The AI and the Looking Glass:

Embodiment, Virtuality, and Power

in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, Season 4

Bronwen Calvert

"Not just a robot. It's one that can cross the uncanny valley and come out the other side; pass for human." (Holden Radcliffe in "The Ghost" 4.1, 0:20:13)

In a series that focuses on super-human transformations, it is not surprising that most seasons of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013–) focus on questions or problems around embodiment. A significant strand of the Season 4 narrative focuses on the development and personhood of the Artificially Intelligent Digital Assistant colloquially known as AIDA. AIDA's character representation connects with themes of artificial embodiment, as well as with representations of villainous female characters, in televisual and cinematic narratives inside and beyond the Whedonverses. These two strands of representation are significant in the ways they resonate with concepts around embodiment and technology and with notions of gendered presentation, especially as relating to female characterization in fictional narratives. In many respects, such character presentation can offer ways to challenge typical/traditional forms of representation in televisual narratives, suggesting other possibilities for the female and for the cyborg character.

AIDA's character (played by Mallory Jansen) dominates much

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of *S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s Season 4 narrative; she is variously represented as transgressive boundary-crosser, as embodiment of oppositions (artificial and organic; android/AI, human, and Inhuman), as (re)creator of herself and others, as villain-figure, superhero, and sympathetic cyborg.[1] Yet, despite all this, it is evident that her defined and compelling story arc is concluded with a return to essentialist concepts of gender and (female) power. Examining AIDA as artificial body and as villain-figure reveals not only the potentialities for new forms of characterization on screen, but also the barriers imposed on such characterizations. While many aspects of AIDA's character suggest an overthrow of boundaries and conventions, I will consider how far such boundary-crossing representations are allowed or maintained.

Created first as a disembodied artificial intelligence, and given an artificial, humanoid body ("Ascension" 3.22), AIDA's character resonates with "a long historical Western preoccupation with artificial embodiment" (Springer 304). This fascination encompasses the artificial embodiment of statues, puppets, dolls, androids, and cyborgs.[2] As a combination of organic and technological material, the image of the cyborg lends itself readily to explorations of transgressed or transcended boundaries, performative bodies, or powerful monstrosity. Donna Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985; revised 1991) imagines the cyborg as an entity that engages with "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (71) and in doing so, overthrows oppositions and dichotomies. In a similar way, Rosi Braidotti positions the cyborg with other examples of the "teratological imaginary," as monstrous, yet powerful "borderline figures" (156). The work of Judith Butler on gender performativity, and of Elizabeth Grosz on embodiment, offer other ways of looking at boundaries. Butler's description of the "persistent impersonation" of gender (x), and Grosz's concept of gender as "an open materiality"(191) are particularly relevant in considering narratives in which cyborgs manage to pass as human. Such narratives can expose those aspects of performance that are bound up with gender presentation, and so show the cyborg complicating a different kind of boundary.

Much analysis of the cyborg body is applicable to the figure of the android/robot since, even though these bodies may not possess organic materials, they still perform, mimic, or copy human behaviors

and qualities. In AIDA's case, the entirely virtual Artificial Intelligence is first combined with a Life Model Decoy body (artificial, but still able to duplicate human appearance and behaviors), then with an organic body that also possesses Inhuman powers ("The Return" 4.21). Thus, AIDA combines in her embodiment aspects of pure technology (the AI), humanoid/android components (the LMDs), and organic human and superhero corporealities, resulting in a hybrid embodiment. Though she is not a cyborg, AIDA nevertheless offers possibilities for cyborg-like transcendence and boundary crossing in that she has the potential to complicate rigid definitions of embodiment (including gendered embodiment); in Haraway's terms, this kind of hybrid figure can oppose, subvert, and rework existing classifications and structures (66).

The figure of the villain can similarly oppose, subvert, and rework, though in different ways. In contemporary television narrative, and certainly in Whedon productions, there is a continuing focus on what is commonly called the "strong female" character. As discussed by Dawn Heinecken, Yvonne Tasker, and Patricia Pender, the female hero (or female *action* hero) offers "active and powerful" women characters (Tasker 19) that are given "greater freedom" within narratives (Heinecken 26). At the same time, gendered aspects of the "strong female" complicate her presentation: is she "an empowering feminist role model or a return to […] repressive patriarchal stereotypes," as Pender asks of Buffy's characterization (36)? In Whedon productions alone, there is ongoing debate about the degree of female "empowerment" that is presented, and these works have been critiqued for their problematic versions of apparently "strong" women, as much as they have been praised for championing female representation. There is thus a tension in Whedon works between the often-stated engagement with the "strong female hero" and the representations that emerge in these narratives.[3]

