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**The transformative potential of popular television: the case of  
Buffy the Vampire Slayer.**

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**University of Huddersfield, December 15<sup>th</sup> 2011**

**Abstract:**

This paper reports findings from an empirical study examining viewers' responses to a popular and critically acclaimed television program, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Viewers' frames of reference were challenged when they identified strongly with characters facing complex moral dilemmas, who behaved in ways that contravened viewers' espoused values. This sometimes led viewers to develop more inclusive, less judgmental moral frameworks. Viewers also used the program to help them imagine how to cope in difficult circumstances and found that the metaphorical and fantasy elements of the program helped them recognize previously unacknowledged aspects of themselves. *Keywords: transformative learning, television viewers, education through fiction, Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

## **The Transformative Potential of Popular Television: The Case of Buffy the Vampire Slayer**

Adult educators recognize that adult learning is not bound by educators or institutions.

Adults learn through life experience, through work and from a range of leisure and cultural pursuits. Scholars have studied these experiences; Finsden (2006), for example, calls these 'less intentional' (p. 72) and discusses transformative learning opportunities for adults from church, family and workplaces. Learning through leisure such as museum and national park visiting (Taylor, 2006), learning as part of everyday life (Biesta & Tedder, 2008) and participation in re-enactment societies (Coles & Armstrong, 2008) have also been studied. In many Western countries state funded adult education has been reducing for some time. In the UK state funded opportunities for liberal, aesthetic and non-vocational education for adults have almost disappeared and the complete removal of state funding for arts and humanities at higher education level has just been recommended (Browne, 2010). This makes understanding how adult learning from arts and humanities can operate outside educational institutions highly pertinent.

The authors of this paper had worked together previously, looking at family and education in *BtVS*. Recently Vivien Burr, a social psychologist, undertook a series of interviews with *BTVS* viewers in order to gain a better understanding of its place in their lives. She also invited Christine Jarvis to analyze these from an educational perspective. These analyses led the authors to focus on the potential for transformative learning offered by the way *BtVS* challenged viewers' existing frames of reference (their "habits of mind and points of view", Mezirow, 2000, p.17).

Television offers exceptional opportunities for learning. It has a presence in most homes and viewing levels are high. News, current affairs and non-fiction programs help to shape understanding and perspectives on the world. This is not necessarily transformative or socially progressive; viewers may learn in ways which reinforce existing prejudices and perspectives. This paper, however, focuses on a particular program to illustrate the transformative possibilities of television's fictional offerings. Individuals invest time and emotional energy following their favorite programs. "My program" can be claimed as personal space, in a manner that recalls the claims Janice Radway's interviewees made for reading in her seminal study of women romance readers: "it enables them to focus on themselves and to carve out a solitary space within an arena where their self interest is usually identified with the interests of others and where they are identified as a public resource to be mined at will by the family" (Radway, 1984, p. 211). One of our participants (pseudonyms are used) said: "When it does come on the kids know I want to watch it. I get really cross 'cos somebody else 'phones. It's always, you know quarter to seven on a Thursday, do they not know Buffy's on? And I get really cross when I'm interrupted and I don't want to share it with anybody either" (Amanda).

### **The Arts and Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning makes "frames of reference more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally open to change" (Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006, p. 125). It is an unsettling process that challenges the existing values and beliefs that shape our responses to the world. The paper identifies some of the features of viewing this television series that acted as "disorienting dilemmas" (Mezirow, 1991) and the cognitive and/or emotional and imaginative learning processes triggered. We discuss whether it is possible to detect initial changes in people's frames of reference from the participants' descriptions of watching

television. We consider the nature and categorization of these changes, noting that a variety of habits of mind, moral-ethical, philosophical, sociolinguistic and psychological appear to be challenged, if not actually transformed by viewers' deep involvement with *BtVS*.

