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“This One’s Broken”: Rebuilding Whedonbots and Reprogramming the Whedonverse

[1] Despite its disconnected parts, Joss Whedon’s *Dollhouse* is more than an amalgam of earlier Whedon themes and figures. Instead, it ascends, in a sense, to represent a new stage for postmodern television. *Dollhouse* is a series that plays with and at programming. Because the dolls are imprinted and subjected to memory wipes, their identities are transient, changeable, and interchangeable. As programmed human beings, they appear as a new version of the bots represented in Whedon’s television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly* and film *Serenity*. *Dollhouse* reconfigures the Whedonbots to experiment with both the characters’ identities and narrative form throughout its two seasons. Yet it also demonstrates that there are limitations to the series’ design and execution. The academic in “Man on the Street”



(1.6) describes the idea behind the Dollhouse, saying, “Every part of you that makes you more than a walking cluster of neurons dissolved at someone else’s whim,” and identifies the threat that, if that technology is used, “we will be over. As a species, we will cease to matter.” In *Dollhouse*, Whedon utilizes his bot to a new end, to become a representation of programming that ostensibly is self-conscious and provides a telling look at the medium. Both corporeal people and robotic creations, Whedon’s dolls show how we are more than clusters of neurons, how television cannot, should not, cease to matter.

[2] “Man on the Street” is an episode that offers a metacommentary on the series by providing different theories about the existence and function of the Dollhouse. This episode is representative of what is at work throughout the series. *Dollhouse*, in such metafictional moments, bares its device, exposing itself as a

fiction, and, in the process, highlights what is at work in televisual programming. This should not be surprising; other Whedon series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Firefly* contain and perhaps are even defined by such moments. What is unique to *Dollhouse* is the way in which the programming of the dolls, their characters and narratives, becomes more than the content of the series to become representative of the series itself.

[3] While “Man on the Street” offers characters’ perspectives on the reality and unreality of the Dollhouse, the unaired episode “Epitaph One” contained on the Season One DVD and “Epitaph Two: Return” (2.13), the Season Two and series finale, present a different perspective with a post-apocalyptic return to the Dollhouse. In their fractured narrative divided over two seasons, the two epitaphs allow the characters, not mere “men on the street,” to reflect on the idea of Dollhouse, the place and the series. In “Epitaph One,” the characters Mag and Griff enter the Dollhouse and discover the imprint chair that Topher Brink uses to program the dolls. Griff says that although the memories seem to be ordered, the method of whoever set it up was unorthodox. Just as Mag and Griff work to understand the function of the chair in “Epitaph One,” the viewers of *Dollhouse* decipher its meaning and significance throughout the series. In its design, the chair allows both the imprint and the memory wipe. As much as the desire to forget is at the source of *Dollhouse*, the series illustrates the importance of remembering and even, if forgetting has begun, resisting the memory wipe. The words “To Remember,” featured in “Epitaph One” and “Epitaph Two: Return,” remind us of that. The story behind the original pilot, “Echo,” provides further evidence. Unaired but included on the Season One DVD, this lost “Echo” provides a solid map for the series and character. Our protagonist, the Active Echo, is a composite of the personalities and memories that Topher imprints upon her and that are supposedly erased. Yet Echo retains traces of those personalities, complicating the function of the Dollhouse over the series’ two seasons.

[4] Echo is like the series itself—fractured and fragmented. In the Season One episode “Gray Hour” (1.4), Echo is on an engagement

as an art thief, but, as a result of a remote memory wipe caused by Alpha, the renegade and psychotic doll who escaped from the Attic, she becomes childlike and incapable of action. When Echo tells her accomplice Walton that the Picasso-esque painting in the vault is broken, Walton introduces the idea of being broken "on the inside." Walton says that the function of art is to show us who we are and this painting shows us that we "start off whole, then somewhere along the line, the pieces start to slide," making us broken ("Gray Hour"). Walton's words reflect how *Dollhouse* functions like the painting; it is a reflection of our world and our fragmentation in the narrative medium of television. At the end of "Gray Hour," Echo recreates the image from the painting in the steam of her mirror, superimposing its lines on her reflection. While "Gray Hour" presents a broken Echo, the series works with the sliding pieces. At the end of Season One, in the episode "Omega" (1.12), Alpha helps Echo ascend by making her a composite of all of her imprints, fragmented yet whole. Although the experiment fails for Alpha, making him broken, Echo's ascension becomes symbolic of the series; it illustrates how the broken dolls of *Dollhouse* and the broken narratives of the series can be put together to make meaning.