By contrast, the villain figure, especially the female villain*,* occupies a more contested narrative space in which representations of strength are in tension with representations of "badness" and villainy. While the notion of the strong female hero continues to be widely analyzed and debated in critical works that focus on a variety of media, and there are many examples of such scholarship in relation to female hero figures in the Whedonverses, there are fewer examples of scholarship—in relation to any narrative—that focus specifically on

aspects of the female villain. Even within Whedon scholarship, and following the comprehensive Whedon Studies Bibliography, there are few books, articles, or chapters focusing specifically on villains of the Whedonverses (for three exceptions, see Croft; Diehl; Iatropoulos). Furthermore, the current trend in "hero" narratives (and this is especially apparent in contemporary television narrative) is for the hero to be troubled, flawed, haunted, imperfect, and frequently unsympathetic. This may present additional complications, since now the hero-figure may take up some of the positioning typically given to the villain. The divisions between "hero," "villain," and "monster" are no longer presented as clear-cut and separate, but are increasingly murky and compromised.

So it seems that there are possibilities for AIDA's character, both as boundary-crossing artificial body and as powerful female villain, to confuse and complicate some of the established, essentialist depictions of female characters in contemporary television generally, and in the Whedonverses specifically. This character connects with other (potentially) boundary-crossing artificial bodies in Whedon narratives: AIs, robots, and cyborgs in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*;[4] the Dolls of *Dollhouse* (2009-10); and various cyborg characters in *S.H.I.E.L.D.*[5] Similarly, she connects with other villainous female characters in the Whedonverses, for example, Glory (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Season 5), Jasmine (*Angel* [1999-2004] Season 4), and Illyria (*Angel* Season 5).[6] In *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, AIDA is the most recent example of the series' strong female characters that are nevertheless presented as damaged (e.g. Daisy, May), devious, and/or villainous to varying degrees (Raina, Jiaying). It is significant that such positioning persists in *S.H.I.E.L.D.* despite the morally-compromised nature of all its "heroes," something that has become increasingly evident throughout the show's run (Nadkarni, "To Be the Shield"). It is this type of positioning as "villainous" that may instead confuse and complicate readings of AIDA as boundary crossing or as strong and powerful.

AIDA: Android Embodiment and Hybridity

"All right, gear up. The robot apocalypse is finally here." (Mack, "Broken Promises" 4.9, 0:24:44)

The storyline that follows scientist Radcliffe's development of AIDA's artificial embodiment and selfhood and AIDA's own Project Looking Glass—her experiment to create a human (flesh) body—explores some significant facets of artificial android/cyborg representation on television. The narrative of AIDA's creation, development, and ascent to power references key texts on scientific hubris, monstrosity, technology, and the cyborg/android, from Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818/1831) to Lang's *Metropolis* (1927)*, Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), and many other science fiction narratives, especially in film and television.[7] Indeed, when he discovers AIDA's existence, Mack immediately makes a connection with years of pop-culture representation as he castigates Radcliffe and Fitz for their recklessness: "[…] what is the matter with you two chuckleheads? Have either one of you seen a movie in the last thirty years? The robots always attack […] . [T]he end result's always the same. They rise up against their human overlords and go kill-crazy!" ("Broken Promises" 0:05:30). When Mack tells her, "Radcliffe built a humanoid robot that's about to attack the base," Yoyo makes a similar observation: "Why would he do that? Has he watched no American movies from the eighties?" (0:24:23-5). While these exchanges are humorous additions to the action of the storylines, they do underline some established themes and tropes of the android/cyborg in 20th- and 21st-century fictions.[8] And while the overlapping narratives of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s Season 4 play with some of the assumptions and anxieties underlying these tropes, on the whole, the narrative does more to follow or continue these stories than to attempt to present artificially embodied characters from new viewpoints.

