired by *BtVS*, it is nonetheless the case that the more we encounter powerful challenges, including in popular culture, to the long-standing, deeply embedded notions of what precisely constitutes power and security, the easier and more logical it seems to be to construct alternatives to the status quo. If we see repeated challenges to the accepted definition of power built on threats, domination, and state security by positive depictions of power being re-defined in terms of mutual enablement, power sharing, and human security, then it becomes much harder for those who continue to advocate for the continuance of the existing system to define the rules of the game. Indeed, it is fair to say that when popular culture challenges hegemonic

ideas central to the structures of power, even small cracks can create openings for alternative ideas. In short, the efforts to challenge the logic of state security based on nuclear weapons at a discursive level might well find a more receptive audience if the basic security and power logics have been and are being challenged in the realm of popular culture.

Buffy struggles to understand her own role and the extent to which her singular role as Slayer fits in with an acceptance of assistance from her close-knit circle of friends. Buffy's challenge to hierarchical notions of power best exemplified by her dealings with the Watchers Council leads her to a more general challenge of patriarchal notions of power. This critique, coupled as it is with an interrogation of instrumental rationality, leads in the direction of another subtext: the indictment of militarism in general and nuclear weapons in particular. It is on the critique of secretive, state-sanctioned, military science that we now focus.

"It was an experiment"[5]: Instrumental Rationality and the Power of Military Science

Before nuclear weapons and the diabolical doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction came the secret scientific Manhattan Project, established at Los Alamos, which sought to manipulate the natural world at the atomic level in order to build a superweapon. The argument then, as now, is that nuclear weapons are desirable because they provide security and serve to combat evil. The ongoing acceptance of the lie that the use of nuclear weapons in 1945 "saved lives"[6] demonstrates clearly that the perpetuation of hegemonic *common sense* continues to shape and define the structures, practices, and

goals of those in control. There is a great deal in *BtVS* that presents an important critique of both the instrumental rationality underpinning Big Science and the military-industrial imperative of creating ever bigger, *better* weapons human-demon hybrid super-soldiers in the case of the Initiative that helps to establish the importance of Buffy's resistance to *common sense* notions of good vs. evil, hierarchical power relations, and the more general concept of our *security* in the modern age.

Jeffrey Bussolini's exceptionally interesting 2005 article "Los Alamos Is the Hellmouth" presents the clear similarities of Los Alamos and Sunnydale: his awareness of the parallels stems from deep personal knowledge of the former and his fascination with the latter. Bussolini makes clear the myriad practical similarities between the two towns, everything from the population to the number of churches (43) and Starbucks outlets (1). But the real strength of Bussolini's insights comes as he focuses on the "Initiative" and points out that not only were both scientific projects highly secret covert military operations staffed by University of California faculty members but that the "fabric of the universe itself is at issue in the Buffyverse and Los Alamos" (¶14). Bussolini ably explores the show's critique of the ethics (or, in actuality, the lack thereof) of a state utilizing science and technology in such a way that democracy is subverted and the state becomes the evil it claims to be resisting. Bussolini concludes his reflections by positing that the similarities between the two locations "makes Buffy's ethics and philosophy of life relevant to reflection on the nuclear age and its ongoing threat to us" (¶34).

In her fascinating consideration of the Initiative alongside Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Anita Rose notes that in the case of *BtVS*, "the hubris and arrogance of science is taken for

granted, and a thoroughly modern fear is added: that of the 'military industrial complex' and its potentially unholy alliance with the academy." Of course, as Rose points out, the university serves as a "breeding ground for the amoral pursuit of knowledge" in Shelley's novel, and in *Buffy* the "site for experimentation is a secret military operation" (137). Andrew Aberdein views the Initiative as a "broad parody of the 'big science' of the military-industrial complex" (84). Such satire, however, has the serious intent of dramatically illustrating the reductionist mindset — the clinical depravity and valorized violence — at the core of that complex.

