Undead, Gothic, and Queer: The Allure of Buffy

by Pamela O'Donnell

Elena Levine & Lisa Parks, eds., ***UNDEAD TV: ESSAYS ON BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER***. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. 209p. bibl. index. notes. ISBN 978-0-8223-4043-0.

Rebecca Beirne, ed., ***TELEVISING QUEER WOMEN: A READER***, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 251p. bibl. index. notes. ISBN 0-230-60080-8.

Benjamin A. Brabon & Stéphanie Genz, eds., ***POSTFEMINIST GOTHIC: CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE***, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 189p. index. notes. ISBN 0-230-00542-X.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (*BtVS*) may well be the most analyzed television show in the history of the medium. Try to name another series that has its own academic conference or its own peer-reviewed journal.[1] A quick search of Amazon.com turns up more than a dozen scholarly volumes about the show — from the ground-breaking *Why Buffy Matters* to the soon-to-be-published *Buffy Goes Dark: Essays on the Final Two Seasons.* The editors of *Undead TV* rightly refer to this television series as "a cultural phenomenon that epitomizes trends in the production and reception of commercial television and offers provocative commentaries on matters of gender, sexuality, class, race, and age" (p.2). That people are still talking and writing about the show five years after the last original episode aired is a testament to its enduring appeal. Given the popularity of *BtVS*, it's hardly surprising that episodes or characters from the series are analyzed in each of the books reviewed here. And because each volume has its own defined discourse, readers have the opportunity to view Buffy as undead, gothic, and queer.

Fans of *BtVS* are well aware that death in the Buffyverse is rarely final. Characters are brought back to life, exist in other dimensions (where there may or may not be shrimp), and revisit the living in dreams. Buffy herself died twice in the course of the series. Perhaps more than any other television show, *BtVS* deserves to be called "undead TV," the title chosen by Elana Levine and Lisa Parks for their anthology of eight essays exploring the cultural impact of *BtVS* (p.3).

In the acknowledgements section of *Undead TV: Essays on Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Levine and Parks note that the idea for the collection began after a "Console-ing Passions" conference (see **http://www.cp.commarts.wisc.edu/home/index.htm**) at Notre Dame in 2000, three years before the *BtVS* series ended. In the seven years between the book's conception and publication, both the world and television changed — a lot — and the editors use the introduction to convince the reader that Buffy *still* matters. They discuss the "afterlife" of a television series, how it lives on in syndication (often global) and is perpetuated in DVD box sets, reissues, and merchandizing. The case of *BtVS* may be unique in that the show's narrative continues in graphic novel form in a series entitled *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Season 8* and in a new multi-player online video game. Alas, *Undead TV* was published before the debut of either the comic or the game, but the authors do make a convincing argument that "the structure of commercial television lends itself to the constant recovery of used, terminated, canceled, expired material for maximum return" (p.5). Can anyone say *Knight Rider*?

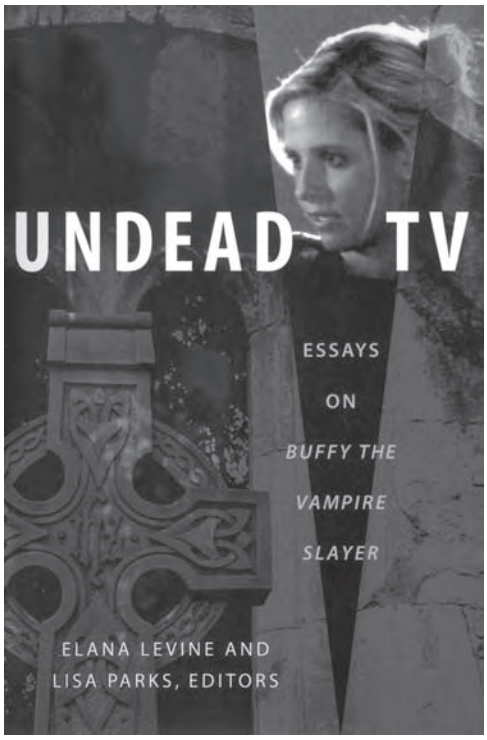
Because the introduction raises so many interesting points about *BtVS*'s afterlife — including how the show's move from the WB to UPN may have doomed the two "netlets" — it's frustrating to discover that very few of the essays use this as a point of departure for their analysis.[2] Indeed, more than half of the essays seem frozen in amber, failing to acknowledge anything after the show's fifth season. Not only do the authors rely on out-dated references (*Ally McBeal* — really?), but they also neglect to engage recent scholarship on the series or to talk about changes in television dissemination and reception. Despite these drawbacks, and the unmet expectations raised by the introduction, there is still much to praise in *Undead TV*.