The transformative power of the arts has been discussed by many who have noted the powerful impact of artistic expression, its capacity to give people a voice and change their perception of themselves and their place in the world (Clover & Stalker, 2008; Manigaulte, Yorks & Kasl, 2006; Sandlin, 2007). However, we often describe practicing art as active and empowering whilst finding it difficult to convey the active nature of *engaging* with art. We talk about consuming, appreciating, enjoying, viewing, reading. And yet, as literary theorists have demonstrated (Davis & Womack, 2002; Littau, 2006), the act of reading is far from passive; meaning is made by readers as much as by writers. In the case of television, it is made by viewers as well as by production teams, directors and script writers. The active process, emotional, spiritual and intellectual, of wrestling with feelings and ideas generated by a work of art can be difficult and exhilarating and can change us profoundly. Art engages the imagination, and “imagination is central to understanding the unknown; it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by ‘trying on’ another point of view” (Mezirow, 2000, 20). It can also transform us by showing us the world in different ways through metaphor, symbolism and imagery, enabling us to connect with areas of ourselves that are hidden as this “inner world . . . reveals its presence through art, poetry and music, theatre and film” (Dirkx et al , 2006, p.127) . This paper attempts to add to the evidence that art transforms audiences as well as artists.

Giroux has argued that film is a “powerful teaching machine that intentionally tries to influence the production of meaning, subject positions, identities, and experience” (2002, p. 6). In many of the examples he cites, he identifies the conservative, hegemonic and

reproductive capacity of cultural products and processes. He calls for a “pedagogy of representation” (1994, p. 87) that focuses on “demystifying the act and process of representing by revealing how meanings are produced within relations of power” (1994, p. 87). Yet he also demonstrates, for example in his discussion of the film *Norma Rae* (2002), how film draws attention to the processes and power dynamics that reinforce inequalities. Although he privileges film over television, the claims he makes for film can be applied to television, in some cases to an even greater degree.

Long running television dramas have extended story arcs, complex characters and become a regular part of viewers’ lives, unlike the time-limited experience of viewing film. Viewers can engage with characters who develop over an extended period. Whilst television viewing may be more casual and liable to interruption than film, this serves to integrate it more fully with everyday life. There is passionate dialogue between viewers on international web-sites dedicated to favorite TV programs. In the adult education field there is relatively little empirical work that considers the educative impact of the media outside educational settings. Wright’s (2007) study of *The Avengers* is one example. Wright and Sandlin’s (2009) review of the adult education literature on popular culture notes that “intentional or not, adults learn from the practice of cultural consumption in their everyday lives” (p. 119).

Tisdell and Thompson (2007) have discussed how adult educators use entertainment media in their work to various ends, including the development of critical media literacy, the deconstruction of stereotypes and the raising consciousness of major global issues (p. 670). Tisdell (2008) has located her research within the field of transformative learning and states that “the media have the power to challenge one’s assumptions about structural power relations” but “it is likely far easier to do so in a higher education class or some other organized adult-learning setting where the purpose is discussion and analysis of a movie or

television show” (p. 62). Other educators concerned with media are similarly conscious of the role of the educator and of co-learners in the learning from the media. Guy (2007), for example, stresses that media can reproduce social structures, as well as offer challenges, and that “learners need a framework for critiquing popular culture” (p. 21). We fully acknowledge the case made by such scholars and value educational experiences designed to promote reflection, to raise awareness of the media’s ability to reinforce social norms, and justify inequalities. Therefore, although we consider how, for our participants, reflection takes place without the stimuli afforded by a structured educational environment, we recognize that they may have learned more had their viewing been part of an educational program. Nevertheless, given the increasingly limited opportunities for such structured educational experiences, adult educators need to understand better the kinds of learning that are stimulated by the new pedagogues: the writers, directors and production teams making television programs with global audiences.