To illustrate the Initiative's seemingly clear superiority, its leader Maggie Walsh scornfully compares its methods — "we use the latest in scientific technology and state-of-the-art weaponry" — to the Slayer's: "[Y]ou, if I understand correctly, poke them with a sharp stick" ("A New Man" 4.12, 6:15-23). The task at hand seems morally clear: using science to slay demons (in Sunnydale and beyond). So common is this sense of superiority that those employed by the Project, unsuspicious what else might be going on at the lab, are comfortable with both the *need-to-know* basis of the research and the hierarchical power structure of the organization. This was also true of the most iconic American Initiative of all, the Manhattan Project, where only a tiny, elite fraction of the tens of thousands of people involved in its many labs and factories knew precisely what they were building. Just as those working on the Manhattan Project believed they were doing something positive for the war effort, so Riley and his soldier pals believe they are delivering demons or, rather, "Hostile Sub-Terrestrials" (Riley, "Doomed" 4.11, 1:36) — to the Initiative cells so they can be studied in order to better combat them. Walsh's secret project, in the words of the chair of the "Council" reviewing the

failure of the program, "represented the government's interest in not only controlling the otherworldly menace but in harnessing its power for our military purposes" ("Primeval" 4.21, 40:42-51). In short, the effort was to create a super-soldier, a super-weapon if you will, that could lead to a superior fighting force to be utilized far beyond the environs of Sunnydale's Hellmouth. Adam, with his uranium core power source, was the prototype and, as Madeline Muntersbjorn notes, Willow's suggestion to work a "uranium extracting spell" links this to the Manhattan Project. "We have yet to experience" Muntersbjorn argues, "the full blowback from that Initiative's monster" (100).

It is worth noting that nearly twenty years after the show's conclusion, an era of *killer robots*, harnessing exponential progress in artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, is rapidly approaching, and has become a major new focus of concern in the global disarmament community (led by an international "Campaign to Ban Killer Robots" partly inspired by ICAN, and with a similar feminist-humanitarian ethos). As law professor Frank Pasquale wrote in *The Guardian*, the idea of regulating rather than abolishing such technology is almost certainly "unrealistic, and all too likely to support dangerous fantasies of pushbutton wars and guiltless slaughters": the very fantasies of invincibility beloved and pursued by the Initiative in its twisted crusade against evil.

And it is worth remembering that the work being conducted under the auspices of the Initiative originated in Nazi science. When Spike awakens in an Initiative cell, he wants to know who has brought him to this lab: "the government? Nazis? major cosmetic companies?" ("The Initiative" 4.7, 6:54-57). We need only to consider a flashback that appears in season five of *Angel*, when we see Spike, in a Nazi uniform, revealing that Nazis have been attempting to

create an invincible army by studying vampires ("Why We Fight" *Angel* 5.13). Including the origin story of the super-soldier project is inspired, as it succeeds in sharpening the critique of reductionist science. This story challenges the viewer to recognize that it is the inherent violence of the instrumental rationality at the heart of the typical application of the Western scientific method not which side is applying it that is problematic. The argument that scientific inquiry utilizing western reductionist method is simply seeking objective knowledge is also called out. Toby Daspit has pointed out that Riley offers a "trenchant critique of modernist ethics" when he tells Adam, "She made you *because* she was a scientist." ("Goodbye Iowa" 4.14, 36:46-47. As Daspit says, "the will to mastery intrinsic in modernist scientific inquiry is itself dangerous. Adam simply personifies that danger" (122). One might be tempted to add that Maggie Walsh's "will to mastery" led her to justify altering Riley and the other soldiers without their knowledge or consent. The immorality of this action is set alongside the mistreatment of other beings (demons, vampires, etc.) to demonstrate the lines that are crossed when one accepts no responsibility for the uses of scientific investigation. South is correct, then, to point out that "there is present in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* a real worry about the uses of technology and the ways in which it can dehumanize humans […] technology provides a means to the ends of those who would subjugate humanity" (98). This "worry" is, as we shall see, the recognition of the foundations of evil that will lead Buffy to her transformational shift to a new understanding of power and security.

