

Postmodernism in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Stuart Hall's essay, "Encoding, Decoding" offers an insightful breakdown into the ideological framework that goes into the process of media production and consumption, specifically within the scope of television. Hall elaborates that within the creation of all television programs lies an encrypted message or ideology that an audience will receive and potentially reject. Producers of television will "encode" messages based on their particular ideologies and assumptions. These coded messages may be conscious or unconscious, but are only effective if they produce some type of meaningful discourse, or "decoding" (Hall 3). Our abilities to both encode and decode these ideologies may stem from our conditioning, understanding of cultural framework, or recognition of signed vehicles (5). Hall presents three hypothetical positions in which decoding is to be received: the dominant/hegemonic position (accepting an encoded message), the negotiated position (acknowledging an encoded message), or the oppositional position (rejecting an encoded message). In this essay, I will take the dominant/hegemonic position in analyzing the season 2 *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* episode, "Halloween", within the framework of postmodernism, as it is presented in the essay, "Postmodernism" by Bernadette Casey as well as the article, "Television Intertextuality After *Buffy*: Intertextuality of Casting and Constitutive Intertextuality" by Jeffrey Bussolini.

Before we can analyze *Buffy* through a postmodern lens, I will first break down some key points in Hall's essay that I deem to be crucial for understanding how encoding/decoding applies to television episodes. Hall emphasizes how media content can never be neutral, but is instead encoded with the values and ideologies of the cultural or political institutions of that day. The ideologies of the producers will seep into the final product, and how the audience will perceive these ideologies is likewise based on the ones they have encoded in their own minds based on their own world view (Hall 4). However, Hall notes that it is easy to distort meaning if we lack a framework on how to perceive it, which is why he introduces a diagram that represents the complexity of creating and consuming television ideologies. Hall notes that we rely on universal indicators and signed vehicles to avoid misunderstanding a message as much as possible (5). While individuals decoding a message can be influenced by their race or class, they can rely on

what universal truths they know in order to accept a message. For instance, in this episode of the show, we, as an audience, understand that Buffy's behavior when she is taken over by her costume (an 18th century maiden), is in alignment with how we perceive 18th century “maidens” to behave. When we take a position (dominant, negotiated, or oppositional), we also take a more structured approach in decoding television ideology.

Postmodernism is described by Bernadette Casey in her essay, “Postmodernism”, as an embrace of “the collapse of boundaries in the realm of popular culture” (Casey 3). Casey argues postmodernism is a replacement of fundamentals rooted in modernity and modernism. Casey defined modernism as a “quest for deeper truths beyond or below the ‘surface’ of representational devices”, while postmodernism goes beyond that by breaking boundaries between reality and fiction (4). It calls into question the distinction between fiction television and the real world, while going beyond the modernist search for reason and meaning, and may even present aestheticism merely for aesthetic’s sake (3). Post modernism is self-referential and self-aware, often drawing inspiration from unrelated source material while utilizing cliches and tropes that originate from several genres of media, creating something new in the process. One way encoding/decoding and postmodernism overlap is with the reliance on previously established tropes that are already ingrained into a viewer's mind. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a great example of a television series that draws inspiration from generally well known historical tropes about vampires (they are merciless soulless bloodsuckers), yet isn't afraid to add new twists that may seem contradictory (but Angel is a *good* vampire who has a soul). It references these real life myths and conceptions about vampires and brings those cliches into the show. It does not hesitate to not only make these sorts of references, but also relies on the audience to grasp these references as well.

Intertextuality is one of the most critical components in defining postmodernism. Casey writes that, “postmodernity is characterized by a blurring of boundaries between separate cultural domains, different historical periods and different styles” (Casey 5). The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode, “Halloween” blends elements of several genres, including horror, gothic, romance, comedy, and teen drama. In this episode, Buffy and her two friends, Xander and Willow, purchase Halloween costumes from a new store, *Ethan’s*. Yet what they don’t know is that the store owner (the eponymous Ethan), has performed some sort of incantation that makes his customers turn into caricatures of the costumes they wear on Halloween night. Buffy wears

the dress of an 18th century maiden, Xander, the costume of a military soldier, and Willow, the sheet of a ghost (she almost wears a more revealing outfit but changes her mind at the last moment). All three of these costumes are examples of intertextuality, making reference to the signed vehicles that represent these characters in modern culture. For instance, we know that wearing a white sheet over one's body does not necessarily resemble a "ghost", but to resemble a ghost is abstract in itself, and a white sheet is a visual that is constantly used throughout popular culture to portray that abstraction. In Willow's ghost costume, we rely on supernatural lore and clichés. Likewise, we rely on the tropes about soldiers when we understand that Xander has transformed into a trained military-esque battle soldier with a need to serve and protect. The producers encoded this message into this portrayal, and although it relies heavily on stereotypes that may originate in war films and media, we understand what is being conveyed to us. This indicates a blending of several different cultural domains.