### **Choice of TV program**

Our interviewees all watched *BtVS* regularly. Readers may wonder why this program was selected for our research. We need to explain whether we are arguing for the educational value of this particular program or making a more generally applicable case about TV viewing. We want to do both. Learning from television, including dramatic or transformational learning, is not limited to specific programs of special merit. Reception theorists have argued variously about the role of readers and audiences in making meaning (Holub, 1992; Stokes & Maltby, 2001). There are detailed connections to be made between these theories and transformative learning theory beyond the immediate scope of this article. Briefly, both consider the interaction of experience (reading a book, or viewing a film or television program in the case of reception theory) with the recipient’s own pre-existing

dispositions and ways of viewing the world. Both embrace an epistemology that views meaning as something that is constructed in the space between experience and the individual having the experience. The key point for this article is that, although the role of the viewer in constructing meaning implies we can never predict with certainty how a program might interact with or challenge any individual's meaning schemes and perspectives many theorists have acknowledged that there are social and cultural factors that affect the reception of texts (Littau, 2006); within any culture there are many taken for granted and shared assumptions. This suggests that there will often be shared responses to programs, and it is reasonable, therefore, to assume that in reality, programs which simply reflect existing values will rarely be sufficiently disconcerting to effect a dramatic change in the perspectives of viewers.

We argue, therefore, that some programs, like *BtVS*, are constructed in ways that make them more likely than others to challenge existing socio-linguistic and moral-ethical frames of reference, to create dissonance, to offer alternative perspectives to accepted social beliefs and culturally approved aspirations and to illuminate contemporary dilemmas. The work of Joss Whedon, the program's creator, has attracted considerable academic interest culminating in the formation of the Whedon Studies Association in 2009, to "further the study of Whedon and his associates" (Wilcox, 2009). Whedon's work has sustained its own academic journal since 2001 (Slayageonline) and continues to attract new scholars to conferences. We think that the kinds of complex moral dilemmas, sophisticated character development, reversal of stereotypes and audience expectations found in *BtVS* and the multi-layered referential nature of the text itself make this program more likely to surprise and stimulate audiences and to offer triggers for transformation than texts which are less complex and counter-cultural.

The final reason for using this particular television program for an examination of the transformative potential of television concerns its radical agenda. How someone will read a text, how they might read against the grain, or detect bias or stereotyping is, as we have acknowledged, unpredictable. It would seem reasonable to suggest, however, that a text offering an element of social critique is more likely to develop a degree of critical social awareness that can significantly alter a viewer's perspective than a more conservative piece. Many scholars have read *BtVS* as a progressive text. Indeed, Burr (2009) noted that its capacity to challenge values and assumptions has sometimes been restricted by censorship that has excised its more controversial elements. It has been noted for its representation of gender and power in relationships (Cocca, 2003; Jowett, 2005), for championing social outcasts (Wilcox, 2001) and for critiquing corporate capitalism (Wall & Zyrd, 2001) and the education system (Paule, 2004). As its director deliberately set out to overthrow stereotypes and to surprise the audience (Whedon, 1998), we might expect some aspects of the series to jolt people out of their established habits of mind.

### **Methodology and Analysis**

As the original purpose of the research was to understand the place of the television program in viewers' lives, the approach to data collection was phenomenological and interpretive. Appropriately for this approach the sample was small and homogenous; individuals approached were committed viewers, 'a closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant' (Smith & Osborne, 2008). Interviewees were found opportunistically by word of mouth and asked to recommend other viewers. There were 11 interviewees, aged between 24 and 51, eight women and three men, with a range of occupations including accounting administrator, community development worker and secretary. Interviews were semi-structured, offering opportunity for digression, so that

participants had “maximum opportunity to tell their own story” (Smith & Osborne, p.59). Interviewees were asked to talk about memorable episodes or scenes, characters they particularly liked, screen relationships they valued and whether/how they felt the series related to their own lives. Interviews continued as long as individuals wanted to discuss the series, generally about an hour.

The approach to analysis was interpretive. It sought to look in detail at participants’ accounts, and, as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), to code these inductively, noting patterns and themes, looking intuitively for sense and meaning, then clustering themes to create coherent connections. Themes were sought “across the entire data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81) so that following initial identification of themes there was a “verification mode” to “qualify or confirm the finding” (Huberman & Miles, 1998 p. 186). At the same time we acknowledge that “interpretation is an art; it is not formulaic or mechanical” (Denzin, 1998, p. 317) and indeed “interpretation is transformative. It illuminates, throws light upon an experience.” (p. 322). So, although the approach was thematic and inductive, and did not begin with a pre-existing template, codes and themes were inevitably influenced by Jarvis’s own frame of reference and the final interpretive framework was necessarily shaped by her pre-existing theoretical interests, including her interest in transformative learning.

