



# The Afterlife of Genre

Remnants of the Trauerspiel in  
Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Anthony Curtis Adler

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dead letter office

**BABEL Working Group**

punctum books \* brooklyn, ny



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*TRAUEURSPIEL* IN *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*  
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First published in 2013 by  
dead letter office, BABEL Working Group  
an imprint of punctum books  
Brooklyn, New York  
<http://punctumbooks.com>

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ISBN-13: 978-0615955742  
ISBN-10: 0615955746

Cover Image: detail from Pieter Bruegel the Elder,  
*The Hunters in the Snow* (1565).



for Paul North, mein mitdenkender Mensch



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## 1: THE QUESTION OF GENRE

In the past decades, the question of genre has come to play an ever smaller roll in critical discourse. Whereas literary critics of historical leaning continue to regard it as a matter of mere taxonomy and classification, even those who are more theoretically astute have little time for a rigorous inquiry into the laws that, more specific than general principles of aesthetics or media and yet more general than the law of the individual work, grant an internal texture to the field of art and literature as a whole, allowing it to appear not simply as a monolithic and homogenous mass of texts, but as a system of different disciplines all of which implicate, yet none of which is adequate to, the whole. For indeed, precisely the most theoretically innovative critical disciplines of the last fifty years—New Criticism, reader response and reception theory, deconstruction, and cultural

and post-colonial studies—each focus their gaze somewhere else, casting it either too widely or too narrowly to recognize principles of genre, in their interaction with the text, as an autonomous theoretical concern. What is lost as a result, above all, is a sense for what Lessing, Friedrich Schlegel, Lukács, and Benjamin each recognized, though each in their own way, with the greatest clarity, and which one might regard as the most important, if also most subtle, legacy of Aristotle's *Poetics*: namely that just as the individuality of the individual person can only be understood as the individual realization of his or her "species being," so too the work asserts its own vital individuality and originality as the exemplification of a genre.

It is in the study of popular culture and in particular film and television, where such seemingly antiquated theoretical concerns might appear least relevant, that this neglect is most troubling. If one had originally hoped that these new media would give rise to a radically new, non-auratic and non-Aristotelian poetics and aesthetics, it is now clear that, with very few exceptions, the genres of the past continue to assert their rights in the new domains, haunting an element that it seems should have no room for them. Precisely this afterlife of genre, however, becomes incomprehensible when we abandon

genre as a theoretical problematic. Indeed, even if the very notion of genre, with its implicit metaphysics of “essence” and “organicity,” is itself no longer defensible, we can eliminate it from our critical apparatus only at risk of becoming blind to precisely what is most uncanny in our own age and, above all, its popular cultural forms: its saturation with past forms of life that, without ever exactly achieving clarity into their own nature, accumulate ceaselessly and without regard for the principle of contradiction. Only an understanding of the life of genre, in other words, can grant insight into its afterlife. The question of the life of genre, moreover, has everything to do with the problem of the genre—the form—of life. To conceive of literature in terms of mere textuality, to refuse to grant genre the status of an autonomous, structuring principle, is to reduce it to the analog of bare life. Literary theory, in turn, could only appear either as a law imposed by violent fiat—as when we demand that every text must have one ultimate meaning—or as a mere repetition of the logic of textuality. Genre is the law and form that has not forced itself on the work from the outside, but inhabits it from within: that is nothing else than the expression of its singularity. The alienation of law from life begins with the afterlife of genre.

Such an inquiry is complicated from the outset by the fact that the philosophical concept of literary genre, articulated in Aristotle's poetics, seems to be already rooted in a generic understanding of human nature. In this sense, its life seems to have been, from the outset, an afterlife: the haunting of human beings in their singularity by the afterimage of a generic humanity. Yet to return to a pre-Socratic moment, in the hope of finding there the authentic law of genre, is untenable, not only because it depends on a highly problematic notion of originality, but also because it cannot really cast any light on the afterlife of genre that touches us most intimately in the present. We must abandon the idea that the afterlife which we seek is the afterlife of an authentic, fully realized life. Thus, it is best to begin, in a seemingly paradoxical fashion, with a genre that was always more dead than living, lacking a fleshy musculature of technical efficiency and aesthetic finish, with its own proper life skeletal rather than organic.

Perhaps the most striking example of such an un-dead genre is the mourning play (*Trauerspiel*) of the German Baroque. For in the case of these strange and almost completely forgotten works, Benjamin argues in his *Habilitationsschrift*, the law of the genre reveals itself

with the greatest clarity in the most skeletal, dramatically impoverished, exemplars—works which were barely able to survive in their own time, let alone into another age (I.1:238). Just as the affinity of the German Baroque to Expressionism gave impetus to Benjamin's study, the revivification of aspects of the mourning play in the popular media of our time also opens up a promising path of investigation. Here, of course, it cannot be a question of the merely superficial appropriation of certain morbid elements such as ghosts, tombstones, skulls—all of which are familiar from the far more living Baroque drama of Shakespeare—nor of the familiar resources of the Gothic horror film, whose immediate power over the affects in fact places them at a far remove from the contemplative attitude of the mourning play. The affinity between the genre's life and its afterlife, if it is to mean anything, must involve the inner organization and not just the outer trappings. In just this respect, however, the popular TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*<sup>1</sup> makes a special claim on our attention. With a gentle and understated campiness suspending extremes of pathos, forbidding an excessive identification either with Buffy or the endless victims yet without depriving the characters (living and dead) of a sympathetic and human fullness, the mood of

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is more restful than urgent. And within this almost contemplative element many of the most peculiar and characteristic aspects of the Baroque genre, as it was conceived in Walter Benjamin's *Origin of the German Mourning Play*, rise from their three hundred year oblivion and, only slightly transformed by their new birth, join together in a macabre procession.

Not only do the "demonic" forces unleash, with every turn, new intrigues against the world, but these crises, threatening the very continuity of earthly existence, are paired with the more mundane (if not less intense) catastrophes of high school and college life, thus revealing a dramatic universe in which catastrophe, no longer measured by the value of what is threatened with loss, appears simply as the gesture of time itself. For like the time of the mourning play, the time in which the action of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* unfolds is neither progressive nor eschatological. Rather, what the demonic makes manifest is nothing else than the hold of the past over the present. Indeed, as Giles explains in the second episode of the first season, in what is perhaps the most substantive elaboration of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* demonology, the demons and vampires that inhabit the world are merely the remnant of the

immortals who dwelled on the earth prior to the advent of human beings. Likewise, through the consequent inversion of all theological categories—the original paradise is a hell, and the end of time the return of the earth to its original demonic possessors—prophesy and messianism are divested of all reference to revelation. In both these ways, time, in its properly historical dimension, is dissolved into space. The future (as openness for the truly new) has been eradicated, and what remains is an essentially static opposition between a sub-terrestrial past and a terrestrial, purely earthly present—an architectonic structure visualized through the spiritual topography of Sunnydale, with its lairs and grottos and the hellmouth counterpoised to the high school and its central library;<sup>2</sup> with the home standing off from the action as the always-threatened refuge of the paradisaical condition of childhood; and with the graveyard finally marking the point of transition between the living and the dead, the present and the past. And indeed, not only does the cyclic take precedence over the linear (the passage between light and day and the lunar cycle play a particularly crucial role) but even the seasons—the cycles of time which, interwoven with the agricultural and organic, pass over into eschatological time—have been banished from an ever sunny

