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**“Disgust, Difference, and
Displacement in the *Dollhouse*”¹**

[1] Consider the premises on which the *Dollhouse* is based: The more money you have, the more freedom you have. The more power you have, the more people you control. While you’ve heard of brainwashing before, the Rossum Corporation offers something new: *brain-wiping*. They’ve developed an electronic device that erases people’s brains, strips them of their will, and reprograms them so that they don’t even know it happened (unless that’s part of the *imprint*). A properly programmed person will do your bidding though, as far as they know or care, act under their own volition. Complete compliance without constant coercion—what’s not to love? Rossum’s *actives* are yours to rent for some special event: “Army of One” anyone? Or perhaps you would like one to take the place of your late wife? Your *doll* will love you and every minute of her time with you, if that’s what you desire. Your *engagements* are monitored at a discreet distance to safeguard your privacy as well as our assets. For most, the *Dollhouse* is just an urban legend. But for those who can afford to buy Rossum’s unique services, this *tech* is most gratifyingly real. So, who are *you*? Are you smart enough to be working for Rossum already? Are you rich enough to be one of their clients? Or are you one of the numberless nobodies destined to become some Somebody’s doll? How we answer these questions sheds light both on what it means to be human, in general, and a unique person, in particular. By taking the premises of the *Dollhouse* seriously, we get to know ourselves better, both as individuals and as members of an extended family.



[2] Let’s suppose the brain-wiping and imprinting technology actually exists but you don’t have access to the tech yet. What do *you* do next?

- a) I don't want any "dolls," gross, but I will do whatever it takes—lie, steal, cheat, kill—to make damn sure nobody messes with my brain!
- b) I don't want to hurt anyone, so I'm doomed. Maybe when I'm a doll, my body will have access to better healthcare than I can currently afford.
- c) Rossum must be destroyed by any means necessary—even if it means letting them wipe my brain so I can take them down from the inside!
- d) Destroyed, are you crazy? This tech is our ticket to immortality! How much will my new body cost when the one I'm living in wears out?
- e) All this talk of people programming is completely fantastic, totally impossible and morally repugnant. Do you *really* expect me to take this ridiculous question seriously?

If you choose (e), then *Dollhouse* is not for you. As the series develops, characters grapple with all of the above. I grant that people-programming is morally repugnant, but will not grant either "completely fantastic" or "totally impossible." Some might think that this ethical quandary is mostly theoretical because technology of this kind could never exist; but this contention is born of ignorance regarding recent developments in neuroscience. Consider, for example, what Saey (2010) reports in **Science News**: "Optogenetics allows scientists to manipulate neurons instead of just observing them."² The University of Reading told **Science Daily** in 2008,

A multidisciplinary team ... has developed a robot which is controlled by a biological brain formed from cultured neurons. This cutting-edge research is the first step to examine how memories manifest themselves in the brain, and how a brain stores specific pieces of data.

Neuroscientists are making steady headway in the direction of the *Dollhouse* tech, and we must not fool ourselves into believing that slavery is a thing of the past. It isn't.³ The fact that the *Dollhouse* premises are not so far-fetched may be bad news, but the good news is that there are better answers to the "what do you do next?" question besides a-e.

[3] I do not *expect* you to take this question seriously.⁴ But if you join me on my tour of the *Dollhouse*, we will visit three tableaux. In the first we consider *Disgust*: in particular, how repugnant behavior challenges us to confront fears of contamination and the vulnerability of our selves as permeable beings. In the second we consider *Difference*: for while human beings share many fears, our reactions to these fears vary wildly. In the third we consider *Displacement*, or the shift in perspective on the familiar by means of the fantastic. The *Dollhouse* is a dark fantasy about desire and belonging that challenges viewers to see their relationships to technology and to one another anew. When we look at ourselves from the displaced perspective of the *Dollhouse*, we discover that we are fragile and flawed creatures, subject to forces beyond our comprehension that threaten to destroy everything we hold dear. However, we also see that when we hold each other dear, there is no possible technology, no power in the 'verse, more efficacious. Individual humans may be frail and largely fictional beings, but our shared capacity for humanity is mighty fantastic and totally real.