Themes were organized into a framework that acknowledged the capacity of the arts to engender empathy and identification. Incidents were grouped into “resonance” and “otherness”. The category “resonance” recognizes that viewers may perceive strong similarities between the fictional world and their own. This can be transformative if viewers then reflect upon the way that the fictional characters engage with and manage these familiar situations. This may shift their own understanding of these situations. In these respects it can

change both their perception of themselves, so that they can imagine different ways in which they might interact with the world, and of the world itself. That is, it has potential to touch both psychological and sociocultural (Mezirow, 1991) dimensions of learning. “Resonance” included accounts from participants in which they:

- Recognized experiences, including life events and relationships, similar to their own
- Recognized character traits similar to their own or those of others they knew
- Noted resolutions, coping strategies or different perceptions relating to familiar problems or relationships
- Showed they understood a situation, relationship or themselves differently as a result of their viewing.

TV may also create identification with characters whose lives and circumstances differ markedly from the viewers’. The emotional investment this creates can develop viewers’ appreciation of the perspectives of those previously seen as outsiders. The category “Otherness” included accounts from participants in which they:

- Experienced something from the perspective of someone whose position (racial, social, personal, moral or political) was significantly different from theirs
- Experienced situations outside their normal experiences
- Reflected on unconscious/ hidden aspects of themselves
- Identified challenges to their perceptions of outsiders.

The report on findings is in two parts. The first offers a summary of features in the program that led to serious reflection. It shows the kinds of characters and situations that resonated strongly for viewers. It also shows how, almost paradoxically, this resonance led viewers to reflect on behavior and situations that were ‘other’, beyond their experience and in some instances, beyond the boundaries of what they had considered morally acceptable. The

second section consists of close readings of two interviews to illustrate in more detail the process of transformative learning through reflection on the program

### **Features that Engaged Viewers**

#### *Imagining and Rehearsing:*

Where individuals identified strongly with a character in an unfamiliar situation this triggered learning as they imagined coping in that context. One participant discussed the death of Buffy's mother:

I used to watch Buffy with a friend who lived nearby, we're both mad addicts (laughs) really, and it used to really affect us, and we'd talk about it for a while, and spent, after watching that particular episode we were both thinking 'Oh God, wouldn't it be awful', you know, if something happened to one of our parents, wouldn't that be awful, and we'd been *discussing* it, and what would you do

These friends used the program to explore a situation they had not experienced, but anticipated. Another participant mentioned the same episode, "still find it very upsetting to watch now. It makes you think what, how you'd feel if anything happened to your own mother." (Claire). Television is used as the basis for an imaginative act, helping them to prepare for one of life's difficult passages. They are dealing with a situation that resonates for them (they have parents and fear their death) but is unfamiliar (they have not yet encountered loss). It was not clear that this was necessarily transformative learning; it extended their existing meaning schemes rather than providing a whole new perspective. What it illustrates is how television can form the basis for serious discussion and can deepen and intensify awareness of common human experiences.

#### *Character Growth and Development: Emotion and Identification:*

Participants consistently identified the presence of long story arcs in each season and the opportunities this afforded for character development as key to their commitment to the series. “It’s more of like an intense storyline that . . . you understand the characters more” (Claire). They also valued character development from season to season and back stories that enabled them to understand how people came to be as they were. “It’s just the way the characters are built, the way we’ve all seen them grow” (Carl). The tropes of the horror genre, such as demon powers, superpowers and witchcraft acted as intensifiers for this – people matured and became more complicated and capable, but within this genre this was shown figuratively and dramatically. For example, Claire, speaking about Buffy’s friend, Willow, said “the character’s grown and, leading up to the end of season six, what she became, what she was capable of . . . she’s got the power to destroy the world!”