California.<sup>3</sup>

The television series also demonstrates more subtle affinities to Baroque drama. The royal court or *Hof*, the primary showplace of the mourning play, finds an almost perfect analogue in the high school, organized as it is around fawning and flattery, rituals of pomp (cheerleaders, the prom, the homecoming dance) and spectacle, and dictatorial control bent on maintaining order in a constant state of exception.<sup>4</sup> And one even discovers that element of the mourning play which might seem least palatable to a modern sensibility and to the demands of the new media—the peculiarly Baroque use of language. If allegory in the strict sense remains mostly absent, nevertheless a lush if sometimes excruciating verbal wit, the apocalyptic speech of demons and vampires, and the learned language of magic and demonology combine to create an effect not unlike the bombast (*Schwulst*) of the mourning play.<sup>5</sup> Meaning, in the traditional sense, is hardly the only, or even the most prominent, function of a language that oscillates between prophesy, Latin incantations, tortured word-play, and the clichéd sentiments of adolescence, and in which even emblems and iconography assert their rights. It not infrequently happens that a conversation held under the menace of a new catastrophe, and even in the moment of

utmost danger, derails into a play of words, producing an effect like that which Benjamin attributes to the Baroque author Hallmann (I.1:375). Stupid puns interrupt and disorient even the most serious conversations. Nowhere though is the implicit rejection of an organic theory of language, in which sound and meaning are united, so evident as in the episode titled “Hush” (14 December 1999). Sinister old men come alive from a fairy tale and steal the voices from the residents of Sunnydale, forcing Buffy and her friends to figure out what has happened while communicating only through written marks and emblems. In a chill and haunting silence, written marks must unravel their own mystery.

## 2: A MOURNING PLAY WITHOUT MOURNING

Yet one thing above all is lacking for the analogy with the mourning play to be complete. There is no, or almost no, mourning. Despite the occasional brooding of the vampires and the human moodiness and all the travails that Buffy must endure as slayer, mourning, especially during the first three seasons, never becomes the dominant mood.<sup>6</sup> It is never allowed to develop according to its own logic, but instead is always transformed into something else, directed into another, essentially different af-

fect. This absence, it goes without saying, is of great consequence. Mourning (*Trauer*) for Benjamin is not simply one feeling among others; not just a characteristic of subjective experience let alone a mere psychological phenomenon. Not only does it encompass nature in its entirety, but it is the necessary correlate of its fallenness—the mode in which its fallenness is experienced—while at the same time intimately connected with the dumbness of nature, its absence of speech. “Fallen nature” not only mourns because it is dumb (*stumm*), but its mournfulness renders it speechless (*macht es verstummen*) (I.1:398). Thus, whereas feelings and affective life are generally regarded as mere supplements to rationality, with the subjectivity of the former opposed to the objectivity of the latter, the mood of mourning for Benjamin stands opposed to, yet on par with, the *logos* itself. It is an epistemic regime in its own right, although one characterized not by the positivity of knowledge but by the feeling of being “thoroughly known by the unknowable” (*erkannt vom Unerkennbaren*) (I.1:398).

One thus cannot regard mourning simply as one aspect among many of the mourning play, or even as the foremost aspect, but rather as the principle which gives unity to the genre, holding together the elements which, in their fall-

eness, are always themselves on the verge of flying apart into chaos. A mourning play without mourning, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* must thus become something completely different, and indeed, this very absence may itself contain the principle for the transformation undergone by the genre with its resurrection in the new media. Yet given the importance of this point for an analysis of *Buffy*, one must proceed with the utmost caution. To substantiate the claim that *Buffy* lacks mourning, freeing this claim from its apparent subjectivism, one may consider one paradigmatic instance which proves that true mourning remains impossible amidst the palm trees and verdure of Southern California.

This is the case of Faith, the other vampire slayer, whose fall forms one of the principal story-lines of the third season. From the beginning, her situation resembles that faced by the king of the Baroque *Haupt- und Staatsaktion*. Standing at the pinnacle of creation, a superhero among ordinary human beings, responsible for preserving the world against the never ending onslaught of demonic forces, she nevertheless remains grotesquely inadequate to the task.<sup>7</sup> It is not simply that, like Buffy, she is ultimately mortal and subject to human passions, but that as a slayer, she is, and must be, unique-

ly chosen, and yet she is not *the* slayer. She is unique, and yet not unique in her uniqueness, nor even, like Buffy, the better of the two. This ultimate lack of uniqueness manifests itself quite immediately in the fact that, unlike the true slayer who has no one above her, Faith is afflicted with jealousy and pride. Unable to avoid taking a demonic pleasure in her powers, she cannot preserve the illusion that the two poles, the human and the demonic, are not infinitely intertwined. For it is, after all, the unique privilege of the slayer, and a privilege that could only belong to one, to have all her violent power, despite its own demonic origin, directed against the demonic. Experiencing so viscerally the fallenness of creation and the contradiction of her own nature should, it seems, give Faith cause to mourn. Yet instead, having discovered her demonic nature, and indeed without wasting a moment on solitary reflection, she embraces the new role with glee.

To see that Faith's apotropaic resistance to mourning is not merely a fluke, an accidental effect of her stupidity, we might consider the episode titled "Earshot," itself perhaps the most direct confrontation with the problem of mourning (21 September 1999). Here Buffy, infected with an "aspect of a demon," acquires the capacity to read minds. Perhaps nowhere does

the show's Baroque aspect appear with such visceral force as when her own mind begins to overflow with the thoughts of others, destroying the unity of subjectivity and linguistic meaning and dissolving her consciousness into a chaos of fragments, a swarm of isolated thoughts. The rupture of her subjectivity, far from allowing her a communion with all creation, is poisoned from the start with the subjective isolation that is the predicament of each human being; our fate as finite rational beings, which, as such, is rigorously opposed to the demonic whose aspect infects her.<sup>8</sup> Exposed to the din of everyone's thoughts, she experiences only their shared isolation; the shared impossibility of community. It is hardly surprising, then, that the one thought to rise with clarity above this universal lament is a scream to "kill them all."

This already suggests that in sunny Sunnydale the pain of a creation broken off into fragments cannot express itself through mourning, indeed not through any pathos whatsoever, but only through the inclination toward a specifically violent activity.<sup>9</sup> In a similar fashion, Buffy, hunting for the future killer, is led astray: not toward the cafeteria worker who had just poisoned the food, but instead toward Jonathon, who, poised atop the high school at a spot that

affords him a panoptic vision of the whole, is on the verge of killing, not others, but only himself. It is as though she were led toward the problem of mourning itself, if only to witness and even enact its necessary exclusion from the dramatic universe of the television show. For not only does Buffy, despite her telepathic gifts, take his suicidal tendencies for homicidal, but his sadness itself assumes the form of a desire to take his own life, and thus of violent action, which, aimed against human life, remains demonic both in origin and effect.

Mourning is thus all but impossible for humans, whose sadness at the fallenness and emptiness of creation is almost instantly transformed into demonic revelry in destruction. Instead it becomes the province of monsters, and specifically of those demons who have, in one way or another, outgrown their own demonism, and who are no longer capable of a childlike, even innocent, paradisial delight at the destruction of life. Spike, already afflicted by human passions and an all-too-human attachment to the earthly,<sup>10</sup> becomes ever more brooding once a surgical procedure deprives him of his capacity for violence. Likewise the “good” Angel, cursed with a soul, reads Camus as he sits alone in his crypt. Yet even here, mourning never appears in its purity and as its

own problem, but instead is given a markedly Romantic cast. The demonic desire for violence, forbidden its direct expression, becomes erotic yearning for an impossible object, and consequently both Angel and Spike's sadness is interpreted as the wretchedness of unrequited or insatiable love rather than the objectless lament of the melancholic at the fallenness of all—and above all his own—nature.

