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Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Polysemy and the Question of Feminist Agency

From Episode One *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has sparked passionate debates among public and academic audiences and critics alike as to the "feminist political potential" of the show. Feminist Theory has always been more than just theory. What is at stake here is a political agenda of the women's movement to end sexism and liberate women from patriarchal power structures. As Seyla Benhabib puts it:

*"...to make sense of the struggles of women, to make sense of the struggles (...) to change contemporary gender codes, as theorists, we must at least create the conceptual space for thinking of the possibility of agency, resignification, subversive deployment."*¹

Feminist Theory is thus always interested in the pragmatic "use", the strategic usefulness of a certain theory or text in terms of the feminist agenda. As Patricia Pender and other Feminist critics have noted, this often leads to a very normative and polarized approach towards popular culture. As she writes in her essay "I'm Buffy and You're...History. The Postmodern Politics of Buffy the Vampire Slayer":

*"Feminist critiques of popular culture frequently mobilize a similar strategy to Buffy's slaying technique – is it friend or foe? – when they question if any given text is part of the solution, or part of the problem."*²

This polarization very much applies to the debates around the feminist political potential of Buffy's character: It seems that our heroine is either seen (and celebrated) as a strong and assertive female hero, which makes her a subversive and empowering feminist role model and thus strategically useful to the feminist agenda. Or she is perceived as a sexualized teenage girl, subscribing to and therefore reinscribing capitalist and patriarchal stereotypes of femininity and female beauty: she is after all young, blonde, slim, buff, heavily made up and overly fashion conscious. So what's the deal? Is Buffy really either contained teenage girl or transgressive feminist hero?

As Pender rightfully points out, the underlying assumption or logic here seems to be that if Buffy is conventionally feminine, overly girlish, if she wears the lip-gloss and shows the cleavage, she cannot be feminist and her political potential in terms of feminist agency is contained. This reflects a common assumption of second-wave feminism about femininity being in opposition to feminism. As Cultural Studies Feminist critic Joanne Hollows writes:

*"For many feminists, feminine values and behaviour were seen as a major cause of women's oppression. In this way (...) second-wave feminism, and the identity ,feminist', was predicated on a rejection of femininity."*³

Pender has already pointed to the problem involved in such a conception of feminist agency: to see Buffy as either "good" or "bad", either "transgressive" or "contained" means to prematurely dismiss the political potential of the show, through reducing what is a wide range of possible viewing positions and meanings offered up by the text to a binary logic. She has to

¹ Seyla Benhabib: *Feminist Contentions. A Philosophical Exchange*, p. 111.

² Patricia Pender: „I'm Buffy and You're...History. The Postmodern Politics of Buffy the Vampire Slayer“, in: *Fighting the Forces*, p. 35.

³ Joanne Hollows: *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, p. 2.

be "either/or", cannot be "both" or something else "in-between" these poles. It also leads to a dead end, because to ask of Buffy to be unambiguously transgressive or subversive is to ask a claim too absolute. Queer Critic Jonathan Dollimore has summarized this problem in his book "Sexual Dissidence" in arguing:

*"Containment theory often presupposes an agency of change too subjective and a criterion of success too total. Thus subversion or transgression are implicitly judged by impossible criteria: complete transformation of the social (...), or total personal liberation within, or escape from it (...)."*⁴

Thus, the logic is: if Buffy cannot be put to use as an unambiguous model of feminist agency, of individual resistance to patriarchal norms, she has to be "bad". But to demand of a television text to mean just one thing appears futile if we follow John Fiske in assuming that television programs as popular texts are always inherently polysemic and open to a variety of readings.⁵ As such, they can impossibly secure just one unambiguous meaning of themselves. According to Fiske, the meaning of a television text, which includes for our purposes the meaning of Buffy's character, is not included in the text itself, but is rather negotiated in the process of "reading" or "viewing". As Fiske puts it:

*"the work of the institutional producers of programs requires the producerly work of the viewers and has only limited control over that work. The reading relations of a producerly text are essentially democratic, not autocratic ones. The discursive power to make meanings, to produce knowledge of the world, is a power that both program producers and producerly viewers have access to."*⁶

This negotiation or even struggle over meaning making takes place between producers and viewers and as such it is as much dependent on the text itself and the potentials of meaning it holds, as it is on the actual context of reception, the social and cultural situation and background of the viewer. In this perception the text doesn't just provide one solitary meaning that is sitting there waiting for us to be understood. It is rather a resource that viewers from different social backgrounds can "activate" in different ways.

Based on this assumption Buffy cannot unambiguously be a feminist role model, as much as she cannot unambiguously be a contained girl or anything else for that matter. Rather the range of criticism dealing with her character already proves, that a sympathetic feminist critic *can* read her as a feminist role model or a blueprint for feminist subversion of stereotypes, but it is just as likely that young male and female viewers in different social situations and with different knowledges and experiences will perceive her as mere "eye candy" and ignore the message of female heroism and empowerment completely. Online interviews with male fans conducted by Lee Parpart actually prove that this is the case. But does the fact that Buffy *can* be read as affirmative of patriarchal stereotypes of femininity or even as sex symbol mean, that we have to dismiss the feminist political potential of the show entirely? Does she either unambiguously have to be a role model for female empowerment or be rejected as "part of the problem"?

I would like to argue that this is not necessarily the case if we rethink the concept of feminist agency and subversion. Even though this is rarely openly stated, what is implicit in most of the criticism around Buffy's feminist potential is a model of agency that is largely based on

⁴ Jonathan Dollimore: *Sexual Dissidence. Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, p. 85.