Some participants stated unequivocally that they identified with particular situations and characters, for example, Julie said, “very much empathizing with the characters as well. I was thinking ‘I’ve been there’ ”. Even when participants said they did not identify with the actual characters, they showed in their responses that they identified with their emotional experiences. Viewers used phrases such as “drifting into someone else’s world”, “you really start to care about the characters and what happens to them” (Jenny). The experience was an emotional, affective one: “it was really intense and you could really feel the, the sort of the pain, you know . . . it’s fiction, but it’s amazing how strongly you can feel about it really.”

The sense of being with the characters and developing with them was possibly the most strongly asserted reason for enjoying the program: “there was a definite feeling anything could happen to the characters and watching them go through changes was interesting, sometimes distressing, sometimes annoying” (Carl). Jenny, speaking about Buffy, said, “they portray how hard it is for her and some things people don’t understand and

sometimes she makes mistakes as well.” She went on to show she valued the multi-dimensional nature of the character and her capacity to surprise and puzzle the viewer: “very well developed, very three-dimensional. She wasn’t perfect, she whinged a lot about things, she worried how she looked, she was strong at the same time, so she had strengths, weaknesses, pros, cons, things you could like about her, things you could potentially dislike about her.” The potential people have to change was important, “it’s sort of the changing, changing your view towards him” (Carl, referring to the character, Spike). They reflected on the complexity of characters like Willow, as she wrestled with tragedy, and abused her own strengths in response to this: “Intensely good and intensely evil . . . Buffy’s backbone and Buffy’s emotional conscience” (Claire).

As a result of this engagement with changing and complex characters, respondents reported a deeper understanding of character and motivation. “All the motivations for why, why they were doing it and it was all very complicated and I thought that was really good, the way it wasn’t all cut and dried” (Julie). For example, Nancy discussed the character Faith, a rogue vampire slayer who carries out a number of atrocities on behalf of the town’s demon-mayor. Initially Nancy says she couldn’t identify with Faith’s murderous behavior, then reports how extensively she reflected on Faith’s motives “does she really know what she’s doing or is she doing it because she’s not been fully accepted and she wants somebody like Giles (Buffy’s watcher and mentor) as a father figure, so she goes to the mayor . . . he treated her well you know, so in her eyes there was nothing, nothing wrong with it.” She also talks about trying to recognize how difficult it would be for Faith to stop: “you, you’ve gone so far and you think well, you can’t bring yourself back out again now you really need somebody to help you.” She says “you can’t even begin to imagine what would’ve been going through her head”, yet imagining what is going on inside Faith’s head is exactly what Nancy is trying to do. In

saying the viewer cannot imagine it, she acknowledges that behavior that seems senseless and transgressive to an observer may make sense when seen from the perspective of the participant. The emotional identification with Faith would appear to have encouraged a cognitive change – a more inclusive understanding of individuals who are usually condemned. Viewing the series has encouraged an imaginative process that leads her to be less judgmental: “you think, you, nobody really knows what, what that’s done to you so they can’t really make judgment, you know?” Here we can see the beginnings of transformative learning; viewers reported being pained and puzzled by the behavior of favorite characters, but appreciated the intellectual and emotional challenge created by this complexity. Jenny stated that one thing that appealed to her was “the fact that as a viewer you weren’t quite sure as to whether they were actually doing the right thing . . . . I think they put that across very well, that everything has consequences and that it’s not always, you know, clear-cut and that.” These viewers of *BtVS* appreciated the huge challenges the characters encountered and began to reflect critically on the difficulties of making right choices and judging the actions of others.

*Reviewing Values: Utopian Longings for Friendship:*

The series appeared to encourage individuals to conceptualize the relationships they wanted. Brookfield (1991) claims that imagining alternatives promotes critical thinking that can be life changing. For example, viewers engaged strongly with the series’ central friendship group. To some extent this group functions as an alternative family (Jarvis and Burr, 2005; Burr and Jarvis, 2007). This provided viewers with a vehicle for talking about friendship.. “It’s the friendship they had as well, things you value in your own life” (Carl). Some felt part of this fictional group for a while and felt an intense longing for something similar in their own lives: “I dream about it sometimes, I’ve actually had dreams about being

in that gang, being one of the gang, you know . . . . I think it's just something that you'd, you'd always wished for, you know, to happen in your life, that you'd have these friends" (Nancy). The program enabled viewers to imagine the kind of relationships they wanted to have in their lives. How far this led to changes or understanding their own friendships differently was beyond the scope of the interviews. It is possible that the experience merely served to provide temporary respite from dissatisfaction with actual relationships. The point is that there is potential here to create transformation through imagining and reflecting on an ideal.