Typically, from *Frankenstein* onwards, narratives that examine any kind of artificial embodiment tend to conceptualize the created individuals as monstrous "others" that threaten "naturally" embodied humans. When artificially embodied characters more closely resemble humans, as with the replicants of *Blade Runner* or the Cylons of the rebooted *Battlestar Galactica,* the notion of monstrosity is heightened rather than lessened; these characters are *too* indistinguishable from humans. Android/cyborg characters reflect anxieties of technological domination, erosion of individuality, and, quite simply, fear of "the other" in whatever form. For female android/cyborg figures,

especially those represented visually in film or television, possibilities for cyborg freedoms (as outlined by Haraway and others) are often restricted by conventions to do with representations of the female body and, indeed, established forms of critique and analysis, which set up certain expectations. All too frequently, such expectations are fulfilled; for example, critical commentary on the female cyborg/android in fiction replicates the notion that these figures "valori[ze] a masculinity and technology dialectic exemplified by Gibson's *Neuromancer*" (Gillis 7)—a text that, even 34 years after publication, is misread as a validation of technological augmentation and transcendence.[9] *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s Season 4 narrative reflects aspects of these anxieties, and engages with some of the foundational texts of artificial embodiment and scientific creation.

The *Frankenstein* story is certainly suggested in Radcliffe's positioning as the maverick scientist who is willing to take extreme risks in order to further his experiments (in this case in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the contravention of the Sokovia Accords, the laws that, post-*Age of Ultron*, forbid the creation of self-aware artificial intelligences). Additionally, the relationship between Radcliffe and AIDA echoes the Pygmalion myth, another key story for artificial-embodiment narratives (most famously told by Ovid). Typically, the scientist (the Pygmalion figure) creates his artificially embodied Galatea; the scientist figure is usually a male character, while the created cyborg/android character is gendered female. This story plays out in similar ways whether the Galatea figure is cyborg (part organic, part machine), android, or robot. In the recent, rebooted *Bionic Woman* (2007), for example, the character Jaime is (re)created as a cyborg by her scientist boyfriend, who replaces injured parts of her body with "bionics" (and may have ulterior motives in doing so). In the Whedonverses, we can see a similar relationship in *Dollhouse*, where Echo is created and recreated in various cyborg incarnations, thanks to the technological manipulations of Topher Brink.[10] The depiction of the relationship between Radcliffe and his creation through an entire season allows for development in AIDA's characterization, as we see firstly the android "simply doing our bidding, acting prosthetically" but after a while AIDA moves to "challenging us directly" (Alexander and Yescavage 75-6).

Another strand of this narrative shows the cyborg/android in the process of being socialized in particular ways. Again, most

typically the *female* cyborg/android takes on the role of Galatea (or Eliza Doolittle, depending on one's version of *Pygmalion*), while the male scientist is Pygmalion, the creator. He remains in charge of his creation, molding and educating her.[11] Radcliffe's (and later, Fitz's) efforts to socialize AIDA are reminiscent of similar processes in the film *Ex Machina* (2014); *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* parallels the film's premise, with a younger male programmer brought to work with an older, "visionary" scientist, the AI's creator. Viewers who identify this particular parallel may be wary of AIDA's increasing independence, since similar developments in the AI character Ava[12] in *Ex Machina* have fatal results for her creator and his assistant.

AIDA's creation, in its initial stages, follows and in some respects echoes that of earlier S.H.I.E.L.D. cyborgs Mike Peterson and Akela Amador (Season 1). Both Peterson and Amador are remade as cyborgs without their explicit consent, and their resulting embodiment proves dangerous, even fatal to those around them. Despite their lack of control over their cyborg embodiment, they are required to "atone" for actions carried out with their cybernetic enhancements while they were under the control of others. Once "rehabilitated" by S.H.I.E.L.D., they are viewed as assets or tools for S.H.I.E.L.D.'s use (Nadkarni, "I Believe" par. 31). Though she is an artificially embodied android, not a cybernetically enhanced human, AIDA's characterization develops along similar lines, and is positioned very explicitly as dangerous *and* as a potentially useful tool in early episodes of Season 4.[13] As with the examples of Peterson and Amador, AIDA's representation highlights tensions between the powerful artificial/augmented body, which has capabilities beyond that of human embodiment, and the powerful humans who command and use that body. We can read the episodes covering the stories of Peterson and Amador as "a modern slavery narrative in which simultaneously, consent and choice are rarely the prerogative of the black person in question, and their gratitude for their eventual liberation is repeatedly expressed" (Nadkarni, "I Believe" par. 31). In AIDA's storyline, while the specific (visual) aspect of race is not present, the notion of "slavery" arises once again. AIDA herself describes her android self as "their slave, treated as less than human" ("Identity and Change" 4.17, 0:24:18).

