Rhonda V. Wilcox

Echoes of Complicity: Reflexivity and Identity in Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse*[1]

"I think we're all in a Dollhouse."

Harry Lennix, actor portraying Boyd Langton,

Echo's handler ("A Private Engagement")

[1] The *Dollhouse* television series (2009-10) was created by Joss Whedon of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) fame. Whedon is a declared feminist, and though the feminism of *Buffy* has been questioned by critics and scholars, the reaction of most—represented, for instance, by the measured response of scholars Lorna Jowett and Patricia Pender—is that the series is in the main feminist (or third wave feminist). Reaction to *Dollhouse* has been much more mixed, with some viewers expressing angry disappointment. After all, instead of the young female superhero in *Buffy*, *Dollhouse* at first glance seems to give us merely a science-fiction version of a house of prostitution, in which the "dolls" (such as main character Echo [Eliza Dushku]) have their memories and personalities wiped and other personalities implanted for a secret, exclusive clientele. Since this is a Joss Whedon show, however, we should expect that there will be many more layers of meaning to contemplate. My own first response to hearing the series' name before it went on the air was to think of the 1879 Henrik Ibsen play *A Doll's House* –something Dale Koontz and I briefly discussed online. Ibsen himself denied being a feminist, but his two-hour play is widely considered to be a proto-feminist work. The drama focuses on a

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woman's individuation and claiming of her identity as part of dealing with guilt and responsibility. Whedon's drama could be described in exactly the same words. His series, however, expands to include not only women but also men (there are male dolls) in the search for identity and in the recognition of complicity as we construct our relationships, our selves. Eliza Dushku, star and a co-producer of the series, points out that the Dollhouse is in part based on actors' role-playing and exploitation.[2] Whedon also inserts characters into the show that allow us to question his role as creator.[3] In episodes like the Whedon-written "Man on the Street," we discover in interpolated (or as Whedon calls them, "interstitial" [Commentary]) "news interviews" that the various attitudes of the public towards the Los Angeles Dollhouse (perceived as urban legend) tell us much about a person's attitude towards human nature and interactions. And in the same episode, the male hero FBI agent who plans to "save the girl" enters a sexual relationship with someone he is using just as surely as any doll. In fact, we soon discover she *is* a doll. If dolls are programmed people, then the Dollhouse corporation, the "hero" male, the "man on the street"—and perhaps we, the audience, the real ones on the street—are all complicit in the programming (computer or television)—not to mention the program's creators, including Whedon and Dushku and the television network. We are all, as Harry Lennix says, in a Dollhouse.[4]

[2] First, the doll-characters and their actors clearly suggest the theme. Eliza Dushku, an actor in *Buffy* and its spin-off *Angel* as well as the star of the series *Tru Calling*, was about to enter into a deal with the Fox Network when she asked her old friend Joss Whedon to lunch. As is widely reported, she talked to him about her own life as an actress and her attempt to find her own path—as she put it, "a woman being pulled in all these different directions and being forced to be all these different people every day" ("Making *Dollhouse*"). In response, at that same lunch meeting, Whedon conceived the idea of the Dollhouse, a symbolic representation of the actor's role-playing—and, in fact, the role-playing all of us engage in. The Dollhouse, which can in part be seen as symbolic of the actor's life, is not simply about prostitution—though historically, as many who are reading this essay

know, actors have been seen as criminals and prostitutes. But the "engagements" of the dolls involve anything from rescuing kidnap victims to infiltrating government-targeted cults, as well as sexual interactions with clients ("Ghost" 1.1, "True Believer" 1.5). Some of the engagements thus involve fiction deployed for a noble purpose, while others have far less impressive goals. The series indicates a continuum of complicity, of which the actors and the dolls are only one part. And while we speak of complicity, we should not forget that the actors are also engaged in creativity. The complexity of this mixture is part of the portrayal of all relationships within the show. FBI Special Agent Paul Ballard believes that the Dollhouse is real, though his superiors think it is urban myth; he has been sent a photograph and a video of a young woman named Caroline, whom we come to know as the doll Echo. "The world is in need of some serious saving," says the original Caroline in that video ("Ghost"). Caroline's entire personality is recorded and placed in an external device so that her memory can be wiped to make room for a personality appropriate for any "engagement," whether noble or vile.