This summary of some features of the series that participants valued shows their considerable emotional involvement. They were engaged by the complex story-lines, because these gave characters the chance to develop and change. The fact that characters grew was cited as central to the viewers' pleasure. They also enjoyed the complexity of the characters, seeing the difficult choices they had to make and understanding the motives and circumstances that led to what might appear to be wrong or immoral decisions. Overall, the focus on character enabled viewers to participate in a morally complex universe; a fictional reality which did not pretend there were simple answers. They also valued the opportunity to experience difficult emotional situations vicariously. The series gave most viewers the opportunity to extend aspects of their own value base – particularly with regard to the importance of friendship and community. This summary shows that the series offers the potential for transforming habits of mind in a number of dimensions: the most obvious is the moral-ethical dimension, as viewers found their beliefs about right and wrong, and good and bad people challenged. Their psychological habits of mind were also being challenged, as they considered how they themselves might respond to particular situations and built ideals about friendship and social organization.

This overview does not claim to demonstrate the deep and sustained change that characterizes transformative learning, but does give an indication of the kinds of properties in a TV show which, because they engage viewers in dilemmas that sometimes challenge their lives and beliefs, could lead to transformative learning. Nor can the overview show fully how these challenges worked and prompted critical reflection. Examining longer sections of the interviews, below, does make it possible to demonstrate more fully how this process of disorientation stimulated critical reflection with transformative potential.

### **Case Studies**

*BtVS* presents many moral complexities (Loftis, 2009). Attractive, ‘good’ characters behave in morally disturbing ways. This engendered significant reflection as participants struggled to reconcile their existing values and beliefs with their affiliation to characters behaving in ways that contravened these. These elements of the interviews were often coded under “otherness” as participants discussed their feelings about characters who behaved in ways that put them outside the boundaries of socially acceptable behavior; characters who were not “like us”.

Spike, a central character, is a vampire with a long violent history, who has a romantic relationship with Buffy. Carl’s reflections on his feelings about Spike show how he sees Spike as profoundly ‘other’, yet identifies with aspects of his behavior; he admires and identifies with Buffy, but is disturbed by her relationship with Spike.

Spike and his relationship with Buffy, because initially I couldn’t get that relationship in my head. When Buffy came back from being dead I understand that the character was messed up, but the fact that she slept with Spike, Spike being a mass murderer, Ok he had the chip in his head, but him being a mass murderer and basically an out-and-out bastard . . . , I just thought “No, she

couldn't do, she wouldn't do that surely?" Even, no matter how desperate or messed up she was, not with the person..not with that kind of person. But then, erm, once the, I still never really had been able to get over that little hurdle in my head, but obviously it's happened and I didn't want to dismiss it, I obviously kept watching things to see where it would all go, and a spin-off from that event happening that I had such a hard time coping with in my own head, . . . after he'd got to his lowest point . . . he then decided to erm, well, I was going to say decided to try to be a better man, or to be more of a man that she wanted . . . the fact that he was trying to do that and the lengths he went to got my attention for two reasons. One being that obviously, if you're in a situation and you've seen somebody, you meet somebody and you think "Oh, they're gorgeous and I'd like to be with them" . . . you think, "Right, I've got to get their attention, I've got to try and get into their little circle of friends or chat her up" . . . and just the fact I've been there before . . . and tried to do things or portray myself in a certain way that I think may have got me into her little personal circle. And the lengths Spike went to to do that, quite metaphorical, which I think, so you get a soul, interested me. And the other reason it interested me . . . is that it really, you know it wasn't a selfless thing. You know, I sat there thinking he's not so much doing this for her benefit as for his, or is he? So you can read it both ways. So I can associate with that. . . . I still always think that person at some point was there ripping the throats out of babies, so I can never quite embrace him one hundred percent in my head. I love the character, he makes me laugh out loud, you know I think Marsters the actor who plays him is brilliant, but always at the back of my head would be that, "You, you did terrible things."

