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Mind, Body, Imprint: Cyberpunk Echoes in the Dollhouse

[1] Thematic preoccupations about the connections between embodiment and technology appear in several contemporary television narratives. Recent examples are the extensive debates about versions of "humanity" in *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-09), explorations of transformation through cybernetics in *The Bionic Woman* (2007), and questions about the nature and relationship of mind, body, and soul in *Dollhouse* (2009-10). All these preoccupations can be found within texts of "classic" cyberpunk from the early 1980s onwards: for example, films such as *Blade Runner* (1982) and *The Matrix* (1999), science fiction novels like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Pat Cadigan's *Synners* (1991), and more recent "mainstream" fiction such as David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004). All these narratives share a preoccupation with the oppositions of technology, nature, mind, body, masculine and feminine. These narratives also share with cyberpunk a long historical Western preoccupation with artificial embodiment, ranging from Greek philosophy to the Enlightenment, and reflecting similar concerns. Anxieties about embodiment, for example, have found expression in the image of dolls, mannequins, statues, automata, androids and, more recently, the cyborg. Thus, the doll Olympia in E.T.A. Hoffman's gothic story "The Sandman" shares a symbolic history with the cyborg assassin Molly in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, with the rebellious replicants in *Blade Runner*, with the fabricant Sonmi-451 in Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, and with the doll Echo and others in *Dollhouse*.¹

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[2] In addition to this shared symbolic history, these narratives also share thematic preoccupations regarding embodiment and technology. Cyberpunk narratives interrogate the status of the organic and the machinic, and present bodies that are augmented or improved in various ways. They also question the degree to which minds and bodies can be separated. All these questions can be brought to bear on the ways embodiment and technology are presented in *Dollhouse* and can serve as a valuable frame of reference for the entire narrative of the television series. This essay will explore the connections between some key tropes of cyberpunk texts and the narrative of *Dollhouse* and will demonstrate the way in which reference to cyberpunk themes serves to deepen understanding of key elements of the television narrative.

[3] Cyberpunk narratives have often been criticised as unproblematically technophilic texts, in which “the border between the organic and the artificial threatens to blur beyond recuperation” (Hollinger 205). These narratives often turn away from “imperial adventures [in space, towards] the body-physical/body-social and a drastic ambivalence about the body’s traditional—and terrifyingly uncertain—integrity” (Csicsery-Ronay 188). Several critics challenge this apparent technophilia, and instead see cyberpunk narratives themselves as texts that query attitudes to technology (e.g., Balsamo, Nixon, Cadora, Harper, Calvert). Instead of reading these texts as presenting the acceptance of technological processes and giving an untroubled, positive view of their impact upon the embodied self, these critics read cyberpunk narratives as problematising the relationship between technology and the body. So, for example, cyberpunk’s reconstructed and challenging bodies can be read as a reminder that “bodies are never nonmaterial,” and as a form of embodiment that “rebukes the disappearance of the body” (Balsamo 39, 33). In “classic” cyberpunk narratives like *Neuromancer* and *Synners*, it is possible to find extensive questioning of the body’s augmentation through technology and consistent re-validation of the importance of embodied existence (Calvert 42-3). Hacker characters, whether male like Case in *Neuromancer* or female like Sam in *Synners*, may make attempts to

escape into virtual worlds, but they are consistently returned to their own corporeal existences.

[4] More overtly technophilic attitudes have been observed in relation to real-world virtual reality systems, where the rhetoric of disembodiment is seen to persist. Margaret Morse summarises this rhetoric as a “contemporary fantasy” which questions “how, if the organic body cannot be abandoned, it might be fused with electronic culture” (Morse 126). Morse and others stress the fact that a body must be involved in the access of virtual reality: “[i]t is as if the apparatus of virtual reality could solve the problem of the organic body by hiding it. Yet the organic body as a problem [...] has only been made momentarily invisible to the user” (Morse 141). N. Katherine Hayles challenges the fantasy of disembodiment by stressing the “crucial role that the body plays in constructing cyberspace. [...] [I]t is obvious that we can see, hear, feel, and interact with virtual worlds only because we are embodied” (1), and this is echoed by Rosanna Stone’s assertion that “[t]he original body is the authenticating source for the refigured person in cyberspace: no ‘persons’ exist whose presence is not warranted by a physical body back in ‘normal’ space” (609). For Hayles, “[f]eminist responses to a construction of cyberspace as an escape from the body are enacted along a spectrum of resistance, from contestations of what physicality means to reinterpretations of what it means to reconfigure the physical body with virtual stimuli” (15). In such re-readings of cyberpunk and virtual reality, embodiment becomes the central focus. “A universality or essentiality which seeks to think the subject minus its corporeality” is judged to be “as theoretically untenable as the notion of a body devoid of all discursive and cultural delimitations” (Bronfen 117). In cyberpunk narratives like *Neuromancer* and *Synners*, it is this corporeal body and its context—the embodied world in which it exists—that is central. While much of *Neuromancer* follows the hacker Case, a character who believes that virtual reality gives him a freedom he could never have if he remained bounded by his body, the narrative constantly draws him back to the “meat” of his own corporeal reality. Cadigan’s *Synners* presents a scenario similar to *Dollhouse*, in that its

narrative focuses on the creation and adoption of new technology ("brain sockets" allowing links to virtual reality) which disrupts boundaries between body and mind. As in *Dollhouse*, this technology is immediately manipulated in the service of big business, and runs out of control. The focus of the narrative, however, is not upon accepting and celebrating the new technology, but upon using embodied existence within a specific context in order to bring the new technology under control, a task in which the hacker Sam plays a central role when she invents a new virtual interface that draws its power from her own body.

