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Moments of inspiration

Performing Spike

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ABSTRACT This article explores the way in which the actor, James Marsters, performs the character of Spike. Beginning with the Greek term *ekphrasis* (the verbal representation of visual representation) this article is an endeavour to describe and recover in language the effect which a particular performance, moment or TV series may have on us. The specific moment of performance that the article addresses is that of Spike's first appearance on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in the episode 'School Hard' (2:3) – a point at which something magical occurs. We breathe in Marsters' performance and establish an emotional connection with the character. It is this connection, based on Marsters' embodied performance, which inspires fan investment in the character and influences subsequent conceptions of what the character should or should not do, resulting in a tension between scriptwriters and the fans who know better.

KEYWORDS *acting, affect, Buffy, ekphrasis, emotion, fans, performance*

He appears out of the darkness and the music stops. He circles the dance floor, his eyes fixed only on her. But she is oblivious to his gaze, dancing and laughing to her own tune. He is hunting, he circles his prey, and I realise I am holding my breath. Something is happening and Spike is making it happen.

This is not how we first encounter the character of Spike in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. That happens in the pre-credit sequence of the episode 'School Hard' when a beat-up car with tail fins and a missing brake light blasts onto the screen, emphatically demolishing the 'Welcome to Sunnydale' sign. It is, however, the first time I really 'see Spike', the first moment he really gets to me. Furthermore, if I now showed you this scene, you would probably argue that it does not happen as I have told it. And you would be right. What I have put into words is a description of how this scene resonates in my memory, how the performance of the actor playing this character affected me and changed my relationship with the show forever.



Lesley Stern and George Kouvaris tell us there is a word for this endeavour, this desire to transform the lived experience of a work of art into a description couched in words. The Greeks called it *ekphrasis*, which has been glossed as ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’ (Stern and Kouvaris, 1999: 10). And its purpose? For Krieger it signifies a ‘romantic yearning for language to convey or even recover a sense of corporeal presences’ in order to ‘to bring things alive in writing’ or ‘to work the magical transformation’ (cited in Stern and Kouvaris, 1999: 11). In other words, I am desperately trying to convey to you what it felt like for me, to try make you feel the same way, at the same time as I try to recover and relive whatever it was that I experienced in the first place. I want to achieve a magical transformation and I want it to happen for you too.

In this endeavour, I believe that as an academic writing as a fan (someone Matt Hills would call a scholar-fan), I am engaging in exactly the same activity as non-academic fans who write about their own relationship with the show (a group Hills would describe as fan-scholars) (Hills, 2002). What all of us are doing in the discourse that we have available to us, whether this be an academic conference paper or a website bulletin board, is a kind of ‘ekphrasis’: an endeavour to describe and to recover in language the effect which a particular performance, moment or TV series may have had on us.

This kind of descriptive writing has found a home in film studies. The collection of essays edited by Stern and Kouvaris entitled *Falling for You*, opens with a poetic meditation by Ross Gibson on the relationship between acting and breathing (Gibson, 1999). Gibson quotes a poem by John O’Hara on the experience of watching the doomed jazz singer Billie Holiday perform which stopped his breath, before proceeding to describe a scene from *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947) in which Orson Welles commands through the rhythm of his breathing. This, Gibson informs us, is the actor’s art: to take our breath away and then to make us breathe again, differently.

Orson Welles was a revered film director and actor. *The Lady from Shanghai* is a film which has been canonized. Film is an art form and performance in film is now recognized as a legitimate area of scholarly study. But what about television? Who takes television seriously as an art form? If you require further proof, just look at the arts pages of any major newspaper. While performance in film may now be recognized as an aspect of the filmic experience which is worthy of serious attention, who talks about performance in television? And most importantly, why is the film spectator granted a privileged and personal relationship with film as a legitimate art form which the television audience is not? Rarely, if ever, has the history of television studies addressed the television viewer as an individual endowed with an aesthetic sensibility. As Matt Hills (2002)



sociological versions of media and cultural studies, even when they deal with fandom. Thus notions of affect, attachment and even passion are eliminated and fandom becomes

largely reduced to mental and discursive activity occurring without passion, without feeling, without an experience of (perhaps involuntary) self-transformation. (Hills, 2002: 66)

Part of the problem has to do with television as a medium, its banality, its overpresence and its sheer unstoppable which, in the past, made it impossible to recover and hold still. A performance on television once seen was lost, except to memory. But now, with the availability of video, with satellite and cable endlessly recycling programmes from the past, and with the re-release of television series in their entirety on DVD, it is possible to consider the television series as a finite text, to study it like a film. More importantly, once the imperative of the narrative has been removed, we can revisit those moments and performances which moved us in the first place and magically transform them into something which is most profoundly our own. Which is what I think is happening when we write about *Buffy*. Which is what I know is happening when I write about Spike.

