

Neoliberal Eugenics in Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse* (2009-2010)

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Abstract: In this paper, Joss Whedon's science fiction series Dollhouse (2009-2010) is argued to contain an implicit exploration of the taboo around "neoliberal eugenics," afforded by its genre-specific use of speculative technologies, and to therefore serve as a reflection of and addition to public discourse concerning the ethical dangers of free market genetic modification. This is done by drawing parallels, through discourse analysis, between themes and events in the series and arguments from prominent bioethicists and philosophers in widely read newspapers.

Keywords: neoliberal eugenics, Dollhouse, genetic modification, bioethics, science fiction

Dollhouse is a science fiction television series that ran from 2009 until 2010, when it was cancelled due to low ratings. It was created by Joss Whedon, known for creating the cult television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), the cult hit *Firefly* (2002-2003), the *Avengers* franchise (2012 and 2015), and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-2020). *Dollhouse* is the name of a Los Angeles based corporation that remains hidden from the public as it deals in ethically questionable and illegal practices. The corporation employs people on a five-year contract during which they are hired out to rich individuals. During those five years, these employees are the property of Dollhouse, which uses sophisticated neural technology to wipe their memories, personalities, and skills, after which they enter the oblivious Doll state and are given names according to the NATO phonetic alphabet to strip them of their individuality and to objectify them. In this empty state, they can be imprinted with specific sets of memories, personality traits, and skills, from a large database, to create the perfect person for the job they are hired for – ranging from the perfect girlfriend to the perfect negotiator for a kidnapping.

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Once the five-year contract is up, each employee's original name and personhood, which has been stored on a hard drive, is returned to them. They then receive enough money to last a lifetime and any emotional conditions that they were dealing with in their pre-Dollhouse life, such as PTSD or grief, are permanently removed.

The two seasons of the series revolve around Echo, a Doll whose behaviour appears to be different from the others, leading to situations unforeseen by her employers. She ultimately leads a group of rebels towards the destruction of Dollhouse and its parent company Rossum, operating first from within Dollhouse, then against the backdrop of a chaotic, anarchic world in which the wiping/imprinting technology has become rampant. Whedon is known for working with themes like feminism, identity, morality, and philosophy, and these themes are also found in *Dollhouse*, as well as trans- and posthumanism (cf. Sherry Ginn's 2014 book *Joss Whedon's Dollhouse: Confounding Purpose, Confusing Identity*). However, there also seems to be a more implicit thematic exploration in the series: that of the taboo around a new form of eugenics, or what can be termed "neoliberal eugenics" in reference to free market involvement and limited government interference in the development of genetic modification. This engagement with "neoliberal eugenics" reflects a wider public discourse on the topic, which has been addressed in articles by several prominent philosophers and bioethicists, including Michael J. Sandel, who served on the United States' President's Council of Bioethics during the George W. Bush presidency, and Marcy Darnovsky, head of the Center for Genetics & Society, in a number of widely read periodicals and newspapers such as *The Atlantic*, *LA Times*, and *The New York Times*.

My aim in this paper is, through discourse analysis, to analytically compare several of such newspaper articles as a source of widely available public discourse that engages with the topic of "neoliberal eugenics" and to relate this to several key scenes or episodes in *Dollhouse*. In doing so, I intend to argue that *Dollhouse* can be read as implicitly reflecting on and adding to the discourse on "neoliberal eugenics" via the affordances of science fiction as a genre which can exaggerate current trends and turn them into subjects for moral appraisal.

Neoliberal eugenics

The term "liberal eugenics" was coined by professor of ethics Nicholas Agar in 1998 in an eponymously titled article published in *Public Affairs Quarterly*. With this term he aims to separate genetic modification under liberalism from the fascist idealism primarily associated with the Nazi regime in World War II. Agar argues that "the distinguishing mark of the new liberal eugenics is state neutrality" (137), or in other

words, liberal eugenics is not a state-issued tool of violence to be applied to all who are deemed “unfit” or “undesirable,” but rather a technological possibility that is part of the free market and therefore up for individual consumer choice – it is up to parents to decide what is best for their children, using genetic modification in a similar manner as the modification of “environmental factors such as schooling or diet” (139). Agar does acknowledge that “[a]n often raised worry is that a market driven eugenics will end up meeting the needs of wealthy prospective parents whilst ignoring those of poorer prospective parents,” and therefore argues that “[w]e may intervene in the market in human improvements to extend access to prospective parents belonging to poorer sections of society” (143). However, for Agar, the emphasis on individual freedom of choice within the liberal ideology of the free market protects individuals from authoritarianism, as it prevents the state from being directly involved in the control over genetics, which was the case in “old” eugenics.

