

## **Popular Culture Monsters Go To Education: The Czech Republic Buffy Case**

*Jana Kratka - Patrik Vacek*

This study analyzes the modes of spectatorship in one of the most re-evaluated phenomena of recent audiovisual culture - Buffy the Vampire Slayer and its spin-off Angel - both in the Czech context to which the issue is rather new. The Buffy series maintains its cult position in humanities research and as such it has undergone extensive observation from many traditional fields of inquiry. However, education sciences have been standing a bit aloof of these efforts. The survey, grounded in bibliopedagogy and cinematherapy approaches, is structured into five parts: 1) Introduction (first public notion of Buffy series in the Czech Republic, Buffy becomes a favorite discussion topic, modes of representation according to respondents' opinions); 2) Identification (favoured and unfavoured Buffy series characters, unifying subjects and issues in accordance to one's real-life experience, self-identification); 3) Fan activities and creative efforts (frequency of Buffy viewing experience, creating blogs, webpage designs and subsequent graphics innovations, fan-fiction stories and hypotheses, using foreign languages within the Buffy fan-fiction creative efforts); 4) Reality and authenticity (spatial representations, masks and costumes, Buffy series vs. other TV series comparisons; happy endings discussions); 5) Aspects of communication (Buffy-related thoughts and shared experience).

media education; TV series, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel, cinematherapy, bibliopedagogy, monsters in education, audiovisual reception

Everyday schooling poses crucial questions on audiovisual culture use and its attractiveness for both educators and students. When evaluating the history and scope of research related to its use in class we can see most efforts were focused on a number of traditional approaches (creating and spreading canon-like film corpora through more or less inventive interpretation routines; instructional tools of audiovisual programmes, literature cinema comparisons; a cluster of media literacy and/or media education movements etc.). To a much lesser extent there is usually being investigated a model that follows the process of audiovisual fiction character identification. Such an approach blends effortlessly audiovisual media as an instructional tool with a respect to its aesthetic, social and economic merits. It can be said the spectator's experience becomes quite significant within that moment - in the sense of situational concept of education - of his or her self-identification with and self-reflexive approach provided by any given

fictional character, and thus the spectator gets a notion of the new level of social and emotional experience.

Taken from this point of view there can be seen a crucial term of cinematherapy which is - quite possible - to perceive as a generic term to cinemapedagogy. That is because it incorporates the fundamental question of a single's personal growth and overcoming problems under the influence of fictional stories. Hesley described cinematherapy as a process in which any given spectator watches a plot-driven film and subsequently identifies it with a number of problems he or she must cope with in real life.<sup>1</sup> Thus, every single human is able to view his or her life from an altered perspective. Cinematherapy as such is based on a presumption we understand some time better each other through other people stories. According to Pardeck and Pardeck principal cinematherapy goals can be characterized as follows: to provide a valuable information and insight into the problem and to enhance social and emotional intelligence through the knowledge of social and cultural differences.<sup>2</sup> The key reason for favouring biblio- and cinematherapy is that it creates an individuum potential which helps every human being to solve the problem in a most individual way - clearly beyond boundaries of a single therapy community.

#### **The Czech Republic Buffy Case**

The present case study builds upon previous findings of Buckingham and Rogge and structures itself into five parts.<sup>3</sup> It analyzes the results acquired during a series of interviews within the *Czech Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and/or *Angel* fan communities in the years of 2007 and 2008. All survey participants quoted in the following pages hold a good reputation and a permanent member status within the Czech web *Buffy/Angel* discussion group [www.buffy-angel.org](http://www.buffy-angel.org), which is considered the largest web fan site of such a kind in the Czech Republic. Also, all participants quoted here are regular visitors or even they lecture themselves at Czech fan conventions (e. g. *Slyercon at The Festival of Fantasy*). The group being interviewed is not also so homogenous in its age structure as it includes a sample of teenagers and young adults within 20 to 30 years of age. The socio-economic status of the group is also almost as much distinguished: some of them are pupils, other being high school students, and not the least of importance, some of them are already having a regular income. Some other participants were not able to attend face-to-face, thus they provided their responses via e-mails. Contrary to our considerations of a live-chat being the best option for data collecting, some of the participants interviewed via e-mail or web discussion groups have provided us more relevant and „more honest“ answers than those

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questioned in real world. This was especially apparent when analyzing speeches relating to personal emotional and reception issues.