Let's go back to that moment when breathing is suspended, when the rhythm of the actor's performance imposes itself on our own. What is happening here?

I have described the moment which initially 'moved' me in the performance of Spike, but freely acknowledge that there are other moments and other performances which affect people in different ways, and that the one that I have described may leave other people cold. Perhaps it would help if you could think about what I am saying, not in relation to Spike, but in relation to some moment of your own, when the performance of an actor deeply affected you. Listening to Joss Whedon talk about the episodes that he has directed, it becomes apparent that for him there are many such moments: the look on Willow's face as Oz tells her he is leaving Sunnydale forever; the entire scene in which Buffy reacts to her mother's death, which unfolds in real time. These are also moments when we hold our breath, when we are transported via the performance of the actor into a space, time and rhythm which is no longer our own.

These are therefore moments of powerful effect, moments of suspension when we forget who and where we are just for a moment. Moments when we lose the rhythm of our own breath and instead breathe with and through the performance of the actors. And in so doing, this performance becomes part of us, part of our own lived experience, and we will never be quite the same as we were before. It is a moment which inspires and transforms us. But this is a way in which no one writes about watching television, a way in which no one talks about the fan experience.

The verb 'to inspire' comes from the Latin 'in' or into and 'spirare' to

breathe. Its literal meaning is 'to blow or breathe into' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971: 1450). However, its figurative meanings include the following: 'To inspire: to infuse (something) into the mind; to kindle, arouse, awaken in the mind or heart (a feeling, idea, impulse, purpose etc).'

I think the performance of an actor may indeed inspire us, infusing 'something' into our mind or heart which affects us deeply and which will change the way we think or feel or even act. I remember a secondary school English teacher who told me that the only books worth reading were 'before and after' books: books which after reading them you were never the same as you were before. At one level, this is always true, but I think she was suggesting that there are some books which make a difference to the ways in which we experience the world. While it seems perfectly acceptable to grant these life-changing experiences to literature and film, I believe they can also happen when we watch television.

So how do we recognize these moments of inspiration? I would argue that the impulse for some of us (fan-scholars and scholar-fans alike) is to acknowledge and make witness to the moment of inspiration through our own performance and 'fan-ish' endeavours, whether this be in the production of words, images or practices, or even our attendance at conventions and conferences. Practices which also may include consumption as a kind of fan performance, the purchase of DVDs, videos, posters and action figures. For the fan, even the act of consuming may be an act of devotion, and an attempt to reclaim the initial moment of inspiration. This possibility thus renders the act of consumption both ambivalent and complex. As Matt Hills reminds us, 'fandom is always performative' even, I would suggest, when it looks like we are simply spending a lot (Hills, 2002: xi).

However, fan performance is inextricably linked to the performance of the actors, since it is the actors' performance of the script which inspires the performance of the fan. Here I want to get back to Spike, since I would argue that his performance has inspired a particular form of fan-performance which reveals precisely the deeply affective and emotional ways in which a television text may be subjectively experienced by fans.

To return to the first moment when we meet Spike in the episode 'School Hard', blasting on to the screen in his beat-up car to the sound of heavy metal music. His point of view is our point of view as he demolishes the 'Welcome to Sunnysdale' sign. But we do not see him yet. Not until he gets out of the car. What we see first is his boot, and the hem of his leather coat, as the camera pans upwards to reveal his vampirish face as he contemplates the view – and then he breathes. He lights a cigarette and inhales. We hear the intake of his breath before he exhales the words, 'Home Sweet Home' and grins wolfishly.

Thus Spike establishes himself as a character who embodies a disruptive force, blasting onto the screen, demolishing signs and simply holding



up the action in order to breathe. He also carries a sexual charge, both in the way in which he stalks Buffy and in the way in which he relates to his mad paramour, Drusilla. He is dangerous: 'Who do you kill for fun around here?' he asks his fellow vampires. He cuts through the cute and despatches the tedious. He kills the 'Anointed One' whom he rechristens 'the Annoying One' before announcing, 'We'll have a little less ritual and a little more fun around here'. And he's on the side of the audience: 'Let's see what's on TV', he announces in the closing moments as he and Drusilla walk out of frame to join the fans who are already watching.