Buffy's transformation into a helpless girl from the 18th century is one of the most interesting and important parts of the episode to analyze. Buffy, a character with a pre-destined responsibility to protect the world, is extremely strong and powerful. She spends her teenage years carrying this weight on her shoulders while battling demons and vampires. A lot of Buffy as a character is founded on her being a strong female lead character who does not need a man to protect her - an unpopular trope in the media. In fact, *she* is the one with the power to protect *men* (for instance, beating off Xander's bully early in the episode). The character she becomes on Halloween couldn't be more opposite from who she is. She is a parody of a defenseless female that faints at the sight of danger. In addition to intertextuality, Casey also highlights the role of parody and self-awareness in postmodernism, stating, "postmodern texts are held to be increasingly introverted, retrospective and self-referential" (Casey 4). Willow makes an intertextual reference to another supernatural television series with a strong female lead when noting Buffy's damsel-in-distress transformation: "She couldn't have dressed up as Xena?". This is also self-aware, as it speaks to the characters recognizing Buffy's role as their female protector, and a reality where she does not play that role is parodic and ironic.

Buffy's metamorphosis also plays into Casey's depiction of nostalgia. Casey states that postmodern texts are filled with "a nostalgic yearning for past images" (Casey 4). Buffy herself becomes enticed when she sees the dress on display at *Ethans*. She admires its beautiful design and elegance, and although she cannot afford it, she still longs to wear it. Buffy may have more

than one motive as to why this dress is appealing to her. In my opinion, Buffy looks at the dress with a nostalgic sense of yearning, which may be partially due to the desire of unburdening herself from her role as a vampire slayer, partially due to the dress being a gateway to the time period when her boyfriend, Angel was once her age, and completely due to her lingering internal question: *what if?* Buffy sees an alternate reality for herself where she is the owner of this dress. Ironically, we see what that reality would entail for her later on. Buffy's alter-ego glances at a picture of Buffy displayed at her house, and feels a familiar impulse to understand her. Yet when Angel talks to Buffy later, he confesses to her that he "hated those people" back in his time. Buffy sees that who she is is exactly who she needs to be. Though these may seem like modernist concepts, it's the way they are handled with irony and self-awareness that makes them postmodern. As Casey suggests, the search for meaning and identity found in modernism is replaced by aestheticism and discontinuity in postmodernism (3).

In his article, "Television Intertextuality After *Buffy*: Intertextuality of Casting and Constitutive Intertextuality", Jeffrey Bussolini argues about two specific types of intertextuality, and specifically their presence in the works of Joss Whedon. The first being, "casting intertextuality", which involves actors whose previous roles inform the audience's perception of their new characters. For instance, an actor known for a significant role in a popular show brings those associations to their new role, influencing how viewers interpret the new narrative. The second type, he calls, "constitutive intertextuality". This refers to the intertextual relationships that exist inherently within a television show's narrative and its broader media ecosystem. For example, referencing or parodying other shows, genres, or pop culture elements (Bussolini 3). While *Buffy* incorporates both of these methods, I will focus specifically on the latter. Bussolini writes that, with intertextuality, "any text is the absorption and transformation of another...every word can be read in terms of at least two or more meanings or significations" (5-6). *Buffy* exists within the context of constitutive intertextuality through its blending of genres and in particular its relevance to the media of its time. For instance, *Buffy* aired in an era of High School-centric media that dominated the television industry in the 90's. It fit right in with the likes of *90210*, while simultaneously appealing to audiences of gothic media and fantasy like *The X-Files*. The result: a show that incorporates all of these into a recognizable crossover of

elements. This ties into the module that Stuart Hall points out when discussing the formulation of media in their socio-political-cultural context.