### **1. Introduction**

Sarah remembers:

*„can sound ridiculous, I know, but the day I saw the first episode of Buffy is still perfectly clear on my mind;-). I was about to join my friend at the cottage in the courtyard (this was in 2001 and my secondary classes were almost over) and she was confiding me enthusiastically she had revealed a great TV series to which I have to surely be exposed to. So, we had sat in front of the TV-screen that afternoon and then I watched my first episode of Buffy; to be accurate, it was 2x07 episode Lie To Me - and then it was there - immediately after I had watched it, I fell in love with it.*

This quotation can be considered a striking example of explanations recorded during face-to-face *Buffy* fan conversations. Each time these talks included a conditional („could be“) approach and quite frequently some precise data (of a specific TV broadcast and its correspondence to fan's geography) concerning primal initiation into *Buffy* phenomenon. Moreover, the survey participants also best remembered the time and place of their spectatorship (most routinely named place was a friend's house) as well as other aspects of participation. Based on all data available we can conclude the beginning of a strong emotional involvement in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series as well as a birth of ritualized watching.

We also got familiar with „pseudo-fans“ / „fake-fans“, who frequently appeared to be one of the most active web discussion groups participants and as such they clearly manifested concern about their research participation. According to this and the fact pupils proclaim a real interest in watching a 10-year-old TV series we had hoped for a great deal of cooperation and participation during discussions. However, subsequent live chat revealed these kids had just pretended their deep interest in the series as they pointed out the fact their homeworks and other forms of class preparation played a far more important role to them. Also they rather frequently articulated they prefer more accessible media products to *Buffy* series (e. g. as casual TV watch or other forms of entertainment such summer holiday camps). The argument for schooling preparation priority can be seen as just an alias that was chosen to minimize the not-so-pleasant process of asking about „serious concern issues“ related to series.

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## 2. Identification

While the answers concerning time and spatial issues of *Buffy* spectatorship were apparently similar, the process of identification was rather different. At the very beginning there usually stands a fundamental interest in the series, followed by the process of identification. At the case of „pseudo-fans“ there is no significant form of self-identification or just very low or shallow found. Favourite characters do not necessarily correspond to those a survey participant is identified with. Once a participant is identified with a fictional character we can see there is no significant correspondence between the measure of „realistic rendering“ of a fictional character; the main factor is its potential for emotional closeness and mind share. Contrary, favoured fictional characters are the ones loved for its good script background, breadth of psychological realism, its character versatility and visual attractiveness. In the process of identification there is a crucial moment of searching an analogy between fictional and real life matters. This can be even strengthened by some forms of trauma overcoming while the most important aspects for a *Buffy* fan are a hope and humor – both presented in the series.

Even it could seem the ultimate state of satisfaction or happiness is provided through a long-term identification process with a film hero, subsequent interview sample concluded that more desired goal is beyond the mere process of identification – the state in which a fictional personality is not able to overcome its trauma, while the spectator is. So, we can agree with Williamson who considers the melodramatic model of pathos and sympathy as preferable.<sup>4</sup>

*Ico: I was simply identifying myself with Angel from the very beginning of his series - Angel actually had a trauma bearing a strange feeling he has harmed a plenty of people and now he is in the state in which he cannot be happy; it was a heavy mind-bending for many, yeah, but it is just behind me now, I already got to another phase of my life, so Angel's self-exaction is not so close to me, actually it never was, this is rather different story - an Angel's chapter of life; if he could have enjoyed his life he would know he did not pay for his yet..., that he actually had suffered...these things that I personally find strange to me and it is not so much to me now...as is it used to be.*

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### 3. Fan activities and creative efforts

Czech Republic *Buffy* fans are familiar with all usual approaches and factors of fandom activities such as fanfiction, video clip editing, web page design and web discussion groups, fan lectures given at conventions, subtitles translations and game activities (quizzes and karaoke). These efforts are considered as not worthy of talking, as something that is mandatory. However, these activities are being made with a serious approach which, of course, not excludes the aspects of joy and pleasure. The opinion on re-rendering of a media product varies significantly within the Czech fan group. Most of all, „false fans“ feel far less understanding for such fanfiction activities.

### 4. Reality and authenticity

Czech *Buffy* fans usually adopt metaphoric reading of series and its relations immediately and moreover they are far from being blind to educational aspects of the series. In that sense they appreciate the way the series is presenting humans and their relationships.