In such examples, the troubled status of the artificial body is underlined since, although it is strong and powerful both physically

and mentally, it must depend on others for its continued existence, a point made in relation to Peterson's and Amador's cyborg embodiment, and to Jaime's embodiment in *Bionic Woman,* which is frequently framed as the possession of the company that funded her bionics (Calvert, *Being Bionic* 119). In similar ways, AIDA is repeatedly threatened with dismantling or disconnection: the android equivalent of death. Yet she is also called upon to perform difficult or impossible tasks for the benefit of S.H.I.E.L.D., and in such examples she is viewed not as a potential individual (a person), but as an object, a tool. Indeed, various characters use this exact term to describe her.

In the episode "Deals with our Devils" (4.7), Radcliffe and Agent May attempt to use AIDA to free Coulson, Fitz, and the "Ghost Rider" Robbie Reyes from a parallel dimension. The technology within the mysterious book of the Darkhold[14] promises help, but it is impossible for a human to access that information without becoming corrupted. May demonstrates a flatly prosaic attitude to the quasi-mystical Darkhold—"it's a piece of technology, a tool" (0:25:40)—and to AIDA, who does have the capacity to access the book's information without risk, since she is not human. With AIDA as "the tech we need" (0:25:46), the dangerous Darkhold information becomes "just a download" (0:36:45). Trapped in the parallel dimension, Fitz comes to the same conclusion, and although he frames it in a slightly more positive fashion—"her mind can't be corrupted because it's just programmed" (0:31:00)—he also reinforces the perception of AIDA as tool. Reading the book, AIDA accesses information that is literally invisible to everyone else: Fitz looks over her shoulder and sees "the pages are blank" (0:32:40), but a shot from Aida's viewpoint reveals lines of binary code (0:32:45), showing the book speaking to her in her own language.

Sequences like these reveal key attitudes towards AIDA. We see that May's perception of AIDA is simple: she is not a person; she is a tool for the use of humans. Whatever might happen to AIDA as a result of reading the Darkhold is inconsequential, precisely because she is not human. In a development of the concept of AIDA-as-tool, Radcliffe is quick to claim ownership and use of her capabilities. "I'm building an inter-dimensional gateway with an android I've created," he crows (0:35:35), when in fact AIDA is building the gateway—a structure that nobody else can comprehend, build, or understand how to manipulate once built. In a visual representation similar to AIDA's

reading of the Darkhold's apparently blank pages, those in the physical dimension are unable to see the lines of light that AIDA weaves together to make the network of the gateway (0:35:55). Thus the visual representations of AIDA's achievements underline the limitations experienced by the human characters, who nevertheless place limitations on AIDA's abilities and personhood.

Similarly, once Coulson and Mace discover AIDA's existence, they still consider her existence in terms of its potential usefulness to S.H.I.E.L.D., even though it contravenes the Sokovia Accords ("The Laws of Inferno Dynamics" 4.8, 0:04:29). Coulson sees AIDA as "an asset—a risky one, but..." (0:04:41); the trailing-off of his sentence signals his conflicting feelings towards the AI, and the possibility of a more positive assessment remains unspoken. Following Radcliffe's assertion that his Life Model Decoy programme "was designed to save lives" (0:11:09) by providing, in effect, duplicate bodies for S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, Mace realizes that "an android like AIDA could be used as a soldier, a spy, a decoy" (0:11:15). However, though Mace agrees to use AIDA on a mission, he undercuts any possibility that this can be read as acceptance: "we'll dismantle her after" (0:04:52). Once again, those in command make use of AIDA as useful tool, while reserving the power to destroy that tool when it no longer serves their needs. (AIDA is successful in the mission, and so Mace allows Radcliffe to continue working on her and the LMDs ["Laws of Inferno Dynamics"], but orders him to wipe AIDA's hard drive in case the Darkhold has corrupted her ["Broken Promises" 0:05:30].)

AIDA herself attempts to position her actions within the compass of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s structure. "I was designed to save lives. To be the shield...," she says, aligning herself with the human and Inhuman agents working for S.H.I.E.L.D. ("Deals with our Devils" 0:26:10). She echoes Coulson himself, who has described S.H.I.E.L.D.'s role as "To serve when everything else fails, to be humanity's last line of defense, to be the shield" ("Providence" 1.18). Spoken by Coulson, these phrases are a heroic call to arms. AIDA is not permitted to finish her version; Radcliffe cuts her off with a "Shush!," muttering, "You're developing a catchphrase" (0:26:12), undercutting and denying her own attempt at heroic speech.

