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Feminism Without Men
Feminist media studies in a post-feminist age

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Post-ing feminism

The terms "feminism" and "post-feminism" are widely used both in the media and in media studies, yet their meaning is difficult to pin down. As Amanda Lotz writes:

> Confusion and contradiction mark understandings of feminism in US popular culture at the turn of the 21st century. Surveying the terrain of both feminist theory and popular discussions of feminism, we seem to have entered an alternate language universe where words can simultaneously connote a meaning and its opposite.

> (Lotz, 2001: 105)

This article considers how this confusion and contradiction impact upon feminist media studies, focusing on the ways in which "post-feminism" features in these debates. The final section works through these issues in relation to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and feminist criticism of the show.

At the outset, a definition of terms must be provided, although this is no easy task. Indeed, a quick perusal of any book dealing with feminist theory provides an array of feminism*s*: liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical or revolutionary feminism, lesbian feminism, black feminism, postmodern feminism, first, second or third wave feminisms to name just a few. Clearly, these feminisms are defined less by commonality than by difference – of membership, generation, allegiance with other political movements, modes of organisation and relationship to the academy – but they do share a common recognition of gendered inequality and a determination to change that reality. Or, as bell hooks (2000: 1) puts it: "feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression." So, until sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression have been consigned to the dustbin of history, there will be a need for feminism. In this context, what can "post-feminism" offer?

If defining feminism is complicated, then defining post-feminism is even more so, requiring a definition both of the feminism to be "post-ed" and of the "post-ing" itself. The feminism most often at stake here is second-wave feminism, which, in both the UK and US, can be dated to the development of the women's liberation movement in the late-1960s. Many contemporary writers – whether they define themselves as post-feminist or not – characterise the WLM as a consensus-based political movement, noting the movement's rejection of conventional modes of femininity and its assumption of a universalised feminist sisterhood (e.g. Brooks, 1997; Hollows, 2000). There is a certain amount of truth in this characterisation. There was (and still is) a tension between feminism and femininity that alienated many women, and the 1960s-70s movement was rightly criticised – particularly by women-of-colour, lesbians and working-class women – for ignoring structural differences between women in the often naïve conception of "sisterhood" (e.g. Carby, 1982; hooks, 1982). However, it is not true that the second wave completely failed to recognise difference (Richardson, 1996). In the British context, for example, debates at the National Women's Liberation Movement conferences held between 1971–78 repeatedly foregrounded women's different positions of privilege in relation to regional, class and sexual identities. Difference, here, was not simply an issue for theory (though it *was* an issue for theory), but related to the organisation and priorities of the movement itself. At the regional and local level, groups organised around single issues (including reproductive rights, wages for housework and violence against women) or sought to bring women together on the basis of commonality *and* difference, in relation, for example, to racial, ethnic or national identities, class, sexuality or experience of motherhood.[1]

However, what is perhaps most worrying about the (re-)construction of the second wave as a period of consensus is the way this functions to take the movement out of feminism or to equate movement with the "post" era (see Brooks, 1997). Feminism's practices have never remained static but have developed and responded to change, both in the contemporary period and in feminism's first-wave (see Littlewood, 2004: 149–50). Acknowledging difference, then, is not to "post" feminism, but to *do* feminism. As hooks (2000: 58) argues:

> There has been no contemporary movement for social justice where individual participants engaged in the dialectical exchange that occurred among feminist thinkers about race which led to the re-thinking of much feminist theory and practice. The fact that participants in the feminist movement could face critique and challenge while still remaining wholeheartedly committed to a vision of justice, of liberation, is a testament to the movement's strength and power. It shows us that no matter how misguided feminist thinkers have been in the past, the will to change, the will to create the context for struggle and liberation, remains stronger than the need to hold on to wrong beliefs and assumptions.

The understanding of feminism upon which post-feminism relies is, therefore, flawed. To be clear, this is not to argue that there is one authentic feminism that post-feminism has simply mis-understood. Rather, it is to point to the very multiplicity of

feminisms – within as well as outside of the second wave – and the inherent difficulty of attempting to fix feminism in order to "post" it.

The meaning of the "post" in post-feminism also requires consideration. Broadly speaking, there are three overlapping ways in which the term is used – to imply a periodisation, a rejection or a development of second-wave feminism – and I will briefly consider each of these, reflecting on the way these meanings are constructed in popular representations and by feminist media critics. It should also be noted, however, that I am – of necessity – glossing over important national and disciplinary differences in the usage of the term (Lotz, 2001: 112). Partly, this is a practical decision – mapping the terrain is already complicated enough and my aim is to give a broad overview of debates rather than a strictly comprehensive account – but it is also an acknowledgement that the ways in which discourses about (post-)feminism circulate, within media studies and within the media, are not bound by national or disciplinary boundaries even as they may exhibit national or disciplinary peculiarities.

Periodising feminism

In implying a periodisation, post-feminism speaks of a time *after* feminism.