*Sarah says: to me both series are in its very nature a good portrayal of how the human interactions are being built. When I get all that fantasy stuff, all vampires, demons and „dark forces“ away ;) there is BtVS/AtS series that makes all that everyday problems visible; such things as first love, first kiss, sex, complicated relationships between parents and a child; simply all that usual human matters. Moreover, the first seasons are good example of immanent education of youths: you are a drinker, you will not last long (Beer Bad); you have sex soon, you will suffer and there is a plenty of such things. In a nutshell the world of both Buffy and Angel series is primarily a depiction of human relationships, even if it is some time transformed into metaphors and it is well functioning without a man's presence.*

A certain top of view - which is based on their experience - is quite common as well as their past media experience. As Williamson further emphasizes fans usually evaluate the quality of a work on the basis of a proper depicting the things they want to see - be it a cute monster or „monster“.<sup>5</sup> In the *Buffy* series case, there can be seen no ruthless monsters, the series goes so far in this aspect of horror that visiting character *Dracula* is depicted as a sympathetic, charming and aristocratic vampire and thus from a very pleasant point of view. Minor characters of real monsters stay aloof of general fan interest and unfavourable characters are just those who are - according to fan - „badly played“ or „black and white“ characters. This

approach, however, does not affect the overall evaluation of the work as a whole. Fans note scripts' errors and omissions, comment on lowered production costs of the series, actors miscasts and so on. Once the errors are found they do not reduce the pleasure of watching. Pseudofans make a strong resemblance to a sort of contempt approach of anti-fans with its irrelevant criteria of critical evaluation such as „reality of life“ concerns.

### **5. Aspects of communication**

We found Czech *Buffy* fans quite similar in issues of reception, identification and fanfiction creative efforts. However, they differ significantly in the way they communicate about series issues. Also, as is usual, they represent different socio-economic and educational status, and a number of communication gaps and schemes appeared during live talks (explanation resignation, a strong insist on using adequate terms when describing series with an articulated need for providing illustrative examples). Some of talks were highly recognizable because of heavy use of specific phrases. Frequently, the *Buffy* case study participants tended to use anglicisms in order to be most accurate in their spoken expressions. Other specific group was created from those who could have precisely described a large number of episodes in its content but they usually withdrew when asked on clarification of series and its representation matters.

Interpersonal communication of (not only) Czech *Buffy* fans flourishes; the fans frequently meet new friends through web discussion groups that make the most of series for their visitors. Although it is apparent that common interest is not enough for inception of a long-term relationship and its permanent growth, there are examples of such a state. At the Czech case of [www.buffy-angel.org](http://www.buffy-angel.org) - which is the principal data source of this case study - there exists a solid hard core of *Buffy/Angel* fans who know each other due to their shared interest which later transgressed boundaries of virtual world. They are united with a number of traumas (concerning family, relationships, sex orientation) which drove them towards the identification with the series characters. Such a community is classified by shared loyalty and confidentiality.

### **Conclusions**

Contrary to the situation of fan research in other countries (namely United Kingdom and United States), Czech research area is still in its infancy when coming to the field of media education and/or fanfiction. Moreover, the educational use of fan culture and its specific outcomes is almost unknown in the Czech Republic. However, seeing the prospective possibilities of the

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field, strong efforts should be made to solidify the position of audiovisual culture within a broader context of both media studies and educational sciences. To conclude the present case study optimistically we firmly hope there is going to be far more less „reasons“ to worry about the presence of both *Buffy* and other popular culture monsters in future education activities.

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#### **Authors affiliation:**

Jana Kratka, Ph.D.  
Department of Education, Faculty of Education, Masaryk University  
The Czech Republic  
E-mail: [j.m.kratka@seznam.cz](mailto:j.m.kratka@seznam.cz)

Patrik Vacek, MA  
Department of Film and Audiovisual Culture, Faculty of Arts,  
Masaryk University  
The Czech Republic  
E-mail: [patrikvacek@seznam.cz](mailto:patrikvacek@seznam.cz)

**Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> J. W. Hesley, 'Using Popular Movies in Psychotherapy'. USA Today Magazine, vol. 129, 2001 (no. 2668), pp. 52–55.

<sup>2</sup> J. T. Pardeck – J. A. Pardeck, *Bibliotherapy. A Clinical approach for Helping Children*. Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, New York, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> D Buckingham, *Public Secrets: East Enders and its Audience*. BFI, London, 1987 (Chapter 4: 'Popular Television and its Audience', pg 154-201);

J. – U. Rogge, *Dětské strachy a úzkosti*. Portál, Praha, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> M Williamson, *The Lure of the Vampire: Gender, fiction, and fandom form Bram Stoker to Buffy*. Wallflower, New York, 2005. pp. 60.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 60.