The language indicates the mental effort that goes into watching the program. “I had such a hard time coping with it my own head”. We think we can see a stage in transformation here. Mezirow examines how “transformations often follow some variation” of “phases of meaning becoming clarified” which include a “disorienting dilemma” followed by “self- examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame” (2000, p. 22). Carl’s existing meaning perspectives have been challenged by the relationship between characters, one of whom he characterizes as good and heroic, and one whom he views as utterly evil.

This causes him discomfort. He cannot just dismiss it because of his engagement with the series and Buffy herself “no she wouldn’t do that, surely”, but he hasn’t got to the point at which it is resolved and a new perspective has taken its place. The latter part of the extract shows him struggling with his own beliefs about human nature and whether character is fixed or not. He identifies with Spike presenting himself well to someone to whom he is attracted, but is struck by the metaphor of acquiring a new soul to do so. He can’t decide on a fundamental moral issue – whether reformation is a selfless or selfish act. In effect he is engaging with a profound philosophical dilemma concerning the nature of goodness. Can goodness or unselfishness ever genuinely be so, if embracing these makes us feel better? He is transforming his habits of mind with respect to ethics and morality but also with respect to his beliefs about himself. He is concerned that he might share characteristics with an “evil” person because he has been able to feel for him and identify with his motivation; in the end this challenges his dichotomous view of human nature.

In the second extract we see how Amanda identifies strongly with Buffy when Buffy is behaving in a way Amanda thinks is “other” – alien to everything she believes in, or believes she herself embodies:

To my surprise, I was quite, when I used to watch Buffy 5, I've always wanted to be able to fight like that, maybe there's a dark side to me I don't know about, and that quite surprised me because I'm not aggressive, I'm not a fighter, never, never fought, never wanted to hurt anybody in that way, wouldn't want to. . . . There's maybe a side of me I don't know, I don't know about, you might not want to! . . . . Yeah, it's a release, you know when she's kicking, I always think, it always reminds me of that beating and the man kicking that boy's head in and it's awful, 'cos I'm not aggressive at all. . . . I think we're all capable of something that is different to how we normally perceive ourselves, and that was quite an eye opener for me. It was almost like an out of body experience, thinking you know, this is not actually me, I'm a gentle catholic girl, you know! . . . . But I was speaking really from, you know, almost salivating, if anyone hurts my girls, then, if I hear of anyone attacking them or hurting them in any kind of way, there's a demon comes out in me and I know it's there and I think, I think it's there in everybody. Just press the right buttons, and that's sad, it's awful that really, isn't it, to admit to that.

Amanda seems to operate within a meaning perspective that rejects violence and only enables her to view herself positively if she believes, as she repeatedly asserts, that she is not violent. Yet the pleasure she experiences seeing Buffy hurt people makes her reflect on her own character, analyzing its contradictions and starting to find ways to accommodate a different sense of herself, one that is prepared to include violent feelings and defensive aggression. She talks about thinking she is another person when she enjoys Buffy's aggression, "this is not actually me". A phrase like "gentle catholic girl" suggests that her sense of herself has been constructed through her social and religious background; watching

*BtVS* challenges this. It challenges some of her socio-linguistic frames of reference with respect to gender; she admires Buffy and actually enjoys the violence, yet she doesn't believe girls should be violent. Her ability to identify with a small girl facing apparently stronger opponents and defeating them brings to the fore her own deep-rooted anger and frustration.

Amanda uses the series' metaphorical framework when she talks about having a "demon" in her. One feature of fiction that there is not space to explore fully is its capacity to produce concrete manifestations of unconscious or semi-conscious desires and anxieties. Dirx (2006) examines how developing an awareness of these and their significance can lead to profound transformations, arguing that, "when we take seriously the responsibility of developing a more conscious relationship with the unconscious dimensions of our being, we enter into a profoundly transformative, life-changing process" (p.19).