As Sarah Projansky (2001: 70) notes, the death of (second-wave) feminism has been regularly proclaimed in the media since the early 1980s. The reasons given for its passing are two-fold: either feminism's successes have rendered the movement obsolete because women now have equality; or, feminism's failures have rendered the movement obsolete in demonstrating the absurdity of feminist demands and the intractability of material differences based on gender. However, to go back a step, the very existence of feminism's second wave depends upon a first wave (usually associated with the struggle for suffrage). To the extent that it ignores this legacy and reduces all feminisms to one feminist moment (in the late 1960s-1970s), post-feminism is profoundly ahistorical (Brunsdon, 1997: 102).

Moreover, proclaiming the "death" of feminism in this way depends upon an assumption that feminism's movement is a linear one. This is difficult to sustain, not least because so much feminist work has to be continually rediscovered by new generations (Spender, 1982). As a result, constructing a feminist lineage is fraught with difficulty. For example, Ann Brooks' (1997) attempt to fix writers and ideas within a chronology culminating in post-feminism leads her to describe Ann Kaplan's work of the early 1980s as "pre-postfeminist" and Teresa de Lauretis' work of the same period as "early postfeminist". Both of these designations imply that there is a moment, in time as well as in theory, before which it is not possible to talk of post-feminism and after which it is not possible to talk about feminism without qualification (hence, "pre-postfeminism" rather than simply "feminism"). Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (1997: 4), attempt to fix their moment even more precisely, defining feminists born between 1963–74 as third wavers. Clearly, the history of feminist theory and practice is important. However, it is difficult to see how this kind of fixing of pre-feminist, feminist, post-feminist *moments* is useful on a theoretical, political or even on a personal, level. After all, how many of us experience feminism in this way?

To give a personal example: my birthdate places me within Heywood and Drake's third wave and my teenage years were clearly shaped by the gains of the second wave, but I only encountered feminist activism and theory as a young adult in the academy. This academic encounter – which privileged the texts and theories of the second wave – led to my involvement with feminist organisations working to challenge male violence and support women survivors, an on-going involvement that feeds into my academic writing and thinking about feminism and the media. How I "do" feminism (and how I do feminist media criticism) therefore continues to shift as I encounter new ideas, practices and challenges and as – through my academic work – I encounter old ideas, practices and challenges that are, nevertheless, new to me. I am continually learning about feminism's present and its history, and that conjunction shapes the kind of feminism I "do". But it also makes the need to fix and precisely define that feminism impossible and rather redundant. On a broader scale, the intellectual effort to fix and define feminism(s) is often counter-productive in that it makes feminism and feminists (not sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression) the subject of our criticism.

One result of this within feminist media studies is that we have numerous studies that explore the "feminism" of women-centred media texts, but very little work that examines the daily playing out of gender relations in non-feminist or male-centred shows. "Post-feminism" has been a key concept in much of this scholarship since the early 1990s (Lotz, 2001). Charlotte Brunsdon (1997: 81–102), for example, uses the term in an essay on *Working Girl* (Nichols, 1987) and *Pretty Woman* (Marshall, 1990) to signal how these films are formed by, yet disavow, feminism. She argues that the female protagonists have a specific relation to femininity, being neither trapped in femininity (pre-feminist), nor rejecting of it (feminist), but, rather, using it to their own advantage in the workplace and the bedroom. Whilst the heroines' uses of femininity often look decidedly pre-feminist, their desires and aspirations – for career advancement, equality in interpersonal relationships, financial independence and sexual satisfaction – are expressed in a vocabulary that is historically specific in its debt to feminism. It is precisely this combination of traditional femininity with the gains of second-wave feminism that many cultural critics – both within and outside of the academy – have labelled post-feminist.

For these critics, post-feminism is not a movement or theory, but a way of acknowledging the complex relationship to feminism exhibited in mainstream cultural texts and, indeed, the term is sometimes used as though it is synonymous with popular feminism. It is the apparent tension between feminism and femininity that is central here and, as a result, a majority of this work is concerned with women and girls. So, for example, we have numerous studies addressing the (post-)feminist attributes of Madonna (Schwichtenberg, 1993), *Sex and the City* (Arthurs, 2003; Kim, 2001; Henry, 2004), *Ally McBeal* (Moseley and Read, 2002; Kim, 2001) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Owen, 1999; Daugherty, 2002; Vint, 2002), to name just a few of the most popular topics. Of course, it is not incidental that these texts/ performers have also become central to popular debates about feminism, from the much-discussed *Time* cover (June 29, 1998) that used Ally McBeal to symbolise the death of feminism, to debates in the quality press about whether Madonna/Carrie/ Ally/Buffy et al. can be defined as "feminist". As Moseley and Read (2002) convincingly argue, it is important for feminist cultural critics to engage with and interrogate these popular (post-)feminisms. However, my concern is that we allow the

popular debate to set the parameters of our own study. Thus, the emphasis of much of this work is on women (critics) judging women (performers, characters) on behalf of a third group of women (viewers, fans, consumers) who look to the media for suitable role models.