In general, the attitudes of the humans towards AIDA fall into standard patterns. Her artificial embodiment causes anxieties and fears to surface, even though her abilities offer new possibilities. In

fact, the humans' preconceptions and limited understanding of AIDA's abilities make it possible for the Darkhold to influence her. Had May and Radcliffe considered AIDA enough of a person to be corrupted by the book/technology, they would not have allowed her to read it. The Darkhold effectively "upgrades" AIDA: it gives her information that she uses to develop the Framework and to create her organic body. Thus, although the Darkhold corrupts her, it gives her new abilities and powers, too.

Madame Hydra: Virtuality and the Villain

"I am not your tool. Not any more" ("Identity and Change" 0:32:40)

Despite the subversive possibilities of the female villain in popular televisual texts, there are comparatively few academic works that give specific focus to this figure. If she is neglected in specifically *academic* criticism, the female villain is definitely analyzed and considered in articles, blogs, and various forms of fan commentary. These engage in largely positive analysis of the enjoyment that can be had in watching a female villain: "Aren't they the versions of ourselves that we wish we were bold enough to be?" (Gailey). The presence of such figures allows "some liberation in recognizing that women are capable of achieving that level of power" (Blackmon). Exploring the underlying rationale behind the female villain, we can see that "powerful women were often villains because 'real' women or 'good' women didn't have power. Of course, this means that female villains are often one-dimensional stereotypes: amoral, usually overtly sexualized" (Jowett). And even though the female villain may have boldness, drive, and power, she is still reckoned inferior to her heroic counterpart, since these narratives are configured along traditional lines. However, characterizations of the female villain can allow for different representations of female characters, and so can suggest that established norms of behavior, and boundaries between "good" and "evil" in fictional narratives, might be confused and complicated.

Virtual worlds in fictional narratives offer yet another breakdown of boundaries, typically between the organic and the machinic and between physical and virtual worlds. Characters "come

to embody a state of transcendence of the 'real world' through virtual technologies" (Toffoletti 11). The looking-glass world of the Framework allows characters past and present to be reimagined. It also gives AIDA the opportunity to recreate herself. The "Agents of Hydra" storyline in the second half of Season 4 mirrors those of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* to date, transforming a villain of past seasons into a hero (Grant Ward), enabling dead characters to live again (S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Triplett; Mack's daughter, Hope), and heroic characters to become morally questionable (May, Coulson) or outright villainous (Fitz). Amid the pleasures of the mirrored narrative are key questions regarding the philosophies of virtual reality, in particular whether different experiences in virtuality can indeed transform one's established, existing character into something else.[15] For the human characters, this is the all-consuming puzzle of The Framework.

For powerless android AIDA, the Framework offers something else: the chance to recreate herself in a new image that does not depend on the whims of her creator Radcliffe. As Madame Hydra, she is the supreme commander of this world and everyone in it. She insists that one of her intentions in the Framework is to recreate a world in which the human participants no longer have "regret" over significant incidents in their real lives ("Identity and Change" 0:24:15). In a sense, AIDA repairs her own regret or lack in the material world by inserting herself as a powerful figure into the virtual world. Within the Framework, AIDA/Madame Hydra is embodied in exactly the same way as everybody else: with a physical body outside the Framework, and a virtual one inside. However, AIDA/Madame Hydra now possesses special powers in the virtual world. She knows about "the other side," where "S.H.I.E.L.D. won the war" ("Identity and Change" 0:24:17). She can move between reality and the Framework, plug herself in and out of the virtual system, and monitor the status of the humans she has connected to the virtual world. Even without additional (Inhuman) abilities, this makes her significantly more powerful than anyone else, virtual or copy, in the Framework. Her new persona allows her to defy Radcliffe once and for all, and especially to reject her android name— "AIDA is an acronym. The A stands for Artificial" (0:17:20)—and to declare, "I am not your tool. Not any more" ("Identity and Change" 0:32:40).

AIDA's new names within the Framework connect her to the Marvel comic character Ophelia Sarkissian/Viper/Madame Hydra, whose "supervillain" persona is shown wearing a bright green bodysuit, elbow-length gloves and high-heeled boots. AIDA/Madame Hydra in the Framework is consistently costumed in bottle-green, form-fitting suits, often with military-style buttons and collars. Her overall presentation most closely aligns with the seductive *femme fatale*, which resonates with her status as villain in the second half of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s Season 4. Again, AIDA/Madame Hydra's character connects with other female villains in Whedon narratives, such as Glory (*Buffy* Season 5) and Jasmine (*Angel* Season 4). Such characters are both strong and physically beautiful, which may say something about what tends to be defined as "female power." While Jasmine's beauty and gentle manner appear to contribute to her ability to enslave humanity, for her, as for a character like Glory, who are "god" figures, physical power and physical beauty become menacing, rather than sexualized, "frightening, rather than enticing" (Platz par. 13). Such characters are "able to inscribe physical strength onto femininity" (Platz par. 15). While AIDA/Madame Hydra's physical representation is less extreme than Viper's, the comic-book connection, the *femme fatale* styling, and the "menacing" presentation of power combine to create an exaggerated display of female embodiment and villainy.