[5] *Dollhouse* exhibits many of the themes central to discussions of cyberpunk and virtual reality. We see especially the examination of positive and negative attitudes towards (new) technology, questioning of the supposed opposition of mind and body, and the interrogation of forms of embodiment including performance, masquerade, and augmentation. The basic situation of *Dollhouse's* narrative, the establishment of "houses" in which individuals agree to have their personalities removed and their bodies "imprinted" with other, created personalities, certainly raises questions of "what it means to reconfigure the physical body with virtual stimuli" and of whether it is possible to create "a body devoid of all discursive and cultural delimitations" (Hayles 15; Bronfen 117). Another key point within the narrative space of *Dollhouse* is that however "programmable" individuals may appear, they are also always physical bodies that must be fed, cleaned, exercised, and given medical attention.

[6] The use of technology in *Dollhouse* is firmly presented as positive by those who are in control of its use. Phrases such as "we help people become better people" and "we give people what they need" are frequently uttered by *Dollhouse* boss Adelle DeWitt in interviews with prospective clients and by programmer Topher Brink as he prepares to create various imprints. In this, again, it is possible to trace a link to cyberpunk narratives where characters often have positive views on technology. In particular, characters often see technology that offers augmentation linked to virtual reality—like the access to cyberspace in *Neuromancer* or to brain sockets in *Synners*—

as an improvement upon life that is “restricted” to the organic body. In *Dollhouse*, this positive attitude is also imposed on the experience of the dolls, as when DeWitt insists, “[W]hat we do helps people. If you become a part of that it can help you” (“Ghost” 1.1). The process of “volunteering” (another loaded term) to become a doll is thus cast as a kind of spiritual journey and given a veneer of altruism while the volunteer period is represented as a gap of time of which the individual will hardly be aware, after which the original personality is restored, the individual is given a sum of money and “normal” life resumed. All this is called into question as the narrative progresses.

[7] The imprint process itself is presented—again from the point of view of those in control of it—as clean and simple both in terms of the surroundings of the imprinting (“treatment”) room and the process enacted upon the dolls summoned there. The room itself is shown as empty except for the imprinting chair, and no electrodes or other intrusive devices are attached to the doll during the process. This is an advancement introduced by Topher; an earlier version of the chair has the doll connected by wires to the head (“Epitaph One” 1.13). Further technological apparatus is viewed in positive ways from the point of view of those in control of the Dollhouse: implants in the back of the neck allow dolls to be tracked, apparently for their safety; “biolinks” are maintained so that the doll’s vital signs can be monitored while he or she is on an engagement. Thus, those in control of this technology are able to laud its advancements and benefits because its “clean” appearance allows them to view it and its uses as altruistic “helping” and “doing good.” Indeed they seem amazed that it could be viewed in any other way; Topher, for instance, insists, “We’re good people” (“Needs” 1.8).

[8] However, this technological paradise is not sustained, and it is clear from early in the series narrative that the viewer is not to accept the positive version (we might see this as spin or sales pitch) of the imprinting process. In the first episode of the series (“Ghost”) the imprinting room quickly becomes a nightmare place when Echo finds a new doll, given the name Sierra, in the chair; here, she is linked to the chair with a web of wires that have been inserted not only into her

head but also over her entire body. The room is in low light, while noise and flashes of light punctuate Sierra's gasps and cries of pain as her original personality is "wiped" to allow her to work as a doll. Echo's voicing of the truth—"she's not asleep...she hurts"—is overlaid with Topher's platitudes and lies—"We're making her better. In a little while she'll be strong and happy and she'll forget everything about this"—while this conversation is punctuated with further electronic flashes from the imprint room so that the viewer clearly understands that Sierra is still being subjected to pain in the chair. The unease of this scene is only emphasised when a later episode reveals that the doll known as "Sierra" is in fact an artist called Priya, who was kidnapped and so never "volunteered" to become a doll ("Belonging" 2.4). The chair and the imprint room are similarly shot in an episode in which former security head Dominic has his personality "wiped" before being taken to "the Attic," a mysterious place where the bodies of damaged dolls and enemies of the company are held ("A Spy in the House of Love" 1.9). Here, in addition to the low lighting with flashes of bright light, the scene is also shot with a hand-held camera, making it indistinct, off-balance, and difficult for the viewer to interpret. That this is a fearsome fate is underlined by Dominic's suicide attempt in the chair, as well as his muffled screams and the frozen expressions of the other characters present. The Washington, D.C. imprint room under the control of Bennett Halverson is even more overtly a place of pain and torture, as Bennett deliberately and (it seems) unemotionally inflicts pain on Echo ("The Left Hand" 2.6). These examples from *Dollhouse* link to cyberpunk narratives in which an initially positive view of technology is stripped away to reveal a far more complex and threatening perspective. In *Neuromancer* the "paradise" of virtual reality becomes a darker and more difficult environment, and it has an impact on both bodies and minds; in *Synners* this virtual space and its technology actually threaten to destroy civilisation.