Disgust: "I can see a monster's shadow, monster in my head"⁵

[4] The creator of the *Dollhouse* does not have fans so much as followers. In "**Whedon's World**," Franklin (2009) notes, "the image that comes to mind isn't of worshippers before an idol but of a chatty gathering of like-minded souls, who have come together to form a community." We looked forward to *Dollhouse* before it premiered. When the show first aired in February 2009, many of us were not only disappointed, we were *disgusted*.⁶ For all its action-packed shininess, "Dollhouse" seemed to be a euphemism for *high-end whorehouse catering to creepy clients with deep pockets and shallow morals*. The show was dark and disturbing: Can you enjoy watching pretty young people be used to gratify the twisted desires of rich people

without being a complicit pervert? Some fans cried “Fox!” and insisted early episodes were no good because of network interference.⁷ Others claimed they did not really enjoy the first episodes (*we are not complicit perverts, dammit!*) but watched only because they had faith that the Creator would transform this disgusting dross into the television brilliance for which he is so beloved.⁸ As Grossman (2009) wrote in “**Dollhouse: It’s Not That Bad,**”

There is a sense of mourning. It's not just that *Dollhouse* isn't that good, but that its very not-goodness seems to prove something more sinister about the universe—the very fact that Joss Whedon can produce something non-awesome suggests that something has gone terribly, cosmically wrong.

When lead actor and co-producer Eliza Dushku went on series premiere press tour, ‘**stick with it—it gets better**’ was her official line (qtd. in Tobias).⁹ Fans were initially invited to distinguish themselves from the masses the network sought to seduce with a flashy new thriller featuring high-speed chases and damsels in all kinds of disturbing distress. The pilot featured kidnappers on a boat, a little girl locked in a fridge, a bit of bondage and Dushku on the dance floor in a dress short enough to race a motorcycle in (viz., a shirt). The show did get better, even as it lost more viewers than it could attract as each new episode delved ever deeper into squicky territory.¹⁰

[5] Consider the contrasts mentioned thus far: informed vs. idiot viewer, fan vs. Fox, mind vs. body. To what extent does the *Dollhouse* depend on these differences? Not much, really. In characteristic fashion, Whedon’s narrative first proposes then subverts its own premises. At the outset we were invited to see ourselves as sophisticated outsiders, but by the end we recognize ourselves as complicit insiders. Dushku was right: the show gets better. But there were two hurdles to be cleared before viewers could really enjoy the series: (1) “technical difficulties” and (2) “who’s my hero?” For some viewers, the show raised too many technical questions about the relationship between memory and identity. Many people think there are only two choices when it comes to the way we think about mind and body: either they’re the same thing or they are not. According to

dualism, mind and brain are largely distinct things with radically different properties.¹¹ On this view, to suggest that mind A can be put in body B just by zapping B's brain is to ignore the human spirit that transcends this mortal coil. You cannot alter the soul of another person by tampering with their bodies. Yet, from brain trauma survivors to better living through chemistry, today's neuroscience suggests that dualism is self-deluding.¹² In contrast, **identity theory** claims that mental states are the same things as brain states.¹³ That is, memory, desire, and learned behaviors are all manifestations of neurological patterns. Rearrange those patterns and you change who someone is. Rossum's founders are committed to identity theory. Yet, by working within that paradigm, they not only free their minds from their bodies, they deliver e-copies of themselves to the regional branches of their business on computer *wedges*, get imprinted on the doll of their choice and deliver announcements 'in person' to all the houses at once—suggesting identity theory is self-defeating. That is, if minds can be recorded digitally and programmed to run on multiple brains, then minds are radically different from brains after all. Thus the first hurdle: If dualism is true then the tech is impossible; if identity theory is true then the tech is possible. But if the tech is possible, then dualism becomes true! Paradox much? Either way, the tech seems to rule out any hope of eternal salvation or a heavenly hereafter. Life after death is possible—but only if your mind takes up residence in someone else's body. The very idea of body-swapping disgusts those who prefer to take their immortal souls and free wills for granted rather than consider that both might be convenient fictions or arbitrary constructs subject to the manipulation of others.

[6] The brain-wiping and re-imprinting process was not a particularly challenging hurdle for Whedonists. We take neither souls nor salvation for granted and have a high tolerance for paradox. Our biggest problem was a lack of heroes and cheer-worthy moments. People good, vampires bad: once upon a time, it used to be so simple. Buffy was the hero of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* while Angel, the vampire with a soul, was the hero of *Angel*. The captain and crew of the *Firefly* series and *Serenity* film are flawed but heroic humans.¹⁴ When the *Dollhouse* premiered there was no one for whom to cheer. The show is about a place, not a person or a crew, and a nasty place at that. Dushku plays Caroline, a reckless youth so committed to

option (c), Caroline's Crusade, that she gets turned into vapid doll, Echo, who becomes different people depending on the imprint of the week. Everyone who works in the Dollhouse is creepy; everyone who doesn't work there denies it exists. The only exceptions to these rules are seriously flawed and hard to like. The FBI agent out to bring the house down means well—but he's so obsessed by his quest he doesn't even notice the nice girl next door who adores him. The ex-cop who handles Echo's engagements seems to care about her. But usually when you love someone you don't enable her enslavement as a sex object by going to work as her *handler*. We loved Whedon's other shows so much because his characters love each other so much. We don't need to agree, so long as we share the power and look out for one another. Responsibility brings remorse but makes redemption possible. Together we shall save the world, or at least live to fly another day: Whedon's cult following feasts upon these nourishing narrative themes. In contrast, *Dollhouse* seemed to offer only empty calories: not so much a dystopian fantasy with a heart of gold, but a bleak portrait of wretched humanity with very little heart whatsoever.