The volume opens with an essay by Mary Celeste Kearney, who reports that the WB purposefully used programming that "targeted a multi-aged market whose members shared a 'youthful' sensibility," thereby making *BtVS*'s appeal more about attitude than about age (p.19). Susan Murray describes how film roles and advertising endorsements are often seen as extensions of the star image of young actresses such as Sarah Michelle Gellar, and how contemporary audiences, being excessively media-literate, expect

to encounter and decode intertextual references. Annette Hill and Ian Calcutt tackle the foreign distribution of *BtVS* and *Angel*; the shows, perceived by British broadcasters as genre suitable only for children, were edited for content, broadcast outside of primetime, and often pre-empted. Their essay catalogs how difficult it was for fans in the UK to watch the complete series and how these challenges colored their perception/reception. In a critical study of television criticism, Amelie Hastie's erudite essay explores "how popular texts such as Buffy help to drive a 'market demand' in scholarly production" and asks how researchers might "avoid falling into television's own traps of ephemerality, obsolescence and market demands" (pp.74–75).

Moving from production into content analysis, Cynthia Fuchs investigates the identity categories of youth and race in *BtVS* and the short-lived series *Dark Angel*, while Allison McCracken's essay explores "the construction of a new kind of masculinity" in the character of Angel, Buffy's vampire boyfriend (p.117). In an essay both delightful and insightful, she describes how the "highly penetrable" body of Angel opens the possibilities of "alternative sexual roles and practices" (p.125). McCracken's analysis carries through the final episodes of both series and traces how this new masculinity continues to be coded as queer in the spin-off *Angel* before the character regresses, assuming a more normative patriarchal role in the show's final seasons. Jason Middleton, in his essay on depictions of Buffy in the television show, in magazine coverage, and as a comic book heroine, analyzes the role of the male spectator.

The concluding essay in *Undead TV* is Levine's own, and she does an excellent job of positioning the series within the discourses of postfeminism and third-wave feminism. In brief, Levine believes that "in a post-feminist culture, responsibility for change shifts from an organized social movement to individuals" while "third-wave feminism remains invested in collective feminist activism and in the fight against a still powerful patriarchy" (p.170). By analyzing the narrative,



and in particular the characters of Buffy and Anya (both pre- and post-vengeance demon), the author makes a compelling case for the show's feminist agenda, noting that "by turning *her* power into *our* power, Buffy ends the series as a truly New Woman" (p.185).

Although the anthology *Undead TV* does unveil a subtext of queer desire surrounding the character of Angel, there is an *actual* text of queer desire — the relationship between Willow and Tara — that is more fully explored in *Televising Queer Women: A Reader*. In the introduction to this volume the editor Rebecca Beirne lays the groundwork for further exploration of the subject. As she observes,