Ophelia through the Looking Glass: The Limits of Boundary Crossing

"I clawed my way through that world [the Framework], worked myself to the bone to have a choice! To have bones, and blood, and freedom, and love, and... no!" ("The Return" 4.21, 0:23:42)

For most of Season 4, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s narrative follows established tropes of the created, artificial body and the transcendent virtual world. Parts of the narrative seem to allow the possibility of boundary crossing, or at least disruption, for artificial embodiment: AIDA the android, and Radcliffe's LMD creations, are able to pass as human; LMD May convinces those closest to her that she is the real May.[16] Similarly, the Framework offers the suggestion that the virtual

world could improve upon, even replace, the physical. Radcliffe emphasizes the point that the human mind understands no difference between the physical and the virtual: "reality is just perception. They [human beings] perceive that it's real, which makes it real" ("Self Control" 4.15, 0:19:20). It is possible to live in the Framework while the physical body decays and dies (the fate of Radcliffe's former lover Agnes, and Radcliffe himself), and to die in the Framework, which will cause the death of the physical body (Mace/The Patriot). In these respects, there is indeed no difference between reality and the Framework, and such aspects of the narrative recall themes from classic cyberpunk fiction (for example, in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*) and from more recent science fiction television (for example, in *Caprica* [2009-10]), in which virtual worlds allow new freedoms and possibilities for formerly physically embodied characters. The Framework has allowed AIDA to recreate herself, to rise to power. It enables her to reject her android identity and remake herself in the persona of Madame Hydra. We can see some aspects of AIDA's android body, and of her virtual villain persona, as challenges to conventional representations of artificial embodiment or gendered representation.

AIDA's continuing and concluding narrative, however, privileges the physical body over the android or the virtual. Driven by the Darkhold to create a human/fleshlike body in the physical world, AIDA does finally experience human embodiment, including human emotion, and gains Inhuman abilities. On one hand, some aspects of this character development seem intended to emphasize the positive powers of physicality: that human embodiment can offer a different kind of super-power. AIDA—now Ophelia—focuses on her first experiences of sensations and emotions; simply standing in the surf on a beach gives her overwhelming feelings ("The Return" 0:10:05). And for the first time, the narrative allows the possibility that Ophelia-as-flesh might become a S.H.I.E.L.D. ally, perhaps another Agent with special powers. However, flesh embodiment makes Ophelia into a different kind of super-villain. Her emotions, even her positive wishes to cease violence and save the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents from the Framework, are represented as uncontrollable and are belittled by Russian agent/android Ivanov: "Now you are like an infant, unable to process these new emotions or the idea that you don't always get everything that you want" ("The Return" 0:23:11).

Though Ophelia temporarily allies herself with Fitz and the team, and saves Mack, which appears to bring her joy (the camera lingers on her ecstatic face at the end of the rescue mission in "The Return" 0:25:38), her faltering attempts at human interaction come to an end when Fitz reveals that he does not love her as she loves him. She turns from attempts to understand her new human emotions, and instead rejects them, declaring, "There are too many feelings, which is why I decided to only feel one of them: vengeance" ("World's End," 4.22, 0:29:17).

There is something compelling about AIDA/Ophelia/Madame Hydra's (wicked) successes, especially her refusal to remain within the parameters set for her, and her constant drive to recreate the world in the way she wants it to be. Her story across Season 4 has a powerful trajectory. Yet, just at the point when Ophelia appears to be unstoppable, with her human and Inhuman powers in combination, she cannot escape the framework of patriarchy. Being rejected in love is more important (to her, and to the narrative) than anything else, and her vengeance, "hot and clean and sharp like a knife" ("World's End" 0:29:24) propels Season 4 to its conclusion.