In discussing the suitability of these characters as role models for (other) women, it is important to note that physical appearance and dress are recurring concerns. Whilst there are important questions to be asked about the media's construction of feminine beauty, there is a danger that this obsessive focus on women's appearance as the marker of their worth – albeit, this time as feminist role models – replicates the construction of women as objects of the (male) gaze in the mainstream media. The emphasis on appearance and clothing also contributes to the construction of feminism as an out-dated fashion or performance, associated with repression and replaced by this season's post-feminism with its lipgloss, designer shoes and push-up bras. In other words, much of this criticism emphasises the (re-)construction of the self rather than providing a framework for action.

In a paper reflecting on the field of feminist television scholarship, Brunsdon (2004) makes a broadly similar argument, noting that much recent work in the field has taken the form of what she dubs the "ur-feminist article". This ubiquitous article begins by noting how a text (or character) aimed at women or focusing on women characters has been denounced or claimed by feminists and goes on to explore whether the text/character fits the author's definition of feminism. Thus, the very project of much feminist television criticism involves an articulation of dis-identity, as though it is only possible for the critic to identify herself (or her object of study) as feminist by saying what kind of a feminist she/ it is not. Moreover, to the extent that feminist television criticism has developed around this ur-article, it has focused primarily on character, appearance and story with the result that other aspects of the television text – seriality, flow, aesthetics, sound and so on – have been rather marginalised. Feminism, not television, has become the critical focus.

Rejecting feminism

While the term post-feminism has a certain validity in describing the simultaneous debt to and disavowal of feminism in contemporary media discourse, it is less useful as a description of feminist theory and activism as it consigns that theory and activism to the past and erases its future. For, if post-feminism represents the evolution of the second wave then it also implies the end of the sequence: how can there be a third, fourth or fifth wave post (i.e. after) feminism? It is in this sense that post-feminism has been associated with a rejection of, or backlash against, feminism.

Post-feminism and the backlash are not new phenomena. Indeed, Susan Faludi (1992: 70) notes that the term post-feminism first surfaced in the US press in the 1920s and was used to construct an opposition between younger women and their feminist elders at the very point that feminist gains began to re-shape the public sphere. In the contemporary context, Faludi links the re-invention of post-feminism to the political conservatism of the 1980s and the attempt to solicit women's consent for anti-women policies by presenting feminism, rather than sexism and oppression, as the source of women's discontent. For Faludi, then, post-feminism is virtually synonymous with the backlash, both in the moments of their emergence and in their ideological projects of pitting generations of women against one another.

The construction of post-feminism as generational requires comment. Admittedly, the language, organisation, style and even some of the key demands of the 1970s' women's movement seem alien to many daughters of the second wave. However, this does not mean that a decisive and antagonistic split is necessary. Indeed, those identifying themselves as third-wave feminists often have a clear sense of how their own politics and activism continue and develop the struggles of an earlier, but still active, generation.[2]

In contrast, the label "post-feminist" – certainly as it is applied in the media – is more often used to indicate a decisive break with and rejection of the more radical politics of second-wave feminism. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the early-1990s when books by Camile Paglia (1993), Naomi Wolf (1994), Katie Roiphe (1994) and Christina Hoff Sommers (1994) very publicly asserted that it was feminism (and not the backlash) that was failing women, and young women in particular. These writers – variously labelled as post-feminists, anti-feminists, power-feminists and new feminists – have little in common, except, perhaps, a general concern with rejecting what they argue is the "victimising" tendency of radical feminism and with exploring women's autonomy and sexual desire. Their arguments are, in many ways, attractive. It is, after all, much less depressing to think about what gives us pleasure than to focus on situations where women are relatively powerless, and easier to change the self than to change society. Indeed, the individual is the main focus of these books and while these authors typically criticise feminism's second wave for ignoring differences between women, the fierce individualism of these texts allows for little constructive consideration of difference. The extensive media coverage these authors received on both sides of the Atlantic replicated this individualism, turning the authors' physical appearances and personal lives into the subject of analysis. This Projansky (2001: 71) describes as an anti-feminist feminist post-feminism: a feminism that insists upon the death of other feminisms in proclaiming its own birth.

The post-feminism born out of this conjuncture is a feminism that is focused on the aspirations and possibilities for individual women (typically, white, affluent, American women) but rejecting of second-wave feminism's demands for structural change. In particular, this post-feminism seems designed to let men (and patriarchy) off the hook, either by celebrating men's feminism or by turning individual men into objects of fun and derision whilst affirming the ideal of masculinity. This phenomenon is not, of course, consigned to theoretical texts and, indeed, a number of feminist media critics and commentators have explored its manifestation in popular culture. For example, in their analyses of rape representations in US film and television, both Projansky (2001) and Moorti (2002) demonstrate that it is on-screen men who most frequently give voice to feminist arguments and teach women about feminism, often in the face of other women's opposition. It might seem counter-intuitive to argue that this is an anti-feminist move, however, when men are cast as "better" feminists than women, women (and feminists) are once more positioned as redundant.