[7] Over time, the *Dollhouse* grows a heart but it emerges so stealthily its pulse is nigh inaudible early on. Consider the first truly great episode, "Man on the Street" (1.6), featuring Mellie, the nice girl next door. FBI agent Paul Ballard relents to her lasagna-laden advances and lets her in on his quest. She agrees to help, despite her obvious jealousy over his fixation with a photo of Caroline. He starts to fall for Mellie, and we begin to think maybe there's some warmth worth watching here after all. But this comfort turns cold when Paul goes for post-make-out takeout and Rossum sends a rapist to kill Mellie and scare the agent off the case. Or at least this is what we think is happening, as we watch in helpless anguish as Mellie is thrown about like a rag doll (wearing nothing but Paul's shirt). But then the phone rings, and the ice-cold voice of Adelle Dewitt, head of the LA house, is heard over the answering machine. She speaks a secret code to activate the assassin lurking within Mellie, *Manchurian Candidate* style. She kills her assailant with savage efficiency. While it does not lack for poetry, the scene does not make us cheer. It's not like watching Buffy choose to destroy some demon from hell with bonus smack talk. Mellie survives only by becoming a mindless homicidal automaton with nothing to say. She doesn't kill in self-defense;

she, or rather It, just kills. Later when Paul asks her what happened, “Mellie” doesn’t know. How could she? She’s a fictional character created by Rossum to keep tabs on an external threat. Turns out, Dewitt had two concurrent agendas: Scare the agent off by terrorizing his newly planted love interest and rid herself of a rogue handler who was raping another active, Sierra, in her helpless doll state.

[8] The warmth shared between Mellie and Paul is brief. The sweetest parts, where she sighs in delight rather than recoils in horror, are hard to savor. Paul may or may not fall for her, but she is programmed to love him no matter what. Their affair has barely begun, and we already know this relationship is not going to end well. What redeeming virtues could such a filthy romance have? According to **Martha Nussbaum** (2010),

Disgust relies on moral obtuseness. It is possible to view another human being as a slimy slug or a piece of revolting trash only if one has never made a serious good-faith attempt to see the world through that person’s eyes or to experience that person’s feelings. Disgust imputes to the other a subhuman nature. (xvii)

In “The Target” (1.2) a creepy outdoorsman rents Echo out so he can hunt her down like a deer. Are we disgusted by this episode because this creep is subhuman? Well, many of us would rather impute to him a subhuman nature than try to see the world through his eyes. Further, one wants to protest that he started it by treating Echo as subhuman in the first place! Even so, “he started it” is a child’s excuse, dismissed the world over by wise mothers as largely irrelevant to questions of whether “it” is an ethical choice. Does Mellie’s love for Paul disgust us because, as a doll, she is subhuman? Possibly, but only if we think free will and continuous uninterrupted memory are essential to our humanity. Since dolls appear to lack both, they are helpless, hollow, and less human than human beings—or so it would seem. But can we really respect the humanity of a psychopath? Can we make a good-faith attempt to see the world through a doll’s eyes? Not only do I think we can, I think we must. As Nussbaum notes, it is not easy. We can only learn to see one another as human “through an exercise of imagination. Humanity does not automatically reveal itself to strangers” (Nussbaum xvii.). There is a robust sense of humanity at play in this series, revealed but

slowly to those willing to put their imaginations to work. Can we watch pretty people be used to gratify the twisted desires of rich people without being complicit perverts? I do not think so.¹⁵ Also, the “who’s my hero?” hurdle that must be cleared before people can become intimate fans of this series is considerable. The challenge is not that we must see the world through the eyes of a slave, master, serial killer, or mad scientist. What is really disturbing about the *Dollhouse* is the way it provokes us to see ourselves, in all of our deviant detail, as unique yet monstrous amalgams of all of the above. As Whedon noted, in his interview with Franklin (2009), not long after the cancellation of the show was announced: “It’s supposed to be about the sides of us that we don’t want people to see.”