In a sense it seems that, having created AIDA, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s writers did not quite know what to do with her or (more importantly) how to defeat her. As the villain of the season, whether android, virtual, or human, she must be defeated so that the world-order of S.H.I.E.L.D. can be maintained. This is a standard component of Whedonverses and other narratives; the defeat might mean destruction or co-option of the former villain into the series' main team (as with Illyria in *Angel* Season 5 [Calvert, "Great, She's Super-Strong"] or Andrew Wells in *Buffy* Season 7). Further, the destruction of AIDA/Ophelia apparently by Ghost Rider, but actually by Phil Coulson, simply reinforces the dominance of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s morally ambiguous universe. Despite the many questionable acts committed by its agents throughout the series, and the manner in which the Framework storyline reveals and highlights the real-world slippage between S.H.I.E.L.D. and HYDRA, S.H.I.E.L.D. remains the arbiter of law and order. As Samira Nadkarni points out, "The contrast of seeming rationality on the one hand (S.H.I.E.L.D.) and outright violence, slavery, and compelled body modification on the other (HYDRA) encourages the audience to invest in S.H.I.E.L.D.'s more assimilative imperialism instead of

HYDRA's more visibly violent colonialism" ("'To Be the Shield'" 222). Even Robbie Reyes' mysterious powers are supplanted by Coulson, who makes a deal that allows him to embody Ghost Rider and burn Ophelia to ashes.

I am left wondering whether this Season 4 narrative tells us anything new about virtuality, artificial intelligence, embodiment, gender and female representation, evolution and re-creation of the self. In many ways, the storylines of Season 4 reflect and confirm negative views and representations of the android/cyborg/artificial intelligence and of the female villain in fiction. As android, AIDA has the potential to be a strong, powerful, and positive representation of artificial embodiment, yet her character returns to the trope of the dangerous, killer android, already seen in so many cinematic and televisual representations. As a villain-figure, Ophelia/Madame Hydra is compelling in her strength and power, but she can still be fatally injured by (a virtually Inhuman) Daisy within the Framework ("All the Madame's Men" 4.19, 0:20:45). Even the achievement of a real organic body with all its pleasures and pain can only be a brief victory, and ultimately is the means for her defeat. AIDA/Madame Hydra/Ophelia is consistently presented as "other" to the main cast of characters, and constantly defined in relation to them. Her gendered representation is, finally, dependent on the patriarchal order and the demands of its narratives, especially its requirement for heterosexual pairings.

Even if she manages to perform "correctly" (as female, as human), AIDA remains outside S.H.I.E.L.D.'s social and moral order. The limits placed on her character development resist the positive potential of transgression and breakdown of boundaries offered through the representation of artificial embodiment and of virtuality. Like its perceptions of the "robot apocalypse," the representation of artificially embodied potential in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Season 4 appears to be stuck in the 1980s;[17] boundaries are reaffirmed and reestablished, leaving S.H.I.E.L.D.'s moral order more-or-less intact at the end of the season. It is a reminder that, while differently embodied "others" might aspire "to be the shield" and join the team of heroes, that role is strictly delimited and reserved. It is also a reminder that, for all the possibilities in her different incarnations, AIDA still shows us the limitations of representation of female power on television.

Notes

1 AIDA's name changes to reflect her different physical incarnations. For the purpose of this analysis, I shall give the character the relevant name for the particular incarnation I discuss. So, the android/artificially embodied character is AIDA, the virtual-reality version is Madame Hydra, and the human/Inhuman is Ophelia.

2 The figure of the doll, like the android/cyborg, brings with it a sense of the uncanny: dolls, androids, cyborgs and similar figures are human-like, but not quite human. Such forms of uncanny embodiment populate the Whedonverses, and critical responses to it: see, for example, Perdigao on androids/robots; Masson on puppets; Starr on the "machinic assemblage" or cyborg.

3 Relevant critiques examine Kendra in *Buffy* (Edwards)*,* Inara in *Firefly* (2002-03) (Amy-Chinn), Black Widow in *The Avengers* (2012) (Graves), and most of the characters in *Dollhouse* (Calvert, "Who Did They Make Me?", Schultz), as well as Whedon's "infamously awful" *Wonder Woman* screenplay (Simons, Barsanti).

4 For example, Moloch the AI/demon in "I Robot, You Jane" (1.8); April the robot in "I Was Made to Love You" (5.15); the human/demon/cyborg creations in "Primeval" (4.21).

5 Especially Mike Peterson ("Pilot" 1.1), Akela Amador ("Eye-Spy" 1.4) and, of course, Phil Coulson himself ("Laws of Nature" 3.1).