The redundancy of women was, of course, taken a stage further in many texts emerging during the 1980s where women were, quite literally, absent. It was this absence that led Tania Modleski (1991) to describe the post-feminist age as "feminism

without women", a description that has two meanings, pointing both to a feminist anti-essentialism (of which, more later), and to the triumph of a male feminist perspective that excludes women. It is important to emphasise that Modleski's "feminism without women" is a popular feminism, that is, it is (post-)feminism *as represented* in media texts (factual and fictional), rather than a development within theory – and, indeed, it is in this guise that post-feminism has most often featured in media criticism.

However, while Modleski saw women being obliterated in the cultural landscape of the 1980s, any review of feminist media studies must conclude that it is men who are missing in action. Feminist media studies' focus on women is not, however, a post-feminist innovation. For example, Brunsdon (1995) identifies four main categories of *feminist* television scholarship: the real world of women working in television; content analyses of the presence of women on the screen; textual studies of programmes for and about women; and studies focusing on female audiences. More specifically, in the introduction to *Feminist Television Criticism*, Brunsdon, D'Acci and Spigel (1997:1) suggest that feminist television criticism is defined by an engagement, "with the problems of feminism and femininity – what these terms mean, how they relate to each other, what they constitute and exclude". Yet, despite its women-centeredness, much of this work sets about deconstructing the very category "woman", with the result that it becomes very self-reflexive, individualistic and difficult to relate to a feminist politic. Indeed, in the early 21st century, we seem to have reached a point where the legacy of feminism in relation to both television content and television scholarship is being repeatedly, indeed almost exclusively, measured by the performances of individual women and girls (Madonna, Carrie, Ally, Buffy et al.). The critical focus on individual women allows the challenge of feminism to disappear as it is positioned as a lifestyle choice (being feminist) rather than a movement (doing feminism). If feminism is equated with women's agency, choice and subjectivity, then questions about gender, about structural inequalities, discrimination, oppression and violence are allowed to slip from view.

Finally, it is instructive to consider the gleeful men-bashing indulged in by female-centred 1990s texts such as *Bridget Jones' Diary* (Fielding, 1997) or *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) which are also routinely dubbed "post-feminist" by critics. In a *Guardian* column reflecting on *Sex and the City*'s first series, Charlotte Raven (1999) describes the show's male characters as:

> commitment-phobes, smug marrieds, posers, nerds, swingers, clingers, work-aholics, slackers, culture bores, philistines, predators, romantics, porn freaks, computer geeks, emotional illiterates, needy jerks, fastidious queens, slobs, liars, confessors, fashion victims, dorks, virgins, perverts, twentysomething bimbos, thirtysomething creeps, fortysomething saddos and – most contemptible of all – losers with tiny dicks.

– hardly a prestigious roll-call. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the column inches devoted to *Sex and the City* were reports on the battle of the sexes. Yet, whilst this battle might look considerably different to that conducted by the feminist men of Projansky and Moorti's rape narratives, there are important parallels: both pre-empt

feminist critiques of male power and privilege by showing men to be either willing t give up that power (feminist) or incapable of wielding power (pathetic). In bot instances power is dispersed to the point where it becomes impossible to analyse th structural inequalities that have concerned feminists. To return to Raven:

> [Feminists'] man-hating wasn't a bar-room grudge but a response to a politic: situation. It wasn't about individuals – most feminists got on fine with individu: men, even as we also denounced masculinity as an idea. These days, the situatio is reversed. The modern man-hater hates specific men but worships the idea c masculinity.

Nevertheless, it would be too simplistic to state that authors like Roiphe or pro grammes like *Sex and the City* are simply anti-feminist, for both the texts themselve and the extensive public debate they generate also provide feminism's most publi face. As Projansky (2001: 70) argues in her discussion of yet-another magazine edi torial proclaiming the "death" of feminism, such texts ensure that feminism lives on ii the public imaginary even if only to instigate the question about its demise. Or, a Faludi (1992) argues, the intensity of the backlash is very real evidence of the clea and present danger to the status quo that feminism represents.

Developing feminism

In this section, I want to consider how the term "post-feminism" is used to describe : regeneration and development of feminist theory within the context of broader devel opments in post-modernism and post-structuralism. "Feminism without women" ir this context refers to an anti-essentialist challenge to the very category "woman" (anc "man", though this is rarely made explicit) and the abandonment of grand narrative: and universalising theories. For anti-essentialists, it should not matter whether we dc our feminism without women or without men: the point is that gender-categories pei se are mutable. But it is important to ask whose interests are best served by such : deconstruction?