[5] Designed by the Rossum Corporation and refined by Topher Brink, the dolls' programming can be read as an evolution in technology and form with a prototype found in the earlier Whedonbots. The Whedonbot is an important piece to the puzzle that is *Dollhouse* as the series' self-reflexivity leads back to itself and to earlier Whedon series. The origins of the Whedonbot can be found in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with the Buffybot and its prototype April. The Buffybot performs as a type of foil to highlight the significance of Buffy's role within the series. Initially, in its creation, the Buffybot is like *Serenity's* lovebot Lenore because the Buffybot is created as an object of Spike's desire. While Warren had created April as a model of the perfect girlfriend, once he finds a real girlfriend in Katrina, he abandons April ("I Was Made to Love You" 5.15). In contrast, because Spike cannot have Buffy, he forces Warren to create the Buffybot as a simulation of the real Buffy ("Intervention" 5.18). But she cannot perform like the "really real" Buffy. When the bot asks Spike, "Should I start this

program over?," Spike replies, "Shh! No programs. Don't use that word. Just be Buffy" ("Intervention"). In Seasons Five and Six, the bot appears as Buffy, fooling the Scoobies in "Intervention" until the real Buffy returns from her quest to find the First Slayer and herself. Buffy says to the Scoobies, "[S]he's a robot. She acts just like that girlfriend-bot that Warren guy made. You guys couldn't tell me apart from a robot?" ("Intervention"), asking an important question for her friends and for the viewers.

[6] Although, at the end of "Intervention," Buffy tells Spike that the Buffybot was "gross and obscene" and is now gone, it is resuscitated and reprogrammed in "The Gift" (5.22) in the masterplot against Glory and then again once Buffy dies. But, again, the Buffybot is revealed to be an inadequate substitution. Although the viewer is tricked into thinking that Buffy has returned (or is at least confused for a moment) in "Bargaining, Part 1" (6.1), when the bot's language program evidences a "glitch" (with the fabulous line "That'll put marizpan in your pie plate, bingo"), Xander says that they want her to "be exactly," and it is Spike who retorts, "She'll never be exactly." Even the malfunctioning Buffybot highlights the problem with the substitution, saying, "'If we want her to be exactly she'll never be exactly I know the only really real Buffy is really Buffy and she's gone' who?" ("Bargaining, Part 1"). Bronwen Calvert writes, "The acknowledgement that 'the only really real Buffy is really Buffy'... is a confirmation of the Buffybot's inability to act as a replacement, while the script's repetition of 'real' strongly emphasises the group's belief in a 'real' or 'ideal' Buffy" (par. 17).¹

[7] The problems with such a substitution become more explicit when Buffy returns from the dead and witnesses or even causes the dismemberment of the Buffybot. Right before the Buffybot is dismembered, she mouths Buffy's name, as order is restored and she (though silently, noticeably) announces her return. But Buffy's return from the dead to her formal life is problematic; as Spike puts it, she "came back wrong." Calvert writes, "Quite soon after her resurrection, she comes to recognise her own 'programming' and the extent to which she is 'going through the motions' of her own life—her recognition, in

fact, of the performance of slaying (“Once More with Feeling” [6007])” (par. 20). Even though Tara assures Buffy that there is nothing wrong in “Dead Things” (6.13), Season Six presents a broken Buffy that is put back together in Season Seven. While the teleological end of the series animates all Slayers so that Buffy is not the only one, in the last shot of the series, Buffy is central to the frame and storyline.

[8] In *Dollhouse*, Whedon radically reconceives the form and function of the bot. The Buffybot works well as the prototype for the Whedonbot as it appears as the first version and it exists and functions as a robot. It is a double for Buffy that is revealed to be a poor imitation in the arcs of the individual episodes and for the storyline of Season Six. In *Firefly*, Joss Whedon recreates the bot in the form of River, a programmed girl who, like the bot and like Buffy herself (once her mother dies and she returns from the other side), is broken. Throughout the series, River is at times like the lovebot Lenore in *Serenity* who becomes stalled in her program, simultaneously enabling the success of the masterplot while creating the obstacles that threaten to destroy them. In “Objects in Space” (1.10), though, River’s fragmentation and brokenness allow her to become *Serenity*. Michael Marano analyzes how the motif of “woman as weapon” reaches its apotheosis in the Whedonverse with the “developmental journey of River in *Firefly* and *Serenity*” that takes her from being fully actualized as a weapon to being fully realized as a person (38, 47).² The narratives of *Firefly* and *Serenity* demonstrate this transformation: if she ever existed as a bot, she is humanized at *Serenity*’s end; she is programmed, co-piloting *Serenity*, but, as Mal tells her about what truly makes *Serenity* fly, she sits like a young girl enjoying his story.³ River ultimately becomes something more whole, a symbol of the narrative made whole through its parts, its layers of storylines, its fragmented ending with the cancellation of the television series, and its resuscitation as film.⁴