[9] Like the notion that individuals "volunteer" to become dolls, the idea that a doll can leave the Dollhouse for a "normal" life is called into question as the narrative progresses. Since the former doll retains "active architecture" within their brains, the possibility remains that

they could always be called back into service, and this is made apparent with Rossum's "Mind Whisper" project in which former dolls are recruited as soldiers with the ability to share thoughts, sound, and vision ("Stop-Loss" 2.9). Former dolls will also be affected by any technology that affects dolls in general, as we see with the "remote wipe" Topher creates in "The Public Eye" (2.5), which works on Madeleine (named, as a doll, November) even though her contract as a doll is finished. Furthermore, the personality with which a doll leaves the house on the completion of the contract must also be seen as an imprint, a version of the original personality, preserved from the time that doll entered the house, was "wiped," and was given "active architecture." It is the outsider, former FBI investigator Paul Ballard, who notes that a doll can never really stop being one; his wry comments "once a doll, always a doll" and "no one ever really leaves here" are especially ironic in view of his eventual fate ("The Public Eye"). As in cyberpunk narratives, the consequences of embodied enhancements cannot be erased or forgotten; Molly in *Neuromancer* will always be a cyborg, the characters in *Synners* will continue to have the ability to connect to virtual systems, Sonmi-451 cannot cease to be a fabricant, just as Roy Batty and the other replicants in *Blade Runner* will always be artificial constructions.

[10] The language of computing plays an important role in *Dollhouse's* narrative, and helps to reveal the way in which, as in cyberpunk narratives, the mind or brain is often privileged over the organic body. Those controlling the Dollhouse and its processes use the language of computing to refer to the dolls, describing them as "glitching" or needing to be "wiped" or "scrubbed" like computer hard drives. This is underlined when Topher and his Washington counterpart Bennett are referred to as "the programmers." The mind/brain is privileged and clear connections made between the way the dolls are viewed and aspects of computing or cybernetic technology. In an extended use of vocabulary across the entire episode "Needs," DeWitt, Dr. Saunders, and Topher all refer to "glitches" experienced in the minds or memories of the dolls, while Dr. Saunders proposes a way of treating "open loops" in their memories, and Dominic points out that

they have “no kill switch, we can’t shut them down.” During the experimental process that makes up the bulk of the episode, Echo confronts Topher and demands that he explain what he does to people in the Dollhouse; his reply, “I put them in a chair and I program them” is both chilling and revealing. He continues to use computing vocabulary to explain his role, insisting “our brains are natural motherboards...I just hack the system.” Here, the location of “glitches,” “loops,” and “program” is the minds/brains of the dolls, where the “active architecture” allows the imprints to be installed. The focus is upon the mind/brain, not upon the bodies of these individuals. The Season Two episode “The Attic” (2.10) shows this focus very clearly: the mind/brain creates a nightmare world where individual fears are played out and these fears have clear and fatal effects upon the body. The mind/brain has such prominence that once an individual is killed in a nightmare, that person is dead in the real world. However, this Cartesian supremacy is overturned in a number of ways as the episode progresses—another feature common to cyberpunk narratives.

[11] Thus, it is possible to trace two distinct, contradictory viewpoints in the narrative of *Dollhouse*: mind over body versus body over mind. We see a privileging of the mind over the body in the way the dolls are viewed as interchangeable, “empty” bodies that can be filled indiscriminately with whatever personality is demanded by the clients. (For example, when Topher asks for a test subject in “Haunted” [1.10], he is somewhat randomly given Sierra simply because she has “been the longest without an engagement.”) However, these bodies must exist so that the Dollhouse’s work can be carried out, and these bodies continue to exist, whether or not they contain the personalities of the imprints. Again, there are links here to cyberpunk narratives. The “replicants” of *Blade Runner* and the “fabricants” of *Cloud Atlas* are seemingly interchangeable bodies created for specific purposes. It is an advantage that they be without self-awareness or personality, for these are entities created specifically to carry out tasks that are either too dangerous or too tedious for humans to perform. Making connections between the dolls of *Dollhouse*, the replicants of *Blade Runner*, and the fabricants of *Cloud Atlas* also reveals an implication of

slavery (also noted in Coker 230). Possibly the strongest cyberpunk connection here, however, is with the "meat puppet" episodes of *Neuromancer* in which the cyborg assassin, Molly, earns the money for her cybernetic enhancements by renting out her body as a prostitute. During these episodes, she is playing whatever role her clients wish while her mind is absent; she is fitted with a "neural cutout" (*Neuromancer* 175), which leaves her awake but with no awareness of what her body is doing. As a "meat puppet" she is only a body, and she describes the process as a "[j]oke, to start with, 'cause once they plant the cut-out chip, it seems like free money [...]. Renting the goods, is all. You aren't in, when it's all happening" (*Neuromancer* 177). Molly's dissociation here is expressed in Cartesian terms, in which the self is located in the mind, not the body: "You aren't in." This "meat puppet" demonstrates a complete separation of mind and body, an absence of "self" in the transaction of sex and, as is revealed, violence; it thus makes a clear connection with the role of the dolls within the Dollhouse.