For Brooks (1997: 4), whose *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cul tural Forms* provides a valuable summary of these debates, the term "post-feminism" denotes a "conceptual shift within feminism from debates about equality to debates about difference". A fundamental problem with this formulation is, of course, the way in which it reduces the history and diversity of feminisms to one strand of the 1960s– 70s movement (liberal, or equity feminism), suggesting that feminism depended upon a consensus (however fragile) among women and an ignorance of the differ ences that shape our experiences under patriarchy. For Brooks, the recognition of difference so fundamentally challenged feminism as to warrant the invention of this new label, though many of the critics she cites (including bell hooks) resist the post-feminist label and, instead, see their work as contributing to the development of *feminist* theory and practice. It is also worth noting that this version of post-feminism is largely an academic one – that is, it is based in theory rather than practice – and has had particular currency in writing about the media and culture. This is, in part, due to the emphasis on discourses rather than on over-arching structures. Yet it is also a

reflection of the fact that it is far easier to de-stabilise gender in the representational field than in our daily lives where our gender-presentation continues to have very concrete material effects. It is telling, in this respect, that Brooks devotes much of her chapter on post-feminism and popular culture to a consideration of Madonna, a performer whose continual re-invention of herself works to de-stabilise categories of gender and sexual identity. However, at this juncture, it is important to ask how Madonna's performances relate to the lived experiences of other women (see Schwichtenberg, 1993). Lisa Henderson (1993: 123), for example, notes that whilst cultural critics might celebrate the destabilisation of fixed gender and sexual identities in Madonna's performances, the political struggles of feminists and queer activists depend upon fixing these identities, both for our own protection and because these identities remain the basis of material inequalities in the social world:

> It is difficult, finally, to acknowledge the divided self and engage the pleasure of masquerade while at the same time fighting a strikingly antagonistic legal and social system for your health, your safety, your job, your place to live, or the right to raise your children. Indeed, this is the other contradiction of lesbian and gay resistance: to be constructionists in theory, though essentialists as we mobilize politically, demanding that the state comply because this, after all, is *who we are*, not who we are today or who we have become in recent history.

Part of the difficulty with much contemporary (post-)feminist writing on the media is that the link between the representational and material spheres has been severed as studies of representational practices have become divorced from a broader feminist political project and history. Moreover, the de-stabilising of the category "woman" has – in practice – led to a very narrow focus on individual women as the objects of study. As a result, much of this writing ends up replicating the focus on the white, middle-class self that was the basis of the critique of the second wave, the difference being that post-feminists do not claim any universal status for this self. In focusing on the individual it becomes, by definition, almost impossible to say anything meaningful about difference: what can an analysis of Madonna, Carrie, Ally or Buffy tell us about differences between women? More damagingly, the failure to connect these analyses to a broader feminist praxis makes the analyses – no matter how interesting and well argued – seem rather pointless. As Modleski (1991: 15) puts it:

> The once exhilarating proposition that there is no 'essential' female nature has been elaborated to the point where it is now often used to scare 'women' away from making any generalizations about or political claims on behalf of a group called 'women'.

Making the personal political should not mean that the personal is the *only* site of political contestation and change. In short, if analysing Madonna can only tell us about Madonna then, frankly, why should we bother?

My intent in providing this brief survey of these complex debates is not to try to fix the meaning of post-feminism once and for all – indeed, this seems to be a rather pointless, if not impossible, task – but to highlight the way in which these "post-ings"

repeatedly focus on women, feminism and femininity as the problem, as the objects of investigation and critique. As a result, much recent feminist media studies presents a feminism at war with itself and the political relevance of feminism is in danger of being lost. Moreover, whilst all this deconstructing of the female gender has been going on, men and masculinity have, once again, been allowed to slip under the radar: hence my reformulation of Modleski's title. As a political theory and practice, feminism without men is surely as limited as feminism without women.

Buffy binaries and *Buffy's* boys

So far, my argument has been fairly abstract. The remainder of this article seeks to rectify this by providing a case study centred on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. My intention is not to argue that *Buffy* (or Buffy) is or is not feminist, rather, I want to consider the ways in which the show's "feminism" has been framed in existing criticism and how this framing has allowed other issues of importance to feminism (and to *Buffy*) to escape critical scrutiny.

In an oft-quoted account, *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon describes the show as,

> my response to all the horror movies I had ever seen where some girl walks into a dark room and gets killed. So I decided to make a movie where a blonde girl walks into a dark room and kicks butt instead.
>
> (Whedon quoted by Early, 2001)[3]

Whedon's creation tale is the starting point for numerous articles (both popular and academic) dealing with the show's feminism and, indeed, Whedon's willingness to use the f-word in discussing the show's ideology and appeal has meant that *Buffy's* relationship to feminism has been consistently foregrounded both on-screen and in responses to the show.