[9] In some ways, *Dollhouse* echoes both earlier Whedonbots and Whedonthemes. The first aired episode of Season One, “Ghost” (1.1) establishes the idea of the Dollhouse by demonstrating Echo’s different engagements and imprints. The transition of her character from lover

to negotiator illustrates the range of possibilities for the dolls and for the series: the dolls, on romantic engagements, appear like the original Buffybot and lovebot Lenore from *Serenity* and, on dangerous engagements, like River. This duality, and even multiplicity, is apparent in the second episode of Season One, "The Target" (1.2). In this episode, Echo begins the episode as Richard's lover, but, as his weekend plan unfolds, she becomes more than his target: she is the assassin and he is her mark. Throughout the series, River figuratively makes appearances in Echo's and Sierra's imprints. Summer Glau, who plays the role of River in *Firefly* and *Serenity*, actually appears on *Dollhouse* as the character Bennett in Season Two. Another Whedonverses alum, Alexis Denisof (Wesley in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*), joins Glau in Season Two to play the role of Senator Daniel Perrin. Alan Tudyk (Wash in *Firefly* and *Serenity*) is present throughout the two seasons as the imminent threat and actualized character Alpha. But these appearances aren't surprising in the Whedonverses; the role of Echo is played by Eliza Dushku, who previously appeared as Faith in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*. Even in costuming, connections abound. Discussing the Season Two episode "The Hollow Man" (2.12) on tv.com, fan lewima writes, "Did anyone else notice that Echo was dressed like Malcolm Reynolds if he was a chick? Totally a modified Browncoat getup. I loved it!" While Echo's brown leather jacket and boots seem to be tailored from Mal's costume in *Firefly* and *Serenity*, her war against the Dollhouse seems to be staged on grounds similar to that against the Alliance in the earlier series and film.

[10] Beyond character design, casting, and costuming, the plots of *Dollhouse* appear like those of earlier Whedon series. In Season Two, Echo, along with Actives (Victor and Sierra) and Actuals (Adelle, FBI Agent Paul Ballard, and Topher Brink), attempts to destroy Rossum Corporation as Angel and company do with Wolfram & Hart. In the process, the programmed humans Echo, Sierra, and Victor are humanized as River is. *Dollhouse* can be read as raiding *Serenity's* wardrobe in a larger sense. Stacey Abbott cites Whedon's description of *Serenity* as a "reboot" of the series *Firefly* and states that although

the "reboot" "raises continuity issues and contains within it the potential to disrupt the narrative for fans of the series, its main purpose is to facilitate the transition of the narrative from television to film" (231). This "reboot" is at work in *Dollhouse* and its effects are the issues with continuity and disruptions. While the dolls' memories are wiped (albeit unsuccessfully for some), Topher/Whedon continually "reboots" the series, sometimes within individual episodes.

[11] But the story in/of *Dollhouse* goes further than recycling plots and characters. This becomes particularly evident in problems with the reboot, Echo's resistance to the memory wipe. The development of Echo's character and the series emphasizes the significance of the assimilation of the pieces, the dolls' individual programs and narratives, showing how they hold the constitutive value of the series. These issues extend to the series itself as well. While the "reboot" of *Firefly* causes continuity issues for the series in the new medium, the reboots within *Dollhouse* expose the possibilities as well as the limitations of transmitting narrative. Although *Dollhouse* is an unorthodox television series that seems disordered, like the multiple personality disordered Alpha and Echo, it offers itself for study and as a study of the limits and possibilities of narrative television. I am not going to tread in rough waters by claiming that *Dollhouse* is a superior series to either *Buffy* or *Firefly* (I am sure that would constitute a type of blasphemy if not outright crime), but I am making the claim that the ideas within *Dollhouse* represent an ascension of the different aspects of Whedon's television and film narratives and, in a larger sense, postmodern television more generally.