[12] Yet, embodiment cannot be avoided, and in the narrative of *Dollhouse*, continued physical existence appears to be as important as the technological modifications that allow individuals to become dolls. If this were not so, surely dolls could be stored when not needed, much as those incarcerated in the Attic are stored in a blank state.² However, a constant in all episodes of *Dollhouse* are the lives of the dolls within the Los Angeles house, between engagements. Here, as they sleep, take showers and saunas, exercise with yoga or tai chi, have massages and receive medical treatments, and are "served five-star cuisine" ("Epitaph One"), the mind/body opposition shifts, and the life of the body predominates. The blank state in which the dolls remain between engagements, which DeWitt calls "tabula rasa" or "doll" state, gives them a childlike and non-intellectual demeanour. They can have simple conversations and carry out basic tasks (including painting and tending bonsai trees), but they are treated as individuals who need to be protected and guarded from the outside world. The emphasis, then, is on a healthy, *physical* life, a life of the body and not of the mind (although sex is ruled out for dolls between

engagements). Dolls who are unhealthy, who are injured or disfigured as Claire/Whiskey and Tony/Victor are disfigured by Alpha's knife ("Omega" 1.12), are unable to "be their best" and work on engagements. Again, this kind of privileging of healthy but mindless embodiment and rejection of injury or pain is present within cyberpunk narratives: Molly once injured is not an assassin but an invalid in "an ornate Victorian bathchair [...] bundled deep in a red and black striped blanket [...]. She looked very small. Broken" (*Neuromancer* 295); while Sonmi-451's embodied function as a server at a fast-food restaurant is fatally compromised when she "ascends" to self-awareness and can no longer maintain the required mindless state (*Cloud Atlas* 205-6). Stone's assertion that "[t]he original body is the authenticating source for the refigured person in cyberspace" is echoed here, as the dolls' healthy physical existence is the source for all the imprints with which that self is programmed (609).

[13] In contrast to the language used by those in control of the Dollhouse, it seems clear that the "imprinting" process carried out upon dolls is also physical, and has embodiment at its core.³ Unlike the body in the healthy but blank "doll" state discussed above, this process does not separate mind and body but is a melding of the two, a transforming process that affects the entire person and personality. Furthermore, there is evidence that the body can "remember" aspects of particular engagements even when that memory has been removed from the doll's mind (referred to as "muscle memory" by Echo ["Meet Jane Doe" 2.7]). There are several examples of imprinting that affects the physical self: in different engagements and scenarios Echo is made short sighted ("Ghost"), blind ("True Believer" 1.5), and is persuaded her arm is broken ("The Left Hand"). There is also evidence that the imprinting process *gives* memory to the body. For instance, Echo is able to ride (race) a motorcycle ("Ghost"), shoot rapids in a canoe ("The Target" 1.2) and of course fight in spectacular fashion in many different episodes, showing that she has been imprinted with "muscle memory." This is apparent, too, with other dolls. Sierra heads a SWAT team, brandishing a weapon in each hand ("Ghost"); Victor in the character of Roger fences with DeWitt ("A Spy in the House of Love");

and possibly most spectacularly, November as Mellie becomes an assassin and kills a man twice her size ("Man on the Street" 1.5). Even during the experiment in "Needs," Echo can remember enough to fight and incapacitate another handler, and she knows how to use a gun. Embodied memories surface in the behaviour of dolls: Victor remembers to look for Sierra as they go to their pods to sleep ("Needs") while Echo gives Richard Connell's "shoulder to the wheel" salute in the last shot of "The Target," even though she is meant to be in "doll" state. Thus, the experiences of embodiment are shown to have more influence upon individuals than the imprints alone. While this could be seen as a feature of Echo's "special" ability to control and remember her imprints, it is evident that other dolls are affected by their embodied or "muscle" memories. This suggests that the corporeal body can process and even override its programming and can reconnect aspects of body and mind. This presents another link to cyberpunk, where bodies that have been augmented with technology have the potential to unite oppositions of mind, body, nature, and machine.