The emphasis in this paper and in the show's presentation of the Initiative is firmly on Big Science, particularly military-industrial megaprojects in the service of

the state (capitalist or socialist). Not all western science, of course, inhabits this 'Frankenstein' territory or is Faustian in its pursuit of illimitable powers (to create or destroy). That *desire*, however, is inseparable from what Theodore Roszak calls, in *The Gendered Atom*, "the sexual psychology" of a science whose "theories, methods, and sensibilities" have been "male-dominated through and through" (14) for much of the last four hundred years. Seen in this stark but true light, the Manhattan Project was an apotheosis, not an anomaly: the explosive climax of a concerted bid through what Vandana Shiva (213) calls the methodical "violence of reductionist science" to master matter and remake the world. Neither Roszak nor Shiva, nor the many other scholars adopting a similar basic stance, would argue that all fields and strands of western science share a collective guilt or stand revealed as a monolithic 'Big Bad.' Science, indeed, has a major role to play (and is playing it) in exposing the monstrous consequences (for example to the climate) of industrialism, militarism, and nuclearism. Science is a social and conceptual terrain, a contested and evolving space, but part of what needs to shift in that terrain is the persistent, patriarchal paradigm 'Man's' right to subjugate nature still at the reductionist heart of much of its practice.

While Big Science, with its capacity to slay us all, forms an important backdrop to the show, it is sometimes hard to detect this thematic background radiation in the foreground plot and action. Sunnydale both is and is not Los Alamos: Los Alamos is always there but, much like the vampires and demons themselves, often more in the shadows than the sun. A lot else is happening, but *power* is inevitably there, ever-present if not always visible, and it is precisely the operation of different types, exercises, and structures of power that the show consistently probes and teases.

"You could never hope to grasp the source of our power"[7]: Challenging *Common Sense*

The manner in which Buffy understands her power and her role as the Slayer shifts throughout the series. There is an ongoing tension between her belief in the necessarily lonely role as the "chosen one" and her recognition of the need for assistance from her friends in the struggle against those "forces of darkness." Initially, the assistance her friends offer is limited: they want to help and she (oftentimes) reluctantly lets them. Through the arc of the program's narrative, this interaction changes dramatically.

Despite her various disagreements with those in positions of power, Buffy tries to conform to the rules of the institutional structures within which she finds herself. For example, although she struggles against some of the conventions established by the Watchers Council, it takes her a long while before she understands that they need her more than she needs them. Similarly, Buffy is willing to join the Initiative even if she feels the need to ask more questions than Maggie Walsh believes to be acceptable. For their part, both Travers at the Council and Walsh at the Initiative see her as a threat. Buffy eventually realizes that the very nature of the accepted operation of power in these hierarchical structures is not only an obstacle to success in her mission but sum and substance of what must be fought against.

The necessity of working together as more of a team becomes crucial in the fight against Adam, and the plan develops as a result of Xander's throwaway comment that "all we need is combo Buffy" ("Primeval" 4.21, 19:23-24). The "logic" of the melding of the strengths of Xander, Giles, Willow, and

Buffy leads to Adam's defeat when she successfully stops him by ripping the uranium core from his chest.

In the subsequent episode, all the participants are visited by the First Slayer. In assessing their dreams, Giles proffers the explanation that "somehow our joining with Buffy and invoking the essence of the Slayer's power was an affront to the source of that power" ("Restless" 4.22, 41:19-26). Indeed, the First Slayer admonishes Buffy for not working alone: "No friends! Just the kill. […] We are alone!" ("Restless" 4.22, 39:24-27). Buffy has most certainly broken the rules but, as Richardson and Rabb point out, she has found that her "power can be enhanced by befriending others" and that it is because of the assistance of her friends that she "has lived more fully, fought longer, and, arguably, accomplished more than Slayers of the past" (74).

It is in the final season when Buffy makes a major breakthrough, allowing her gut-level resistance to patriarchal hierarchy to come into clear focus that the transgressive nature of the show's radical challenge to orthodox notions of power becomes dramatically evident. As Kevin Durand argues, Buffy's recognition not only of the true patriarchal nature of the Watchers Council but the entire conflict between it (with the Slayer as its instrument) and the First Evil (with Caleb as its instrument) is not a fight between good and evil at all. In fact, there is a daringly direct equivalence between them. As Durand points out: "While the Shadow Men try to reinstitute the hierarchical system of patriarchy that is now revealed as no better than the 'evil' it seeks to fight, Buffy has gained not brute power but knowledge" (180). And it is with that knowledge that she seeks to think anew the operation of power. Again, Durand:

> Only after the Shadow Men showed her the vastness of the army arrayed against her, could Buffy have the epiphanic