[12] At the center of *Dollhouse*, Echo is the ascended character who remains a composite of all of her parts. By the series' end, she is the only doll other than Alpha who retains imprints without the use of flash drives. Programmed with multiple narrative threads and character arcs, she transcends her role as the most recent Whedonbot to become a symbol of television, or at least a composite. In this role, Echo has another prototype. In Sidney Lumet's 1976 film *Network*, Max Schumacher offers a critique of his lover Diana Christensen as well as television as a medium, telling her,

"You're television incarnate, Diana: Indifferent to suffering; insensitive to joy. All of life is reduced to the common rubble of banality. War, murder, death are all the same to you as bottles of beer. And the daily business of life is a corrupt comedy. You even shatter the sensations of time and space into split seconds and instant replays. You're madness, Diana. Virulent madness. And everything you touch dies with you. But not me. Not as long as I can feel pleasure, and pain...and love."

As River becomes Serenity, Diana becomes television, indifferent, insensitive, and mad. In *Dollhouse*, Echo is television incarnate, or at least a version of it. Yes, this comparison leads us to the equation of television with virulent madness, but it goes further.

[13] Echo is not a model of Diana's television programming; she offers a different picture of television in the twenty-first century. The ascended Echo at the end of Season One and Echo of Season Two is a composite of the original Caroline and the many characters Topher imprints her with. While Alpha, the original, becomes insane and murderous as a result of his ascension,⁵ Echo is able to assimilate the different versions of herself, take down the Dollhouse, and liberate the other dolls. As a corollary, Whedon's complicated series draws on many sources, experiments with new ideas and techniques, and examines its own function. While Max's condemnation of television renders it incapable of feeling pleasure, pain, and love and acting as an instrument of death, an analysis of the Whedonbots reveal a different kind of programming. The Buffybot has glitches that possibly allow her to feel (evidenced in her line "I think my feet are broken" ["Bargaining, Part 1"]) as well as know; River engages her own program to fight the Reavers and sacrifice herself; and Echo, as Whedon's most recent protagonist-bot, negotiates multiple personalities, creating a sense of order within herself. Echo's world and *Dollhouse* are unorthodox to say the least but ordered nonetheless.

[14] As the medium of television changes over time, along with its viewers, new arguments about the constitution of “quality television” emerge. In their introduction to *Fighting the Forces*, Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery turn to Robert J. Thompson’s list of distinctive characteristics of quality television to construct a place for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. On Thompson’s list, numbers four and seven read “Quality TV has a memory” and “Quality TV is self-conscious” (qtd. in Wilcox and Lavery xxiii). *Dollhouse* not only has memory and is self-conscious; it is about memory and self-consciousness. As *Dollhouse* plays with programming and reprogramming the dolls, it recalls earlier Whedonbots and earlier series beyond the Whedonverses (yes, there are some) while offering new ideas about the limits and possibilities of the medium. While I highlighted two of Thompson’s points as a gauge for measuring *Dollhouse*, the nine that Wilcox and Lavery apply to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* can be extended to *Dollhouse* as well.⁶ But, here, my approach is not an assessment of the successes and/or failures of *Dollhouse* as a series but rather an exploration of how Whedon utilizes the bot to self-consciously analyze why television matters.

[15] In *Why Buffy Matters*, Wilcox states that, like all art, *Buffy* “shows us the best of what it means to be human” (13). Extending her terms to *Dollhouse*, a series that evidences the struggle to be (or remain) human despite the presence of technology that threatens human existence by making us cease to matter, yields interesting possibilities. The representation of memory and self-consciousness extends beyond the masterplot and Echo’s character development to the workings of the series on many levels. Some of the characters enter the Dollhouse in the attempt to forget painful memories. A contract with the Dollhouse promises the offer of escapism and massive monetary gain for the potential dolls. Tony (the doll Victor) enters the Dollhouse in the attempt to forget the post-traumatic stress disorder incurred from his time as an Army Ranger, and Madeline Costley (the doll November) tries to escape the grief she experiences as a result of losing her daughter Katie. The episode “Needs” (1.8) restores the dolls’ original personalities, providing the characters’

stories and demonstrating the problem of restoring those selves. "Needs" depicts Madeline returning to her daughter's grave. While "Needs" reveals a masterplot within the Dollhouse to give the dolls closure to their traumatic experiences in their former lives, it reveals the impossibility of achieving such closure; the entire series revisits those experiences.