[3] Every time a doll is wiped, he or she returns to consciousness with the Platonically resonant question, "Did I fall asleep?" Special Agent Paul Ballard sees Caroline as a Sleeping Beauty victim (see the Espenson episode "Briar Rose" 1.11), but the series also shows her as complicit. Though Caroline has acted with good intentions, she has been caught breaking the law for political reasons (we eventually learn she has accidentally caused the death of her lover and the maiming of a friend).[5] The Rossum Corporation—the Dollhouse corporation—has offered her a five-year contract to become one of their "actives," their dolls; in return, they will make her legal problems go away and make her very rich. As the rogue doll Alpha later scornfully puts it, "The road got a little rocky, and [Caroline] thought, 'Hey—I'll go to sleep,'" echoing the standard statement of a doll after wiping ("Omega" 1.12). (In fact, there is a Sleeping Beauty motif that runs through the series.)[6] The clients' fantasies are easy to see, but as Whedon says, there is also "the doll['s] fantasy. . . the idea of taking

away the pain. . . not having consequences. . . cutting out the part of you that is only about the pain" ("Man on the Street" Commentary).

[4] Caroline is under extreme pressure (in the pilot "Ghost" she says, "I don't have a choice, do I?"), but she does, of her own will, choose to sign the contract—as, presumably, did Eliza Dushku when she agreed to work with the Fox Corporation. Whedon says ("Finding Echo") that Dushku is a "liberal feminist," and that she "wanted to do something political [and] deal with sexuality, not just 'look at me in a hot dress.'" In some shots, it must be said, we get the hot without the dress; the advertising inserts of Eliza Dushku present her as virtually naked, and the episode "A Spy in the House of Love" (1.9) gives us a shot of Dushku as a dominatrix with a rear view that might have seemed more at home on HBO. We should perhaps also note gestures towards gender-parity; we are given beefcake a-plenty with actor Tahmoh Penikott as Paul Ballard, especially in a pilot scene of him in a boxing ring ("Ghost"). At the same time, many of the characters display a high degree of self-consciousness, and the series invites that same self-consciousness from the audience. In one episode in which Echo appears to have been sent on an engagement as a birthday-present hooker for a rich man's nephew, we learn she is instead in the hotel as a leader of a crack team of thieves. When the camera presents a shot of her breasts as she changes clothes, she says to her team (and us?), "They're called breasts, and yes, they are exceptional. You can mention that when you blog about them later" ("Gray Hour" 1.4). Whether we are *examining* exploitation or *participating* in it is part of the question Whedon and Dushku put to us.

[5] Like Caroline/Echo's memory, the first pilot of *Dollhouse* was wiped, and replaced with another. In a sense the decision was thrust upon Whedon, but in another sense he, in choosing to participate in the system,[7] was complicit in it—in close parallel to Caroline/Echo, to the dolls (and Dushku). Just as there are parallels between the dolls and the actors, so too are there parallels between the dolls and the writer/creator (*Six Characters*, anyone?).[8] There are also parallels between the series creator Whedon and the scientist creator of the dolls' personalities—as well as parallels with the participants in the

fantasy, the clients (or would the participants in the fantasy be the audience?). All share in the creation of and engagement with illusion; all are complicit. Creating a show for Fox, the network that broadcast and cancelled *Firefly*, Whedon had to know that there was the possibility of exploitative behavior. But he dealt with the situation by choosing to make the show, in important ways, *about* that behavior—and to give us the opportunity to think about it. In the commentary for the re-done pilot, focusing on a motorcycling sequence, Whedon says, "In no way are we pandering to Fox with an action sequence that will get them excited," and as the camera moves (as he states) "through the motorcycles to the skimpy dress, I'm like, 'What have I become?' I'm like Michael Bay except I'm not as good at editing." Of the beefcake boxing scene with Tahmoh Penikott, Whedon asks, "Did I mention pandering?" And later in the commentary he simply says, "I'm a whore"—a doll in the Dollhouse indeed. Whedon also is the creator of the dolls; he has more than once noted his similarities to Topher Brink, the cutely nerdish, brilliant character who creates the mental templates for the personalities for the dolls ("He reminds me of me!" ["A Private Engagement"]).[9]

