On a bad week, we reach twenty million people: on a good week, thirty-five.

(Morocco, 2001)

_In series 5, episode 2 of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Buffy enters the front door of her Sunnydale home. Her mother is lying on the couch. The camera pans to the mother. Her eyes are wide open, mouth slack, not breathing. Buffy shakes her mother’s shoulders. No response. She runs into kitchen. Dials 911. ‘Hello. It’s my mom. She’s not breathing …. What should I do? … Do you know how to administer CPR? … It’s very simple. You want to tilt your mother’s head back. Cover her mouth with yours and breath into her mouth. Give ventilations then …’ Buffy tilts her mother’s head back. Pinches her nose. Gives two breaths. Starts chest compressions. ‘1, 2, 3, 4, 5…’ Suddenly a cracking noise. Buffy gasps. ‘Oh God! Hi. Are you there? I broke something …. The paramedics should be there in a moment. You might have cracked a rib. It’s not important…. She’s cold …. The body’s cold?… No! My, MOM! Should I make her warm?… No, if she’s not responding to the CPR, the best thing is to wait for the paramedics. OK?’ Buffy looks out the front window. She hears the ambulance siren. Goes to the front door. Ambulance pulls up. Cut back to mother lying on couch, looking very dead. Buffy sees her mother’s skirt hiked up revealing her slip. Hurries over and rearranges the skirt as the paramedics enter. Paramedic feels for pulse. ‘Getting no pulse…. How long’s she been like this?… I found her… a few minutes.’ Cut to flat line on monitor. ‘She’s cold, man. Call it.’ Paramedics quietly begin to_
pack up. ‘I’m sorry, but I have to tell you that your mother’s dead. It looks like she died a good while before you found her. There’s nothing you could have done.’ Sound of dispatcher on paramedic’s radio: ‘Dispatch 7. We have a 206. What’s your status? … We’re moving …. Right. I’m going to call this. Now the coroner’s office may take a while. In the meanwhile, you should have a glass of water and try not to disturb the body. Do you need anything? Is there someone you can call?’ Buffy sees the paramedics to the front door. Cut to commercial break. Return from break. Overhead shot of Joyce’s body. Head and shoulder shot directly into dull eyes and slack mouth. A pair of hands emerge from screen left and zip her into a body bag.

(Buffy)

Mediated death

Media portrayals of CPR encompass the pathos of the dying victim, the heroism of the individual rescuer, the shiny technology of a powerful science and the tensions within a society that puts guns on the streets and paramedics in ambulances. In the flashing lights of the ambulance, in the image of the body convulsed by electrical shocks and in the glowing line of the cardiac monitor announcing life or death, CPR stands as a sign of the modern: modern life and modern death.

CPR and television grew up together. Network broadcasting in America began to reach a mass audience in the early 1950s and it was in the early 1950s that resuscitative protocols began to coalesce around studies on artificial ventilation. CPR since its inception has exploited the power of the moving image as a tool for instruction, as a means of propaganda and as a form of entertainment.

Instruction, propaganda, entertainment

After acceptance of mouth-to-mouth ventilation at the Armed Forces Conference on Artificial Respiration and Nerve Gas Poisoning in Denver in May 1957, Peter Safar, with help from the US Army, began to make documentary films of his experiments. In December 1957, on live television from New York, Safar demonstrated mouth-to-mouth ventilation on his own wife, Eva, while James Elam narrated. Elam, supported by the Army’s Walter Reed Movie Group, made the film Rescue Breathing in 1959. Several thousand prints were made and dis-