

BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER [1997]

Arthur Taussig

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Buffy (Kristy Swanson), a "totally" vacuous high-school cheer leader, finds out from Merrick (Donald Sutherland), an ancient "trainer," that she has inherited the role of vampire slayer. At first refusing Merrick, she ultimately abandons her valley-girl ways and begins training and killing vampires. She finds her previously interesting high-school friends vacuous and looks to an outsider, Pike (Luke Perry), for friendship. After confronting and killing Lothos (Rutger Hauer), the vampire leader, at the high school dance, she goes off with Pike on his motorcycle.

Buffy is a fun film, but a frustrating one because it could have been so much better. This film is a post-Ninja Turtles remake of Hammer's *Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter* [1974], not in and of itself a bad thing.

While the plot of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is pretty thin and mostly fluff, its heart is in the right place. And it does bring up some challenging issues. First, *Buffy* is a critique of contemporary teenage social values. Second, it extends and amplifies the newly fashionable idea of a female hero. And, of course, it is a vampire film. If *Buffy* had addressed each area individually, it probably would have succeeded. But combining these at the psychological and mythological levels ultimately dooms *Buffy* to box-office failure. Unfortunately, contemporary audiences want their issues simplified, not made more complex. Let us look at each aspect.

Taking its cue from previous teenage social critique films like *Heathers* [1989] or *Pump Up the Volume* [1990], of which *Buffy* is a mildly anemic cousin, this film takes place in a land where MTV and fast-food turns teenage minds into putty – often Silly Putty. From Guys and Dolls to Vals and Malls. While the jokes about the vacuousness of these teens are really quite fun – “The ozone layer,” squeals Buffy, “we gotta get rid of that.” – any comedy worth its writers has a serious side too. One of the weightier propositions is that Buffy and her cohorts are vacuous because they lack reasonable adult role models. The adults are as air-headed as their kids. Buffy's mother is more interested in her expensive watch running slow than what her daughter was doing in all hours of the night. The school principal, trying to relive his 1960s experiences, comes across as both a bore and a fool. The basketball coach is not reliving the 60s, he never left them – much to the complete consternation of his students. Buffy's father is such a non-entity that I am sure he appeared in the film only because I saw him mentioned in the credits. But all this changes once a reasonable adult appears – Merrick, the ancient trainer of vampire hunters.

As soon as Merrick (the only non-vampire adult of any substance) comes on the scene, he becomes a substitute father, showing concern, helping Buffy with her problems, and listening to her. Buffy slowly evolves from a self-centered, born-to-shop mall addict to a citizen of a universe expanded to contain social concerns of the broadest scope. While I realize this is a very simplistic, single-issue solution to a very complex problem, I cannot disagree that it addresses at least in part the problem of teens enmeshed in narcissism. Thus, Buffy simultaneously becomes a female hero and a vampire slayer.

Buffy uses many aspects of the mythological "Hero's Quest" formula. Merrick, as I have pointed out, functions at the social level, but in the mythological sense he is the Wise Old Man helping the Hero on the mythic questing journey: Merrick is to Buffy what Merlin is to the young Arthur, or what Obi Wan Kenobi is to Luke Skywalker. In this clever way *Buffy* uses a traditional mythological figure as social commentary. Combining different levels of subtext in this way to fulfill contemporary needs is an admirable extension of traditional myth. While *Buffy* succeeds with the secondary figure of Merrick, it fails on this score with the central and most important figure – Buffy herself.

Since *Alien* [1979], it has become politically correct for a woman to play the traditional male hero role. Unfortunately, women cannot simply substitute for men in what has, for centuries of folk mythology and for decades of movie mythology, been a male role. A female hero must be more than simply a woman in man's clothing, a woman with excess testosterone, like in *Red Sonja* [1985] where Brigitte Nielsen plays a muscle-bound Conan-ette with delightful silliness, or *Aliens* [1986] with Sigourney Weaver's respectable imitation of a World War II John Wayne figure recruited to lead the Marines to victory. The real challenge is to make a female hero not just as heroic, but as psychologically significant, as meritorious of our support, and as mythologically connected as the male heroes we have been seeing for so long – and still make her uniquely female. *Buffy*, with tongue firmly in cheek, makes an interesting and daring step in that direction: using Buffy's menstrual cramps as an "early warning device" to detect vampires is perhaps the cleverest social/sexual comment in the film. We rarely see menstruation even mentioned in film, and if so, it is always in a negative context. It brings to mind the most common talk-show objection to a female president, "What happens if a crisis occurs and she's having her period?" Well, *Buffy* has an interesting answer: her period makes her more, not less, competent – and certainly more competent than any man in the same situation. If only the writers could have discovered more female attributes that could have been made heroic, *Buffy* would have worked better.