### 3: VIOLENCE AND MOURNING

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a mourning play without mourning. It is the catastrophic history of an empty world,<sup>11</sup> as experienced by an age that has outlived the capacity to mourn; for whom mourning can only appear as an atavistic anachronism, a hold-over, even more ridiculous than the Vampire's passé clothing, from the bombastic and brooding culture of "old Europe." For it is not only as "neutered" demons that Spike and Angel mourn, but as children of the popular Romanticism of nineteenth-century Europe. Just as the teenagers of Sunnydale prove even more clueless as vampires than as humans,<sup>12</sup> Spike's (and to a lesser extent Angel's) vampirism is perhaps nothing more than the natural denouement of a human temperament prone to Romantic affect, dreams of gran-

deur, a yearning for infinity and darkness, and a nostalgia for the past.

What is it, then, that takes its place? The answer is to an extent already clear. In every instance, as we have seen, violence—be it the demonic violence directed against life or the erotic violence seeking to possess the beloved—preempts mourning. Yet there is also a third sort of violence: the violence of Buffy first of all, but also of Willow and Xander and Giles, and even Angel and Spike in their good or at least tame manifestations. With its identification, the question of Buffy's own relation to mourning becomes pressing. If I have avoided this up till now, it is not because her role, as the truly chosen slayer, excludes the experiences that would lead to mourning. Her situation, no less than Faith's, is implicated in the ambiguity of the relation between the human and demonic. While she is entrusted as slayer with the protection of all creation from demonic forces through a power that is itself of demonic issue, she is nevertheless fully mortal, and thus not only forced to reckon with the futility of her task, knowing full well that there is an "expiration date" stamped on every slayer, but to devote herself absolutely to defending an order to which she herself only partially belongs, and indeed only belongs through her mortality, thus on-

ly through the negative.

Rather, I have postponed the discussion of Buffy precisely because her violence, more than any other character's, not only appears as a preemption of the possibility of mourning—a channeling and transformation of acedia into activity—but also suggests how a specific genre of television comes into being in and from its exclusion. While Faith's demonic—and Angel's and Spike's erotic—violence doubtless have their place in the series, they remain *parerga* to a work that takes its name from *the* slayer, whose travails, despite occasional digressions, always remain at the center of things and whose labor of slaying gives rhythm and structure to the whole. This rhythm moreover, as a function of her characteristic mode of violence, stands in the most striking contrast to the rhythm imparted to the plot by demonic and erotic violence. It is not dramatic and progressive but regressive. If *eros* and *thanatos* plot toward a catastrophic denouement, it is the particular privilege of the slayer and her crew to postpone the end at every new turn; foiling each successive plot and thus making possible a new episode. In this way, it is the labor and calling of the slayer to create a serial temporality: the time of the television series—a time that, at every moment, is able to see itself away into the fu-

ture, into a new time. If all demonic and erotic violence is a plotting, either toward death or possession and the union of hearts, Buffy's violence is a plotting against plot. Thus we must not confuse it, to use the terminology developed in Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*, with a truly sacred violence—a possibility almost completely absent from the world of Buffy. Hers is not sacred, not revolutionary, but only counter-demonic and, moreover, thoroughly reactionary in its impulse. It only sustains the status quo, preserves the existing order, makes room for new disasters. Her task, one could even say, is not messianic but counter-messianic, and it should come as no surprise that the two arch-villians of the first two seasons, the judge and the anointed one (the English translation of the Greek *ho christos* and the Hebrew *mashiach*) name aspects of the Christian deity. Buffy, whose name already suggests pure physicality, a natural "buffness," was chosen not to redeem or save mankind, but rather to check the messiah, to put off the day of judgment, and above all to destroy those who, born again from the death of their bodies, seek, through a communion of blood, to turn others into their kind.

#### 4: THE THEOLOGY OF TELEVISION: THE ACTION FILM AND THE PASSION PLAY

It is now possible to approach with full force the question of genre. What *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reveals through its consequent transformation of the genre of the mourning play is nothing less than the theological basis of the serial television show. The “serial” here refers neither to a series of chapters excerpted from a novelistic whole and published in sequence, nor to a number of sketches involving the same characters in the same general situation and bound together through a loose chronological order, but rather to a genre in which each episode presents a dramatic unity whose catastrophe is deferred in such a way that, rather than resolving itself into marriage or death, sets the stage for a new episode and a new catastrophe. So understood, the genre of the serial stands in a very privileged relation to the media of television as a whole. Television is uniquely able, through the periodic deployment of episodes, to sustain this strange rhythm of repeated catastrophe over the course of many years. With *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* the media of television exposes its own hidden theology.

At the heart of this theology, to repeat, is the counterpoise of two violences: the demonic and the counter-demonic. Whereas the first is dras-

tic and dramatic, bent only on destroying human life and plotting the end of all things, the second seeks nothing more than to preserve life against dissolution by foiling every new demonic plot. Television itself is merely the endless playing out of these plots and counter-plots, and thus it supposes, as the condition of its possibility, the impossibility of a truly sacred or indeed creative violence. Nowhere does its bleakness reveal itself with such intensity as in the eternally returning sameness of the sitcom, where, in its most classical versions, every change of fortune has been cancelled out by the end of the half-hour.

It is of crucial importance, moreover, that Buffy's violence always takes the form of a virtuosic display of agility and strength. It is not enough merely to plot against catastrophe. Rather, in each case a new feat of remarkable physical prowess is necessary. This alone crowns the counter-plots and defers the end of time. In just this way, moreover, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* exposes the theological foundations not just of the serial, but also of the "action" show or film. For it is only in a world from which creativity has been banished—in which each moment only offers the choice between the continuation of the given and its annihilation—that the gymnastic virtuosity of the "action hero" could ex-

ert such hypnotic power; that we might imagine the fate of the world to depend purely on a certain individual's deft moves, muscular physique, and preternatural ability. Only in the absence of every other human potency could an utterly unproductive parrying with the forces of evil appear as the highest form of humankind—indeed as the super-human *par excellence*.

The action of the action hero and action film of course has nothing to do with the *praxis* of Aristotelian drama, or even with the *Haupt- und Staatsaktion*. It does not principally depend on dramatic structure, nor does it imply a certain grandeur and magnitude. Rather, it has far more in common with the action of the “action figure” with its articulated and mobile limbs. It is mere movement, which neither involves nor happens through language, nor allows any interpretation apart from its immediate show of force. If it has a theatrical precedent prior to the advent of film, apart from the crude swash-buckling of the traditional stage, it is in the *dance d'action* of Noverre, who, in conceiving a theater based almost entirely on a minute control over the auditory and visual experience of the audience (the “spectacular elements”), deserves credit for elaborating, many decades before the discovery of photography, the possibilities of an art form based on the presentation of

a moving image.<sup>13</sup> Yet it is equally clear that the representation of the sort of “action” we find in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is uniquely dependent on the peculiar possibilities of film or video. Without the absolute control over the sensory content that it allows, it is impossible to present such elaborate choreography of humanly impossible movements. Thus it is perhaps not just the theological grounding of the serial, of television, and of the “action film” that we discover in *Buffy* but of the cinematic and video medium as a whole.