[16] While Tony's and Madeline's actions reflect the human need to forget, an attempt to escape the pain of being human, Caroline's (Echo's) and Priya's (Sierra's) narratives highlight the problems of controlling another human being, what the "man on the street" identifies as the threat of using that technology and obliterating the human race. Both Caroline and Priya are forced into service, Caroline by those threatened by her knowledge of the Dollhouse and Priya by Dr. Nolan Kinnard who, when he realizes he can't have her, drugs her so that he can have her turned into a doll with whom he can buy his time. By the end of the series, Echo and Sierra learn their backstories and those stories become their motivation to action and the reclamation of parts of their former identities. Echo uses her story as motivation to take down the Dollhouse and Sierra is able to confront Nolan ("Belonging" 2.4). The results of Echo's and Sierra's realizations and actions demonstrate the tension within the series. In the episode "Belonging," Topher gives Sierra the opportunity to return to life as Priya and confront Nolan. But this day has disastrous consequences; when Nolan attempts to kill her, she kills him in self-defense. She then needs Topher and Boyd to help her cover up her crime. When she returns to the Dollhouse and is back in the chair, Priya asks Topher to make her forget that day and her actions. Topher is reluctant to alter her original identity but, feeling responsible for her actions and, more importantly, her guilt and regret, he concedes. In contrast, Echo emphasizes the need to remember. In the episode "Omega," she risks falling to her death in the attempt to save her original imprint as Caroline, the original piece of her identity that Alpha threatens to destroy. And, in "Epitaph One," Echo leaves her imprint, enabling a young girl Iris to keep her identity alive, in case she herself is lost.

[17] With its entangled narratives, *Dollhouse* highlights how identity is constructed and reconstructed through lived and remembered experiences. In Season One, the episode "Briar Rose" (1.11) explicitly depicts the theme by focusing on the recovery of the stories of a girl's abuse and Caroline's life; both are activated by a reading of *Sleeping Beauty*. In "Briar Rose," a story recalls another, bringing repressed memories to surface. Laura Tanner writes that violence "has the capacity to destroy not only the form of the victim's body but the familiar forms of understanding through which that victim constructs him- or herself as subject" (4). In her description, the body's experiences, including pain, are written onto the body and the self. In the story of forgetting and remembering pain is the story of constructing (or sustaining) one's identity. Marano's analysis of River's transformation hinges on her capacity to remember, to "have a sense of a past that will help her to reclaim her humanity" (46). If River represents an apotheosis, Echo signifies a new stage in ascension. While River is purged of the secret of Miranda, Echo retains the many imprints, the memories of characters and stories.

[18] In a way, Echo re-programs herself. She is able to call on those personalities, giving order to herself and their narratives. In *The Warrior Women*, Dawn Heinecken argues that while the series *La Femme Nikita* "fetishizes the realm of the flesh, of emotions, physical sensations, and relations with others" (38), Nikita herself is a "postmodern heroine" whose "identity remains unfixed and unstable, whose identity, if she has one, exists only in the moment, a moment between life and death, thought and emotion, a moment which can never be fixed or contained" (63). Echo is a revision of both Whedonbot and Heinecken's version of Nikita as postmodern heroine. Echo is programmed but human; she retains memories and traces of her experiences yet slides between characters. Echo destabilizes her own identity and resists containment. But she also becomes more than that—she becomes a programmer. Julie L. Hawk writes, "But Echo, having spent her entire existence fulfilling the polysemic metaphors of her name, becomes an echo of yet another kind, an echo of a posthuman evolution, a presence that, though residual, is now in the

narrative system. A presence that has the power to change the story" (par. 21).⁷ While the episode "Ghost" replaces "Echo" as the pilot in Fox's broadcasting, echoes remain and rewrite the narrative of Caroline and *Dollhouse* itself.

[19] *Dollhouse* functions by severing and enabling connections, sometimes with one five minute micropulse like that which Topher uses to program the dolls. It performs acts of forgetting as well as recovery. This work of remembering is not limited to Echo; both Victor and Sierra initially forget their earlier lives but, as Sierra begins to remember the trauma (and is reminded by new abuse by her handler Joe Hearn ["Man on the Street"]), she remembers Victor. In "Belonging," Victor waits for Sierra long after she is supposed to return, evidencing how the sentient experiences become imprinted as much as the programmed narratives. "Epitaph Two: Return" reunites Priya and Tony in the post-apocalyptic world. While "Epitaph One" reveals Priya's tattoo reminder of her name and identity, "Epitaph Two: Return" depicts Tony destroying his flash drives (or, better, memory sticks) and beginning to form new memories with his son.