The blonde girl in question is, of course, Buffy Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar), a former cheerleader who is also the vampire slayer. The first two seasons repeatedly return to the apparent incongruity of conjoining "Buffy" with "vampire slayer" and play on and with characters' and viewers' expectations of the blonde girl, expectations that clearly change as show and character develop. Nevertheless, in the early seasons, a large part of the show's humour and drama comes from the apparent conflict between the demands and gains of feminism and femininity and it is this conflict – and the various ways in which it is played out within the show and in secondary texts – that has been the major concern of those interested in its relationship to feminism. Patricia Pender (2002: 35), for example, notes that much of the debate revolves around opposing value judgements about the feminist credentials of the central character and the show: "Put simply, is *Buffy* good or bad?" As a physically strong, assertive and sexually desiring heroine Buffy is claimed as a (good) feminist. As a young woman concerned with her appearance, clothing and desirability to the opposite sex, she is a bad feminist, but – depending on the position of the author – she might still be a good post-feminist. For many critics, the combination of feminism and femininity places *Buffy* firmly in the "post" era.

Asking the question "is *Buffy* good or bad" for feminism seriously limits the

scope of feminist enquiry to how we define feminism and construct a feminist identity. Moreover, to return to Lotz, with confusion and contradiction marking popular definitions of feminism, it should hardly be surprising that the same characteristics are variously read as feminist, anti-feminist or post-feminist, and celebrated or condemned on these grounds by different critics. To give an example, Buffy's appearance is a central concern in many early responses to the show. Buffy – as played by Gellar – is blonde, petite, nubile, perfectly made-up and, above all, fashionable. Her favoured daywear in the early seasons is a short skirt, spaghetti-strap top and high heels: clothing designed to expose and shape her body according to conventional standards of feminine beauty. For some critics, this conjunction of feminism and femininity is to be celebrated in extending feminism's appeal to a new generation of women and girls; for others, it compromises the show's feminist premise by constructing Buffy/Gellar as a sexualised object.[4]

I am less interested here in which group of critics are "right" than in the fact that Buffy/Gellar are so often the focus of critical consideration. The reason often given to justify this is their importance as role models for young girls who use media figures to help them construct their own sense of identity and agency (e.g. Vint, 2002). Yet, this depends upon a very limited notion of identification and fails to account for the possibilities and pleasures of cross-sex identification and same- and cross-sex desire. Indeed, while Whedon talks about selling feminism to boys as a major concern,[5] boy fans have been the subject of little (if any) feminist scholarship. As Anthony Easthope (1986: 1) pointedly argued nearly 20 years ago, the effect of this critical interest in women is to allow masculinity to pass itself off as natural and universal, placing it beyond critique.

Moreover, much of the good Buffy/ bad Buffy debate fails to consider the show *as television*. In other words, this criticism (particularly in its more populist versions) is a harking back to the "images of women" approach that characterised feminist critiques of the media in the late 1960s and early 1970s and paid little attention to medium specificity (Walters, 1995). For example, whilst the concern regarding sex-object-Buffy may well be justified at a meta-textual level (Vint, 2002), the television show rarely constructs Buffy/Gellar as the object of a sexualised male gaze. It is undoubtedly true that her daywear – in the early seasons in particular – is flesh-shaping and exposing, however, the camera rarely lingers on or fetishises her body. Further, when it comes to night-time slayage, Buffy rarely wears such obviously sexualised attire: indeed, when she does – as in Season 2's opening episode "When She Was Bad" – it is a sign that all is not well. More typically, in fight scenes Buffy is shown in long shot, her face and form obscured by shadow and dark lighting as well as by her loose clothing and long hair.[6] Combined with the specular and narrative privileging of the woman's point-of-view in the show, this makes it difficult to argue that *Buffy* privileges a male gaze in any straightforward way (Daughtery, 2002).

As Pender also notes (2004), the need to resolve Buffy/*Buffy*'s feminist credentials seems to serve for some critics as a justification of their own engagement, preventing an acknowledgement of the show's complexities and contradictions. I am reminded here of Modleski's warning that feminist media criticism risks becoming increasingly narcissistic, "based on an unspoken syllogism that goes something like

this: 'I like *Dallas*; I am a feminist; *Dallas* must have progressive potential" (1991: 45). One of the implications of this in *Buffy*-studies has been a marked reluctance among feminists to consider the show's less liberatory aspects – such as its treatment of race and class – as though this would somehow tarnish the object of study (Pender, 2004). Alternatively, a post-feminist approach might seek to embrace these contradictions as part of the post-feminist fabric of the show. In either case, the effect is the same: the marginalization of difference and an emphasis on the individual.

To the extent that we allow the popular television text – and the growing body of critical work on such texts – to define our "feminism", we marginalize many of the most important challenges feminism *as a movement* posed and continues to pose. From my own perspective, as a feminist working mainly on gendered violence, it is pertinent to note that whilst (post-)feminist action heroines have been the subject of recurring critique within feminist media studies (e.g. Inness, 1998; Helford, 2000; Early and Kennedy, 2003; Tasker, 2004), there has been relatively little academic work that considers media representations of male violence from a perspective informed by feminism. In this respect, the critical silence on male violence in *Buffy* – particularly from those critics interested in the show's relationship to feminism – can be read as evidence of the way that the post-feminist frame works to banish the spectre of the radical ("victim") feminist and her analysis of patriarchy. Yet, radical feminism is more than a spectral form in the show itself, which – although inconsistent on this point – often seems to offer a surprisingly radical analysis of the systematic nature of male violence. My intent here is not to demonstrate that *Buffy* conforms to my version of feminism (as in Brunsdon's ur-article), rather, I want to point to some of the themes that are too often neglected within feminist media studies in this "post-feminist" age.