This virtuosic, choreographic action implies a rigorously materialistic, atheistic worldview. The material world, in its possibilities of movement, seeks to maintain itself as a closed sphere of meaning, sufficient in itself. Yet this materialism, rather than incorporating the attributes of God, and above all the creativity of the divine word, excludes these from reality, and, indeed, in the action show the violent performance of this exclusion is of the very essence of action. This suggests the opposition between the mourning play and the serial action show, and the implications of the impossibility of mourning. The act of mourning, and the mournful labors of the allegorist, still retains a vestigial remembrance of the divine. *Trauer*, even if it supposes the experience of the world as a crea-

tion without a creator, nevertheless preserves a relation to divine creativity. It is “die Gesinnung, in der das Gefühl die entleerte Welt maskenhaft neubelebt, um ein rätselhaftes Genügen an ihrem Anblick zu haben” (I.1:318) [“the state of mind in which feeling reanimates with masks the emptied world, in order to take an enigmatic satisfaction in looking at it”]. Similarly, the semiotics of allegory—the fact that every person, thing or relation can mean anything else—involves a peculiar antinomy. While it pronounces an “annihilating yet just verdict” on the profane world, characterizing it as a world in which details (and thus the very substance of profane life) don’t matter, it also points beyond the merely profane toward its transcendent ground:

[d]och wird, und dem zumal, dem allegorische Schriftexegese gegenwärtig ist, ganz unverkennbar, daß jene Requisiten des Bedeutens alle mit eben ihrem Weisen auf ein anderes eine Mächtigkeit gewinnen, die den profanen Dingen inkommensurabel sie erscheinen läßt und sie in eine höhere Ebene hebt, ja heiligen kann. Demnach wird die profane Welt in allegorischer Betrachtung sowohl im Rang erhoben wie entwertet. Von dieser religiösen Dialektik des Gehalts ist die von Konvention und Ausdruck das formale

Korrelat. Denn die Allegorie ist beides, Konvention und Ausdruck; und beide sind von Haus aus widerstreitend. Doch so wie die barocke Lehre überhaupt Geschichte als erschaffenes Geschehn begriff, gilt insbesondere die Allegorie, wenschon als Konvention wie jede Schrift, so doch als geschaffene wie die heilige. (I.1:351)

[yet no one will fail to recognize, and least of all if he has the allegorical interpretation of scripture in mind, that those signifying props, pointing as they do at something else, attain a power that allows them to appear incommensurable with profane things and raises them to a higher plane, and can indeed sanctify them. Considered allegorically, the profane world is both elevated in rank and devalued. The dialectic of convention and expression is the formal correlate of this religious dialectic of content. For allegory is both convention and expression, and both are inherently in conflict. Yet just as Baroque doctrine in general grasped history as created event, allegory in particular is held to be conventional like every script, and yet “created” like holy scripture.]

Save through the mood of mourning, allegory would be unable to hold on to even these last

traces of creativity. Instead of resurrecting the world of things and allowing a transcendent potency to manifest itself, it would reduce it to a mere node in a labyrinth of endlessly deferred meaning. Bereft of the capacity to mourn, allegoresis becomes a violence aimed toward every spark of original creation, every intrusion of newness into reality, by referring it back to what has already been; dismissing it as already passé and hence inessential. It is, in other words, the purely negative irony—altogether distinct from the Romantic dialectics of self-formation and destruction—that, inhabiting the serial situation comedy as the law of its genre, annihilates everything new at the moment of its occurrence. If the action film or show is nevertheless neither comic nor ironic, it is only because this destructive force, rather than appearing as a function of mere *fortuna*, has been sundered into two violences—a demonic and a counter-demonic—which oppose each other in endless strife, thus lending a dramatic structure, with its plots and counter-plots, to reality's ironic self-dissolution.

Such atheism, which remains almost perfectly consistent in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* despite the ceaseless accumulation of occult and religious motifs, is not opposed simply to the theism of a “religious” world view. Indeed, it only

becomes possible to deny god once his attributes have been banished from this world. Thus, both theism and atheism are opposed, even more fundamentally, to a perspective which allows divine creativity to inhabit the world without confusing it with, or conceiving of it in terms of, the being of the things in the world.

To get a better sense for the nature of this opposition, consider a theatrical genre that stands in a near proximity to the choreographic impulse of the “action film” and whose own more recent development is closely related to film. As I already hinted with the invocation of Jean-Georges Noverre, the choreographic action of the action film belongs, more originally, to the ballet. The choreographic impulse, as Benjamin observes, is born of the Baroque mourning play, and yet at the same time marks its passage into new genre and media, in which mourning and allegory alike lose their privilege. For just as in the opera—that other decadent product of the Baroque—the sensual sonorous body of language gains ascendance over the written and emblematic (I.1:385–386), in the ballet, the secularization and spatialization of historical time becomes absolute, and a perfectly continuous space-time emerges which is no longer compromised by the fragmentation of allegory and thus no longer able to point out-

side itself (I.1:274).

The action film, no less than the ballet, takes place in a choreographic medium from which language has been banished. The articulate noises that occasionally pierce through the silent gestures of the hero and villains serve only to explain an action that itself occurs merely through the silent manipulation of the forces of nature and bears no essential relation to the human word. And this explanation, moreover, is for the most part nothing more than a further mystification, referring through an often nonsensical idiom to powers and relations that are in no way intuitively graspable. Such dialogue has nothing in common with the language of traditional drama, but is much more like the scenario that communicates to the viewers of a ballet, in advance of the actual performance, the names and natures of its personae and the schema of their interactions. Yet there is this essential difference between the two genres, whose own histories and destinies are more closely linked than one would think. In the action film, the mutual interplay of violence and counter-violence negates creativity, and in its purest form must banish even the last trace of creativity from its work, even denying the authorial originality of the artist through either slavish submission to a logic of imitative cita-

tion or, even more radically, by making the entire *action* (or rather the *passion*: action and passion are, of course, correlate terms) appear merely as a slavishly literal reproduction of sacred script. The ballet, in contrast, while for the most part denying the cult of the genial artist, signifies at every instance a divine creativity which, no longer banished into the wholly transcendent, inhabits nature to the last detail. Not only do the virtuosic steps reveal a potency of the body that is no longer subordinated to destruction (the keystone of the traditional ballet, the *pas de deux*, expresses neither violence nor erotic longing, but a completely fulfilled love<sup>14</sup>), but the greatest story ballets—*Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *La Bayadere*, *Romeo and Juliet*—are nothing else than celebrations of the demolition of a demonic order of violence and bondage. *Sleeping Beauty* is the purest in this regard, with its scenario itself a perfect explication of the balletic *pas*. Here the dramatic elements that still animate *Swan Lake* and that return to Prokofiev's masterworks have been put to rest, and the entire ballet is merely an enactment, crowned by a long *pas de deux*, of the fall of nature—of Princess Aurora and her court—under a demonic spell and its subsequent reawakening.<sup>15</sup>

## 5: PARADISE REGAINED

It is not a question here of passing judgment on *Buffy*, and least of all from the perspective of a theological faith in a transcendent god. *Buffy* indeed deserves no small credit for revealing with exceptional clarity the theological horizon that underlies not only the genres of the action show and television serial and the video and cinematic media as a whole, but also the mode in which, at the present moment of time, the experience of reality is possible. In this respect, it stands in sharp contrast to such shows as *Seinfeld* or even *The Simpsons*, which find it too easy to revel in the comic reflexes of a violent irony, allowing the viewer, having identified himself with the demonic intrigues of a cyclic fate from which there is no escape, to rejoice in a Satanic laughter.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, because of the force with which *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, with its splendid parade of demonic manifestations, haunts its own origins, it cannot help, despite the purity with which it exemplifies its genre, occasionally gesturing beyond these limits and breaking free from the demonic circle. Some of these gestures, no doubt, point back toward theism. When Buffy, for example, is forced to sacrifice her vampire lover, whose soul had just recently been returned to him, in order to keep the world from being sucked into hell through

a dimensional vortex, her actions assume a moral aspect utterly incompatible with the gymnastics of the action hero. Yet other gestures point beyond theism and atheism and toward a nature that, no longer fallen, is immanently endowed with a creative potency. This is the case in the climax to the third season. It is significant that the high school graduation and the mayor's "ascension" to a pure demonic form coincide with the centennial of Sunnydale's founding. The town of Sunnydale, like the court of *Sleeping Beauty*, has existed for a century under the spell of the demonic powers upon which it was founded, and, consequently, the two courts that, together with the cemetery (in German: *Friedhof*), provide a show-place for the action of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, are intimately bound to secularism: to the secularized, cyclic time characterized above all by the division of human time into *saecula*: epochal periods of one-hundred years. For these reasons, the killing of the mayor and the destruction of the high school do not merely defer one more catastrophe, but involve the catastrophic destruction of a spatialized, secularized catastrophic time. That the destruction of the high school was necessary to kill the mayor hardly negates its figural significance. Just as the temple, the site of the high priest's machinations, quakes and falls

at the conclusion of *La Bayadère*, the high school's incineration and collapse signals the fall of the demonic court and the rupture of its hold over creation. It announces nothing less than the coming of new gods: not the restoration of the creator to creation, but rather the divinity, the immanent creativity, of nature. It is of the greatest importance, moreover, that this seemingly final action, the last plot against the demonic order, does not depend in the last instance principally on Buffy, but rather on the collective effort of all the students acting *en masse*. Armed with weapons, they have for the first time become responsible for their own fate. It is as if the fall of the demonic powers had to coincide with the loss, if only temporary, of Buffy's auratic privilege as uniquely chosen. Although she was still needed, it was in an almost passive function: acting as bait in order to distract and lead astray a demonic power whose one weakness consisted in its own fixation with the slayer and her uniqueness; or in other words, in its own incapacity to free itself from the all-too-human principle of individuation.<sup>17</sup>