> moment that reveals that the entire power structure is flawed; that the Shadow Men and the First are essentially of a piece, and that only through radical shared power (and knowledge), can a system that is built on the patriarchal oppression of women be overthrown. […] For Travers, for the First, for the Shadow Men, for the Council, for Caleb, power is something that is accumulated and wielded like a hammer. For Buffy, power, she is coming to see, is something that is shared and thereby multiplied. (180-181)

Buffy has been on the edge of a deeper understanding of patriarchal power all along. As Durand notes, the "structure and implementation of power" has been used in a consistently patriarchal way by the Master, the Mayor, Adam, Glory and in each and every case, they were defeated "through a joint empowering of others beyond the one with 'obvious' power" (182). But it is not until she makes the leap from seeing the world through the lens of *good vs evil* that the key recognition dawns, namely that it is the patriarchal structures with their commitment to dominating power that must be overcome:

> It is not that Caleb is one of the "bad guys"; rather, it is that through Caleb we see that the "good guys" the Watchers Council, the Shadow Men are also the "bad guys," perhaps deluded by their own self-importance, but all of a piece nonetheless. They are all part of a patriarchal power that is fundamentally corrupt at its core […]. Whedon presents a masterful critique of "the forces of good," even more damning that the critique of the forces of Evil. The kernel of this critique is that patriarchal, hierarchical structure and exercise of power, whoever wields it and to whatever purpose to which they lay claim, is itself merely

> an expression of the power of darkness, the First Evil. (Durand 184)

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider why it is the case that Buffy continually overcomes the "Big Bads" with help from others but fails to challenge the *common sense* understanding of power. Despite eventually having challenged the hierarchical structures of both the Watchers Council and the Initiative, Buffy's own actions have continued to reinforce the same security logic. She inhabits the military role repeatedly, uses the language of being in command, and posits that "democracies don't win battles. It's a hard truth but there has to be a single voice" ("Empty Places" 7.19, 36:11-12). What accounts for this apparent inability to break the habit of hierarchical control? It is important to recognize the ways in which we all absorb the *common sense* understanding of how the world works, and *BtVS* leads the viewer through season after season where the main characters come close to recognizing that there is something fundamentally wrong but cannot quite put their finger on it. The patriarchal understanding of the *power to dominate and control* is woven tightly throughout our understanding of state security and, in turn, our own security. It is precisely because Buffy's understanding of her role as Slayer is to provide security to the people of Sunnydale that she has a difficult time in breaking free from what Lorraine Dowler defines as militarism "the attitudes of a society about military effectiveness" (491) that we have been indoctrinated in a manner that serves status quo interests. Buffy struggles to break this, shall we say, habit of mind precisely because the ideas underpinning the narrative of security are maintained through their constant repetition and re-enactment, including by her own actions. She must realize the depth of the deception before

she can move beyond it. It is this action that opens the gates for the viewer to similarly challenge the *common sense* understanding of power and security that their own worldview has been infused with.

"And the flip side?"[8]: Challenging the Social Construction of our Reality

There is a humorous scene in "Life Serial" 6.5 in which Buffy attends a sociology class with Willow. The topic of the day is the "social construction of reality" which is defined by one of the students as "a concept involving a couple of opposing theories, one stressing the externality and independence of social reality from individuals" (5:09-15) to which Mike, the professor, jumps in with "And the flip side?" (5:16) The flip side, presented by another student is that "not each individual participates fully in the construction of his or her own life" (5:18-21). Willow's own interjection a few minutes later is telling: "Because social phenomena don't have unproblematic objective existences,they have to be interpreted and given meaning by those who encounter them" (5:43-50).

In a sense, the power of Buffy's ultimate challenge to the orthodoxy comes from her recognition of precisely this view despite her having been unable to grasp the nuances of the theoretical argument in a university setting. The *common sense* view of hierarchical power structures and the construction of security as a struggle of good and evil are not the result of some unalterable cosmic rule or pre-ordained order but, rather, have been built up by hegemonic forces and maintained in civil society. As we have seen, the widespread consensus around the status quo view in Buffy's reality makes it appear to be inevitable, even desirable, just as it seems in *our* reality. Arwen