Where *Buffy* breaks down worst is in the foundation of all myth-based films – the villain. It is on the basis of the villains that we judge our heroes. A really good villain is unique: he or she is the best possible person to bring to the surface previously hidden heroism and, at the same time, force the hero to face previously unquestioned aspects of the self and/or the society. The more appropriate the villain, the more the hero is forced to look inside and search internal values to find solutions. The larger the villain, the greater the battle, both internal and external, and the more the hero learns as a consequence of the

adventure. Here *Buffy* fails in three major areas: the hero/villain connection is weak, the final confrontation is flat, and the final battle leads to no gain in self-knowledge.

The closer the relation between the hero and the villain, the more emotional drive the film will have and the more heroic will be the conflict. The detective is a good example. If the budding hero is trying to find a criminal that is unknown to him or her, then it is simply a hunt. But if the detective is personally involved – relative, friend, lover – then a whole host of moral and ethical questions arise that may be even more difficult and more interesting to solve than the crime itself. TV detective shows are weak because there can be little personal involvement, for even in a short 26-week run you quickly run out of close friends, family, or lovers. In the better detective movies, there is often a strong, personal involvement. Consider, for instance *Marnie* [1964] (wife), *Shadow of a Doubt* [1943] (beloved uncle), *The Thin Man* [1934] (a close friend), *The Maltese Falcon* [1941] (lover), or *Basic Instinct* [1991] (all lovers), *Chinatown* [1974] (lover's father), and *The Big Sleep* [1946] (lover and her sister). Here *Buffy* blows it again, for Buffy and Lothos never really meet, never get to know each other, never discuss values, and never reveal their differences. Thus, their conflict is very weak and does not drive the film forward as it should. What a different film it would have been had Buffy discovered (a la Luke Skywalker) that Lothos was, for instance, her father all along.

Another difficulty is that, in addition to having an impersonal villain, *Buffy* also has a villain that is morally superior to the hero. The positive values are ascribed to the enemy, thus the ancient and cultured world of the vampires is far more attractive than the empty world of the contemporary teens – and this works against the film. Yet the film insists we think Lothos and his ilk evil. If Lothos and his crew could upset the valley girl playhouse with a bite or two, then my feeling is: let them chomp away.

Furthermore, a good villain must be more than just related to the hero in the everyday, surface world, there must be internal, psychological, and symbolic connections too. The best villains are external projections of the hero's Shadow – that portion of the psyche the hero would least admit, that portion he or she would least like to face. For example, we can be certain that within James Bond, the dutiful, compulsively neat, and mostly unimaginative civil servant, lurks an unrecognized flamboyant, creative, and avaricious ego maniac like Goldfinger. Is Lothos Buffy's Shadow? Sure. Lothos represents everything she does not like in the outside world and all that she denies within herself. Lothos is cultured and experienced while Buffy is vacuous and naive. Lothos is the caring leader of a large community; Buffy is simply out for herself. Thus, it seems that he will be a good Shadow/enemy. But problems arise as soon as Merrick takes Buffy under his wing and begins training her. She becomes more and more like Lothos: introspective, involved with a community, aware of values beyond herself, and so on. And as this happens, Lothos becomes less and less an appropriate enemy. By the final confrontation, they both have the same values: they think the teenage world is vacuous and worthless. In many ways Lothos has better plans for the community than Buffy. He wants to turn them into vampires – at least that's something. Buffy, while rejecting her classmates, does not know what to do for them and in the end simply leaves with her boyfriend. The community about which she and the film supposedly care so much about

is left unchanged and without hope. Since Buffy's own changes have already taken place under Merrick's tutelage, she learns nothing from her battle with Lothos. But this psychological gaff is only one way in which the ending of *Buffy* is unsatisfactory.

To add to the disappointment, *Buffy* fails to realize that the filmic hero has changed over the past decade in terms of the final battle myth. In *Buffy*, all the build-up comes to nothing in a flat final battle. These days you can't simply have the hero stab the villain once and it's over! All fantasy mythical quest films since Brian DePalma's *Carrie* [1976] have a resurrecting villain, that is, the villain must be killed several times and each time the fight escalates to new heights. Good examples of this change in the basic hero myth are *Terminator* [1984] and *Aliens* [1986]. By omitting the escalating final battle, *Buffy* fails to bring its female hero into the mythological class of heroes developed by previous films (on which *Buffy* depends so heavily). Here the film guts itself. Gone is any possibility of empowering the political statements it has been struggling to make with a mythological foundation.