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, this is to say, should have ended with the third season. Then it would not only have discovered, but also overcome the law of its genre. Instead it went on, submitting itself to the strictures of this law de-

spite all the insight that it gained; indeed despite the fact that, caught under the glare of this insight, the genre could not persist, and that, however strictly one tried to preserve the law at a formal level, its substance and content would change. As a result, a cloud of irony swept over *Sunnydale*. The repetition of catastrophe, the plurality of apocalypse, becomes a sort of inside joke among characters who accepted it willingly, recognizing in it the condition of their continuing employment. The first and second season reached a pinnacle of sinister intensity with its depiction of a Satanic fraternity sacrificing high-school girls to a giant snake in return for worldly riches and power (“Reptile Boy,” 13 October 1997). But the motley band of college vampires occupying a vacant fraternity that inaugurate the fourth season—an animal house for the un-dead—appears altogether farcical (“The Freshman,” 5 October 1999). Vampires, it seems, have as little place amidst the chaos of minds and bodies becoming liberated as Cordelia and Harmony’s petty snobberies or Xander’s irredeemable goofiness.

Yet this intrusion of irony and farce is only the first symptom of decay in a show that has outlived itself. In the fourth season, the comical parade of vampires—creatures whose fierce and nostalgic sensuality make them almost lov-

able—soon becomes nothing more than a side-show for a main event that takes place elsewhere and involves an altogether different sort of intrigue. The court and staging ground for this new plotting is the university itself, whose spatial configuration already suggests the conflict that is to play itself out. Just as the high school was divided into the classrooms at the periphery and the library at the center, UC Sunnydale is organized around an opposition, now vertical rather than horizontal, between the sunlit campus classrooms and the subterranean lairs of the Initiative. Yet if in the high school, the learning that took place in the classroom was nothing more than a foil for the true knowledge found in the demonological lore of the library, the conflict vividly manifest in the spatial layout of the university is between two epistemic regimes, which each have their own claim and competence: on the one hand, a modern scientific attitude regarding reality with objective detachment and depriving humanity of all special claims, and on the other hand, a “humanistic” spirit of teaching, devoted to the cultivation of the capacities of the individual and the remembrance of the written word.

The first is exemplified, above all, by Professor Walsh. Not insignificantly, her field is psychology: the science which, touching on the

same field of concerns as the humanities, best exhibits the transformation that the world undergoes under the gaze of the scientist. For if the chemist and physicist's manipulations of reality, couched in an exotic symbolism and involving utterly imperceptible forces and processes, retains a magical aura in the eyes of the layman, the psychologist is able to aim her words directly at the language of our naive self-awareness. Nevertheless psychology, acting on a mental reality principally through the mediation of various symbolic media, can have little direct power over an inhuman—brute, inanimate, dead or even mechanical—reality. Thus Walsh, needing hands as it were, is paired with Dr. Angleman, whose direct penetration into an inarticulate matter suggests in the most visceral terms the particular violence of the means and method of science, just as the psychologist's disenchantment of the human psyche, freedom, and the ethical order, exposes its result.

While the scientific attitude and activity of Walsh is in no way magical—it denies all inherent mystery to nature and refuses all traditional knowledge, conceiving of demons as nothing more than a more opaque, less understood aspect of perceptible reality—its manipulation of reality is, at one and the same time, a

manipulation of signs; a form of semiosis unique to itself. Gathering up the corpses of demon and human alike, sundering limbs from the whole, it stitches these together while even adding electronics and mechanical devices, and thus encompassing the extremes of creation. Just as the allegorist's ultimate triumph is over the human body, which it separates into parts, destroying its unity, in order to have these mean something other than their organic function, Walsh and her partner require for their work the *disjecta membra* of the creaturely world in its abundance of forms.<sup>18</sup> Yet their ultimate aim is not allegory but its opposite: the resurrection of scattered corpses into a higher form of life, a higher unity. It is as though they sought, by way of the most extreme embrace of the fragmentation of a fallen and shattered nature, a greater perfection than the organic perfection of the human body. They seek, as it were, a higher symbolism by way of allegory. Integrating the strengths of the demonic, human, and mechanical, this new creation is not only seemingly invulnerable to decay, almost free from death and fear, but even capable of creating more life. It is, in other words, a nature that, through its complete saturation with the scientific spirit of its makers, knows itself in such a way that grants it power over creation,

allowing it to control the creative potency of life, freeing it from the need to project itself outside itself into an object of its worship. Whereas mankind is for the most part incapable of fathoming let alone controlling the force of life and hence still remains haunted by the thought of its creator, Adam, Walsh's monster, is able to quickly dispense with all dependence on his origin, not merely killing his mother, but transforming her into an almost-mechanical slave: instead of the *deus ex machina*, a *machina ex deo*.

This also suggests the special significance of the name Adam. He is Adam not only as the first of a new race, but as one who still exists in a paradisaical state. And indeed a paradise from which, unlike his namesake, he cannot fall. Not only can woman no longer tempt him, since he possesses in himself the power over new creation, but, animated solely by a scientific spirit, the knowledge he seeks has nothing to do with the knowledge that precipitated the fall; the fallen knowledge of good and evil. He is able to know his nature completely, without knowing himself at all; without the slightest trace of self-reflection or the moral knowledge to which it gives rise, and hence also without mourning. Unlike Frankenstein's monster, who received a humanist education from *Plutarch's Lives*, *The*

*Sorrows of Young Werther*, and *Paradise Lost*, Adam (perhaps in this a most characteristic product of the new university) is not given over even for a second to brooding, but is, from the get go, a man, or rather a monster, of action.

Adam's source of life is a radioactive core. Electricity, magnetism, and chemistry—the great obsessions of the natural sciences during the Romantic period—lend themselves to allegory, just as the biological order finds its correlate in the symbolic, which—a finite form that, infinitely reflected in itself, expresses the infinite—demands an organic structure. Yet the process of fission where the “fragmentation” of the seemingly inviolable “atom”—the degeneration not just of organic substance but of matter itself—emits radiation suggests a mode of signification in which the most extreme form of decay goes hand in hand with the creation of new energy. The fantastic promise of nuclear power is nothing less than a higher synthesis of the symbolic and allegorical, the organic and inorganic—and hence, once again, a control not just of the principle of organic life but of the divine creative act itself.