Spicer finds Giles's assessment of Buffy's plan to share her power with all potential slayers as "bloody brilliant" unconvincing. Arguing that the "text offers no concrete explanation for why we should consider the plan brilliant or even adequate" (¶24). Spicer rejects Giles's explication of the plan's brilliance stemming from its transgressive nature in that it "flies in the face of everything […] every generation has done in the fight against evil." Spicer dismisses Giles's assessment with an analogy:

> There is no necessary connection between transgression and brilliance: to build a moon rocket without concern for Newtonian physics would fly in the face of everything every space program has ever done. (¶24)

While Spicer is quite correct that no automatic designation of brilliance should be accorded an idea simply because it is transgressive, she fails to grasp a crucial point about the social constructivist critique, namely that there is an obvious distinction between social relations and physical laws. It is the mistaken equation of the two that leads to the ongoing acceptance of socially constructed rules as though they are immutable. Giles's flash of insight into the truly transgressive nature of Buffy's plan reflects the shattering effect when one recognizes that another world is indeed possible. Buffy has seized the moment to learn Mike's lesson and decides it is time to re-interpret and give a new meaning to the social phenomena she encounters. In short, she no longer accepts social convention as though it is an immutable law of nature.And this is precisely the difficulty confronted by the feminist activists and scholars who in the "real world" attempt to challenge the definitions of *power* and *security* in an effort to undermine the

uncritical, *common sense* acceptance of the notion that nuclear weapons are an important part of state security for the countries possessing them.

"A bunch of men […] made up that rule […] . So I say we change the rule"[9]: Challenging the Nuclear Orthodoxy

The *common sense* argument for the possession of nuclear weapons is one based on the security of states. This notion that security comes through the threat or use of weapons to obliterate the enemy through the use of overwhelming power is accepted by the leaders of nuclear armed states (and those who huddle under the so-called nuclear "umbrella").[10] Citizens, the logic goes, are helpless without this protection from the dangerous actors who inhabit what is referred to in international relations language as an anarchical world: a world in which there is no authority above states and that state leaders must therefore take what action they can to protect their citizens. The Cold War construction of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire" was sufficient justification for the United States to build up a stockpile of nuclear weapons that could destroy the world many times over, just as the Soviet demonization of American capitalist imperialism generated a similarly senseless overkill arsenal. And while the Cold War has long ceased to be the framing device through which we examine global politics, the ongoing possession of nuclear weapons in adversarial states is proffered as sufficient justification for massive spending on new and improved weapons systems and, in the case of the Obama administration, the launch of a massive one trillion dollar modernization program of the US nuclear arsenal. More than three decades after the end of the Cold War, American

and Russian nuclear weapons remain on hair-trigger alert, a situation that could lead to an accidental apocalypse. "Winning" a nuclear war is, in any real sense, meaningless given the utter destruction of both people and the planet. Yet the nuclear logic continues to dominate security dialogue with its view of self-interested states competing in a vicious and unpredictable world. But is another view of the security dilemma possible? This question has long been answered in the affirmative by those (including a great many feminist activists) who see in the Bomb a looming apocalypse.

For many decades, feminist scholars have sought to challenge the masculinist logic central to the power to dominate. It is important to note that this challenge has never been about what men or women think, say, or do but rather about gender coding of what is deemed to be strong, active, and independent (masculine) as opposed to weak, passive, and therefore dependent (feminine). Through such gendering, it seems virtually impossible for state leaders (regardless of their sex) to act in collaborative ways even when options exist and they instead fall back on the masculinist logic of strength and power. As Carol Cohn and Sara Ruddick have argued:

> Once the gender-coding takes place […] then any system of thought or action comes to have gendered positions within it. For example, we see the devaluation and exclusion of the "the feminine" as shaping and distorting basic national security paradigms and policies. And once the devaluation-by-association-with-the-feminine takes place, it becomes extremely difficult for anyone, female or male, to take the devalued position, to express concerns or ideas marked as "feminine." What then gets left out is the emotional, the

> concrete, the particular, human bodies and their vulnerability, human lives and their subjectivity. (6)

During the Cold War, the dominant nuclear discourse focused on what Matthew Bolton and Elizabeth Minor have called the "big Other" (387), a bipolarity which, ironically, depended on both sides of the supposed divide "on patriarchal ideologies of 'protection' and a supposed 'objective' and hyper-rational utilitarianism that dismissed concern about human and environmental impacts." Post-Cold War, they note, this dominant discourse and with it the "common sense" of state-centric, militaristic paternalism was not replaced but refined and rebranded, moving from "a focus on the big Other (the opposing Superpower), to a fixation on preventing proliferation to 'non-Western' countries, while preserving nuclear-armed state arsenals" (387).