[20] Echo's retention of her programming highlights what is at work in the series as it suggests how memory works for its viewers. Throughout the series, *Dollhouse* plays with the viewers' memories, leaving traces, severing connections, and offering recovery. In *Firefly* and *Serenity*, Wash (played by Alan Tudyk) is the pilot of *Serenity* and appears like Whedon himself, directing the show and providing revealing commentary on the crew and narrative. In *Dollhouse*, Topher, as that character with unorthodox methodologies, is our Whedon if Wash ever was. In *Dollhouse*, Topher is the one to consolidate a two hour process into five minutes (at most) of imprinting, translating narrative and images all at once in a micropulse, as he proudly tells Adelle and us he is capable of in "Epitaph One." The ordering of the narrative within individual episodes and the series itself is unorthodox, indeed, yet that is part of its strength. The pieces of *Dollhouse*, at times, come together wonderfully, as they do in "Epitaph One" and "Epitaph Two: Return." Yet other episodes like "Stage Fright" (1.3) and "Haunted" (1.10) create lacunae that seem to threaten the series'

storyline (and even continuation). The beginning of Season Two is disorienting as Echo is a married woman and mother, but the fictionality of the engagements is exposed, and Echo returns to herself and the Dollhouse. Meaning is made as the narratives unfold, sometimes over the course of many episodes.

[21] Furthermore, viewing the entire series on DVD allows pieces to come together that aren't originally made apparent. A scene in "Gray Hour" depicting Echo's, Sierra's, and Victor's instinctual "grouping" (which leads Boyd to wonder if it evidences remembering) is borrowed from the unaired pilot. The images imprinted on the "dumbshow" "Mr. Miller" in the unaired "Epitaph One" are in the unaired pilot. In the unaired pilot "Echo," we witness Echo's experiences and the memory wipes while we are assured that the client to whom Adelle is delivering a sales pitch "won't ever forget" his experience. While the characters retain recognition of each other that transcends the wipes, when presented with the entire series (sans network-created lacunae) viewers are able to fill in the blanks as well. As "Gray Hour" exhibits how, in art and in life, pieces begin to slide, come apart, and "Man on the Street" suggests the obliteration of these clusters of neurons, the teleology of *Dollhouse* constructs a collage of the parts.

[22] Performing the work of memory, self-consciously exposing its own work of fiction, the series highlights the ways in which televisual beginnings, endings, and in-betweens are contingent upon such relations. While Max's vitriolic comparison of Diana to television in *Network* that depicts the medium as shattering the "sensations of time and space into split seconds and instant replays" is applicable to *Dollhouse* in some ways, Max is referring mostly to news programs; narrative series are more complicated, and *Dollhouse*, problematically so, extends the terms even further. In "From Beats to Arcs," Michael Z. Newman analyzes the structure of the contemporary scripted prime-time serial, the PTS, and highlights the significance of memory. He writes that repetitiveness (repetitions ranging from "previously on" segments to those in character dialogue) makes the narrative accessible and even gratifies regular viewers by reminding them "who

the characters are, what they do, why they do it, and what is at stake in their story" (Newman 19-20). He writes how repetition is part of the structure and design of the successful series, for, "Beating out the story as they do has a strong rhetorical force, giving us reasons to care about characters and want to know more" (Newman 20).

Dollhouse works with and against these terms, connecting and severing threads within and between individual episodes. While *Dollhouse* plays with the dolls' memories, it also plays with the viewers' memories of the characters. The audience of *Dollhouse* is poised between remembering and forgetting.

[23] This is part of the design of the series, for we, as much as Echo, must work to put the pieces together, while network decisions create irreconcilable chasms between the sliding pieces. While Topher works to master the dolls' programming, making the process faster and better, Fox's programming negatively impacted the series. One of the aspects that Thompson includes as a measure of quality television—the notion that "quality shows most often undergo a noble struggle against profit-mongering networks and non-appreciative audiences" (qtd. in Wilcox and Lavery xxi)—further problematizes a television series' ability to answer Newman's challenge. With a pattern of broadcast similar to that of *Firefly*, *Dollhouse* is aired out of order, with its pilot "Echo" going unaired. Watching the unaired pilot after the rest of the season has been aired, in effect, causes those pieces to slide even further still. "Epitaph Two: Return" is aired, unlike its sister episode, and its reference to the person whose method of ordering the imprints was "unorthodox" could be read as a criticism of Fox. Part of the story of *Dollhouse*, like all television series, is the story behind its production and its gaining of an audience and shares. DVR and other recording devices allow us to catch up with the episodes and perhaps contribute to the low ratings and death of the series—I'll stop there. The release of the series on the DVD allows the inclusion of the unaired pilot, a lost "Echo," and episode "Epitaph One" and offers us an autopsy that can be read like that of *Firefly*. Fox's airing of the series (with the Rossum Corporation's masterplot turned apocalypse revealed in the "epitaphs") as well as promotion complicate the issues.