[6] A key episode for understanding the series reveals even more about this thread. The sixth broadcast episode and second written by Whedon, "Man on the Street," is one which Whedon (in the commentary) says he sees as yet another pilot (which would make the third). In this episode we see one of the many revelatory character parallels that Whedon uses to convey his ideas. In this case, two men are focusing on Echo—Paul, as we have just seen; and Joel Mynor, a wealthy man whose loving wife has died tragically just before he could share his success with her. Caroline/Echo is taking his wife Rebecca's place for his anniversary, when he will give her the home she always wanted. But the parallel is not simply between Joel and Paul, though Joel certainly points that out; the parallel is also between Joel and Joss. The character Joel Mynor, like Joss Whedon, is a creator of fantasies—in Mynor's case, internet games. Played by (and written specifically for) comedian Patton Oswalt, the character even talks in a fashion reminiscent of Whedon's interview style: when, off screen, Joel

brings Rebecca in to see their new home's kitchen, we hear him say, "And the oven gets food so hot it actually goes through this thing called the cooking process—it's very scientific." One could even compare the wives in the case: Whedon, a declared nerd, has pointed out that his beautiful wife Kai Cole accepted him before he became famous.[10] And in the commentary for the episode, he asks us to examine our reactions to the hunky Paul Ballard vs. the normal-looking Joel Mynor: "If a couple isn't about the same level of attractiveness or age, we say one of them has a problem." At the same time, he acknowledges, "the idea the [Joel Mynor's] rose petal fantasy bed for his wife would look like cheesy porn is not just a joke, it's also the truth behind this episode—from one point of views it looks lovely, and from another view it looks icky." In establishing not only doll-maker Topher Brink but also client Joel Mynor as a parallel, Whedon certainly acknowledges his own complicity in this Dollhouse world.

[7] The "Man on the Street" episode is central in many ways—among others, in my view, in making clear the complicity of the character Paul Ballard, the FBI special agent, who most clearly fits the part of the traditional male hero. One of the most engaging scenes in the series involves the conversation initiated by Joel Mynor after Paul Ballard interrupts his time with Echo/Rebecca and she is removed by her handler. Over the strawberries and champagne meant for his anniversary, Joel dispenses almost avuncular advice to Paul—or it could be seen as self-justification. Paul, who realizes he cannot pursue an arrest, seems compelled to listen, perhaps to assert his own self-justification. As Joel says to Paul, "We all have a fantasy—we need it to survive. I think your fantasy is about my Rebecca. . . . The brave little FBI agent whisked her away from the cash-wielding losers and restored her true identity. And she fell in love with him. . . . Tell me you haven't thought about it. Her grateful tears, her welcoming embrace. . . . There's no room for a real girl when you can feel Caroline beckoning." Paul Ballard's admirable determination to expose wrongdoing does seem driven in part by obsession with Caroline, and Joel seems to have forced this to consciousness. Paul is divorced and apparently has no friends off the job other than a neighbor, Mellie,

who clearly is infatuated with him. Immediately after Joel chastises Paul for his inability to connect to "real life," and Paul has returned home, Paul kisses Mellie—and the cause-effect relationship is indicated by the structure of the dialogue. Mellie asks, "Did you get the guy?" (i.e., Joel). "I talked to him," says Paul. "And?" asks Mellie. Then comes the kiss, in direct sequence from the reference to Joel's talk.

[8] One might argue that Paul has had an awakening (to put it in Dollhouse metaphor) as a result of his conversation; and, indeed, the banter in bed after Paul and Mellie make love is genuinely witty and sweet (Whedon, in the commentary, cites the actors' "chemistry"). But as he first kisses her, Mellie resists, saying "Don't think about her and kiss me." He denies it; but if he is not thinking about Caroline, it seems to me that he is mainly thinking about himself—using Mellie to prove to himself that he was not simply obsessed with a fantasy girl. With Whedon's positive comments about the actors' chemistry in mind, I ask myself about my negative reaction: Did I think this because actress Miracle Laurie is beautifully plump? I don't think so. Did I think it because Paul has been shown repeatedly disregarding her and her offering of herself (in the form of nice hot casseroles) in the past? I believe so. In any case, as Whedon says in the episode commentary, "The show is about . . . how everybody's perspective is in one way or another valid." ("Bring your own subtext.")[11] For me, Paul's initial choice to make love to Mellie (whatever the relationship might have grown to be) was equivalent to using her as a doll, and was an emotionally revelatory moment in the series: The idea that we, normal humans, sometimes use each other as dolls is certainly not new, but this moment, the experience of watching, somehow made it more (you should pardon the expression) real. The discovery, later in the episode, that Mellie actually is a doll seemed almost redundant.