The advocates of nuclear arsenals are brought to mind by Rhonda Wilcox's depiction of those with power who "can choose not to hear, not to know" and the exemplar of this attitude, the Gentlemen who "are monstrously silent in the face of the horrors they create." Wilcox is right to ask "how many times will we see those in power maintain such a silence while evil proceeds? It is not surprising that their attendants wear straightjackets; their garb suggests the insanity of such behavior the pretense of civilized politeness while killing is accepted as a matter of course" (160). This is a perfect evocation of the "nuclear normal," personified by the psychotic rationality of Herman Kahn, with his strange love of calculating stupendous mass-death: "doing the math" on the Apocalypse.

The *common sense* notion of state security backed by nuclear weapons states has always been highly gendered with critiques of anti-nuclear activists throughout the Cold War

being seen as naïve and emotional. The anti-nuclear movement has a long and varied history replete with strong feminist action, and the current success of the global ICAN coalition is based on a deliberately discursive shift characteristic of the broader trend, beginning with the 1997 Landmines Ban, towards "feminist humanitarian disarmament"[11] away from the state-centric identification of other states as "enemies" that the Bomb supposedly protects us from, towards the recognition of the Bomb itself as an enemy humanity cannot hope to securely co-exist with.[12]

But just as with Buffy's struggle to see beyond the logic of strength and power that she had uncritically accepted, so too has it been difficult for society to shake the *common sense* notions of Realist power politics. However, Buffy *was* able to move beyond the orthodoxy to re-think the world, and so too have feminists had success in shifting the discourse in the direction of humanitarian concerns and away from that of the state-centered balance-of-power struggle. Indeed, the reformulation of nuclear weapons as a threat to human security and the natural world and a rejection of the supposed security benefits of them has led to the successful negotiation of the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the "Ban Treaty" which was adopted by 122 states at the General Assembly in 2017 and entered into force in early 2021.[13]

The conceptual seismic shift represented by the Ban with its feminist-humanitarian rejection of the dictates and premises of *national* security in the nuclear age is made clear in its radical Preamble:

> Cognizant that the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons cannot be adequately addressed, transcend

> national borders, pose grave implications for human survival, the environment, socioeconomic development, the global economy, food security and the health of current and future generations, and have a disproportionate impact on women and girls, including as a result of ionizing radiation […]
> …
> Recognizing that the equal, full and effective participation of both women and men is an essential factor for the promotion and attainment of sustainable peace and security, and committed to supporting and strengthening the effective participation of women in nuclear disarmament […]. (United Nations. TPNW)

The Ban, of course, has yet to deliver abolition, as the nine nuclear-armed states and their nuclear-dependent allies remain wedded to nuclear violence as the supposedly indispensable preserver of international peace and security. But for the clear majority of the world's states and peoples, there is only one "big Other" humanity needs to come together to slay: the Bomb itself.

"There is only one thing on this earth more powerful than evil, and that's us"[14]: Redefining the Logic of Power

Can Buffy's challenge to the *common sense* ideology in her world lead to support for challenges to the *common sense* ideology in ours? Can the powerful critiques leave viewers more open and receptive to arguments made about the patriarchal power narratives embedded in nuclear logic? To my mind, a *counter-hegemonic* argument is successfully made. And once Buffy

comes to fully understand the way power operates, a transformation is possible.

Douglas Kellner argues that "the series is at best Feminism Lite, soft-pedaling feminist ideas in images and narratives rather than discourses or more progressive representations and narratives" (15). This is debatable. His notion that the series "like most television reproduces much dominant ideology" seems to entirely miss the radical challenge to the understanding of how power operates currently and how it *could* operate (17).