The "Simplified" commercials that Fox aired as fifteen-second explanations, a "*Dollhouse Simplified*" and "*Dollhouse Simplified: Echo*," show how complex the series and character are.⁸

[24] When considering the plot of *Dollhouse*, we cannot forget that narrative television is, after all, narrative. In *Why Buffy Matters*, Wilcox compares the episodic function of *Buffy* to Charles Dickens' works, making a case for the connections between the genres (as well as their distinctions). In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks identifies the importance of and the problems associated with discussing plot.⁹ He explains how "our common sense of plot" is molded by the "great nineteenth century narrative tradition that, in history, philosophy, and a host of other fields as well as literature, conceived certain kinds of knowledge and truth to be inherently narrative, understandable (and expoundable) only by way of sequence, in a temporal unfolding" (Brooks xi-xii). According to Brooks, in "this golden age of narrative,"

[A]uthors and their public apparently shared the conviction that plots were a viable and a necessary way of organizing and interpreting the world, and that in working out and working through plots, as writers and readers, they were engaged in a prime, irreducible act of understanding how human life acquires meaning. (xii)

I include these quotations from Brooks because they recall the design of *Dollhouse*, its function as a self-conscious series that explores how "human life acquires meaning" and, conversely, becomes meaningless, ceases to matter. It is not a stretch to use Brooks to this end; while he focuses on narrative design in literature, he notes, "We still live today in the age of narrative plots, consuming avidly Harlequin romances and television serials and daily comic strips, creating and demanding narrative in the presentation of persons and news events and sports contests" (7). Yet, despite our interest in narrative and need for them, Brooks notes that we are inherently suspicious of plots, particularly toward their resolutions, as he acknowledges that "the story of plot may be interminable...and any terminus reached suggests the need for a revisionary epilogue, another perspective, a different narrative" (313).

[25] We cannot escape the problems with closure that abound throughout *Dollhouse*; however, when Newman discusses how closure should happen at the end of each episode of the PTS, those gaps become glaringly evident. Newman argues that each episode of the PTS leaves “some causal chains dangling, but seldom at the expense of sacrificing resolution and coherence, seldom in a way that promotes textual instability or radical, modernist aperture” (20). While his formula applies to the series he discusses (*Gilmore Girls*, *Law & Order*, *Felicity*, *Judging Amy*, and even *Lost* are some examples), as Lavery identifies in “Apocalyptic Apocalypses,” the Buffyverse (and I add the Whedonverses) defies such formulas. When Newman includes *Buffy*, it is in a line that disentangles and uncomplicates the plot and series: “Buffy unveils a threat to Sunnydale in act one and removes it in act four” (21). I introduce Newman’s argument here not as a counter to what is at work in *Dollhouse* but rather as an example of a formula for episodic television that *Dollhouse* actively calls into question, writes into the script, and even erases.

[26] The multiplication of narratives and characters contained within Echo exacerbates the problems with endings that Lavery identifies as being at work in *Buffy*. Lavery writes, “As a television narrative, every episode of *Buffy* offers us a variety of ‘little deaths,’ mini-apocalypses as well: the distinctly televisual ends, allowing for commercial breaks, that come within the narrative itself; the ending of each episode...; the endings of narrative arcs; the ending of each season. And finally, we have the final narrative eschatology of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* itself” (3). While the series *Dollhouse* multiplies and entangles narratives, offering juxtaposition rather than closure in the development of the protagonist’s character, the Dollhouses themselves offer clients the opportunity to evade death, as we see in Season One’s “Haunted” and Season Two’s “The Hollow Man.” The two episodes contain plots that allow a transcendence of death through imprinting and living on in a doll’s body. *Dollhouse*’s treatment of beginnings and endings fits Brooks’s description of how, in postmodern literature, ends “have become difficult to achieve,” absent or permanently deferred, leaving one “playing in anticipation of a

terminal structuring moment of revelation that never comes, creating the space of an as-if, a fiction of finality" (313).