As I look at the episode again – and again – which includes my moment of inspiration, the moment when Spike checks Buffy out at the Sunnydale nightclub, the Bronze, I realize that this is the way I want Spike to be for ever. Having breathed in his performance, and made it part of me, I feel a sense of ownership, an emotional connection with the character which means I am watching out for him. And in watching out for him, I become increasingly aware of the performative space which he is allotted in the text, the scenes, the lines, the way in which he is being written in or out of the series.

This is, of course, how the character is experienced as the text unfolds, inspiring hundreds of fans to perform their fandom on numerous websites discussing and debating the performance of the character. Gwyn Symonds (2003) has documented the progress of this debate in some detail, arguing that 'engagement with the story is the basis for the broader experience of fandom'. At one level this is true, but I do not think that it is the whole story. I think it is the engagement with the embodied performance of the character which is the basis for fan investment in the show, and that debate about the narrative trajectory of the characters is indexical to the nature of that commitment and the fans' own moments of inspiration, the moment when they too 'saw' the character and believed what they saw.

In other words, the debate between the fans, and the issues that they have with the writers, revolve around the narrative development of a character which the fans do not like or accept on the basis of their experience of the character in performance. Their conception of Spike, what Spike would or would not do, should or should not do, are being challenged by storylines which take the character in directions that they find unacceptable. Meanwhile, the writers engage in elaborate strategies of self-justification, as Marti Noxon argues:

We've made our case. Certain people get it and understand it, and other people are going to be Spike-shippers [a term for those in favour of the Spike–Buffy relationship] no matter what. *That's in no small part due to the charisma of the actor* . . . Sometimes things don't go the way we intend. It seemed very obvious to us that the Buffy–Spike relationship couldn't work in the long run, so now we need to reiterate why . . . I think people have forgotten the Spike of two seasons ago. I mean, he tried to kill Willow! (Symonds, 2003, emphasis added)



As Symonds point out, the writers' desperation to try and convince fans of Spike's unacceptability as a potential good guy and partner for Buffy inspired Noxon and Whedon to write an attempted rape scene into Season 6. However, what they did not allow for was what Noxon calls 'the charisma of the actor', or what I would call the power of the actor's performance to realize Spike in a way which has continually transcended the script. In other words, James Marsters has always brought something to the performance of Spike which has been beyond the grasp of the writers to contain, something which the fans have inspired and which inspires them in their relationship with the character which also transcends the text.

To return to my own moment of inspiration, in a featurette to the DVD Season 4 entitled 'Spike, Me', James Marsters the actor speaks. With his American vowels and affable demeanour he does not look or sound like Spike, even though he is in Spike's body and wearing Spike's clothes. Furthermore, Marsters discusses Spike as an entity outside of himself even though it is his body which embodies Spike, although he does occasionally slip between the first and the third person. You may be able to take the actor out of Spike, but you cannot take Spike out of the actor. In the course of this 10-minute disquisition on the character of Spike, Marsters reveals how he was introduced initially as a 'disposable' villain, intended to be the 'ultimate cool' and supposed to simply get out of the way. However, Marsters' first day on set required him to play the scene at the Bronze with which I began. He tells us: 'As an actor, I right away played an attraction to Buffy.' In other words, through his initial moment of performance, Marsters breathed life into Spike, infusing the character with desires and agency which transcended the text. It was this moment of inspiration which I breathed in, and it is the moment which stays with me as I try to resolve myself to the direction which the character has subsequently taken.

This is, of course, the fate of the television fan following a long-form drama series in which the writers are forced to generate new storylines around a constant group of characters in ways which make the characters notoriously unstable and fragmented. I have written about this problem elsewhere (Turnbull, 2005), largely in terms of how this instability of character reflects the postmodern experience of subjectivity as always in process. But I want to take a different tack here and argue that, for the television fan, such instability of character and identity can be a source of disaffection with a TV series. When the writers develop a character in ways which contradict the fans' moments of inspiration, then the series risks losing its affective charge and emotional engagement.

So we return to the scene in the Bronze, to review it, and reclaim it and relive the moment when Spike established himself for me as a character. Asked to sum up the character of Spike in one word, Marsters grins: 'If I only had one word to describe Spike, it's glee – in all the wrong things –



which is so fun.’ This may not be the way that Spike has been written, but it is the way Marsters performed him from the start, the way he inspired Spike and the way I breathed him in.

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Biographical note

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