Christina Rawley and Jutta Weldes offer interesting insights into the ways in which the Buffyverse challenges understandings of in/security as presented and perpetuated by scholars of traditional international security studies. And while their assessment that, "far from being a frivolous exercise, analysing the Buffyverse has significant implications for how and what we research as scholars of in/security" (526) is surely correct, their view of the final season as a representation of the post-9/11 discourse in the U.S. can be challenged. Though they acknowledge that the final episode undermines the seventh season's depiction of a hierarchical, militarized approach to the First Evil, they nonetheless conclude that "the narrative arc's lasting effect is a severe shrinking of the terrain upon which in/security is able to be theorized and performed. In effect, this season reproduces much of the in/security logic of the Bush administration's 'war on terror'" (525). Nothing, to my mind, could be further from the truth.

Carol A. Stabile admirably discusses the "renaissance in the remasculinized atmosphere of the Bush era" (86) and posits that the popular culture superhero response to the 9/11 attacks "with their narratives of protection and secular salvation, richly illustrate the power of sexism in a militarized culture […] these

representations of superheroes are a crucial part of a wider ideological field of gendered understandings of power that sharply illustrate a collective poverty of the imagination when it comes to thinking about how and why gender should matter in the years to come" (86). There can be no doubt that in the two decades following the shattering events of 9/11, the hegemonic *common sense* has been reasserted and defended through popular culture. But *BtVS* remains an outlier in this reassertion despite the disappointment expressed by Rawley and Weldes among others.

It is true that Buffy *herself* initially falls back on traditional constructions of security, but it is the genius of the *show* to place in front of the viewer the deeply flawed orthodoxy of hierarchical, patriarchal militarism, radically problematizing the certainties offered by the standard tropes of *good vs. evil* (and manly leaders with all the right answers). Stabile is correct, in my view, to argue that the power of *Buffy* lay precisely in its refusal of "the trap" of the false dichotomy of "feminized powerlessness and masculinized protection" (91). The show, instead, invites us to realize, as Buffy eventually does, that patriarchal, militaristic structural logics lie at root of human insecurity.

This reflection on the feminist critique of power should not omit a consideration of the presentation of the Guardians. Julie Sloan Brannon identifies them as a "female group…that has stood behind the Watchers' Council, and unbeknownst to them has held back a weapon for the Slayer to use before the end. Their knowledge of its eventual need, that the patriarchal Watchers would in the end fail, adds an interesting layer to the gender dynamics of the show" (¶4). The idea of the Guardians understanding the fallibility and therefore the inevitable demise of the Watchers Council is an interesting one. But far

from *standing behind* the WC, Symonds' assessment that they "through history monitored the patriarchal Watchers to help protect Slayers" may be a more accurate description. It would seem that Symonds is also correct in suggesting that it is the Guardians and the Scythe they forged that "enabl[e] Buffy to reject patriarchal precedent and to change Slayer lore" (¶3). Could the revelation of an older order be the signal we need to recognize that a new world could emerge, one based on an ancient gynocentric order one that is non-hierarchical, and based on principles and ethics of care and sharing?

"We *changed* the world"[15]: Concluding thoughts

As the deeply held, *common sense* view of gender roles and the hierarchical structure of patriarchy becomes challenged at multiple sites academia, diplomatic fora, and popular culture the ongoing operation of hegemonic control becomes increasingly difficult despite repeated reassertions, such as that witnessed after 9/11. But popular culture matters enormously and Joss Whedon as "public pedagogue" (Jarvis) serves up a masterclass in how to destabilize the accepted *truths* underpinning status quo power relations. "Whedon can be seen as a radical educator," Jarvis argues, precisely because

> he enables his audiences to experience ways of looking at the world that challenge aspects of neo-liberal hegemony, and also encourages them to become critical thinkers who have to reflect on their own feelings and perspectives and resist simplistic perspectives on morality and the difficult political choices facing global society. (¶40)

Important questions remain, of course, around the transformative potential of popular culture. As has been mentioned, we have empirical evidence, thanks to Jarvis and Burr, demonstrating the extent to which viewers of *BtVS* engaged in transformative learning. "Viewers were either engaged in a process of transformative learning," Jarvis and Burr found, "or were experiencing a degree of engagement and challenge that made this a possibility." Furthermore, "viewing prompted critical reflection that challenged their sense of themselves and their beliefs about complex moral issues" (177).