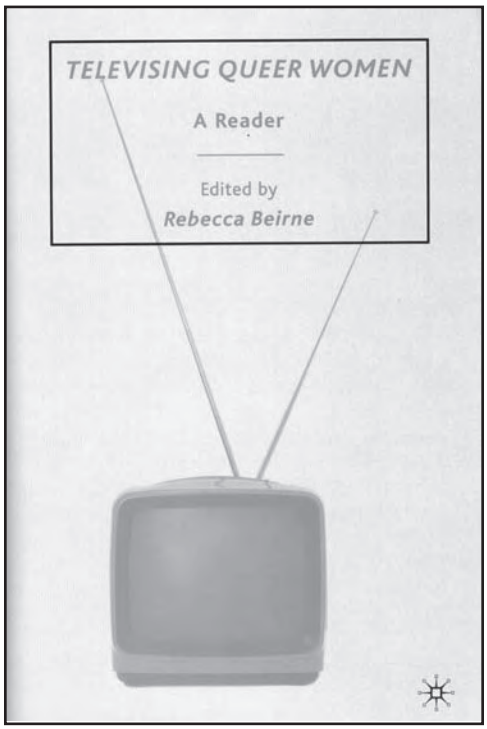
> Lesbian and bisexual women have a unique position in popular cultural representation. Simultaneously fetishized and ignored, desired and disparaged, they have frequently been represented in popular culture as either oversexed sirens or sexless creatures whose lesbian life warrants nary a moment of screentime. (p.4)

Beirne offers a brief history highlighting some of these problematic representations — from the lurid (*Police Woman*) to the comic (*Ellen* and *Roseanne*) to the daring (*Sugar Rush*). She also traces moments of early political activism that demanded and won more balanced depictions of queer women on the small screen. Beirne is the first to mention the website AfterEllen.com, a resource repeatedly referenced by authors in the collection for its "news, reviews and commentary on lesbian and bisexual women in entertainment." She concludes her introduction with a discussion of the scope of academic publishing, noting that queer scholarship has tended to focus on American and British shows and advocating that more attention be "paid to queer women's representation on television in the rest of the world" (pp.13–14). While this may be a subtle apology for a collection completely focused on American television shows, Beirne goes on to say that the purpose of this collection is to "acknowledge and gather together discussion of existing work to provide future scholars with a starting point for their research" (p.14).

The first essay in this collection is unique in that it discusses the televised personalities of Ellen DeGeneres, a — oh, let's just say it — "seminal" figure in the history of queer television. Unlike the other authors in this collection, Candace Moore tackles

the subject of an actual lesbian on TV, something quite different from a lesbian *character* on TV (who, as Kelly Kessler points out in her essay, is often portrayed by a straight actress). Moore examines the "varied performative rhetorics" that Ellen uses in multiple genres (sitcom, talk show, comedy special) and contexts (daytime, primetime, cable) to continually renegotiate/reinscribe her lesbian identity (p.20). In an essay that is balanced when it could have been prescriptive, Moore eventually concludes that "Ellen *performs* her queerness through her daily dances — illustrating both her control over what is expressed and her pleasure in expressing it" (p.30).

Kelly Kessler's essay, "Mommy's Got a Gal-Pal," discusses several made-for-television-movies with lesbian themes. Kessler provides detailed analysis of two movies about besieged lesbian mothers, *What Makes a Family?* with Brooke Shields and *Two Mothers for Zachary*, starring Valerie Bertinelli. Since both movies were based on actual events, she has the opportunity to compare the film versions of the characters to their real-world counterparts, finding that the two have little in common. In the end, she argues that by using "heterosexual stars to draw an audience, thereby linking the sympathetic lesbian mother to social norms of beauty, gender, and class…[these films] simultaneously dismiss and delegitimize divergent lesbianisms" (p.47).