The horror genre is predicated on translating unconscious fears into physical threats and critics have examined this working in *BtVS* (Chandler, 2003; Wilcox, 2001). In this instance Amanda uses the metaphor to acknowledge a previously hidden, even denied, aspect of her own character. Her recognition of the "demon" within her is illustrative of a significant feature of learning through television, the potential it offers for viewers to identify with characters who are outsiders, living lives that are very different from their own – indeed this has been used as a deliberate pedagogical technique; Brown (2011) exposes his students to narrative films in which they encounter outsiders, so that engaging with these characters helps students re-assess their own world views, and Tisdell's (2008) research participants 'discussed the role of television or film in helping them expand their understanding of marginalized 'Others.' In the case of *BtVS*, this could often be seen through identification with the demons and vampires themselves, especially Spike and his suffering, but interviewees also mention identifying with other characters whose behavior seems socially or

morally transgressive. In this instance, , Amanda comes to identify with the characters who are on the outside, the demons, by recognizing that she shares some of the characteristics that have made them outsiders.

## **Conclusion**

The interviews indicated that the series has the potential to stimulate transformative learning and that there were some examples of changes that could be described as transformative.

Viewers were either engaged in a process of transformative learning or were experiencing a degree of engagement and challenge that made this a possibility. Viewing prompted critical reflection that challenged their sense of themselves and their beliefs about complex moral issues. As one viewer said, “I like something to actually think about, something that makes me think, either when I’m watching it or when it’s finished” (Malcolm). Pleasure and emotional engagement were central to this process. The writers and directors were pedagogues, presenting characters that grew and changed and facing viewers with complex moral dilemmas (Loftis, 2009). They created situations that challenged commonly held assumptions and drew on powerful symbolism to confront viewers with a range of unconscious or semi-conscious fears and desires.

These findings do not challenge the value of structured educational approaches to the media. It is possible to read fictions in ways that reinforce hegemony and confirm established ways of thinking. Watching TV can be anathema to transformative learning. Teachers can select and combine fictional encounters most likely to create learning for particular groups and offer activities to promote critical engagement and dialogue (Alexandrin, 2008; Guenther and Dees, 2000; Guy, 2007; Tisdell, 2007, 2008). This may require a degree of risk and courage, as Smith (2000) demonstrates in her description of using popular texts to challenge the intersection of racism and patriarchy. Teachers can work with groups to expose members

to new ways of reading and deconstructing popular fictions. We could readily imagine teaching sessions that build on the stimulus provided by the kind of episodes and themes that participants discussed, sessions that would provoke dialogue, and extend the making of critical connections. Indeed, scholars have examined ways in which *BtVS* specifically can be used to explore a range of themes (Kreider & Winchell, 2010). It was noticeable that the emotional and imaginative experience of viewing had created dissonance and discomfort, pain and pleasure. It led people to reflect on their views of themselves and the world. As teachers, though, we can see the lost potential. Viewing created little opportunity to consolidate and develop learning. For example, in the case of Amanda, there was considerable opportunity for deepening understanding of ways gender is constructed; opportunity to take the emotional disorientation and use it to challenge and rebuild cognitive frameworks. More generally, across the piece, viewers identified with those who were “other”, helping them to develop more inclusive habits of mind, but there was little evidence of in-depth critical analysis of the implications of this for excluded groups generally. The use of the texts in an educational context would have made it possible to consider the wider social and cultural implications of these issues, to raise questions about race and class, for example, in the context of the white, middle-class world of *BtVS*, and to consider how far the monsters and demons represent excluded groups. This would have made it possible for viewers to add conscious, cognitive understandings to those that were developing as a result of their emotional involvement.

Nevertheless, scope and funding for the study of TV fiction is limited, leaving transformative learning through popular fictions increasingly in the hands of creative individuals and teams: writers, directors, producers and others. Viewing looks likely to continue to be an important site of learning. As Wright (2007) concludes in her analysis of

the impact of the television series *The Avengers* on women's sense of themselves and the possibilities open to them, "As adult educators, we must pay attention to the powerful influence of the popular." (p.70).

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