[14] Specific fight scenes also present aspects of programming as it affects embodiment. In two fight "spectacles" in the episode "Man on the Street," the viewer is shown dolls in combat according to their engagement programming. The composition of shots and the choreography of the fights demonstrate the capability of each doll and the way in which their individual imprints have had dramatic effects upon their embodied capabilities. When Echo and Paul Ballard fight in the Chinese restaurant, the encounter is presented in terms of spectacle, with fast movements from actors and stuntpeople, swift camera movement and choppy cutting, together with drum-heavy dance music on the soundtrack. The sequence with its martial arts and dance references echoes William Gibson's cyborg character Molly, who approaches combat like a dancer or an actor playing a role. Molly, like Echo, uses her programmed enhancements to best her opponents with a fighting style that is explicitly described as performance, as "a slow, deliberate dance choreographed to the killer instinct and years of training" and as a representation of "every bad-ass [cinema] hero"

(*Neuromancer* 253-4). In "Man on the Street" Echo's supremacy in the encounter is never really in doubt, from the moment she knocks Paul to the kitchen floor and is shot from below, looking down at him with a knife in her hand, to the similar shot that ends the sequence, with Paul on the ground in the alleyway, Echo's boot on his back. However, the fight finishes, not with Paul's defeat, but with Echo's programmed speech warning him away from the Dollhouse. Thus the expectations of a resolution to the physical fight are undercut as Echo and Paul cease fighting and move to a verbal confrontation. I note that even here, Echo has the upper hand with the programmed knowledge about the Dollhouse and even, it appears, programmed awareness that a police officer will appear exactly at the right time to be wounded.

[15] Within the same episode, November as Mellie is "switched on" as an assassin with a script uttered by DeWitt. This sequence contains some significant contrasts with the Echo/Paul fight a few minutes earlier. The camerawork is still choppy and fast, but the soundtrack plays slow, elegiac classical music, and the camera follows Mellie as she is thrown about and dragged across the floor. She is clearly placed in the position of victim as the camera looks down on her as she struggles with former Dollhouse handler Hearn, who has apparently been sent to kill her. This, together with the music and choreography, works to persuade the viewer that Hearn will succeed in killing her, and also to heighten the surprise once DeWitt activates her. Once Mellie becomes the assassin, the position of the fighters is swiftly reversed, with Hearn ending in the "victim position" thrown to the floor and his neck broken across the low coffee table. The two fight sequences in this episode demonstrate extreme examples of the separation of body and mind that is seen to varying degrees across the whole narrative. Echo is first programmed to fight and then to deliver a verbal message to Paul; November is turned into an assassin following a recitation of words and retains no memory of the physical feat she has performed once Hearn has been dispatched. The versions of programmed embodiment seen here allow an individual to exercise extraordinary abilities and apparent power but, more than anything, reveal the empty body behind the imprinting process. It is in fact this

kind of extreme mind/body separation that is challenged as the narrative continues.

[16] Throughout *Dollhouse's* narrative, we see Echo's evolution and growing control of her imprints, which in turn has an effect upon her body. Echo's ability to access and use her "muscle memory" is demonstrated in "The Public Eye" and "The Left Hand," in which, as in "Gray Hour" (1.4), Echo is "wiped" and apparently returned to "doll" state. Yet, in contrast to her behaviour in "Gray Hour," Echo is fairly coherent and able to function, even to drive a car. Whereas in "Gray Hour" she huddles on the floor repeating the line "Can I go now?" from her handler script, in "The Public Eye" she is able to access her embodied memories of action (fighting and especially dodging) so that she can attempt to defend herself against handler Cindy Perrin. This is displayed as flashbacks of the relevant action, which appear before Echo repeats each movement. Thus, when DeWitt agonises about Echo "lost in the world in doll state, utterly helpless" at the end of "The Left Hand," her analysis does not accord with the evidence, and this is borne out in the following episode when Echo has reached a stage of control over her various imprints and is able to make relatively successful use of their different skills ("Meet Jane Doe"). So, by the conclusion of "Meet Jane Doe," we see that Echo's control of her imprints is a physical control and that Echo no longer returns to the empty "tabula rasa" state but is, as Boyd insists, "a person" in her own right ("Stop-Loss"). I read this as a reuniting of mind and body on Echo's part. As in cyberpunk narratives, Echo has taken active control over her mental and physical states and is using her embodied augmentation (in this case, her imprints) in an active and purposeful way; she insists, "I made me" ("Stop-Loss"). In the same way as in cyberpunk narratives, *Dollhouse's* narrative challenges the notion of the separation of mind and body.

[17] In addition to this, the notion of the "natural" body is complicated and becomes overlaid with the concept of performance or masquerade. A regular viewer sees the doll characters take on different personalities together with different physical capabilities. At the same time, a regular viewer experiences the successive unmasking

of characters as dolls, which in turn encourages doubts about the integrity of all of the characters, any of whom may turn out to be a doll. This process begins early in Season One with Victor as Lubov and continues with November as Mellie and, most dramatically, Claire as both the doll Whiskey and as Dr. Saunders. These unmaskings are occasionally made to the viewer before other characters are aware—for example, viewers see Victor and November in action as dolls before Paul Ballard knows that they are dolls; thus, the regular viewer gains an advantage over characters in the narrative.⁴ The dolls can be seen to be playing a role, to be masquerading as a particular personality (Lubov, Mellie, Dr. Saunders); so, the performances observed challenge the idea of embodiment as “natural” and unchanging.