Similarly, the tyranny of beauty and the male gaze are taken up by Tanya R. Cochran in her essay on the visual rhetoric of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Since this collection was published before Buffy herself had the opportunity to experience Sapphic delight, this essay instead focuses on the characters of "Wiccy" lovers Willow and Tara.[3] Cochran interrogates the image of 'lesbian' perpetuated by the *BtVS* series and delineates how photographs in men's magazines of the actresses who portray Willow and Tara, Alyson Hannigan and Amber Benson, complicate that representation. As she states, "I turn to theory to argue that neglecting the exchange of ideas among dissonant images, texts, and audiences denies the intricate interaction of cross-media images and texts, ignores fans' blurring of actor/character identities, and dilutes Whedon's feminist intentions" (p.50). In prose that gets no less convoluted, Cochran draws on the work of Vito Russo, Barthes and Habermas (among many others) to argue that the lack of clear visual markers in the depiction of Willow and Tara erases their lesbian visibility. At the same time, this invisible lesbianism allows the attractive young actresses to be tapped for seductive photo spreads in magazines such as *FHM* and *Stuff,* thereby revivifying the power of the heterosexual male gaze. As a result, the show's producer Joss Whedon becomes, according to Cochran, "a collaborator in the visual dilution of his own purportedly feminist visual text. Whedon is caught in the web of Willow and Tara's (in)visibility" (p.58). Illustrations from these photo spreads would have been helpful to the reader, but the author acknowledges in a footnote how difficult it is to acquire image rights. One finishes this essay with the nagging feeling that in the area of lesbian representation, the show's producers are damned if they resort to stereotypes and damned if they don't. But like Susan Murray in her essay in *Undead TV*, Cochran does important work in exploring the production of meaning in this increasingly omni-media environment.

In the second *BtVS* essay in *Televising Queer Women,* Cynthea Masson explores the rhetoric of questioning — be it locutionary, illocutionary, or perlocutionary — in Willow's various relationships and incarnations, from Vamp Willow to Dark Willow. As the author notes, "Willow is *Buffy*'s questioner: the one who, from her first scripted line to her last, uses questions as means of establishing and securing her relationships and a place of power within the Buffyverse" (p.66). In an illuminating account filled with dialogue from the series, Masson traces the use by various characters of language that underscores their actions and motivations. The author does an excellent job of explaining and applying rhetorical analysis — stressing both the power of language and that of silence. As Masson demonstrates, the show's commitment to interpretive space extends to the final scene of the series, in which Buffy, after being asked repeatedly what she now plans to do, "merely looks out at the landscape and smiles. She says nothing" (p.79).

In addition to the two essays on *BtVS*, this volume also features chapters on lesbian representation in the television series *ER, Queer as Folk, Sex*

in the City, and *The O.C.* Five of the fourteen essays however (more than a third of the book), deal with Showtime's lesbian drama *The L Word*. This may not be surprising, for as Marnie Pratt notes in her essay on audience response to the show, "what sets *The L Word* apart is not only the fact that the majority of its main characters are lesbians, but also that these characters' lives, relationships, and political or social issues are the focus of the series" (p.137). Pratt is troubled that the show "clearly appears to be under the same heteronormative conceptions of gender and beauty as most other aspects of popular culture," but finds hope in the responsiveness of the show's producers to the audience's call for more balanced and inclusive representation (p.142).

The constructs of femininity, or more specifically, "fem(me)ininity," are also the subject of Erin Douglas's essay, "Pink Heels, Dildos, and Erotic Play." Douglas argues that there are "moments in the series that show queer femininity," and that these moments demonstrate "that femininity does not signify normativity" (p.196). She quotes other respected theorists at length to support her position, but this tactic, oddly enough, makes her seem unsure of the authority of her own voice. That being said, her "theorizing the performance and performativity of fem(me)ininity" is an insightful addition to the field of queer studies (p.208).

Two of the essays on *The L Word* address the show's depictions of bisexuality. Jennifer Moorman, in her essay "Shades of Grey," catalogs the difficulty in representing bisexuality on screen since the gender of a character's current love interest works to define his or her sexual orientation as essentially heterosexual or homosexual. This difficulty is somewhat mitigated by the serial narrative of television, but *The L Word*, as Moorman notes, "keeps telling us that bisexuality is normal and valid, but its actual depiction of bisexuality remains unstable and conflicted" (p.171). While characters such as Alice and Jenny are sometimes portrayed as confused or immature, the author remains hopeful that their complex desires and motivations will continue to force the show's audience and writers to "embrace sexual difference and to depict sexuality as open and fluid" (p.176). Faye Davis, on the other hand, explores the power relations in the lesbian/bi community in "Paradigmatically Oppositional Representations." She posits that "lesbian sexual identity in *The L Word* is represented as settled and stable…[O]nly those who are bisexual appear to encounter any identity issue" (p.179). Moorman and Davis both discuss the political expediency of adopting an essentialist mode of representation — that sexual orientation is not a choice — and show how this position is complicated by the very nature of bisexuality. Davis goes on to explore the character of Shane, not as a bisexual but as the "unambiguous site for the lesbian part of the television market to identify with" (p.192). Some may disagree with her contention that