With Adam human life transcends its own most fundamental limit: dispensing altogether with ethical knowledge, the knowledge of right and wrong, it gains in its stead an almost abso-

lute power over a creative power immanent in nature. In this way, as I already hinted, the fact that he kills his mother and creator is not a sign of his fallenness and corruption but of his perfect innocence and unchallenged right to remain in paradise. Nor can we regard Walsh's murder as the just punishment for the human hubris of trying to usurp god. The significance of her death and subsequent resurrection as a walking corpse escapes a tragic logic: it is neither punishment nor a necessary sacrifice, but her return into Adam's own paradisaical condition. All that she really loses, with the loss of reflective self-awareness and moral knowledge, is the altogether lamentable capacity to enjoy her creation in a state of exile from paradise. Moreover, her death, far from blocking her will, allows for its perfect realization. In Adam, her innermost intention, the scientific spirit, lives on purified of human desire, weakness, and limitation.

Yet the regained paradise of the new Adam belongs entirely to the demonic order. His innocence is not outside of the fallenness of creation, but occupies its innermost center. It is the intoxicating, vertiginous bliss of absolute falling: a falling that falls away even from itself, and thus can never know its own fallenness since it has lost all relation to a non-fallen point

of reference. In a similar way, the creativity that science would restore to matter by creating a form of life endowed with sovereign control over its own life-source is not a divine, but a demonic creativity. It is not a creation from nothing, but rather from chaos: the dissolution of matter into its elements. Hence for Adam, the imperative to create is inseparable from the imperative to destroy; the pursuit of life inseparable from the pursuit of death.

It is telling that while Buffy ultimately defeats Adam through an act of physical virtuosity, she could not do this alone, but needed the support of a magical spell. It is above all a good magic that opposes itself both directly and symbolically to the evil science of the Initiative. If the latter represents the extreme tendency of the spirit of science, the former is a dire attempt to hold on to a humanistic tradition whose foundations had been torn away from it through the triumphal march of a scientific worldview. For indeed, all the loves of the humanistic philologist of yore—musty books, dead languages, emblems, strange lore, even the oddities of nature—gain a new hold on life through the magician. The power these things gain, transformed into a spell, seems even to issue directly from their refusal to accept the verdict that a future time has pronounced on them. The magical spells, however

diverse and strange and preposterous in their effects, are perhaps nothing more than allegories for the ability of the mustiest antiquities to persist in the world despite their groundlessness, as though through sheer force of their aura; as glamour if not as grammar. Whereas science refuses all essential differences in kind, reducing all reality into a single homogenous field, the magician not only depends on differences of species, but on the special auratic properties of objects and even on the irreducible difference between the different languages and the absolute uniqueness of the name. In this way, moreover, the magician preserves, through his very mode of signification, human language itself, forbidding it to become a mere tool for the exposition of the “true language” of the natural world. Nor may we forget that magic and science ultimately share the same end: both involve the attempt to restore to the created world a sovereign creative vitality, though the former seeks this not by unleashing the inner forces of nature, but by approximating human language to the creativity of the divine word.

In the fourth and subsequent seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* magic and science confront each other as diametrically opposed intrigues operating at once with and against nature. Each attempts in its way to overcome the difference

between humanity and nature, either by rendering nature compliant to the human word or by dissolving humanity into a purely natural existence. Both are ultimately symbolical in character, and both, moreover, restore an immanent creative potency to the created realm, considered either as nature or language.<sup>19</sup>

But magic is no more able than science to overcome the fallenness of creation. The mark of this is a peculiar limitation to which it is subject: it at once cannot and must not overcome the frailty of human flesh. On the one hand, as Giles explains in answer to Willow when she suggests using witchcraft to heal Buffy's mother Joyce, the powers of magic end precisely where the surgeon's begin. And even while it can (or almost can) succeed in raising the dead, its own ethical code demands that its practitioners refrain from interfering in the "tissue of life" and gaining a god-like power over creation. For it is in this way, above all, that magic remains a thoroughly humanistic discipline. It is radically committed to human finitude: its powers perhaps only exist to enable its foundational discipline—the refusal to forget the difference between humans and god—to appear in the clearest light. Nowhere is this so clear than when Dawn tries to resurrect Joyce. That at the last moment, her mother already arisen and at

the door, Dawn annuls the spell, suggests not merely some psychological maturation, the successful transition beyond the first stage of mourning. It is Dawn's own *apoanthroposis*: her induction into the creaturely realm. Even though her origins are mysterious; even though she was immaculately conceived by an order of monks and exists only as a fantastic incursion onto reality; even though her life is itself a sort of dream, she is nevertheless able to become human, fully human, by accepting mortality as the human condition; accepting, in other words, that to be human, to exist as human, is to exist mortally, and that hence one can never be resurrected as human but only as something inhuman and monstrous. For the demonic itself, stripped of metaphysical mystification, is ultimately perhaps nothing else than the refusal of this insight: the denial, by conscious life, of finitude. Demons are those who have not grown up to this knowledge; whose adolescence is infinitely suspended. With demons, as with adolescents, the denial of finitude is only possible through the denial of consciousness. But there are also those demons, like Angel and later Spike, who are subject to a second transformation. They become conscious of their infinitude, and indeed infinitely conscious. Previously existing in a paradisaal absence of self-

knowledge, they thus acquire an immortal soul.

## 6: The n<sup>th</sup> Degree of Afterlife

Magic and science define the two poles of the conflict through which *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, having outlived the possibilities inherent in its genre, continues to live on. It is as though its after-life consisted in the confrontation of different attempts to restore the possibility of closure, the redemption from the cyclic and catastrophic time of the serial, that had been irrevocably lost after the end of the third season with the denial of the series's own graduation beyond itself and its laws. Even the strange plot line of the fifth season—with the introduction of a hell-god and the more positive appropriation of messianic imagery—may be understood in this way. Like the nutcracker in Hoffman's tale, the key is nothing else than the power to open up the present moment, rescue it from eternal repetition, and allow a new and radical turn in history (a truly historical event) through the new dawning, the arrival of new gods. And if this key, like the nutcracker, must assume human form, it is above all because it too has come too late, has missed its time, and thus can only be preserved for the future through a symbolical representation. In contrast, glory, the god in exile, is already past her time, and her

presence therefore can only be destructive, satanic. In this regard, her name says it all: for it is only the after-gods that demand slavish worship, who wish to revel in their glory, appearing as idols. The true gods, by contrast, are the gods that are coming; that belong purely to the future.

Yet while Buffy's afterlife in the fourth through seventh seasons is merely the aftereffect of the inability of the serial genre to live out a natural life or come to a properly dramatic climax, this very inability itself exposes a deeper principle. For the cyclic form of the serial is itself only a symptom of a genre which, quite paradoxically, is not grounded in the limitation and circumscription of its nature but on its infinitude; and which therefore cannot exhaust its essence, cannot live out its possibilities or culminate in a "classical" exemplification. It is the symptom, in other words, of a genre that, refusing its own mortality, continues to live on through a living death; no longer genuinely creative or productive—creating only new revelations of its lack of creativity—and yet incapable of being put to rest. In this way, the afterlife of Buffy, and even her literal resurrection in the sixth season, is the truer, more characteristic life of the series, and the first three seasons, one could even say, exist only in order to enable the

last four. The show must live properly at least for a while—with the hope of dramatic completion—in order to survive itself as a walking corpse.

In these later seasons, moreover, mourning, so rigorously excluded from the first three, seems to take over. Yet this mood, it is important to note, is itself essentially different in kind from the mourning of the Baroque. For it is not so much human as demonic. The object of this mourning is not the fallenness and transience of a creation abandoned by its creator, but the inability of a life that has outlived its own finitude to feel itself. It is the lament of the fallen genre: of the genre that has fallen off from the possibility of death, which cannot even properly decay, but is fated to the insubstantial, reflection-less, repetition of its forms and contents. The episode called “The Body” (27 February 2001), a slow-paced mourning play danced over Joyce’s corpse, only confirms this. For it is not through Buffy, Willow, or Xander’s eyes that we mourn, nor even Dawn or Anya’s, but Spike’s: his sadness alone is poignant. What he mourns, though, is not the passing of earthly things, but his exclusion from the community bound together by a shared finitude and a common mourning. For no one, it seems, can allow Spike to feel what they feel.