Difference: “If I’m a monster, I am a willing one / this roller coaster ride is an enticing one”¹⁶

[9] According to neurobiologist **Eric R. Kandel** (2006), “the idea that mind, the most complex set of processes in the universe, might yield its deepest secrets to biological analysis” was “unthinkable” until the 1950s (xi). By mid-decade, scientists, philosophers, and storytellers were exploring this possibility in their work. In 1956, **U.T. Place** published his famous essay, “Is Consciousness a Brain Process?” An early advocate of identity theory, his answer was a resounding yes. In 1957, **Frederik Pohl** published his short story, “The Haunted Corpse” featuring a “polycloid quasitron,” precursor of the *Dollhouse* tech.¹⁷ In Pohl’s story, the military has a mad scientist’s lab surrounded and his invention under armed guard before they understand exactly what it does. Colonel Windermere’s inability to “get it” frustrates Dr. Horn who tries to explain: “The brain, you must realize, is essentially an electrical device” (77). But the military man is not interested in metaphysics. He wants to know what the quasitron does. He initially supposes that the purpose of the device is to electronically kill a man without touching him. The fact that the colonel can’t see the big picture enrages the scientist: “my quasitron... removes...the quantity that we will term x, which, added to the body, produces a man, subtracted from it, leaves a corpse” (78-79). Windermere is a bit slow so he turns to Horn’s assistant for help with this “ghost” business: “Call it life, plus intelligence,

plus soul, if there is such a word in your lexicon, Colonel...Dr. Horn drains them from the body, stores them—can, if he wishes, replace them, or even put them in another body” (79-80).

[10] A-ha! When Windermere finally clears the first hurdle, the military applications are obvious. You could send your own man behind enemy lines inside a captured soldier and no one would be the wiser! He rushes back to the lab to find out whether the Horn Effect has been tested, rigorously and successfully, on human subjects. Dr. Horn fumes:

These ridiculous laws governing the conduct of institutions! I’ve tried, I swear I’ve tried, to be permitted to conduct a simple exchange. A man dying of terminal cancer, you see, and a feeble-minded youth. Why not? Put the sound mind in the sound body and let the decayed parts rot together! But will they let me? (80)

The Colonel approves a human trial, though not on himself. He sees general’s stars in his future for being the guy who brought the Horn Effect to the attention of the Pentagon. After the first successful trial on an AWOL grunt and the colonel’s XO...well, suffice it to say that it is entirely possible that the founder of Rossum is none other than Dr. Horn, inhabiting new bodies and performing alternative identities, for over five decades now.

[11] Brain-wiping and personality imprinting technology means different things to different people. In the Pohl story, the mad scientist sees it as the key to immortality while the colonel sees it as the ultimate in espionage. “Man on the Street” features interviews with assorted Angelinos, each responding differently to a reporter’s query, what do you think of the dollhouse myth? In this episode, we also meet the Internet mogul of “Bouncy the Rat” fame who sees it as an opportunity to re-connect with his late wife, the woman who loved him but did not live long enough to see him make good. The FBI Agent sees it as an unjust violation of civil rights, while Topher Brink, lead programmer of LA house, sees it as the means to eliminate mental illnesses like PTSD and schizophrenia. Dewitt is under the

impression that, because her actives sign a contract with Rossum, their bodies are merely "on lease." Since they will not remember their engagements, what they don't know can't hurt them. In other words, she's a self-deluding administrator whose elegant elocution cannot hide the fact that she's a stone-cold pimp.

[12] Still, over time we learn to love her. In part it's because, for every monster you may imagine, there's always one out there that's worse. Dewitt's a cruel tyrant, but she's no Dr. Horn. Dewitt cares for her dolls, albeit in a paternal and perverse way. She lets them roam the spa-like environs of the LA house when they are not out on assignment. They amble from the pool to the painting area, from tai chi instructor to massage therapist, like so many superfit zombies in hip activewear. They are "free range" in the words of Topher's analog from the DC house who observes: "We keep ours more like veal" ("Getting Closer" 2.11). Adelle sends the rapist to Mellie to be executed: "It did not lack for poetry" is her line, her vigilante style of justice more sympathetic than no sense of justice at all. She's a complex character, "**layerific**" as one fan noted.¹⁸ Dewitt does not judge her clients. In fact, she is a secret customer at the company store. When a Rossum executive shows up at her house in her lover's body, she refuses to let him take it or any other body in her house away because, "They belong to other souls" ("Epitaph One" 1.13). These souls may be in suspended animation on computer wedges while her actives serve out their contracts, but she assumes responsibility for them nevertheless. By the end of the series, when everything goes to hell in a bucket, she shoulders an automatic weapon and leads the charge in an attempt to bring Rossum down, and suddenly I discover I'm gay for guns.