It seems to me to be inarguable that *BtVS* can assist those interested in the impact of militarism on society to come to grips with immanent possibilities for challenging the towering twin *logics* of Big Science and the modern security state. Big Science with secretive labs and huge budgets is central to the development of weapons of mass destruction, and in *BtVS* comes under sustained exploration and critique. A similarly rich critique is offered of the very notions of power and security which go largely unchallenged in the real world. The program rises to the challenge to open up for our consideration a fresh way to view power that serves to undermine the hegemonic *common sense* way of understanding the world. And where Xander exclaims, "We saved the world!", Willow is justified in responding, "We *changed* the world" for the Slayer logic has been left in tatters by Buffy's "bloody brilliant" plan. In the real world, we are not there yet, but cracks in the *common sense* logic are evident and perhaps expanding. As Wilcox has argued, the show matters "for the same reason that all art matters because it shows us the best of what it means to be human" (13). Its power also resides in its ability to resist the prevailing worldview and, as a result, to disclose to viewers the dramatic

possibilities in the nuclear age, literally the life-or-death choices inherent in our own agency.[16]

Notes

[1] Angel to Buffy, "Welcome to the Hellmouth" 1.1, 24:56-25:00.
[2] Buffy to Joyce, "Becoming Part Two" 2.22, 19:58-20:00.
[3] I use italics to denote *common sense* in the Gramscian sense of the concept. For an excellent summary of Gramsci's main ideas see Boggs.
[4] Bernazzoli and Flint note that Gramsci's ideas around hegemonic establishment of values and norms were designed to explain "societal acquiescence to a capitalist system," and they are eager to clarify that they are not wishing to imply "that there is necessarily a ruling military class analogous to the ruling economic class of which Gramsci spoke" (397). It is important to note, however, that the effort to establish militaristic values is part of the broader hegemonic control central to capitalist systems. I do not have the space in this paper to consider all the myriad aspects of hegemonic control, but readers should be aware of Gramsci's broader critique.
[5] Mr. Ward, member of Council overseeing The Initiative, "Primeval" 4.21, 40:40.
[6] For further information on this particular "Big Lie" see: Lifton and Mitchell and Broadhead. The latter article includes information about the ways in which the vast majority of participants in the Manhattan Project did not know what, precisely, they were working on.
[7] Über-Buffy to Adam, "Primeval" 4.21, 38:21-22.
[8] Mike to class, "Life Serial" 6.5, 5:16.
[9] Buffy to the Potentials, "Chosen" 7.22, 27:54-28:07.
[10] It is important to note here that NATO is currently the world's only nuclear-armed alliance. My own country, Canada, serves on NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) which meets regularly to review and refine the Alliance's nuclear war plans, including the possible first use of nuclear weapons.
[11] For a thorough review of the history, ethos, and potential of feminist humanitarian disarmament, see Arimatsu.
[12] If we need a further reminder that gendering arguments does not equate to men or women holding specific views, we can consider Donald Trump's

Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, who, when announcing the US would boycott a UN session to draft the nuclear weapons ban, questioned whether or not the ban treaty's supporters "want to look out for their people." Haley further used her status as a woman ("as a mom, as a daughter") to make an emotional appeal to "family values" and argued for the importance of nuclear weapons to protect people. See Loretz.

[13] The TPNW entered into force on January 22, 2021, 90 days after the deposit of the 50th instrument of ratification (Honduras). To become a full member of a treaty a state has first to sign and then ratify it. By May 19, 2022, of the 122 states that adopted the TPNW in 2017, 86 have signed and 61 of those signatories have proceeded to ratify. From June 21-23, the First Meeting of States Parties will be held in Vienna. Previewing the meeting, an ICAN Press Release stressed the urgent need to shift from a state-centric to human security paradigm: "The meeting will take place in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and threats to use nuclear weapons, at a time when the world is waking up from a 30 year fantasy where the 9 nuclear armed states and their allies convinced people that nuclear weapons could exist without ever being used. The past month has made it clear that nuclear weapons do not prevent war, and nuclear war is closer than ever. The only solution is to immediately prioritize nuclear disarmament" (ICAN).

[14] Buffy to Giles, the Potentials, and the Scoobies. "Bring on the Night" 7.10, 41:03-09.

[15] Willow, "Chosen" 7:22, 41:23.

[16] The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, whose thoughtful comments are much appreciated, and also the editors for their technical editing skills. Special thanks also go to Sean Howard, whose insights have strengthened this article enormously.

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