To allow this would be to jeopardize the authenticity, grounded in the uniqueness and in-iterability of life that we, as humans, cling to so tenaciously. Thus his feelings are condemned to solitude. Spike's life, like Dawn's, is dreamlike, and yet whereas for Dawn, whose feelings are in a sense all that is real, it is only through a pure submission to feeling that she, and all those around her, can avoid the specter of insubstantiality that arises whenever she and they reflect on her origins, for Spike, whose very feelings are denied their reality, the only way out is through a purely ethical action; a sacrifice unfathomable in terms of selfish motives. But perhaps in just this way his mourning, even as it falls silent within the show, finds such resonance with us as viewers, and above all when we realize how little sadness even the most extravagant procession of corpses, limbs, blood, and wailing can arouse in us. Living in the media of television, we have outlived ourselves. Death is familiar, a cliché; life a rerun.<sup>20</sup> Like vampires, we need our daily dose of blood to revive us, if only briefly, from the torpor of existence.

Is escape possible? Is there a genre which could explode the media from within? Perhaps not. Yet we do glimpse hope in those characters who, far from living beyond their time, have not yet, and never will, catch up, and who,

never quite coinciding with themselves, are able to feel their feelings, and above all the feeling of their humanity, as strangers to the human, and yet without quite feeling strange. In this way Anya in particular is always such a breath of fresh air. Her words—and she never says anything but what she thinks and feels—give voice to a human finitude, a fleshy, creaturely existence, experienced without mystification. Her love is purely sensual and yet absolutely faithful, and it is almost as if the human body itself, innocent of consciousness, was granted the gift of language. And in Dawn as well we are able to feel, now more seriously, the strangeness of life, and perhaps it is in this feeling above all that the coming gods need her, just as it is above all from feeling that the sybaritic Glory tries to flee. Anya and Dawn, each in their own way, recall the following words of Baudelaire:

The laughter of children is like the blossoming of a flower. It is the joy of receiving, the joy of breathing, the joy of confiding, the joy of contemplating, of living, of growing up. It is like the joy of a plant. And so, generally speaking, its manifestation is rather the smile, something analogous to the wagging tail in a dog or the purring of cats. (1992, 151)

As activity gives way to passivity, as the action film becomes the passion play, these possibilities come more and more to the fore. We see this, above all, at the end of the fifth season, when Buffy, knowing herself unable to hold off catastrophe with the usual deft moves, saves the world by giving her life; by offering her life in place of Dawn's. She acts only from feeling—ethically she has every right to sacrifice someone who is not really human—and yet her feeling is perhaps more than just sisterly affection; it is a certain faith that Dawn, as the key, is not only the instrument of demonic apocalypse but also of divine revelation; of the advent of the future. Perhaps Buffy even feels that it is only from within the demonic time of cyclic catastrophe that Dawn must be interpreted as the dawn of hell rather than heaven. And thus she chooses, with her own death, not merely to hold off catastrophe, but to bring catastrophic time to a close while allowing the key to survive into the future in order to open a new time. With her death, the dead finally bury the dead, opening up space for the living: for the child of a new life. It is as though, between the two sisters, the messiah had been divided into the two opposed aspects whose confusion is the death of all theological thought: the adult who must die to redeem mankind from sin, and the child

whose birth brings new life. Whereas Jesus's crucifixion brings the tragic logic of the Pagan world to a close, closing off the old time, his birth marks the advent of the future. Between them lies an abyss, and to develop theology from the logic of sacrifice, to preserve it as sacrament or as the model of divine love, is to suffuse Christianity with Satan. Buffy's love, her gift—the gift of Christ *qua* action and passion hero—is death rather than life.

Yet just as the new mourning of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is different from the mourning of the Baroque, so too is this passion. For it is not a suffering of the finitude of the creaturely realm, but *for* its finitude; not of feeling, but for feeling. The principal martyrs of the fifth season, Buffy and Spike, both suffer for the same reason: the only thing they truly feel, and the source of their mourning, is their lack of feeling. Spike suffers, and Buffy dies, not because of feeling but in order to feel: and hence *for* Dawn. Or in other words her feeling for Dawn, her only feeling, is a feeling for feeling. What Buffy feels is her own demonic exclusion from the realm of feelings grounded in human finitude. She sees, with perfect clarity, that her own violence is necessarily unfeeling. Likewise the life that Dawn signifies is not eternal life,

but the life of a finitude rejoicing in its finitude; a life of pure feeling.

It must also be clear why, when Buffy awakens at the start of the sixth season, she is in such a terrible mood. For her resurrection, like the Christian messiah's, cannot but annul the finality of sacrifice, allowing fragments from the demonic order of the past to penetrate into the new time. Once again, it seems, the logic of the serial, the vampiric afterlife of the mourning genre, levies its claims on the future.

## NOTES



<sup>1</sup> Many of these same elements appear prominently in the gothic genre from the Romantic period onwards, and one might thus argue that the genealogy of *Buffy* would lead back through vampire literature, gothic literature, and, above all, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Yet I would suggest that *Buffy* shows a greater affinity to the Baroque mourning play than the gothic genre as it emerged in the late 18th and 19th centuries.

<sup>2</sup> That the mourning play involves the spatialization of the historical time of Christian eschatology is among the most central theses of the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. For its most pithy expression, cf. Benjamin I.1:260, 274.

<sup>3</sup> There are exceptions to this—in one episode it even snows—and these exceptions always prove the rule, since as this last instance clearly suggests, the appearance of seasons is linked to positive appropriations of Christian thematics which can no longer be reconciled with the subversion of Messianic elements.

<sup>4</sup> Compare with Benjamin I.1:271.

<sup>5</sup> For the significance of *Schwulst* or bombast in the German *Trauerspiel*, cf. Benjamin I.1: 376–381.6. This is especially significant given the role of mourning in Vampire literature. Mourning, conceived of from a psychoanalytic rather than Benjaminian perspective, is at the heart of Lawrence Rickel's extraordinary study of vampire literature and film, *The Vampire Lectures* (1999).

<sup>7</sup> Compare with Benjamin I.1:249–250.

<sup>8</sup> Here again we might refer to the fragmentary demonology presented by Giles in the first season.

<sup>9</sup> Compare with Rickels, *The Case of California* (1991, 10): "California is where unending mourning achieves its society-wide manifestation (or massifi-

cation) as sadomasochism, where the death wish yields to the death drive (which takes a detour via suicide), and where the femininity of mourning constitutes the group's secret agenda, gender, and desire."

<sup>10</sup> So, for example, in the last episode of the second season, Spike justifies his motives for not annihilating the world: "We like to talk big, vampires do. 'I'm going to destroy the world.' It's just tough guy talk. Strut round with your friends over a pint of blood . . . the truth is I like this world. You've got dog racing. Manchester United. And you've got people. Billions of people walking around like Happy Meals with legs. It's all right here" (19 May 1998).

<sup>11</sup> The vanity of the world in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* may even be regarded as, in a certain sense, more radical than the vanity of creation experienced in the Baroque, which, as Benjamin argues (I.1:317–320), issues from the Reformation and its denial of an expiatory function to earthly works. For indeed, now it is not only the sacred function of works that is called into question, nor even their human meaningfulness, but the values of worldly productivity and accumulation that gradually took their place with the advent of capitalism

and its ideology. Not only does the world of Buffy seem scarcely touched by the economic boom of the late nineties, not only does prosperity itself (as in the episode “Lizard Boy”) appear as satanic, but it is only when the world is threatened with annihilation that it appears worth anything at all. The self-generating dynamic of economic growth, in other words, has been rendered inoperative. It is no longer possible to value the world as the possibility of future growth, but merely negatively; as what is not yet destroyed.