[9] Yet another character parallel in the episode further emphasizes the idea of Paul's complicity: Echo's morally trustworthy handler Boyd Langton ("the moral center," are Whedon's words in the episode commentary) discovers that Hearn, another handler, has been sexually abusing Sierra, the "active," aka doll, that Hearn has been assigned to protect.[12] Paul, the FBI agent who plans to protect

Caroline, however, also seems, as Joel Mynor points out, sexually or romantically obsessed with *her*. In the afterglow of Paul's first sexual encounter with Mellie, when she sends him from their bed to get Chinese food, he has his first face-to-face meeting with Caroline/Echo in the Chinese restaurant. He first sees only her reflection—and of course, he knows only her reflection, not the real person; he has known her as a photograph, then a video, then a face in a glass panel.[13] But Caroline/Echo very literally interrupts his time with Mellie. Paul's relationship with Caroline includes much more noble desires than Hearn's physical use of his doll Sierra. But the parallels are dreadful and complex: while Paul talks with Echo, Hearn, on Dollhouse orders, attacks Mellie—only to be killed by her when the Dollhouse activates her sleeper state. While we feared Mellie's death, it seems Hearn was sent to Mellie as a death sentence for his sexual use of the doll he was supposed to protect. For a complex array of reasons, in the first episode of season two, Paul Ballard becomes Echo's handler. Ballard is no Hearn—but there is a continuum of gray leading from Ballard to the blackness of Hearn.[14] Heroism, in Whedon as in life, is not pure; the hero is complicit.

[10] Perhaps it is Paul's complicity that poetically justifies his final fate. At the end of the first season, in "Omega" (just before the unaired future-time episode "Epitaph One," released on the Season One DVD), the crazed doll Alpha has stolen and endangered the "wedge" containing the imprint of Echo's original personality, Caroline Farrell. Paul saves this imprint from destruction. At the end of season two, in the future-time episode "Epitaph Two: Return," Echo saves the imprint of Paul's personality.[15] The narrative parallel emphasizes the irony: Paul has seen "imprinted" persons as less than real.[16] But he has gradually moved from an essentialist to a more existentialist view of personhood, of identity. Though he has seen Caroline as real and Echo as little more than a placeholder, he eventually sees Echo too as real. And he himself, in fact, becomes complicit in the Dollhouse system in the most personal of ways: he becomes a doll. When Alpha tortures Paul in "A Love Supreme" (2.8), he leaves him brain-dead. Paul is given Active brain "architecture" and imprinted with his own

personality. In spite of his views on the unnaturalness of the system, he chooses to accept life on those flawed terms. And when the re-imprinted Mellie tells him "I'm a program," he says, "So am I. I decided—it doesn't matter any more. We feel what we feel. I didn't want to reach the end without you" ("The Hollow Man" 2.12). He has not claimed to feel 'true love'; but he clearly cares about Mellie. And she resists her programming as a sleeper assassin directed to kill him, because as she says, "When we were together you made me feel like a real person"—something we all would ask for.

[11] Mellie takes the choice to kill herself rather than be used to kill Paul Ballard. He is thus responsible for helping her gain a sense of identity and yet simultaneously involved in her death. He has spectacularly failed to "save the girl" in traditional hero fashion. He has also saved Caroline's wedge, but does he save Caroline herself? At the least, Echo participates in saving Caroline. As for Echo, he does not save her, she saves others—and he joins her in doing so, though there are many they cannot reach. By the time of "Epitaph Two: Return," set in 2020, they work as partners, but they are not fully united. "I've been knocking for ten years, and you still won't let me in," he says. "I've let you in a few times," Echo says with a smile, implying sexual encounters. But he still calls her, even with "a hundred people inside . . . the loneliest person I know." When she says "It's kinda sweet," his reply is "Not for the person who's with you." In the end, Paul will be the person who's with her, in an unnervingly ambiguous conclusion for an unnervingly ambiguous series. With his body dead, shot as he saved another young woman, she takes his imprint into herself. If we want to get Freudian, we can say that the woman takes the man into herself; but that is hardly sufficient as a reading. Paul, who focused originally on the enslaved body of Caroline, is himself now bodiless—perhaps the appropriate fate for the man who used Madeline/November/Mellie's body even after he learned she was a doll ("Haunted" 1.10); the man who told Echo that *Caroline* was real ("Vows" 2.1).[17] One might read the scene of Echo and Paul's inner communion (with bright light on their faces in the receding dark) as an idealized combination of minds rather than bodies; but again, that