> [d]epictions of feminine lesbians are displayed in opposition to Shane's masculinized lesbian and provide a palatable and relatively normalized representation; meanwhile, Shane allows an explicit stereotype and point of identification for the lesbian community. (pp.192–193)

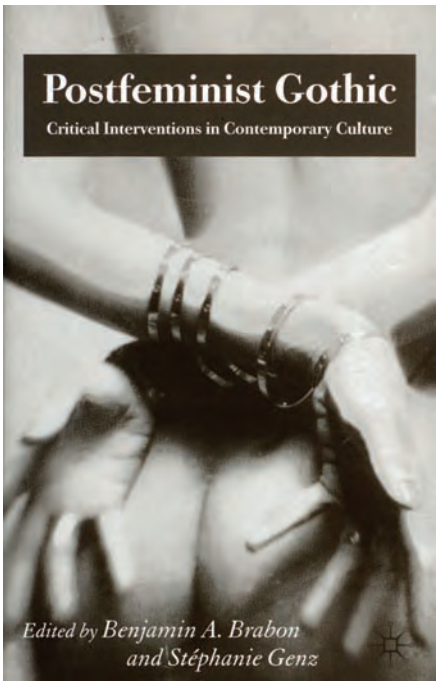
It seems equally reductive and essentialist to argue that a character depicted as sexually promiscuous and commitment-phobic would be the "point of identification" for the entire lesbian community. While not a lesbian, I have to admit that I find Shane the most compelling character in the show (perhaps *because* of her faux masculinity), and I believe she plays a similar role in the narrative as the character of Brian Kinney does in *Queer as Folk* — the unattainable object of desire.[4] Despite this area of contention, Davis does illuminate the power of polysemic texts, showing that series such as *The L Word* can be "read" in a variety of ways by a diverse audience.

Televising Queer Women: A Reader fulfills its editor's stated goal of bringing together contemporary criticism on the topic of lesbian/bisexual representation and serving as a point of departure for future study. Although the book is geared toward an academic audience, general readers will find most of the essays accessible, and the comprehensive index and bibliography are valuable tools for those interested in exploring the topic further. As noted previously, studies of contemporary popular culture can be hampered by the relevance and currency of the objects of analysis. In this instance, most of the shows discussed in the volume are off the air or in their final season. Given the breadth and depth of scholarship involved, however, this volume should continue to be viewed as a valuable resource.

The love of all things Buffy leads one to a completely different realm in the book *Postfeminist Gothic: Critical Interventions in Contemporary Culture.* Somewhat less accessible, this volume developed out of a special issue of the journal *Gothic Studies,* published by Manchester University Press. The book opens with an introduction by its editors, Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz, both of Napier University in Edinburgh, who spend nearly a dozen pages delineating the potential meanings of such descriptors as post-, feminist, postfeminist, Gothic, and even post-Gothic. And, in a move that should surprise no one familiar with

contemporary theoretical positioning, the editors eventually decide not to artificially limit their investigation by settling for any single definition. Instead, they admit that their "underlying aim in selecting the essays…has not been to secure the meaning of postfeminism, to establish it, if you like, as a locus of truth, but rather provide a space for debate where postfeminism remains open to interrogation" (p.3). It should be noted that unlike Levine, who delineated the differences between postfeminism and third-wave feminism in her essay in *Undead TV*, the authors in this collection choose to use the two terms interchangeably.