<sup>12</sup> The only exception is Willow, whose bookishness, Jewishness, lesbianism, and sorcery mark her as different from her peers.

<sup>13</sup> Or we might go back even further to the birthplace of the Modern theater in the *intermezzi* of the Italian Renaissance. Here the theater is a branch of architecture, involving the application of principles of perspective and mechanics to create a moving tableau and thus deceive the viewers. Noverre’s contribution, in a sense, consists in attempting to assimilate this purely speculative Renaissance conception of the theater with the loftier pretensions of high drama toward expressive power and coherence. Indeed, with the development of dance as an

autonomous theatrical art form, the principal *technai* of the Renaissance architect—perspective and mechanics—become inscribed into the human body, becoming a sort of second nature to the dancer. Mechanics and perspective, rather than serving as means to the end of spectacle, instead become what is first and foremost expressed through the dynamic interaction of the dancers on stage. In this respect, moreover, the tendency of the Modern cinema toward special effects at the expense of everything else may be regarded as a largely unreflective return to the thaumatopoesis of the first theaters. The action hero himself remains only as a vestige of the choreographic impulse of the dancer, and, not surprisingly, shows a tendency—one need only think of Arnold Schwarzenegger’s terminator—to relinquish almost all human characteristics, becoming pure machine. If, unlike the theatrical productions of the Renaissance, the action film trades in ever more hyperbolically conceived “end-of-the-world” scenarios, it is perhaps because, whereas then the mastery of technology testified to, and served the ends of, human dignity, now technology has emerged as an end in itself, or rather as the eclipse of all human purposiveness, in such a way that the film medium, with its ever increasing submission of every artistic prerogative to the exigen-

cies of purely instrumental reason, itself reproduces, through its own medium, the very process that it also incorporates as content. The catastrophe film, we might say, is always already also itself the catastrophe of film.

<sup>14</sup> Significantly, precisely this moment of supreme happiness must be exiled offstage, regarded as obscene, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: not merely in order to satisfy the censors, but because this alone, within the logic of the film, and in sharpest contrast to the ballet, is unrepresentable.

<sup>15</sup> Precisely because, in the ballet, expression is not direct but is mediated through a formal, non-phonetic language which, as the consequence of training, thoroughly saturates and denatures the human body, we cannot confuse this creativity with a vitalism rooted in natural organization.

<sup>16</sup> The relation of this reality and its experience to the media that both structure and reflect it and must never be regarded as external instances nor yet simply as the whole of reality, however, is complex, falling outside the scope of our immediate concerns. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to point toward one particularly il-

luminating facet of this relation. Even though the seriality of television shows, like the sequentialization of films, is in some sense purely a function of market forces, nevertheless these market forces, which demand new growth at every turn in order to stave off the catastrophe of economic crisis, themselves partake of the same logic of episodically-deferred catastrophe as the serial genre itself.

<sup>17</sup> It is also significant, in this regard, that whereas in every other episode the essential clues come from the quasi-sacred texts of demonology, here the unraveling of the demon's secrets, and ultimately its defeat, depends on a purely scientific discovery made not by a watcher or gatherer of ancient lore, but an ordinary professor and researcher.

<sup>18</sup> Compare with Benjamin, I.1:391.

<sup>19</sup> Here one might recall the following passage from *Der Kunstwerk im Zeitalter ihrer mechanischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, which suggests the nature of the opposition of science and magic:

Der Chirurg stellt den einen Pol einer Ordnung dar, an deren anderm der Magier steht. Die Haltung des Magiers,

der einen Kranken durch Auflegen der Hand heilt, ist verschieden von der des Chirurgen, der einen Eingriff in den Kranken vornimmt. Der Magier erhält die natürliche Distanz zwischen sich und dem Behandelten aufrecht; genauer gesagt: er vermindert sie—kraft einer aufgelegten Hand—nur wenig und steigert sie—kraft seiner Autorität—sehr. Der Chirurg verfährt umgekehrt: er vermindert die Distanz zu dem Behandelten sehr—indem er in dessen Inneres dringt—und er vermehrt sie nur wenig—durch die Behutsamkeit, mit der seine Hand sich unter den Organen bewegt. Mit einem Wort: zum Unterschied vom Magier (der auch noch im praktischen Arzt steckt) verzichtet der Chirurg im entscheidenden Augenblick darauf, seinem Kranken von Mensch zu Mensch sich gegenüber zu stellen; er dringt vielmehr operativ in ihn ein (Benjamin, I.2:495–496).

[The surgeon represents one pole of an order at whose other pole stands the magician. The comportment of the magician, who heals the sick through the laying on of his hand, is different from

that of the surgeon, who undertakes an operation on the sick. The magician maintains the natural distance between himself and the one being treated; put more precisely: he diminishes it—by virtue of the hand he lays on—only a bit and increases it—by virtue of his authority—a great deal. The surgeon proceeds the other way around: he diminishes the distance to the one being treated a great deal—by pressing into his interior—and increases it only a bit—through the caution with which he moves his hand among the organs. In a word: in contrast to the magician (who is still hidden in the practicing doctor) the surgeon, in the decisive moment, refrains from confronting the sick person as one human being to another; rather he penetrates into him with an operation.]

Benjamin's essay also suggests the political dimension of their conflict. Whereas the extreme political tendency of modern science is the dissolution of individual differences, reconstituting society into a homogenous mass that, acting according to rational principles, is free from all internal strife, magic, bound in its operations to

the aura, amplifies the cult of personality. Thus when Jonathan Levinson uses the dark arts to transform himself into a superhero, Sunnydale, his face plastered on every billboard, begins to resemble a fascist dictatorship.

<sup>20</sup> Nowhere is this so clear than in the episode where the leader of a group of teenagers who wish to have themselves transformed into vampires insists on forcing reality to conform with the scripts of old movies, and at one moment even repeats the lines of a film playing silently in the background (“Lie to Me,” 3 November 1997).

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W. dreams, like Phaedrus, of an army of thinker-friends, thinker-lovers. He dreams of a thought-army, a thought-pack, which would storm the philosophical Houses of Parliament. He dreams of Tartars from the philosophical steppes, of thought-barbarians, thought-outsiders. What distance would shine in their eyes!

~Lars Iyer

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## The Afterlife of Genre

Anthony Curtis Adler

Could there have been television without California? California without television? The one shows the other: the ostentatiously novel singularity of the place and the seemingly self-effacing transparency of the medium. Yet if television and California both promise again and again to offer us something new, young, immaculate in its transience -- a pure surface that will never get caught in the ditch of time -- they are also both haunted through and through: by the itinerant contents of the past that they cannot banish, by memories of the infantile-perverse utopian fantasies that taunt us in constant replay, by the contradiction played out in the very gesture of dismissing history and leaving the dead to bury the dead. California and television, as it were, conspire in a vampirologic: the forever-young is what has been there the longest, what really "takes us back." And so we also will take ourselves back: to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, already almost charmingly quaint, and Walter Benjamin's magnum opus *The Origin of the German Mourning-Play*. What can come of this improbable conjunction? It will not seem too strange that Benjamin, posthumous wanderer across the textures of Americana, should again take up lodging at the Hotel California. But more is at stake than just another hapless visitation from the on high of high theory: reading *Buffy* as the remediated afterlife of the dead-on-arrival genre of the baroque German mourning play, Adler's book records the first broken, awkward steps toward a project that, with the recent rise of "quality television," seems more urgent than ever before: a political-theological characteristic of the television series.

dead letter office





Adler, Anthony Curtis

*The Afterlife of Genre: Remnants of the  
Trauerspiel in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

punctum books, 2014

ISBN: 9780615955742

<https://punctumbooks.com/titles/afterlife-genre/>

<https://www.doi.org/10.21983/P3.0061.1.00>