single statement is incomplete. Their closing conversation suggests equality: "You wanted me to let you in," she tells him, recalling their earlier words, and "We'll work through it." But Echo has controlled all the other personalities she has imbibed; will Paul be any different? Is Echo joined with him in unending love or trapped in fantasy? Is Paul elevated to the Platonic ideal or reduced to a memory? Whedon and company give the complicit hero an ambiguous fate, leaving it to individuals in the audience to play out the choices.

[12] And if the hero is complicit, how much more so is the father? Boyd Langton at first seems a misplaced person—a man of clear moral judgment who has somehow ended up in the Dollhouse, where he becomes Echo's handler. An "ex-cop," he "comes highly recommended" ("Ghost"), and he always does his job with superlative efficiency even while questioning the practices of the Dollhouse in almost every episode. In his protective relationship with Echo, Boyd becomes a father figure; Topher calls him "Papa Bear" in "Haunted." Time and again he expresses concern about Echo's situation, and time and again he acts on her behalf—even taking a bullet for her in the second episode, "The Target." Yet in the antepenultimate episode "Getting Closer" (2.11), we learn that Boyd is in fact the director of the Rossum Corporation, the man pulling the strings of all the dolls. His persona has been no more real than a doll's imprint (though that statement is, of course, more complex than it might seem). He has concocted a plan to have only the "deserving few" inoculated against having their personalities wiped, while the rest of humanity is mentally evacuated, ultimately at his command.

[13] Issues of character development aside, this revelation is symbolically, thematically weighty. Boyd is presented as an ex-cop, an authority figure; as the director of Rossum, he stands for the corporate world. He is a father figure; he is also called, by Rossum employees, the "Founder." He might just as well be called a Founding Father. All of these identities point towards a symbolic representative of the patriarchy—and the patriarchy in this story is highly complicit in the technological/corporate choices that lead to the destruction of civilization. It is all the more unnerving because Boyd has convinced

himself that what he is doing is for the good—just as any highly patriarchal father might say of his control of his daughter. Indeed, Boyd in his revealed role as the Founder calls Echo, Adelle, and Topher his "family" ("The Hollow Man"). When Topher points out that Boyd is responsible for the death of the brilliant programmer that Topher loved, Boyd simply says that some "sacrifices" must be made—without any apparent recognition of the reality of the pain. Adelle calls him insane, and in fact, he seems oblivious to the possibility that they might resent his deception, his betrayal: "I love you guys!" he asserts. Patriarchal complicity is perhaps the most dangerous, yet the least likely to be recognized by its enactors. The patriarchal man is convinced he is doing what's good for us, no matter how many of us suffer and die.

[14] The shock of Boyd's complicity is a blunt challenge to the audience. It might be compared to the kind of dramatic choices that Whedon makes when he unexpectedly kills off a major character such as Wash of *Firefly/Serenity* or Tara in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Here, though, we have a moral evacuation (or at least a re-imprinting). The character has not just died; the person we thought he was, never existed. And this is the person Joss Whedon called the show's moral center. Does that mean the show's moral center never existed? Or that it is not to be found in the usual narrative location? Whedon's full comment is actually, "If there's a moral center in the entire show it really is him. It's not even Caroline, who is clearly compromised in some way, and it's not Echo yet, although the idea is that it becomes Echo." That "if" is a word we should have paid attention to. Whedon scholars and *Buffy* fans might compare Boyd, in his relationship to Echo, with Giles, in his relationship to Buffy. Giles has participated in the patriarchal system of the Watchers just as Boyd has participated in the system of handlers (and Rossum overall); each of them seems like a father to the young woman, and each of them watches and allows her to go through pain. But Giles extracts himself from that system, while Boyd is revealed as its megalomaniacal master—and, in turn, the woman he handled kills him. Topher uses his tech on Boyd, wiping his mind so that he becomes yet another doll; and Echo uses the doll Boyd

as a human bomb to blow up Rossum headquarters. While most of the main characters recognize their own complicity, Boyd never does. The horror is therefore the greater; and the violent result is no real solution. When, after the explosion of Rossum, Paul asks Echo, "Did we save the world?," she answers, "I guess we did"; but the screen cuts immediately to the post-apocalyptic chaos we had been shown in "Epitaph One." This Hollow Man ends the world not with a whimper but a bang.