The introduction also offers useful background information for readers unfamiliar with Ellen Moer's original conception of "the Female Gothic" (a product of second-wave feminist criticism) and the subsequent rejection of this category by writers who found it guilty of "essentialism and universalism" (p.7). This leads the reader nicely into a description of the new discourse, "postfeminist Gothic," which the authors describe as a "contentious new category and critical realm that revitalizes Gothic and feminist criticism and invites new perspectives beyond the theories of the second wave and the Female Gothic" (p.8).



The introduction concludes with a brief description of each of the essays in the collection. With topics ranging from the Borg Queen to the spectral phallus, the chapters excavate the postfeminist Gothic in a wide variety of texts and media — film, television, fiction, and even verse drama. In one of these descriptions, however, there is a statement that seems to belie the editors' commitment to an anti-essentialist mindset. They write, "The *violence inherent in heterosexual relationships* [emphasis mine] is also taken up by Judith Halberstam's essay" (p.9). Despite this incongruous lapse, the editors and authors of this collection appear committed to investigating the intersections of postfeminist theory and the Gothic in a diverse range of texts.

Given that so much time is spent analyzing the nuances of postfeminist Gothic in the introduction, it is a bit disheartening for the reader to discover that every author in the collection feels compelled to revisit the debate and provide his or her own interpretation and positioning. This aside, all of the essays are thoughtful and well reasoned, although some may be more accessible to a general audience than others. Rhonda Wilcox (editor of the aforementioned *Why Buffy Matters*) does an excellent job of summarizing the characters and plot development of a different television series in her analysis of TNT's *Witchblade,* a show that even she can't help but describe as "overwrought" (p.45). Wilcox outlines the various Gothic elements of this fantasy series. About the decision of the show's writers to "re-boot" the series in the finale of season one by having time run backward, "to return to the first day of the story," Wilcox ascribes postfeminist motives to their rejection of "patriarchal narrative" (p.52).

The spectral phallus is showcased in one of the most thought-provoking essays in the collection, Benjamin A. Brabon's chapter on the postfeminist man as depicted in the films *Falling Down* (1992) and *Fight Club* (1999). As he says, "I argue that the crisis in masculinity witnessed in these films reflects the complex negotiation of man's position within contemporary society," because "the sadistic forces of patriarchal violence are no longer turned solely against women" (p.57). Since the postfeminist man now joins woman as a victim of patriarchy, it would have been interesting for Brabon to discuss what this new arrangement might mean for women — both those featured in the films and in society as a whole. His argument that "the female heroine cedes her position and role to the postfeminist man" remains convincing, however, and he successfully repositions these films as cultural markers of a time when the postfeminist man "is struggling to keep a grip on the spectral phallus" (p.66).

Speaking of phalluses, another movie that wouldn't at first glance be considered a postfeminist Gothic tale is, of course, *Bride of Chucky*. Judith Halberstam has written an informative (and entertaining) history of the neo-splatter genre and a "penetrating" analysis of this film in particular. Where else could one contemplate Chucky (a voodoo-enhanced, pedophile-soul containing, serial-killing child's toy) as a "lesbian phallus" — an "alternative site of erotogenic pleasure" (pp.36–37)? Those familiar with the film may not be surprised at Halberstam's assertion that its most horrifying prospect is that of heteronormativity, particularly since the titular bride is martyred giving birth to the seed of Chucky.

Since *BtVS* is the connecting theme among the three works under review here, an essay by Claire Knowles on the show's heroine and her shadow/nemesis, Drusilla, merits attention. In

"Sensibility Gone Mad," Knowles links the characters of Buffy and the vampire Drusilla to the Gothic fiction of Ann Radcliffe and the protofeminist writing of Mary Wollstonecraft. As she puts it, "One of the key elements that connects Radcliffe's and Wollstonecraft's writings is their simultaneous investment in, and yet interrogation of, the discourse of sensibility" (p.142). Knowles does a convincing job of positioning Buffy as someone who "embodies many of the typical elements required of a Radcliffean heroine of sensibility" — she is young, beautiful, blonde, watched over, and physically trapped by her destiny as a vampire slayer (p.146). Drusilla, on the other hand, represents "sensibility that cannot be governed by rationality" (p.151). Her madness is an excess of sensibility, a condition Wollstonecraft warns readers of in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Because *BtVS* seems so much a product of its time, Knowles's essay succeeds by underscoring the surprising connections between this contemporary text and eighteenth-century discourses of female empowerment (p.152).