[18] The idea of performance or masquerade is particularly emphasised in those cases where the doll is imprinted with a “whole,” pre-existing personality, especially if it is a personality that has previously been featured in the narrative. Here I include Echo as Margaret whose imprint is intent on solving her own murder (“Haunted”), Victor as Topher (“The Left Hand” and “The Hollow Men” 2.12), Paul as a version or doll of himself (“The Attic” and following episodes), the girl “Iris” who is imprinted as Caroline (“Epitaph One” and “Epitaph Two: Return” 2.13), and especially Claire/Whiskey as Dr. Saunders (revealed in “Omega”). When, for example, Echo takes on Margaret’s personality, the “original” or “real” Margaret has already been seen at the start of the episode, and there is, in fact, a double layer of performance at work, as Echo/Margaret proceeds to impersonate a fictional friend in order to gain access to the family and to solve Margaret’s murder. The imprint gives Echo an affinity with horses, but we also see Margaret following her own customary routine at bedtime—a different sort of “muscle memory.” In the case of Claire/Dr. Saunders, the imprinting process has given her a particular set of skills which are also rooted in embodiment. She has an embodied dexterity that would normally come through “muscle memory” and the gradual, cumulative learning process of studying for a medical degree. Claire/Dr. Saunders is able to care for the dolls and others in the house, dress and stitch wounds, and speak to the dolls in

an apparently solicitous way. Yet here I find the notion of "performance" undercut,⁴ at least in Season One, by the way that Claire/Dr. Saunders appears to have a distinct personality that is not the same as the older, male Dr. Saunders (at least according to the glimpses in "Omega"). While some traits remain (for example, they both offer the dolls lollipops after giving medical attention), Claire/Dr. Saunders presents an independent character whose strong opinions about the care of the dolls appear to be informed, at some level, by her own experience as a doll. This chimes with Paul Ballard's insistence that it is impossible to "wipe away a person's soul...who they are, at their core" ("Omega"). It is possible that the personality of Claire/Dr. Saunders can be explained only by the continued existence and influence of her "core" self, her "soul."⁵ Once again this accords with cyberpunk narratives in which characters continue to retain their own "cores" or "souls" despite body augmentation or disembodied feats in virtual reality. The hackers Case and Sam have their respective strong personalities whether they are in virtual state or not. In *Cloud Atlas*, Sonmi-451 arguably develops a "soul" along with her self-awareness, while the image of replicant Roy Batty with a dove towards the end of *Blade Runner* also suggests the presence of a "soul."

[19] The "whole personality" imprinting process, in turn, challenges and threatens to overturn the boundaries between life and death. Imprints of personalities are "resurrected" into new bodies, as with Margaret and Dr. Saunders who have died. This is done in a similar way for those incarcerated in the Attic; Dominic, needing to be questioned, is put into the body of Victor ("Briar Rose" 1.11). This also gives rise to a kind of duplication with personalities of those neither dead nor "wiped"; for example, Rossum head Clive Ambrose appears simultaneously in the body of Victor and in the bodies of other dolls ("Epitaph One"), and Topher uses Victor to create a "twin" which allows him to be in two places at once ("The Left Hand"). Attitudes towards these resurrections or duplications are fairly consistent through different episodes. Dominic's questioning is represented as entirely disturbing and upsetting for all those involved, and Dominic himself screams and resists when he realises he is not in his own body.

Boyd, Topher, and DeWitt all display unease or distaste for a process by which "we can give you life after death" ("Haunted"), and DeWitt's confrontation with Ambrose gives the clearest evidence that she will resist the new "complete anatomy upgrades" service, especially since she asserts, "You cannot have that body...it belongs to another *soul*" ("Epitaph One," my emphasis). Despite the comic overtones of Victor as Topher, by the conclusion of that episode it is evident that Topher is troubled by the presence of another self who tries to argue that he should be allowed to stay in Victor's body, and wipes his duplicate quite abruptly.⁶ All these examples resist the separation of body and mind, particularly the notion that the mind can have an existence independent of one particular body. We see this as a central theme in cyberpunk narratives in which various attempts to create a disembodied virtual world where the mind exists without the body end in failure or catastrophe. In *Synners* and *Neuromancer* characters are able to maintain a purely disembodied existence only for a limited time; in *Blade Runner* and *Cloud Atlas* the attempt to create empty slave bodies cannot be sustained. Where characters manage a kind of virtual existence, this is presented as a limited way of being and no match for the full experience of embodiment in the corporeal world.