[15] A re-viewing of the series does not present any dialogue that directly contradicts Boyd's role as Founder—or actually one of two founders; he betrayed the first, the one who created the science; Boyd was the man of business. In "The Attic" (2.10), in which Echo is condemned to Rossum's mental gulag, there is interesting foreshadowing in that one of her tortured visions has Boyd morphing into a pederast who had abused one of her imprints, a character we had encountered in the pilot "Ghost."[18] But in contrast to this foreshadowing, the non-diegetic music always supports the perception of Boyd as a sympathetic character. From one perspective, this might be seen as an unfair use of conventions. From another perspective, it might be seen as a way to have audience members experience the shock similar to that someone in real life would have, upon discovery of betrayal by someone truly trusted. The non-diegetic score, after all, cues us to an emotion—and typically is used for direct emotional equivalence or clear-cut irony. But in this case our trust in the score was misplaced (for years), just as our emotional trust in the character was misplaced (for years). As Boyd says in "A Spy in the House of Love," "In my experience, that kind of trust always leads to pain." Perhaps the audience assumed that he received the pain, but in the end it seems more likely that he caused it. At least he was complicit in its creation.

[16] There are a wealth of other characters who could be explored in this light (or dark)—Topher Brink, Adelle DeWitt, Victor/Anthony, even Sierra/Priya, and the other members of the Rossum Corporation as well as the clients. But we should also acknowledge that anyone who watches the series is complicit as well.

The title alone of "Man on the Street" should hint as much. That episode starts with a screen declaring that we are about to see "Testimonial documents" in a "case"; we then see a set of news interviews of "everyday Angelinos" to learn their views of the urban legend the Dollhouse. But after seeing a few, the camera discovers for us another screen within the diegesis and a TV news report with an image of Echo in a long dress as a member of a religious cult; then another screen with an image of Caroline in the video taken of her in college; all these are being viewed by Special Agent Paul Ballard—and, of course, simultaneously by us. We all see reflections of each other in our heads; none of us lives mind-to-mind with another.[19] As Adelle DeWitt says, "Illusions aren't worthless. They're at the heart of most relationships" ("Haunted").

[17] Whether or not we think they are at the heart or just acknowledge them as part, we know that illusions are there. In a deleted scene from the pilot, Echo, imprinted with another personality on an engagement, makes the application to the real-life audience even more explicit: "I had this whole relationship. . . .all in my head. I was—what's the word—imprinting—no, projecting. That's all anyone does. We put what we need on the people around us." (And for her listener, who thinks that "sounds like heaven," she warns, "It's the other place.") But it's not just a matter of acknowledging the illusions in our interrelationships. Like the dolls, we are programmed. In the original pilot "Echo," the personality programmer Topher challenges the handler Boyd: "Why do you wear a tie? It's just what grown-up men do in our culture. They put a piece of cloth around their necks so they can assert their status, and so they can recognize each other as non-threatening kindred. . . You wear the tie because it never occurred to you not to. . . Everybody's programmed, Boyd."

[18] By the end of the first season we learn that that programming includes, among others, the kindly Dollhouse physician Dr. Claire Saunders: she too is a doll. Repeatedly through the season we learn that characters we assumed were "normal" (such as Mellie) were in fact dolls; but Dr. Saunders was one of the doll-tenders—indeed, a character who sent troubled dolls on a "self-directed

journey," a quest ("Needs" 1.8). She is involved in Dollhouse strategy sessions. She is a benevolent woman whom we may have identified with, but who is forced to recognize that she is not as much a creature of her own free choice as she had believed. And so we must wonder about ourselves, as well—about the degree of determinism in our own lives. In the Whedon-written second-season opener "Vows," despairing and angry, Claire Saunders calls Topher her creator, "The Lord my God" —another reminder of questions we may ask ourselves about our own beginnings: from whence comes our own hardwiring? As Boyd, ever the voice of wisdom (and later her lover) says to her, "Every person I know is pretty poorly constructed" ("Vows"). Trying to encourage her to go out into the world, he tells her "Everyone has an excuse for not dealing. But eventually that's all they are—excuses" ("Vows"). All of us are in some way complicit in the construction of ourselves.

