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Dakota S. Becker

Virginia Commonwealth University

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Progression of the Representation of Female Protagonists in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy Shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Orphan Black*

Dakota S. Becker, Virginia Commonwealth University

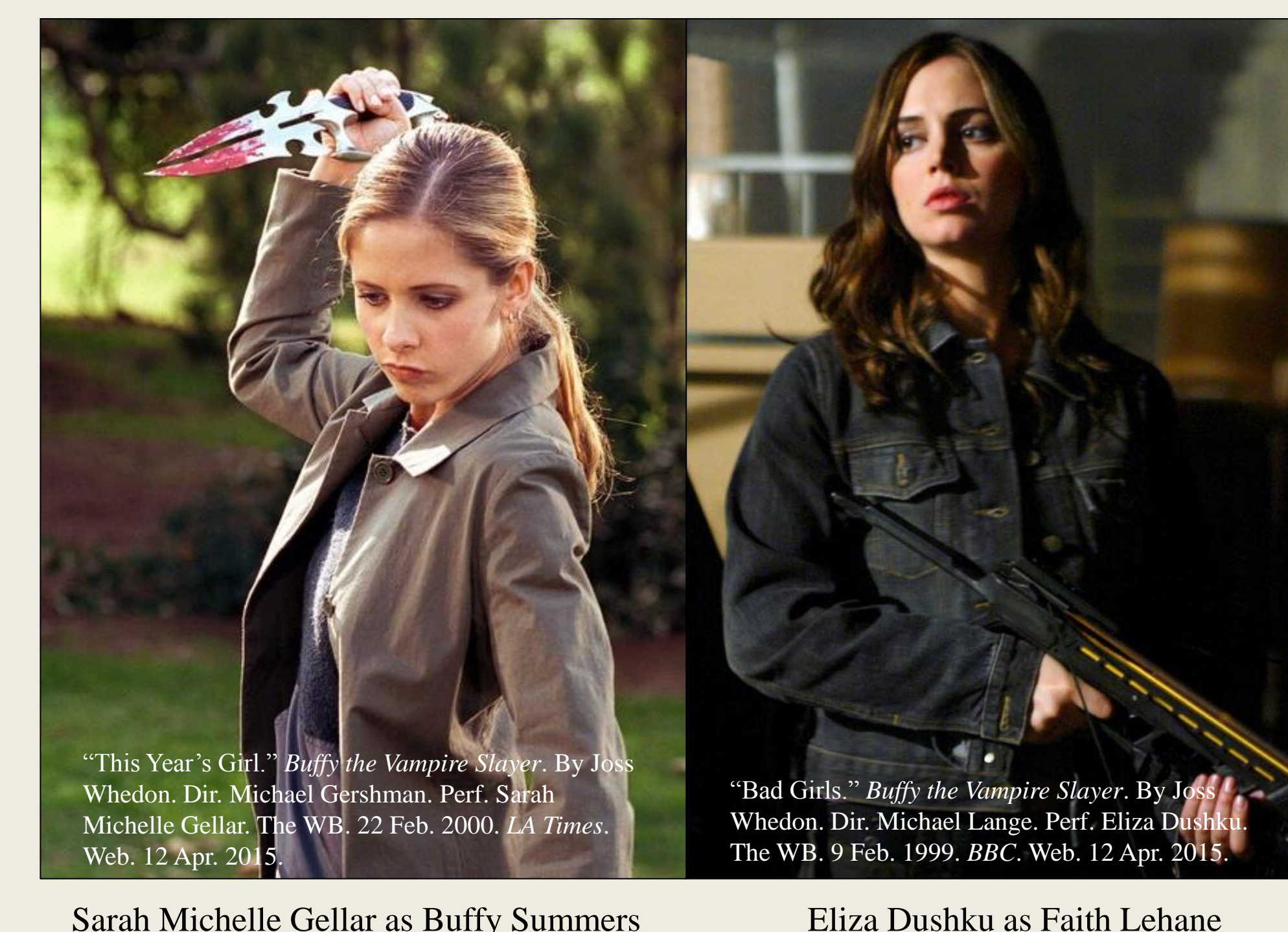
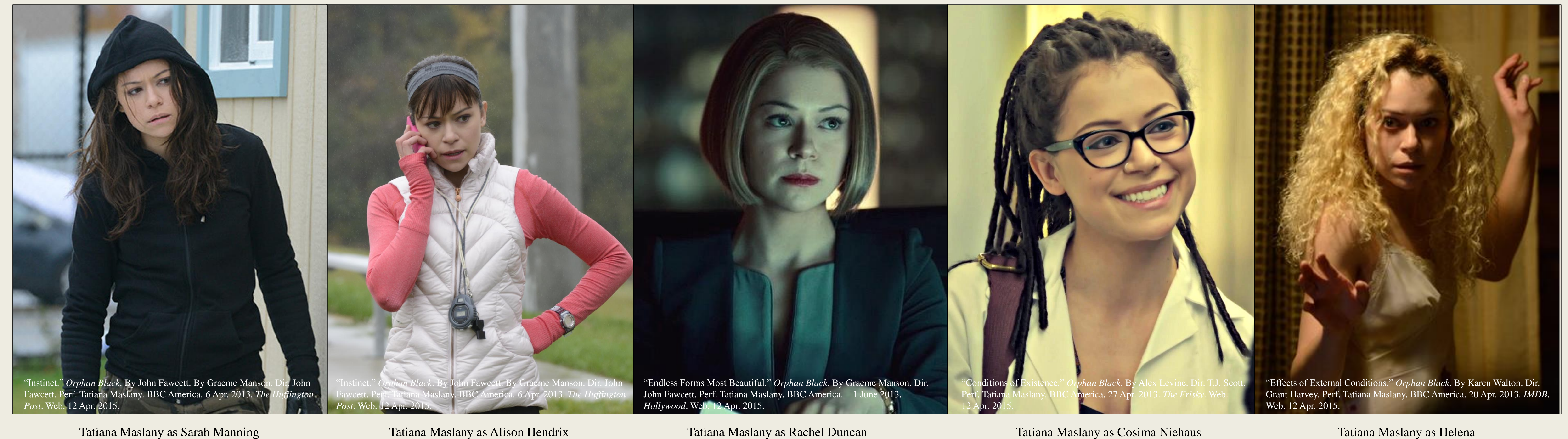
Mary C. Boyes, Faculty Mentor