[20] The consequences of the separation of mind and body in *Dollhouse* are shown towards the end of the series. Finally, it is Echo's body, not her mind or her ability with her imprints, that is the focus for Rossum founder Boyd Langton and for the version of his co-founder represented as Clyde 2.0; indeed Clyde states, "The mind doesn't matter; it's the body we want" ("The Hollow Men"). Echo is subjected to an intensely physical and painful process to extract her spinal fluid, which contains the "cure" for those who have been imprinted. The focus on the empty body is fully realised in the dystopian future of "Epitaph One" and "Epitaph Two: Return," where individual personalities are "wiped" creating blank "dumbshows," bodies are transformed into soldiers through mass imprinting, and Rossum boss Matthew Harding has his mind transferred into a succession of bodies he refers to as "suits." We also see the use that individuals known as "tech-heads" are making of the imprinting technology, downloading

various abilities into their own bodies. The connection with the imprints of the Dollhouse is brought into focus when Priya challenges Tony on his use of the technology, accusing him of “[choosing] to be Victor” (“Epitaph Two: Return”).⁷ With all these examples there are clear links with cyberpunk narratives. The augmented bodies of the “tech-heads” echo the cyborg bodies of Molly in *Neuromancer* and the hackers in *Synners*; the empty bodies of the “dumbshows” echo the replicants of *Blade Runner* and the fabricants of *Cloud Atlas*; while the transformation of the technological discovery of imprinting into a threat and finally a weapon that destroys civilisation is a narrative paralleled in *Synners*. Like *Dollhouse*, its conclusion focuses on ways to rebuild communities and reaffirm embodied experience. Furthermore, its characters recognise that the dangerous technology cannot be forgotten or un-invented, something that has not yet been fully accepted at the end of *Dollhouse*.

[21] I see *Dollhouse*'s ultimate narrative challenge to the mind/body opposition in the version of reality presented in the episode “The Attic.” The Attic is a supposedly disembodied place: those imprisoned there have had their personalities wiped, and their bodies are stored in individual rooms, connected to computer terminals that monitor their vital signs. The “reality” for these people is entirely virtual, taking place within their own minds. Furthermore, these bodies and minds are being used to power Rossum's huge mainframe computer. Here is another clear cyberpunk link to *The Matrix*: in that narrative, too, human bodies are used as generators to power the computers that have taken over the world, while human minds are given a virtual dreamworld to keep them docile.⁸ For those inside the Attic's virtual reality there is confusion about what is real and what is nightmare. The various nightmare experiences are grounded in embodiment with extremes of heat and cold (in Tony's and Echo's nightmares) and images of the body including feeding and dismemberment (in Echo's and the Japanese man's nightmares), corpses (in Priya's nightmare), and attacks with knives and guns throughout. Physical sensation is emphasised; for example, when she is first attacked, Echo tries to persuade herself that “the Arcane” is

“not real” only to be flung to the floor and gasp, “That’s real--that’s very real.” Similarly, Echo and Dominic engage in a hyped-up action sequence of a fight which is complete with characteristic “action-hero” fighting moves like running up walls and spinning kicks executed in mid-air, and which again is reminiscent of some of the impossible action sequences in *The Matrix*. In this *Dollhouse* episode are further links to cyberpunk narratives, especially to the notion of a virtual world to which some characters have access. In Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, the character Case attempts to escape from his body into the virtual world, but this eventually provides him with a way to reconnect with his own embodied self and to be “reborn” into his own body, “his own darkness, pulse and blood [...] behind his eyes and no other’s” (310). Similarly, Cadigan’s *Synners* includes Sam, the hacker character who uses her own body to power a link to a virtual world. Here again, not only virtuality but control of the virtual experience becomes a means to reaffirm embodied life. In *Dollhouse*, embodiment provides the way out of the Attic through (virtual) deaths that nevertheless appear and seem to feel real. Paradoxically, the deaths of the virtual bodies allow the characters to rediscover and reanimate their own bodies in the real world.

[22] It is evident that the narrative of *Dollhouse* as a whole raises questions about the connections among mind, body, and imprint. The notion that mind and body can be regarded as separate entities is consistently challenged and complicated, in much the same way as in narratives of cyberpunk fiction. It might be argued, however, that the conclusion of the series in “Epitaph Two: Return” does appear to undercut some of the preceding validation of embodied experience. While the majority of the characters are reconnected with their own personalities in their own bodies, with Echo’s download of Paul’s imprint we see more of a possibility for the privileging of mind-only transcendence than has hitherto appeared. Once Echo⁹ has carried out the download, she is able to keep Paul’s and her own personalities separate. Crucially, Paul appears to accept this new awareness, with a laugh (something rarely seen in his embodied persona) and a reference to “a lot of baggage” that he now seems happy to reveal to Echo. This

is in sharp contrast to his reaction when he was revived from brain death by being imprinted with a version of himself; then, his first words were a strangled "what have you done to me?" ("The Attic"). At the conclusion of "Epitaph Two: Return," Paul's downloaded imprint is visually represented in a concrete and corporeal way, with both Echo and Paul as embodied, inhabiting a space in which they can move about and converse face to face. It is implied that their relationship can continue to develop, despite in a disembodied state; this could be read as a superior state to the embodied transformations revealed elsewhere, and this is troubling in the context of the overall *Dollhouse* narrative.