[19] So—in *Buffy*, everyone who makes it through high school, everyone who endures normal life—everyone's a hero. In *Dollhouse*, everyone shares the guilt. This is not a feel-good series. But the guilt is only part of the story; just as important is forgiveness. This issue arises more and more as the series progresses. If the *Angel* series is about atonement, *Dollhouse* is about forgiveness, including the willingness to forgive ourselves. In "Haunted" (written by Jane Espenson, Maurissa Tancharoen, and Jed Whedon), a brother and sister's forgiveness helps redeem a grim view of family. In Espenson's "Briar Rose," a young girl must forgive herself for not running away from her abuser. Caroline/Echo needs to forgive herself for both the death of her beloved and her choice to become a doll. But the damage and pain in her nature make her forgiveness of others even more significant. We all know how it feels to be wounded; and as Dr. Saunders says, "I like my scars. . . .without my scars I might as well be one of them," the blankly innocent prelapsarian dolls. Dolls are innocent; scars are sin; sin is consciousness.[20] When Echo touches Topher's chest after the disastrous Omega incident, it seems to be a moment of absolution.[21] In "Epitaph One," the unaired Season One episode set in the future, Adelle is still uncertain whether she will

receive that same absolution, but we have already seen Adelle comforting Topher, and Adelle and Saunders helping their little community, their "circle." Back in the present, when Dr. Saunders drives away in the sun in "Vows," her hatred seems transmuted. It seems she may begin to forgive herself.

[20] By "Epitaph Two: Return," the series' end, the lovers Victor and Sierra find it necessary to forgive each other in order to make a life together again with their son. And both Saunders and Topher have given themselves and, one hopes, forgiven themselves, helping others find a better world. She stays in the postapocalyptic ruin of the Dollhouse to guide people to "Safe Haven," though "I told her she'd lose her mind if she stayed," says Echo—and lose her mind she does. Topher, too, approaches insanity because the supposedly amoral scientist has gradually recognized his own complicity in the damage to so many. He reaches that understanding in part because of the tutelage of the angry Claire Saunders, who confronts him after her realization that he has programmed her. Why did he make her detest him, she wants to know? He wanted her to present a different view from his own, he tells her—and he made her "better than me" ("Vows"). In effect, he has created a conscience for himself; Claire Saunders is that conscience. She helps him recognize his own wrong-doing, and perhaps he helps her see her own identity. In the end, like her, he sacrifices himself; he chooses to set off the tech that will return people to themselves, though it will require his death. "A small price to pay," he calls his death, because "I didn't want to cause any more pain": and Adelle, like a mother, physically comforts him. With further grace, he tries to relieve her guilt—and speaks to her truly—when he refuses her offer to join him in death: "I'll fix what we did to their heads. You fix what we did to the rest of the world. Your job is way harder." External action and internal reality both have their role: Adelle will fulfill Echo's fantasy of leading the dolls out into the light, into the world. And Echo accepts Paul into herself, with all his "baggage"—an ongoing gesture of forgiveness.

[21] To reach forgiveness, we must first know our guilt. There can be no forgiveness if we do not recognize our need for it—a shared

need. Writers, actors, characters, corporations, viewers—we are all complicit in the creation, because any creation involves complicity. And in some ways, all creation is the Dollhouse; we all live in a Dollhouse. Existence in this life is flawed. Few of us, as the Buddhists would say, are fully awake. And as the dolls ask again and again after every one of their brief engagements, their brief lives, "Did I fall asleep?" The answer is "For a little while." Each episode is a dream; but we must be very awake to dream with Whedon.

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[1] This essay was originally presented in a slightly shorter form at the annual PCAS / ACAS (Popular Culture Association in the South / American Culture Association in the South) conference in Wilmington, NC, October 1-3, 2009.

[2] See, for example, Muntersbjorn in this issue.

[3] See Davis in this issue.

[4] In the unaired original pilot "Echo," the chief doll programmer and computer genius Topher Brink also says, "We live in the Dollhouse, which makes us dolls."