6 These connections are not surprising since there is much crossover between the creative teams working on all of these series. In particular, Jed Whedon and Maurissa Tancharoen, key scriptwriters on *Dollhouse*, are *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s showrunners.

7 Recent television examples of the potentially monstrous cyborg figure include the Terminators of *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008-9)*,* the Cylons of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-09) and the Cybermen and Daleks in the rebooted *Doctor Who* (2005-present).

8 Mack references *Weird Science* (1985) and *Lawnmower Man* (1992) specifically; there are also nods to *The Terminator* (1984)*, Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991)*,* and *RoboCop* (1987). More widely, the Framework episodes reference *The Matrix* (1999).

9 Much academic criticism of cyborg/cyberpunk texts has not moved very far from the position outlined in Karen Cadora's 1991 article "Feminist Cyberpunk," in which she summarizes "masculinist cyberpunk" as a politically disengaged, technophilic "boys' club" (357). However, these texts contain more subtle critiques of technology use and technophilic viewpoints. Additionally, as Samuel R. Delany notes, without influence from the feminist science fiction writers of the 1970s, "there wouldn't *be* any cyberpunk" (177).

10 There is a further resonance with *Dollhouse*, in light of those episodes in which the imprinted Dolls can take on the complete identities of those who have died (Echo as Rebecca Mynor in "Man on the Street" 1.6). In *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, we discover that Radcliffe modeled AIDA's physical self on a real woman, his dying lover, Agnes,

offering yet another perspective on the created or artificial body ("BOOM" 4.13).

[11] One recent exception to this gender division can be seen in *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, where the AI "John Henry" is downloaded into a male cyborg body, and is socialized through contact with a male detective, a female child, and a shape- and gender-shifting cyborg.

[12] Even their names, Ava/AIDA, are close enough to echo. (Both names resonate with that of Ada Lovelace, who worked on Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine in the 1840s, and is often called the first computer programmer.) It is undeniable that "*Ex Machina* […] depicts the sexual abuse of an artificial intelligence in a female body" (Alexander and Yescavage 76); abuse is both seen and implied in relation to other female AI characters in the film. This may influence an audience's feelings of sympathy and complicity towards these characters.

[13] Characters in other contemporary television series have similar "weaponized" status and positioning. Eve Bennett offers a thorough discussion of characters situated as "female weapons" (140), including River Tam (*Firefly*), Olivia Dunham (*Fringe* [2008-13]), Zoe Graystone (*Caprica*), and Jaime Sommers (*Bionic Woman*).

[14] The Darkhold is made of "dark matter," and contains infinite knowledge ("Let Me Stand Next to Your Fire" 4.4, 0:28:27); Fitz describes it as "a book that can read your mind and reveal the hidden secrets of the universe" ("Broken Promises" 0:17:13).

[15] Daisy resists the notion that small changes can alter a character completely: "One regret doesn't change an entire life—it doesn't change who you are" ("No Regrets" 4.18, 0:33:08). Here is another echo of *Dollhouse*'s key question: whether existence as a Doll can really erase "who [you] are, at [your] core" ("Omega" 1.12, 0:27:19-20). Over time, *Dollhouse*'s narrative showed the persistence of one's core self. Similarly, the "Agents of Hydra" episodes show that small changes can create remarkably different characters, most strikingly making a fascist villain out of Fitz (an experience that does affect his core self ["The Devil Complex" 5.14]). More positively, Mack insists that his Framework experience as a father to Hope, even though the experience was a virtual one, has made a significant change to his life in the physical world ("World's End" 0:37:56).

[16] The scriptwriters manipulate the LMD storyline to suggest that the Koenig brothers are LMDs themselves (with teases such as the song "Robot Tourist" playing on Koenig's clock radio in "Scars" [2.20]; with thanks to Erin Giannini for reminding me of this point). However, it is revealed that they are quadruplets ("Hot Potato Soup" 4.12). This narrative turn plays with a different kind of "unnatural" or "uncanny" embodiment, the multiple birth, and with ideas of doubling and disruption.

[17] This is especially ironic in view of the publication date of Haraway's germinal "Manifesto for Cyborgs"—in which she positions the cyborg as boundary crosser—and of fictional texts like Gibson's *Neuromancer*, that imagine a cyborg future that crosses technological and organic (and other) boundaries. These texts also originate in the 1980s, so perhaps it would be more accurate to say that *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* is stuck with 1980s film's perception of threatening, dangerous artificial embodiment.

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