[23] Yet perhaps this "transcendent" connection could be resolved with reference to comments made about "the soul," which appear throughout the narrative. "The soul," defined by Paul as "who [you] are...at [your] core" is, in some sense, the "real" self. I have discussed this in the case of Claire/Dr. Saunders, who appears to retain aspects of her "real" self alongside her imprinted personality. This appears elsewhere in the narrative, too: Alpha, for example, retains some memory of the power plant where his original personality took the women he had abducted ("Omega"), and he takes pains to avoid the return of this particular "soul" ("Epitaph Two: Return"). For those imprisoned in the Attic, whose personalities have been "wiped," the notion of "soul" as real self is particularly important. Without the soul, these individuals' virtual existence remains a paradox: where do the memories come from that are transformed into nightmares? That the individuals continue to retain some of their memories, and indeed are seen to have degrees of agency within the virtual world, supports the notion that the "soul" continues to be present. In the concluding moments of "Epitaph Two: Return," the fact that Paul's and Echo's personalities remain separate and—to an extent—intact may also support this reading. Furthermore, at this conclusion of the series, embodiment is reaffirmed elsewhere, for instance in the future of Priya, Tony, and their son, who are all looking towards a future free of augmentations through imprinting. And whether Echo and Paul indeed "transcend" embodied life and validate the presence of the "soul," it is

evident that this transcendence requires at least one body to make it possible. Thus, the blending of these two personalities in the final moments of the series may indeed represent the successful combination of all aspects of self, including the soul.¹⁰

[24] Reading *Dollhouse* alongside cyberpunk narratives allows particular aspects of the television series to be clarified. While cyberpunk as frame of reference is only one of many possible ways to interpret *Dollhouse's* narrative, it is one that illuminates the narrative's central preoccupations. *Dollhouse's* narrative accords with cyberpunk's in its examination of the impact of technology upon individuals and communities, its interrogation of the ethics of technological development (for example, technology that begins as a means to improve lives and ends as a weapon of war), and in the way that the separation of mind and body causes chaos and destruction, which is resolved when the two are reunited. Connections with cyberpunk narratives can also help to resolve apparent contradictions or paradoxes in *Dollhouse*, such as the ability of the body to remember information imprinted on the mind, or the continued presence of the "soul" within an apparently empty body. At its conclusion, as in cyberpunk narratives like *Synners* and *Neuromancer*, in *Dollhouse* any possibility for enhancement through technology is underpinned through corporeal existence and the creation of new communities. Thus, the battle that most of the characters join is a battle to achieve a balance among the different aspects of personality and embodiment: mind, body, imprint, and soul.

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¹ I choose the term "doll" over the term used by those in control of the Dollhouse, "active." "Active" implies agency and choice, while "doll" more accurately reflects the status of these individuals while subject to the imprinting process and its consequences.

² That this is not common to all houses is suggested by Bennett Halverson's comment, "You let them roam [...] like free range chickens. We keep ours [in the D.C. house] more like veal" ("Getting Closer" 2.11).

³ The personality imprints bring into question other aspects of embodied existence, such as the "inscription" of bodies with different kinds of dress. Inscription through dress is evident (and at times fairly ridiculous) in the way that dolls with different imprints are costumed, a process we see most clearly through Paul Ballard's eyes (in "Belle Chose" 2.3). How a personality is expressed through dress or costume is also represented most compellingly in "Needs," where Echo, Victor, Sierra, and November find their way into the wardrobe warehouse and choose clothes for their original or near-original personalities. Significantly for what is revealed later about their original

personalities, while Echo, Sierra, and Victor dress themselves in dark-coloured trousers and shirts or t-shirts, November selects a pale, flower-printed dress and a pair of sandals, dressing herself for the role of "mother."

⁴ Conversely, characters in the narrative know that Claire is a doll a very long time before this is revealed to the viewer.

⁵ Editors' note: Elements of Dr. Claire Saunders' personality can also be attributed to Topher's programming choices; see their heated discussion in "Vows" (2.1), after she has discovered her status as a doll.

⁶ Furthermore, in "Epitaph One" there are two kinds of "performance" as two versions of Claire are present: the people of 2019 meet "Whiskey" while in flashbacks another "Claire" appears. In Season Two, Claire is shown to be imprinted as "Clyde 2.0," a version of Rossum's co-founder. Each individual is presented as a distinctive embodied personality.

⁷ Despite Priya's accusation, it must be noted that Tony becomes a "techhead" precisely in order to fight for the survival of Priya and other individuals and to deny the power of the imprinting technology. In the same way as the hacker Sam in *Synners* uses her own body to "hack the system" and restore it, Tony "becomes" Victor to undermine and destroy the system that gave him that technology.

⁸ In an interview, Whedon has stated, "the first *Matrix* is my favourite movie ever."

⁹ Despite signposting in "Epitaph One," Echo is not renamed "Caroline" at the conclusion of the narrative. This does not seem to be an omission, but rather a comment on the way the many imprints/personalities, including Caroline's, have now been integrated. Again, this could be read as an affirmation of the reconnection of mind and body.

¹⁰ Editors' note: On the idea of the soul elsewhere in Whedon, see Scott McLaren; see also the endnote on McLaren in Connelly/Rees, this issue.