Introduction

The Sci-Fi/Fantasy genres are heavily permeated by issues such as homophobia, racism, and misogyny. There is an underrepresentation of female leading characters that are dynamic, equipped with a strong sense of individuality, and respectable. A decade ago, *Buffy* reigned as a popular culture icon and a representation of the “Girl Power” movement. *Buffy*’s merits as a feminist series remain heavily debated but nonetheless *Buffy* continues to contribute to the ongoing dialogue regarding the representation of women in broadcast television and the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genres specifically. Subversive shows such as *Orphan Black*, an ongoing series heading into its third season, have been thrust into the spotlight of contemporary culture as worthy of inheriting *Buffy*’s crown. This study analyzes whether or not any significant progress has been achieved regarding the representation of female protagonists by comparing *Buffy* and *Orphan Black* in terms of the Girl Power motif, the depiction of appropriated “masculine” traits in conjunction with femininity, empowered sexuality, and the prevalence of the Heterosexual Script.

Overview

My interest in researching how the representation of subversive female characters, particularly female protagonists, has progressed in the past decade stemmed from my personal interest in *Buffy*. Watching *Buffy* for the first time almost two decades after it aired presented a unique vantage point from which to evaluate the series. I quickly realized that I had underestimated the feminist merit of *Buffy* and was surprised to grasp the fact that *Buffy*’s feminist text, emphasizing the strengths of femininity and the positive role collectivity plays in fighting against adversity, is comparable or, in some cases, significantly more progressive than a number of contemporary broadcast television series. I began to question whether the representation of distinctive, autonomous female protagonists has significantly increased in the past decade or if it is only perceived to have increased. My initial research brought to my attention an article drawing a connection between *Buffy* and *Orphan Black*, which acted as a jumping off point for further research.



Results

The research reveals that, according to the previously aforementioned criteria, *Orphan Black*, which has not previously been studied academically and which is an ongoing television series, surpasses *Buffy* in terms of empowered sexuality and the presence of heteronormativity and the Heterosexual Script. However, while it is clear that the representation of female protagonists have attained a greater degree of diversity in *Orphan Black*, it is difficult to identify clear boundaries by which to assess the feminist value of these characters. The Girl Power motif is present in both shows, an element of its feminist potential realized with the series’ emphasis on collectivity.

Conclusion

The representation of female protagonists has progressed in the past decade. The extent of this progression is difficult to determine based exclusively on the criteria outlined in this study. Although the results of this study directly relate to the representation of female protagonists in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genres, the results might also be generally applicable to the study of the progression of female protagonists on broadcast television.

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