[13] Wait, *what?* I am a heterosexual woman who abhors firearms. Ask around. Love men, hate guns. But the sight of Adelle Dewitt packing heat as she sets out to defend her house turns me on. Now, this experience makes me uneasy, sends me scurrying for excuses. The actor, Olivia Williams, is brilliant, power is sexy, heroism is hot, guns are symbolic—whatever. While fantasy is the business of the *Dollhouse*, it is not its purpose. The purpose of the *Dollhouse* is to see ourselves more clearly, especially those sides of ourselves we are not in the habit of including as part of our personal identities. In my case, "gun-loving lesbian" is not the only "alter" I

recognized while watching this show. I am also a workaholic afraid to leave her office and a mutilating madman, inscribing scars upon my own flesh.¹⁹ I am the one-girl revolution who can integrate it all and the made-up girl next door who just wants to do for her man. *I am a man dying of terminal cancer and a feeble-minded youth*. Dr. Horn and his Rossum cohorts think they can discern the sound parts of humanity worth saving from the decayed parts that should be excised and left to rot. In reality, all of us are mixed-up messes, part brute fact, part pure fantasy. At the outset of the series, there's no one to cheer for, except for maybe one or two folks who might be all right. By series' end, for those who can stand the squicky, there's all of humanity to cheer for, except for maybe one or two folks who are not at all right.

[14] Even then we cannot cheer their demise as the destruction of the monstrous other. Even if they get blown up, we cannot claim victory. We have no idea who that mutilated corpse actually belonged to, and their evil masterminds, for aught we know, are backed up on a wedge somewhere, just waiting to be downloaded into a new body. More importantly, as **Margrit Shildrick** (2002) notes:

In seeking confirmation of our own secure subjecthood in what we are not, what we see mirrored in the monster are the leaks and flows, the vulnerabilities in our own embodied being. ... Moreover, what is at stake in a politics of identity and difference is the security of borders that mark out the places which are safe and which are unsafe, and who is due moral consideration and who is not. But despite the foundational claims, those boundaries are never finally secure, not because the claims of the excluded may become too insistent to resist, but because exclusion itself is incomplete. (4-5)

Human beings are not fixed, but fluid and fragile creatures with permeable borders. For this reason, human freedom is not an all or nothing affair, but a fluid phenomenon that comes in degrees. People have less freedom than they typically realize, yet more freedom than they habitually exercise. What

limited freedom we do have may be demarcated, provisionally, by the choices we make, including the fantasies by which we choose to live. People may choose to watch the *Dollhouse* or not. Many of Whedon's fans chose not to, and it's hard to gainsay this decision. For what we see reflected back to us when we look at ourselves from the *Dollhouse* perspective is neither flattering nor for the faint of heart.

Displacement: "When you're a part of the scientific scene the greatest monster of all is love."²⁰

[15] **Charles C. Benton** is an architecture professor who takes aerial photographs by rigging remote-controlled cameras to kites. It's possible to send a video signal from the camera up in the sky down to the photographer on the ground, but he doesn't shoot that way. He prefers to line shots up in his mind and see what his camera captures only after he reels it back in:

Sometimes you can really think through it and you get what you thought. But more often than not, things are revealed that you didn't anticipate. You're not totally in control. This is probably the most seductive part for me. Just by displacing ourselves, then we get an entirely new perspective on things that are familiar. And it reveals a lot. (qtd. in **MAKE: television Episode 2**)

The *Dollhouse* is a seductive television show that displaces its viewers by giving them a new perspective on the familiar by means of the fantastic that reveals a lot—more, perhaps, than many want to see. As Joss Whedon says, in his interview with Ryan (2009), "My favorite thing is to shake it up...to get people to a different place." Those who would disparage his lack of artistic freedom at Fox ignore the fact that neither auteur nor administrator has complete control over the creative process. As the chorus of "Marked" by Bad Religion reminds us, "everyone you see leaves a mark on your soul." In fact, "everyone you love leaves a mark on your soul," whether they are truly real or barely so. We are in constant collaboration with one another. No matter

how hard you might try to immunize yourself, someone somewhere is always messing with your brain.

[16] As it turns out, option (a) is not all that different from option (e) insofar as they both deny our permeability and vulnerability to the programming of others, their alien ideas and even stranger stories. But what choices remain? Surrender our disposable bodies to the highest bidder? Wage bloody war over who must die and who gets to live in a better body later? Caroline's Crusade can emerge as the most ethical and rational choice by comparison. However, there's no reason to presume our options are limited to the list with which we began. My answer to the "What do *you* do next?" question is to reject the idea of a mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive set of possible responses with only one optimal answer. A short list of conflicting options makes for excellent drama, but in real life we have more choices. As **Alan Ball**, maker of such squicky television as *Six Feet Under* and *True Blood*, notes:

Well-adjusted people who really get it and are able to capably traverse the highs and lows of life without any real upsets or surprises? Those are the people we aspire to be and the people with whom we want to surround ourselves, but, as characters, they are boring. If you look back at mythology and early literature and the narratives of different religions, it's all about the big, crazy stuff and these wildly unconventional families.
(qtd. in Rentilly)

Dollhouse is all about the big crazy stuff, mind and brain, self and other, free will and determinism. *Dollhouse* starts from the premise that traditional dualism is self-deluding. There's no scientific evidence of an enduring immaterial soul that exists independent of the body, yet there are so many ways to manipulate people by tampering with their brains. The *Dollhouse* also shows that identity-theory itself leads to paradox. But if minds and brains are neither the same thing nor different things, how shall we understand human experience?