[27] Between aired and unaired episodes, broken and cohesive storylines, *Dollhouse* returns us to other aspects of the Whedonverses, making us remember, making us perform that work of recovery. Brooks writes, "Any final authority claimed by narrative plots, whether of origin or end, is illusory. ...It is the role of fictional plots to impose an end which yet suggests a return, a new beginning: a rereading" (*Reading for the Plot* 109). The series' resolution in "Epitaph Two: Return" hinges on a memory wipe of the dolls who have left the Dollhouse with Adelle and Zone, restoring their original personalities, while Echo remains Echo/Caroline/all of her imprints, retaining her memories and even integrating Paul Ballard into her memory and identity. While that Caroline remembers, the young girl imprinted as Echo/Caroline awakens to ask "What happened?" and is told that it's a long story and not to worry about it. In the moment before the memory wipe, before sacrificing himself, Topher turns to the memorial wall that contains pictures of the characters, those lost and found, and the words "To Remember." This memorial was first shown in "Epitaph One," leading to the young girl Iris (who is imprinted as Echo/Caroline) looking at a picture of Caroline and saying, "I hope we find me alive."

[28] At the series' end, Echo is alive, with all of her parts intact. And even the "evolved" Alpha is believed to be able to survive the blast. As *Dollhouse* offers its own epitaphs, its postmortem, performed with the release of the DVDs and critical discussion online and in books and journals, offers a point of origination for the work of recovery, the attempt to find meaning in the wake of its demise. As the dolls are liberated from the Dollhouse, the scene recalls Echo's failed escape plot in Season One but this one is "no fantasy." The apocalyptic world in 2020 is unlike the world of *Firefly* and *Serenity* but is perhaps more reminiscent of *Angel's* L.A. As with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dollhouse* calls all Actives and Actuals to action, offering them the choice to remember or forget. As Topher says, "Some things aren't on the Cartesian plane"; *Dollhouse* ostensibly exists in the liminal space between categories, oftentimes with its pieces sliding. As viewers of

the series, we have the ability to make sense of the series through these pieces—DVDs, books, and essays on the series, on the Whedonverses. We, the viewers, ultimately sit in the imprint chair. We are the corporeal watchers choosing to make meaning of *Dollhouse* and its imprints, resisting the memory wipe, and learning from the Whedonbots how to be human.

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¹ Calvert's essay "Going Through the Motions: Reading Simulacra in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" offers a comprehensive analysis of the female robots in the Buffyverse. Her statement that "both mechanical and organic bodies are subject to various forms of programming" (par. 5) in *Buffy* reflects common ground with the design of *Dollhouse*.

² Marano notes that River is the most recent example of the trend but that "there could be more in Whedon's future work that are more apotheosis-y" (38). I offer that *Dollhouse* is that now realized work.

³ Gregory Erickson writes that *Firefly* questions "the idea of what it means to be human and explore the possibilities of creating meaning within a space of nothingness" (168), while Lorna Jowett raises a question about the possibilities in *Firefly*, asking, "Do we have to choose *either* emotion and the physical, or the technological amenities of progress?" (113). Both highlight the contradiction in the series, a contradiction that is rendered in River's positioning at the end of the narrative.

⁴ Stacey Abbott refers to *Serenity* as more "regeneration than resurrection" (229), but I use the term resuscitation to play with the notion of the series as an embodied entity.

⁵ Alpha's ascension leads to the restoration of his original personality, a violent criminal, along with the other imprints that fight for dominance in his ascended self. Additionally, he is unable to mediate the competing personalities, although "Epitaph Two: Return" suggests that he has more control over these sliding pieces.

⁶ Wilcox and Lavery cite Thompson's list of characteristics of "quality television." In addition to those discussed above, the others include having a "quality pedigree," having a "large ensemble cast," creating a "new genre by mixing old ones," tending to be "literary and writer-based," having controversial subject matter, and aspiring toward realism (qtd. in Wilcox and Lavery xxxi-xxv).

⁷ See Hawk's essay in this issue.

⁸ One "simplified" commercial explains "Before she was Echo, her name was Caroline, a student, a do-gooder, an activist, and now a prisoner. That's the *Dollhouse* Simplified by Windows 7" ("Dollhouse Simplified: Echo"), with scenes from the series and lines of dialogue inserted between the descriptions. Another commercial states, "Here's the simple who's who in the *Dollhouse*. Echo: sexy doll. Victor and Sierra: hot dolls. Boyd, Adelle, and Topher: non-Actives, which is fancy talk for non-dolls. Finally, Paul. First he hunted dolls, then he controls dolls, and now he protects dolls. *Dollhouse* Simplified by Windows 7" ("Dollhouse Simplified"). While their attempt is to "simplify" the series and possibly gain new viewers, the commercials highlight how complicated the series is.

⁹ Like Wilcox, Brooks turns to Dickens' work. His chapter "Repetition, Repression, and Return: The Plotting of *Great Expectations*" offers a model for how the serialized works function.