Another important aspect of *Buffy* is that it is a vampire film. Most horror films (as distinguished from science fiction films), especially those with monsters, address adolescents (who, of course, can be of any age). This is true of the *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* cycles – and *Buffy* is no exception. These films are often metaphors for what concerns teenagers most: puberty and its associated sexual confusions. Consider Frankenstein's Monster. He is created without the involvement of woman. He's put together from mismatched pieces, he's too big for his clothes, he's clumsy, he lacks communication skills, he keeps knocking things and people over, everybody is against him, no one understands him. In the end, all he really wants is a girlfriend but is terribly confused as to how to go about it. Here is the perfect picture of a teenager passing through the rigors of puberty! I wonder how many adolescent minds echo Dracula's famous statement, "To die, to be really dead – that must be glorious. . . There are far worse things awaiting man than death." *Dracula's* concerns are closely related to those of Frankenstein's Monster. Dracula, too, represents sexual awakening. In his attack, Dracula must get close enough to his (primarily female) victims to make physical contact. He does this through charm, wit, good looks, and impeccable clothes – in essence, he seduces them. Afterward, his victims lay drained – literally and figuratively – in a good imitation of post-orgasmic bliss. The vampire's "kiss" is a combination of misplaced penetration and misplaced oral sex; death and orgasm are confused (not terribly off the mark, actually. In French, an orgasm is called *le petite mort* – "the little death"). Preying on young women, he causes them, often against their will, to become sexual – vamps. Just as a boy's unconscious confusions about the details of sex and birth are represented in the Frankenstein cycle, so the Dracula films represent a young woman's unconscious confusions about sex.

Another problem with *Buffy* is that eroticism has always been a subtext in the Dracula cycle. This was finally brought to the surface in America in 1979 with John Badham's *Dracula* with John Languella in the title role. While teenagers have been vampires since the 50s with *I Was a Teenage Vampire* [1957], a recent contribution with contemporary hippie vampires, *Near Dark* [1987], was stylishly directed by Kathryn

Bigelow. The combination of horror and comedy was perhaps best done in the forties with *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* [1948] where Bela Lugosi as Dracula plans to transplant Lou's brain (?) into Frankenstein's Monster. It works because the monsters play it straight all the way through. And this is where *Buffy* breaks down: the monster begins straight and then, about halfway through, begins hamming it up and competing for laughs with the comic leads.

Some of the sexuality of vampire genre is missing in *Buffy*. For instance, all the traditional apotropaic, methods of turning away evil, ways a Vampire can be stopped have their everyday, real-life equivalent of being sex preventatives. Consider the comic possibilities: crosses bring up religious guilt, sunlight erases connubial darkness, garlic on one's breath is a gross-out.

Since the Vampire and the Monster film cycles treat complementary sides of the same problem, we would expect a strong relation between the two. In fact, there is one: whenever a Frankenstein-type film is released, Dracula is sure to follow. This began with the original *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, both released in 1931. Almost coincident with *Buffy*, we were subjected to *Universal Soldier* [1992] in which two dead Vietnam soldiers are brought back to life to do the bidding of an evil scientist. One gets involved with a woman and is cured of the evil inherent in men giving birth to men. A nice twist on the Frankenstein theme, but a lousy film. The month after *Buffy*, we have *Death Becomes Her* [1992], another film about the dead being unnaturally brought back to life and cared for by a man, another nice twist on Frankenstein (and a much better film). A month before *Buffy* we had *Batman Returns* [1992], a film that has both a vampire (Max Shreck) and a resurrected dead (Cat Woman). Thus, within a few months, we have two vampire films and two Frankenstein-related films. This is strong evidence that the public, especially the pubescent public (adults included), unconsciously demands *both* archetypal statements: the confusions of male maturation and the confusions of female maturation.

And in dealing with the sexuality inherent in the Vampire myth, *Buffy* fails again. While vampires abound, we never see anyone bitten. The "biting scene" has always been one of the high points of the vampire genre: the approach, the hypnotic spell, the touch, the relaxation, the submission, the penetration, the sucking, the exhaustion – the sex! *Buffy* actually seems frightened of sexuality. If anything, the symbolic messages it sends are anti-sexual: all the vampire stakings are quick and clean, almost perfunctory. No one (neither the characters by virtue of the writing nor the audience by virtue of the photography) takes any pleasure or delight in these penetrations. Amblin's right arm is torn off in symbolic castration (or perhaps as a punishment for masturbation?). So here again *Buffy* fails to resolve the problem of using conflicting myths. The film does not manage to adequately combine socially conscious messages of restrained sexuality with the rampant sexuality of the vampire tradition.

Buffy's failures are an almost textbook example of what happens when film makers employ mythologies and psychologies to strengthen their film but do not consider deeply enough their history, meaning and function. For instance, using a female hero is politically correct these days. However, having a female hero in a vampire film, thus

combining these two very powerful myths, is very difficult and leads to certain conflicts and difficulties. The vampire story, developed in numerous films for the past six decades, is already rife with sexuality in the form of men awakening women to sex. Thus, women are the receivers in this mythology. On the other hand, the hero's quest myth requires the hero (male or female) to be the doer rather than the receiver. You can see that there are some basic conflicts here that require a very clever solution. Unfortunately, *Buffy* is not up to the task.

Directed by Fran Rubel Kazui. Produced by Kaz Kazui and Howard Rosenman. Written by Joss Whedon. Buffy: Kristy Swanson; Merrick: Donald Sutherland; Lothos: Rutger Hauer; Pike: Luke Perry; Amblin: Paul Rubens. Released 1992 by Twentieth Century Fox.

Ref: Paul Barber. *Vampires, Burial and Death: Folklore and Reality*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1988.