⁵ "An essential characteristic of television is its polysemy, or multiplicity of meanings. A program provides a potential of meanings which may be realized, or made into actually experienced meanings, by socially situated viewers in the process of reading." Fiske: *Television Culture*, p. 15.

⁶ Fiske: *Television Culture*, p. 132.

Enlightenment ideas of an autonomous transcendent subject. In this concept intentionality, accountability and self-reflexivity are seen as the prerequisites for an autonomous female subject, that through its actions is able to creatively alter its surroundings, to subvert existing power relations, and effect social and historical change. It is important to note, that power in this model is conceptualized as something *external* to this subject and that this is seen as a necessary prerequisite of the subjects possibility to resist and subvert existing power relations. I would instead like to suggest, as Patricia Pender has already done, a different conception of feminist agency and subversion. One, that is less based on an intentional and autonomous female subject and more on the discursive power of language and in order to do that I would like to draw on the work of Judith Butler.

For Butler the potential for subversion and feminist emancipation lies not in the autonomous female individual or subject rejecting patriarchal power structures or effecting social change intentionally. Her political program is rather to deconstruct the fixed categories of sex and gender in order to cause what she calls "gender trouble"⁷ and open up space for gender identities outside of the heteronormative and binary frame of femininity and masculinity. Drawing on the work of J.L. Austin and Jacques Derrida, Butler encourages us to view femininity and masculinity not as fixed or stable identities, as we commonly like to believe, but rather as culturally or discursively constructed categories,⁸ as performances. These performances "cite" what we already know and expect about gender, what we think of as the ideal of femininity or masculinity. It is through this permanent and repetitive citation of the norms of gender and sex that these categories appear as stable and natural. Even though, as Butler writes "*There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender. (We might state) that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results.*"⁹ And it is in this way that both our gender and our sex are constructed by language, that they are circumscribed and constituted by the discourses about men and women.

This however doesn't mean that our fate is sealed, that we are fully determined by the discourses that constitute us and that there is no possibility for subverting existing gender codes. Agency, subversion and resistance, however, are for Butler not seen as subjective, as an attribute or trait inhering in the will of an autonomous individual subject. The possibility for agency and thus subversion lies for Butler within the discourses and power relations that construct us (as men and women) themselves. In "Feminist Contentions" she writes:

*"To be constituted by language is to be produced within a given network of language/discourse which is open to resignification, redeployment, subversive citation from within and interruption and inadvertent convergences from other such networks. ,Agency' is to be found precisely at such junctures where discourse is renewed."*¹⁰

I think what Butler is trying to express here in an admittedly somewhat twisted manner is a model of *agency as resignification*. If gender were fixed there would be no possibility of changing or subverting gender norms. It is exactly *because* it is a performance that has to be performed time and again that change and resignification become possible. As Butler writes: "...change and alteration is part of the very process of 'performativity'"¹¹ The key to subversion of patriarchal and repressive norms of gender than lies not in the subjective

⁷ See Judith Butler, *Das Unbehagen der Geschlechter*, p. 61.

⁸ We all have certain ideas of what defines a man or a woman (these are the discourses that Butler refers to). In order to be perceived as a person at all, our bodies have to be read/perceived as either masculine or feminine (Butler calls this being intelligible).

⁹ Judith Butler: *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 25.

¹⁰ Judith Butler: "For a Careful Reading", in: *Feminist Contentions. A Philosophical Exchange*, p. 135.

¹¹ Judith Butler: "For a Careful Reading", in: *Feminist Contentions. A Philosophical Exchange*, p. 133f.

resistance of individual women, but in the possibility to alter what it means to be a woman, in the displacement of norms through repetition.

So the question of Buffy's feminist political potential is thus shifted: If agency and the possibility of subversion are no longer conceptualized as individual and intentional resistance to oppressive and patriarchal gender norms, but as resignification through causing "Gender Trouble", then Buffy wouldn't longer have to be a role model for the former in order to be considered strategically useful to the feminist project of emancipation. Instead we could than consider her political potential in terms of resignification, in causing "gender trouble" and thus revealing femininity as a performance, which means it's contingent rather than necessary or fixed.

I would like to argue, that to equip a petite young girl with superhuman powers and make her act as a hero could cause exactly the sort of "gender trouble" that Butler calls for. That it is precisely the clash between Buffy's hyper-feminine and girlish looks and her performance as heroic and super strong that holds the potential to resignify femininity in a way "useful" to the feminist agenda. In performing a role that is culturally considered masculine with a body that is considered both biologically female and feminine, Buffy's performance is more than just a mere reinscription of dominant norms of masculinity and femininity. At the same time that it repeats existing norms of gender, it is also recontextualizes them in a parodistic manner and can thus be considered a subversive repetition of these norms. So if Butler states "*The task is ... to repeat and ... to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself...*"¹², then Buffy's performance could be seen as such a form of displacement of norms.

As Richard Dollimore pointed out, such a form of subversive reinscription or resignification can never be entirely politically correct, as it is always ambivalent. As in the cultural practices of drag, it is always both: an affirmation as well as a parodistic subversion of dominant norms. Of course, this is not the sort of immediate and instant transformation or total liberation from oppressive norms that many theorists of subversion and feminists call for. Instead such subversive repetition is rather a gradual and slow shift.

And crucially, in such an understanding, the inherent polysemy of the television text, the fact that Buffy can be read as both strong and subversive hero and contained girl, would not disqualify her as strategically useful to the feminist agenda. It would be exactly what makes her strategically useful. Instead of looking at Buffy through a reductive binary logic as either subversive or contained and then dismissing her political potential, because of her girlishness, we might more usefully identify her body and character as a site of intense struggle over the meaning of femininity.

¹² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, S. 148.