Buffy's primary focus may be to "take back the night" for the living, but it is notable that the undead and demonic are – with few exceptions – male.[7] This, in itself, is hardly exceptional – content analyses of prime-time television consistently find that the majority of both perpetrators and victims of on-screen violence are white males (Gunter and Harrison, 1998; Center for Communication and Social Policy, 1997, 1998a, 1998b) – but the very routine nature of male violence should surely make it more, not less, worthy of feminist comment and analysis (Boyle, 2004). Yet, the first book-length feminist studies of television violence were not published until the early 2000s (Cuklanz, 2000; Projansky, 2001; Moorti, 2002) and it is notable that these studies all focus on a very specific form of violence, namely, rape. Certainly, *Buffy*'s treatment of sexual violence is worthy of feminist attention. However, so too are unexceptional, routinised examples of male violence which may, indeed, be invisible as violence given the cultural value attached to aggression as an expression of normative masculinity. Where *Buffy* is relatively unusual (and potentially radical), is in the way in which this link between heterosexual-masculinity and violence is critically and provocatively kept in view. This is perhaps most explicit in the figure of Caleb (Nathan Fillion), the final season's misogynist villain, but comments about the aggressive and morally questionable behaviour of men, as a group, are made throughout. Interestingly, it is often left to recurring male figures to comment on the limits of masculinity. When the hapless Xander (Nicholas Brendon), is possessed by a hyena in "The Pack" (1.06), for example, Buffy's Watcher, Giles (Anthony

Stewart Head), resists labelling his sexually aggressive, condescending behaviour as demonic:

Giles: Xander's taken to teasing the less fortunate? [. . .] And there's been a notable change in both clothing and demeanour? [. . .] And otherwise all his spare time is spent lounging about with imbeciles?

Buffy: It's bad isn't it?

Giles: It's devastating, he's turned into a 16-year-old boy. Course, you'll have to kill him.

Buffy: Giles, I'm serious.

Giles: So am I, except for the part about killing him. Testosterone is a great equalizer, it turns all men into morons. He will, however, get over it. [. . .] Buffy, boys can be cruel. They tease. They prey on the weak. It's a natural teen behaviour pattern.

Although Giles' essentialist account is quickly proved wrong, he is not wrong in pointing out that a level of aggression, competition and misogyny is an accepted part of normative constructions of masculinity within the Buffyverse (and beyond). This recognition of what men as a group stand to gain from violence (both in terms of their status with other men, and in terms of material and sexual power), whilst central to feminist critiques, is in direct contrast to accounts of male violence in other mainstream media contexts where the focus is typically on drawing a clear distinction between violent men (monsters, beasts, perverts, fiends) and "normal" men (Benedict, 1992; Boyle, 2004). In contrast, *Buffy* continually draws parallels between its monsters and its men, making masculinity both visible and problematic.

Admittedly, this might not seem immediately obvious from the above example where "evil" Xander, possessed by a hyena, is, quite obviously, *not* Xander. More generally, in the early episodes there does appear to be a relatively clear-cut distinction between man (the conscious, socially situated agent) and monster (the inhuman, asocial beast) that is underlined by the mise-en-scène: the monsters look monstrous, inhabit dark spaces on the margins of Sunnydale and are often in full or partial shadow. Yet, such an *absolute* distinction is difficult to sustain. The vampire, the werewolf and the possessed teen are liminal figures: humans who become monsters and retain the human's visage (at least some of the time) and memories. One of the more interesting complexities of the Angel/Angelus character,[8] for example, is that it is the demonic Angelus who has the most in common with Liam, the drunken, sexually aggressive and immoral man the vampire once was. As Angel comments in "Doppelgangland" (3.16), the traces of the vampire are in the human. Equally, those who are introduced as demons frequently express human emotions and complexities. As major characters move from one position to another any ideas of "absolute" evil become increasingly complicated and this, too, is visually rendered through changes in costume, make-up, lighting and so on. Whilst it could be argued that this de-stabilisation of identity is quintessentially post-feminist, to follow this argument is once more to re-direct the focus of our enquiry from a quintessentially feminist issue (gendered violence), to feminism itself.

Finally, *Buffy*'s centuries-old demons are also associated with the past and,

specifically, with a pre-feminist past that they bring with them into the show's presen In this sense, while Buffy (the character and the show) might be beneficiaries c feminism, it is clear from the outset that Sunnydale is not a post-patriarchy. In othe words, an analysis of the Buffyverse (like an analysis of our own world), demonstrate the difficulty of fixing pre-feminist, feminist, and post-feminist *moments* and th necessity of considering movement, organisation and behaviour at both the individua and societal level.