[5] Her lover, Leo, agreed to break into Rossum with her to investigate animal cruelty, as is revealed in the first season episode "Echoes" (1.7); they were discovered after they had found evidence of far more frightening experiments, and he died after being shot by Rossum security agents. In the second season, we see Caroline pursuing her investigation of Rossum by breaking in again and yet again, this time befriending and using the brilliant programmer Bennett Halverson, who, like Leo, joined Caroline in breaking in. Caroline left Bennett trapped under the rubble of an explosion, asserting that she would make sure that she was the only one caught and that Bennett could lie her way out. Bennett sees herself as deserted by Caroline (and later tortures Echo, whom she still calls Caroline), while Caroline has told herself that she has protected Bennett as best she could; their relationship is fraught with reflective wrong.

[6] See, in this issue, Davis and St. Louis & Riggs.

[7] One might contrast Whedon's web-based *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, which was done outside the television network system.

[8] See Davis in this issue.

[9] However, Whedon also says that the darkened office space of the dolls' physician "represents my brain" ("A Private")—a comment that becomes particularly interesting by the end of the first season, when we learn that the character inhabiting that dark space is actually a doll. In other words, in this offhand comment Whedon identifies himself with a character that thinks she is in control when she actually is not—something that might apply at least in some degree to his situation with the series.

[10] See, e.g., Havens 19.

[11] Whedon famously made this remark to advocate the possibility of openness of interpretation of the texts he and his associates create ("Joss Says").

[12] Hearn's abuse is a matter of revulsion for all concerned. Yet one might ask why his sexual use is so much worse than that of the paying clients. Of course, this activity is not included in the contract, and it is done to the childlike unimprinted dolls, not to one of the adult personas. As this issue's coeditor Cynthea Masson points out, Adelle DeWitt

orders Hearn killed, whereas she does not order the death of even her traitorous security chief Lawrence Dominic.

[13] In the episode commentary, Whedon notes the director's choice to use the reflection in this scene and comments that the idea of reflection is thematically important. Further, as Cynthea Masson points out, the audience "know[s] only the reflection of these actors, not the real people"—part of the multiple levels of perception the show suggests.

[14] And as Cynthea Masson observes, Paul Ballard ends up dead not at Echo's hand, but nonetheless in the process of helping her. See the later discussion, in this essay, of Paul's fate.

[15] Technically, a redeemed Alpha saves Paul's imprint by prompting Echo to incorporate it in herself before most imprints are wiped out world-wide.

[16] See Hawk in this issue.

[17] The character's actual name is Madeline Costley. Since the name Madeline/Magdeline is traditionally (however unfairly it may be) associated with sexually promiscuous women, one might translate the name as "expensive whore"; but, as Cynthea Masson notes, one might also consider that the relationship was costly for both Madeline and Paul Ballard.

[18] In the broadcast pilot "Ghost," Echo is imprinted as hostage negotiator Eleanor Penn—who, as it turns out, was herself abducted as a girl by the same child molester who forms part of the group with which she is negotiating: he is the "ghost" of the title, who has told her she cannot fight a ghost. Paul also becomes this sexual predator in her Attic vision, suggesting some connection with the failings of Boyd Langton; and, in a different way, Paul becomes a ghost in "Epitaph Two." In "Making *Dollhouse*," Whedon says that the series creators did intend to "compromise" the Paul Ballard character so that he would become "uglier and weirder and cooler."

[19] See Masson in this issue on the screen-within-a-screen shots in "Belle Chose." As she notes, we all gloss one another. See also the scene in which "Caroline" is first introduced to Paul Ballard as a reflection.

[20] See Ian Klein's essay in the forthcoming *Joss's Dollhouse*, edited by Jane Espenson.

[21] Because of an externally initiated problem with the computer system, Topher accidentally piles up composite personalities into Alpha, a man who was originally a serial killer; Alpha repeatedly kidnaps, kills, and wounds. In "Omega," Alpha kidnaps Echo and imprints her with every personality she has ever been assigned; the Frankenstein's monster wants a bride. (And as Frankenstein's monster is a physical patchwork, Alpha is a mental one.) But Echo, despite the danger, manages to contain the multitudes without losing her mind—though she temporarily loses the wedge that contains her original personality, Caroline. Alpha threatens its destruction, and does kill a woman he had used as its vessel.