[17] The philosopher **Galen Strawson** is famous for his denial of free will and an immaterial soul that is independent of the body. In *Mental Reality* ([1994] 2010) he writes, "Experience is as much a physical phenomenon as electric charge" in an echo of Pohl's mad scientist (105). But Strawson does not deny the reality of subjectivity and lived experience: "experience is as real as rabbits and rocks. Indeed, its reality is still, in this post-post-Cartesian age, the thing we can be most certain of" (103). A commitment to the reality of mental experience as a natural, rather than supernatural, phenomenon does not commit us to deterministic materialism wherein everything real is physical and everything that happens is a necessary effect of a prior cause. The mind may not be supernatural, but, as Strawson argues,

[W]e do not know the limits of the natural. ... Most naturalists think that all naturalists must be materialists. But this is true only if everything natural is physical or material. We can't know that it is true unless we make it true by definition. Much is uncertain, and must remain so. (2)

People often think there are only two possibilities: minds and brains must be either (a) exactly the same thing or (b) two totally different things, one material and natural, the other immaterial and supernatural. These two possibilities are seen as mutually exclusive (only one of them can be true) and jointly exhaustive (at least one of them must be true.) But what if neither possibility is true? If so, then what we have here is a false dilemma. The *Dollhouse* escapes between the horns of this dilemma by reminding us that the scope of the natural is broader than that of the physical. Mind and brain are neither independent nor identical things. They are both natural phenomena; but while the brain is a complex organic locus of neurological processes, the mind, in contrast, is an embodied experience and elusive presence that constructs itself from a dimly recalled past and projects itself into any number of possible futures.

[18] The wildly unconventional family that comes into being over the course of the show is assuredly nothing to aspire to, but its members do love

each other in the end. In the *Dollhouse*, people can be programmed to love each other, as we saw in the case of Mellie and Paul, whose relationship ends as badly as it begins. Together they are trying to bring Rossum down from the inside when someone decides to kill the former FBI agent by awakening the sleeper assassin. When Mellie hears the trigger, she fights on cue, quickly rendering Paul defenseless. He may not love Mellie, the girl next door, as much as the girl of his dreams. But he does not want to hurt the woman holding a gun to his head, not even in self-defense. The assassin has him in her sights as he pleads with her, desperate to counter-awaken Mellie. He succeeds. But when Mellie comes to and realizes what she's about to do, she turns the gun on herself and blows her own brains out rather than hurt her beloved. That's how much she loves him. Mellie's story is about love that's true—but it's less with the "Aww!" and more with the "Eww!" Her story is disgusting and her love for him is tragic, but it is no less real than Paul's love for the girl of his dreams, for whom he would sacrifice himself. His love for Echo may seem to be more spontaneous, but it is not unplanned either. Someone sends Paul a file with information about Caroline in the hopes that he will fall in love with her and seek her liberation. Madeline has her brain scrambled by a mad scientist and turns into "Mellie," who cannot help but fall in love with Paul. After a madman mails Paul a video, "Paul" must save the girl, even though chances are really good that she no longer exists. His love story is no less tragic, as the most traditional answer to "who's my hero?" turns out to be the most easily imprinted of them all.

[19] In the *Dollhouse* love can be planned and deliberate, but it can also occur spontaneously. As the series develops, we discover that even those who've had their brains wiped can fall in love with one another on their own. Indeed, *grouping* happens between dolls in all houses, not just in laidback LA. Rossum's solution to this problem is simple. If your dolls start to display feelings for one another, assign them to separate houses. Topher doesn't want to separate Victor and Sierra because he loves how much they love each other. In "Belonging" (2.4) we meet Priya, the woman who becomes the doll Sierra. When she is imprinted as her original self, we discover that this new Priya is not exactly the same as her original self. For when she catches sight of Victor, she is astonished to discover how deeply she loves him even though she is not sure who he is and does not trust her

feelings. She confronts Topher and asks whether her love for Victor is real. Topher confirms that her feelings are not only real but also fully reciprocated: "He loves you back." Those of us in the audience gradually start to care more about Topher precisely because of how much he cares about the inexplicable but undeniable feelings shared by these unlikely lovers: We love how much he loves how much they love each other because love, in contrast with disgust, imputes a human nature to the other. Now, if you're going to run a high-class more-human-than-human whorehouse, you need to separate grouping dolls because true love that transcends conscious understanding is bad for business. When Victor is out on a romantic engagement, he cannot perform because, "I am in love with someone else" ("Stop-Loss" 2.9). He doesn't know who his beloved is, exactly, which isn't surprising since he doesn't know he's a doll programmed to adore "Miss Lonely Hearts" no matter what. The client is understandably furious: This is *not* the complete compliance she has come to expect from her "Roger"!