Other chapters in *Postfeminist Gothic* include Luci Armitt's discussion of contemporary women's writing (*After You'd Gone*, by Maggie O'Farrell; *Case Histories*, by Kate Atkinson; *Fingersmith* by Sarah Waters); an analysis of postfeminist Cinderellas by Stéphanie Genz; a comparison of the two film versions of *The Stepford Wives* by Anne Williams; Diane Long Hoeveler's dissection of the *Candyman*; an investigation of postcolonial and postfeminist Gothic in the writings of Nalo Hopkinson by Gina Wisker; Donna Heiland's analysis of the verse drama *Beatrice Chancy*; and Linda Dryden's comparison of the Borg Queen in *Star Trek* to Ayesha, the archetypal Gothic villainess of *She*, H. Rider Haggard's Victorian-era novel.

The final essay in the collection, by Fred Botting, may be the most challenging for those uninitiated into the oft-tortured prose of contemporary theory. Botting may also be the most troubled by the construct of postfeminism. Early in the essay he notes,

> "Post," for all the illusions of a progressive movement (beyond the limitations of modernity or feminism) that its dismissive gesture implies, seems to sanction only a disavowal that liberates a shift to an ateleological circulation of banal monstrosities, commodified presentations, consumerist desires evacuated and exhausted by the entrepreneurial creation of hybrid novelties. (p.172)

On that happy note, Botting draws on a host of French theorists, including Deleuze and Guattari, Baudrillard, Irigaray, Lacan, and Lyotard, in his essay, which eventually analyzes the four *Alien* films. He notes that by the final film, *Alien Resurrection*, "posthuman and post-feminist seem fully realized…[T]he categories of human and gender appear obsolete, along with all the ideological bases — nature, bodies, feelings, ideals — that support them" (p.181). His optimism unabated, he concedes in his conclusion that "[h]umans in the *Alien* series are almost exclusively unappealing. Morally if not physically deformed, they are little more than meat by-products, detritus, waste: post-modernism, post-feminism, post-humanism, post-gothic — a line of shite" (p.183).

Taken as a whole, *Postfeminist Gothic* deserves an audience, not only for its interrogation of varied texts that resonate with contemporary audiences, but also for the important work it does in creating a space within which theory can be applied and debated. Or, to use the language of the editors, this volume engages and foregrounds "the contradictions, ambiguities, and multiplicities involved in these critical positionings" (p.12). And, as befits a scholarly volume, all of the essays include notes and a list of works cited.

Each of the volumes under review helps illuminate discourses of identity, feminism, power, capitalism, etc., as reflected in popular culture. As products of a specific time and place, the anthologies help readers identify key characteristics of their own position and subjectivity within these larger discourses. They are also valuable contributions to their respective disciplines and are certainly worthy additions to individual and library collections. And I think we can all agree with Giles, tweedy librarian and Buffy's watcher, when he says, "I still prefer a good book."[5]

Notes

1. *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* (ISSN 1546-9212) has already published twenty-six issues at **http://slayageonline.com**.
2. The Warner Bros. network (the WB) and United Paramount (UPN) merged to become the CW network in 2006; see **http://articles.latimes.com/2006/jan/29/business/fi-buffy29**.
3. In the comic book series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Season Eight*, Issue 12, "Wolves at the Gate, Part 1."
4. See **http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZSzzgg-Nvg**.
5. *BtVS,* "I Robot, You Jane," Season 1, Episode 8.

[*Pamela O'Donnell is an academic librarian at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She attended Lawrence University (B.A., Art History and English, 1985) and the University of Wisconsin–Madison (M.A., Library and Information Studies, 2002; M.A., Communication Arts–Media & Cultural Studies, 2003).*]