In conclusion, as feminist media critics we need to continually keep in focus th ways in which our analyses of cultural texts contribute to broader struggles bot within and outside of the academy. We need to think about our methods, about ou objects of study and, perhaps most importantly, about the *purpose* of our study. Fo example, examining representations of men's violence against women has long bee seen as part of the broader feminist struggle to challenge and de-naturalise that vio lence – as the preceding discussion of *Buffy* begins to suggest. As Benedict (1993 argues, changes in representation don't only follow on from changes in reality, the can also lead the way. This is why struggles over language and meaning matter an why analysing, challenging and changing how we – and others – speak about o otherwise represent men's violence (or other forms of gendered realities and inequal ities) is an important part of feminism's transformative project. This does not mea that feminists cannot also study music videos, or shoe shopping, or romance novels but it helps to remind us that in all our work we need to retain a sense of the broade picture. In this respect, we cannot afford to lose sight of how debates about feminisn (and feminists) are used within the media. It is hardly surprising that disputes ove the feminist identities of figures like Madonna, Carrie, Ally or Buffy have receivec such widespread media attention for, as I have argued in this article, such a focu allows the more difficult challenges posed by feminism – challenges to male privilege and power, to the lived tensions of all of our daily lives – to slip from view. Tc let these debates define our "feminism" in the early 21st century would be a truly regressive move.

Notes

1 To get to grips with the diversity of debate it helps to get beyond academic sources and examine documents produced within the movement – newsletters, conference materials, oral histories, and so on. These documents can be accessed in a variety of feminist archives, including (in the UK) the Glasgow Women's Library (see http://www.womens-library.org.uk/), the Women's Library (see http://www.thewomenslibrary.ac.uk/) and the Feminist Library (see http:// www.feministlibrary.org.uk/).

2 See, for example, essays collected in Heywood and Drake (1997), Mirza (1997) and in Gillis, Howie and Munford (2004).

3 Buffy made her first appearance in a 1992 film, written by Whedon and directed by Fran Rubel Kuzui.

4 For more on this, see Owens (1999), Fudge (1999), Vint (2002) and Pender (2002).

5 Whedon comments: "If I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who

takes charge of the situation, without their knowing that's what's happening, it's better than sitting down and selling them on feminism" (cited in Esmonde, 2003).

6　The need to disguise the stunt doubles used in the fight sequences provides a practical reason for this.

7　Whedon himself describes *Buffy* as a chance for horror's prototypical blonde girl to "take back the night" (in Esmonde, 2003), an allusion to on-going feminist campaigns. *Not once* in 144 episodes does Buffy battle a lone female or an all-female gang in her patrols. This is not to suggest that *Buffy*'s female characters never act violently with evil or morally questionable intent, but morally reprehensible violence does *not* bring female characters together in the way that it routinely unites male gangs.

8　Angel (played by David Boreanaz) is Buffy's first love. A vampire cursed with a soul, Angel loses that soul (reverting to Angelus) after he and Buffy have sex.

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10

Girls Rule!

Gender, feminism, and Nickelodeon

Sarah Banet-Weiser

In June 2000, the Museums of Television and Radio in both New York and Los Angeles presented a three-month retrospective that honored the children's cable network Nickelodeon. The retrospective, "A Kid's Got To Do What A Kid's Got To Do: Celebrating 20 Years of Nickelodeon" featured screenings of past and current programming, hands-on workshops, an interactive gallery exhibit, and seminars for families. One of the seminars, titled "Girl Power! Creating Positive Role Models for Girls," lauded Nickelodeon's efforts over the past 20 years to challenge traditional gender stereotypes on children's television by featuring girls as primary lead characters. A "girl power" seminar had a particular cultural resonance in 2000: the connection between these two concepts – "girl" and "power" – once thought to be completely absent from the world of children's popular culture, had become normalized within the discourses of consumer culture. In the contemporary cultural climate, in other words, the empowerment of girls is now something that is more or less taken for granted by both children and parents, and has certainly been incorporated into commodity culture.

Indeed, the rhetoric of girl power has found currency in almost every realm of contemporary children's popular culture. In the mid-1990s, The Spice Girls, a manufactured, pop-music girl-group, adopted "Girl Power!" as their motto. And, at the same time, the alternative internet community the Riot Grrrls incorporated girl power ideology in their efforts to construct a new kind of feminist politics (see, for example, Baumgardner & Richards, 1999; Currie, 1999; Douglas, 1999; Driscoll, 2002; Kearney, 1998; Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein, 2001). T-shirts emblazoned with "Girls Kick Ass!" and "Girls Rule!" became hot new items for both high-school and elementary school girls, and Nike's "Play Like a Girl" advertising campaign skillfully used the concept of "commodity feminism" to sell athletic gear (Goldman, 1992; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). In the sporting world, the success of the 1999 Women's Soccer World Cup tournament, the public focus on tennis superstars Venus and Serena Williams, and the creation of the Women's National Basketball Association