[20] Her loss is our gain as the *Dollhouse* clears both hurdles in a single leap of faith. That is, what is bad news for the technological slave trade is good news for those who seek more life-affirming alternatives to the grim alternatives with which we began. Love can be deliberate, as in the case of Mellie's love for Paul, or spontaneous, as in the case of Victor's love for Sierra—or somewhere in between, as in Paul's love for Echo. But no love between people is a simple matter of past behaviors. Love is subjunctive, characterized more by what we would do and less by what we have done, more by what we desire and less by what we recall. Dispositions, capacities, and potentials are all natural phenomena that challenge scientists and philosophers alike because they do not refer to what was or what is but to what might be or what could be under varying circumstances. We know Victor loves Sierra, not because of his physical responses to her presence (his "man reactions") but because he means it when he says to his beloved, "there's nothing I would not do for you" ("Epitaph Two: The Return" 2.13). Love is not something that can be pinned down, like a specimen in a jar, or predicted and controlled, like a mechanical device. Love is hard to define from a scientific perspective because it is about possible relationships between embodied beings that inhabit complex interrelated webs of experience wherein *all the possible Victors love all the possible Sierras*.

[21] The *Dollhouse* affirms the post-human intuitions of Shildrick: "In the light of the potential of late twentieth-century biotechnology to radically vary the body, the need to reconfigure relational economies may be of special urgency" (131). However, it also affirms the classical humanist intuitions of Nussbaum, wherein we do not naively take one another for granted as autonomous agents, but love one another and our differences so that subjectivity and agency become more possible for more people. On her view, the *politics of humanity* is

a political attitude that combines respect with curiosity and imaginative attunement....going back at least to the Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero, who used the Latin term *humanitas* to designate a kind of responsiveness to others that prominently included the ability to imagine their experiences. The politics of humanity, as I shall use the term, includes respect. But respect, as usually conceived, is not sufficient for it: something else, something closer to love, must also be involved. (xviii)

Love as imagined here has the power to connect vulnerable selves together in such a way that the whole is mightier than its parts. The *Dollhouse* celebrates love's power, in all its manifestations, from spontaneous to deliberate, from righteous to wretched. Another complex love story of the series develops within Echo as she learns to not only integrate but also love the multiplicity of identities imprinted in her brain. The masterminds at Rossum think Echo is exceptional. As naive materialists, they believe she must possess some special DNA that confers upon her the unique power to resist repeated mind wipes and recall her personality programs. Their tragic flaw is a lack of imagination, for they cannot fathom the possibility that both her resistance and re-integration make explicit the natural powers implicit in all of us. The best answer to the "who's my hero?" question posed above is *humanity*, understood as a kind of imaginative responsiveness and willingness to embrace the other. When we see ourselves from the *Dollhouse* perspective we discover we're all programmable perverts. No wonder ratings

were low! But when we see ourselves from the *Dollhouse* perspective we also discover our shared capacity to cultivate humanity. We discover we have more freedom to love ourselves than we are accustomed to imagine and that our love for one another may be more powerful, albeit mysterious and monstrous, than the most advanced neuroscience possible.

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¹ Many folks helped me write this paper by providing feedback including Alyson Buckman, Estil Canterbury, Jeanne Kusina, Daniel Ansted, Leslie Ann Chambers, my mom, my sisters, and insightful referees.

² This document is a hypertext. In addition to works cited, particular names, titles, and technical vocabulary are in color signifying hyperlinks to either an original source or additional information. Links in the endnotes will take you to websites where you can hear the songs quoted at the beginning of each section.

³The BBC maintains a website that documents modern slavery around the world:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/world/slavery/default.stm.

According to a recent CBS news report, Ohio is at the center of the US child sex trade:
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/02/11/national/main6196454.shtml>.

⁴ Dear Katey Rich at www.cinemablend.com: I am not a "Bad Whedonite"!

⁵ One-Eyed Doll, "**Monster**." Here you can listen to track 11 of the eponymous album. Fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* should note second verse wherein "a monster will take a wooden stake and nail me to the ground," reminding us that who or what is monstrous depends on your point of view.

⁶As "binky" commented on 13 Feb. 2009, "This show is total ick. It's not being subverted or parodied. It's just being really disgusting, thus far:"

<http://princessmc.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=television&action=print&thead=2747>.