One of the qualms about constitutive intertextuality is the discourse for how creative the work of media can be. Bussolini writes about Joss Whedon's use of referential dialogue in *Buffy* to other works of media. In the Halloween-themed episode of the show, a good portion of the dialogue are references, arguably more so than other shows. If all of these are taken out, the length of the episode will certainly be shorter. Bussolini refers to critics who argue that the writer's approach to dialogue borrows too much from other sources rather than inventing its own rhetoric. However, that is what makes *Buffy* the perfect postmodern show. It doesn't steal or plagiarize other works, it alludes to them, while also building upon their ideologies and structure, and therefore creates an original body of work composed of plenty of recycled tropes. *Buffy*, as a whole, is largely about reinvention, and this particular episode is the perfect example of how that's done. *Buffy* is a body of work formulated at the hands of media scholars and experts.

Bussolini also discusses the decoding of encoded messages in media by pointing out how in postmodern media, much of the work of understanding is done by the consumer. If "Halloween" contains elements of intertextuality like referencing mythological tropes and supernatural television series, the audience will rely on their prior interactions and individual unpacking of those ideologies to comprehend the message of the episode. He writes, "despite creativity or art, writers do not choose or create their own language...they must proceed with a shared background." (Bussolini 9). So when Cordelia asks, "Angel's a vampire?... but the cuddly kind, right?...like a *Care Bear* with fangs?", not only is she being intertextual by referencing the *Care Bears* media, she is also recognizing the constitutive intertextuality nature of the show. First off, she is recognizing the breaking of rules surrounding the idea of vampires in how they are portrayed in *Buffy*. The postmodern-ness of the show allows for the existence of a vampire with a soul. Second, the audience will only understand her joke if they are familiar with the *Care Bear* franchise. A viewer who grew up in a non-American country may very possibly overlook this remark and not understand it. However, the writers will throw it in anyway, and leave it to the viewer to decode the reference at their own discretion.

Adopting a dominant-hegemonic perspective on interpreting the ideologies depicted in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode "Halloween" requires us to unpack the episode's embedded

messages regarding identity, gender roles, and the effects of cultural representations. The narrative offers a distinct critique of the vulnerability of self-identity and the significant role that external influences—especially media portrayals and historical stereotypes—play in molding individual behavior and perception. Throughout the episode, characters assume the identities associated with their Halloween costumes, illustrating how societal expectations and cultural frameworks can manipulate personal identities. Buffy's transformation into a damsel in distress parodies the traditional role of women in fantasy and historical dramas, subverting the audience's expectations by showing how this is a false identity for her. It goes against the foundation of her character, which is exemplified by statements she makes under the spell such as: "I was brought up a proper lady, I wasn't meant to understand things. I'm just meant to look pretty and then someone else would marry me". The episode is a great example of how external forces like media and history have the power to shape and control personal identity, but they are ultimately constructions that can be challenged and overcome.

I accept the encoded messages that cultural representations significantly influence personal identity, often reinforcing restrictive stereotypes, especially for women. This episode perfectly takes these concepts and wraps them in an ironic bow. For example, When Willow is just herself, she is a shy girl who wishes to be seen. When she covers herself with a sheet, she is somehow more seen than ever. Not only does dying force her to present herself as the way she pleases, it allows her to step into another reality, where, like Buffy, she can understand how it'd be like in another set of shoes. Likewise, Xander likely picks a soldier outfit in order to embrace his masculinity, which is shattered early on in the episode when Buffy defends him against a bully. On Halloween night, he is the one with the guns to protect a helpless Buffy from demons. Through the implications associated with each person's costume, they assume the role of that character and get a taste for the longing desire within them. The episode emphasizes the importance of reclaiming one's true identity from these external forces, aligning with the show's broader feminist and postmodern themes that challenge conventional narratives and power structures.

In conclusion, we can decode postmodernist ideologies in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* by analyzing how the show approaches topics such as identity through a nuanced lens. The way we

understand these topics is embedded in the preconceived ideas we hold based on the media we have consumed our entire lives.

Works Cited

Bussolini, Jeffrey. "Television Intertextuality After Buffy: Intertextuality of Casting and Constitutive Intertextuality." "Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies", vol. 3, no. 3-4, 2004.
<https://www.whedonstudies.tv/uploads/2/6/2/8/26288593/bussolini.slayage.10.1.pdf>

Casey, Bernadette. "Postmodernism." Television Studies: The Key Concepts, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2008, pp. 190-195.

Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79, edited by Stuart Hall et al., Routledge, 1980, pp. 128-138.