⁷ Dan French's post at Tube Talk provides a useful timeline of the show's production, air-dates and cancellation. "Phil from Hampshire" commented on 13 Nov. 2009: "Dollhouse started really badly, mostly due to Fox's interference:"

<http://www.digitalspy.com/tv/s63/dollhouse/tubetalk/a186477/was-it-right-to-axe-dollhouse.html>.

⁸ Comments by "Ask Rachel" from 13 Feb. 2009 were echoed all over the web: "I'll definitely be tuning in next week but only in the hopes that it will get better and not because I was impressed by what I saw tonight:"

<http://www.televisionaryblog.com/2009/02/talk-back-series-premiere-of-foxs.html>.

⁹ For example, see interview with Scott Tobias posted on February 27, 2009, wherein Dushku advises "diehard fans" to "take it through episodes six through 13, because that's where I feel Joss got to take the reins back a little bit. And the show really gets pretty remarkable at that point." She predicts folks will come around: "once we sort of hit that place where the show takes off, I think it's going to be important to send some screener copies back out there to some of the reviewers that maybe didn't jump on board the first time around, or some of the diehard Joss fans that felt they were missing his voice in some of the first shows. Because his voice is back, and it's loud, and it's as exciting as ever once we get rolling." <http://www.avclub.com/articles/eliza-dushku,24418/>.

¹⁰ Neologism combining "squeamish" and "icky." On 2/14/10, a Google search for "Joss Whedon" "Dollhouse" and "squicky" yielded over 29,000 hits.

¹¹ Dualism asserts that everything is one of two kinds, for example, either matter or spirit. This view takes on particular significance in the philosophy of mind with respect to the differences between brains and persons. For more see the Stanford Online Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry by Howard Robinson ([2003] 2007):
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism/>.

¹² A brief history of neuroscience can be read in Chapter 8 of Kandel (2006), "Different Memories, Different Brain Regions." The chapter starts with his observation, "In a large sense, learning and memory are central to our very identity. They make us who we are" (116) and continues with the story of how memory, in particular, becomes a variety of distinct faculties with specific locations in parts of the brain. So, for example, after H.M. had his hippocampus removed in 1953, "he was unable to convert any new memories into

permanent memory" (127). Today, anesthetics are given to patients facing traumatic surgery so that they can experience temporary anterograde amnesia. To learn more about different kinds of chemically caused amnesias see K. K. Jain's ([1998] 2009) article, "Drug induced memory disturbance," at <http://www.medlink.com/medlinkcontent.asp>.

¹³J. J. C. Smart begins his (2007) Stanford Online Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry thus: "The identity theory of mind holds that states and processes of the mind are identical to states and processes of the brain. Strictly speaking, it need not hold that the mind is identical to the brain.... Consider an experience of pain, or of seeing something, or of having a mental image. The identity theory of mind is to the effect that these experiences just *are* brain processes, not merely *correlated with* brain processes."

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mind-identity/>.

¹⁴ And, as one referee remarked, even **Dr. Horrible**, the protagonist of Whedon's online musical in three acts, is endearing despite his penchant for evil, because we are sympathetic to his thwarted attempts at love and glory.

¹⁵ Consider the provocatively titled essay by Michael Narkunski, "Dollhouse makes rape sexy in the good way." Is it possible to explore the darker side of human nature without cultivating that same darkness? Narkunski writes, "it is obvious that what happens in the dollhouse may be disgusting, maybe even more-than-disgusting, but also appropriate for the disgusting world we live in." Viewers do not agree on this point as comments on his essay show:

<http://nyulocal.com/entertainment/2009/02/27/%E2%80%9Cdollhouse%E2%80%9D-makes-rape-sexy-in-the-good-way/>.

¹⁶ Bad Religion, "**Marked**." This hyperlink takes you to a live-version of the song.

¹⁷ There's a **radio adaptation** of Pohl's story archived online. Note also Richard Condon's novel, **The Manchurian Candidate**, was first published in 1959.

¹⁸ Comment posted by Daphne on 7 Sep. 2009 at the Adelle Dewitt fan forum hosted by Fox:

<http://dollhouseforums.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=24&t=1461&st=0&sk=t&sd=a&start=0>.

¹⁹ "Compulsive Skin Picking (CSP), also called pathological skin picking, neurotic excoriation, or dermatillomania, is defined as the habitual picking of skin lesions or the excessive scratching, picking, or squeezing of otherwise healthy skin is a poorly understood disorder:" http://www.psychnet-uk.com/dsm_iv/skin_picking.htm.

²⁰ We Are Scientists, "**The Method**." The last track on their 2002 album, like all of their recordings, is available for free download at their website:
<http://www.nebulizemymind.com/music/music.html>.