In *Can We Cure Genetic Diseases without Slipping into Eugenics?* (2018), eugenics historian Nathaniel Comfort expresses scepticism towards the kind of free market liberalism espoused by Agar and argues that “[l]iberal eugenics is really neoliberal eugenics” (183). By replacing liberal with neoliberal, Comfort explicitly addresses the shape liberalism has taken in many Western societies over the last four decades and questions what “individual freedom of choice” really means.

In *Neo-Liberal Ideology* (2008), Rachel Turner establishes the four cornerstones of the neoliberal ideology as revolving around the market, welfare, the constitution, and property (13). All four aspects are ultimately tied to ideals about a strong and efficient economy that would reduce the size of state control and subsequently promote individual freedom. A free market society, Turner argues, is “the most productive and efficient economic order” for neoliberals because, “[l]ike Darwinian natural selection, competition in the market order acts to eliminate negative inefficiency by selecting out winners by their profit achievement and eliminating inefficient loss-makers” (124). Additionally, “[t]he rationale behind privatisation was to expose state-owned enterprises to the full rigours of competition and to restore the central role of the market in the allocation of resources” – it would “reduce the size and scope of state control” and “increase individual freedom through the expansion of consumer choice” (131). Similarly, private property is portrayed as “the most fundamental of civil liberties” and acts against the “totalitarian oppression” of property encroachment (192). The welfare state is furthermore seen as infringing “the freedom of the individual” and leading to “economic inefficiency and ineffectiveness” (163). The constitution, finally, “represents a means through which the powers of government and other state

officials can be curtailed" (167). Turner however, argues that the neoliberal ideology plays out differently in practice. For instance, she argues that although neoliberals define the market as self-generating and separate from politics / the state, it actually "does not exist in isolation" (136) but rather needs politics, because "national strong state capacities and participatory democracy are essential ingredients for the preservation of a global market society" (137). In *Economics: The User's Guide* (2014), Ha-Joon Chang furthermore states that neoliberalism, which "has been the dominant economic view since the 1980s," is "very close to, but not quite the same as, classical liberalism": whereas classical liberals opposed democracy, as they believed that for instance women and poor people should not have the right to vote, neoliberals "do not openly oppose democracy" but "many of them are willing to sacrifice democracy for the sake of private property and the free market" (36).

It is these driving forces behind neoliberalism that lead Comfort to argue that there cannot be freedom of choice in such a system. Neoliberalism subverts the liberal ideology of individual choices and rights into individual pressures and expectations in order to maintain the free market and centralize profit as the system's main goal. As such it risks trivializing or ignoring factors such as privilege and discrimination, and the social barriers that may lead to certain people being excluded from market participation and the accompanying benefits. Therefore, in practice, neoliberal principles lead to increased inequality and a revival of the exclusionary spirit of classical liberalism. This subversion means that an incongruity exists between the neoliberal ideology of freedom and its practical consequences. According to Comfort, subjecting genetic modification to the free market will therefore not protect consumers from authoritarianism, as was argued by Agar, but will rather ensure that parents will want to choose those traits that will make their children successful, in other words, those traits "that society privileges" – or in other, cruder words still, those traits that will lead to "the same tired old Aryan master race" in the shape of "tall, white, straight, handsome [men]" (Comfort 183) (in addition I would mention 'non-disabled') – all *under the guise of* individual consumer choice. According to Comfort, then, the emphasis on individual choice does not protect individuals, but rather protects the system (i.e. free market capitalism) from individual contingencies (e.g. any individual qualities, illnesses, or disabilities that supposedly do not fit in a productive society). The term neoliberal, rather than liberal, helps to express concerns about the subversion of free market genetic modification into something that resembles old eugenics, only this time not because of an explicit view on racial superiority and inferiority, but because of an implicit, (semi-)hidden structure that still prefers a certain type of body and mind

that has been at the centre of liberal humanism for centuries and that is associated with intelligence and productivity – and therefore most suitable to survive in a hard-working, money-churning society. What such a structure does is enforce the idea that individuals should change according to standards produced by the interaction between the market and society, rather than the other way around, and thus, as Comfort argues, the (implicit) societal pressures that lead to “freely chosen” genetic modification (e.g. capitalism’s pressures on productivity) “point toward the same outcomes as authoritarian collectivism: a genetically stratified society resistant to social change – one that places the blame for society’s ills on individuals rather than corporations or the government” (Comfort 185) – meaning that genetically enhanced human beings will gain a new type of privilege over those who, for whatever reason, do not have access to or do not want to use genetic modification. Ultimately, what such developments might lead to are new class divisions in addition to the loss of individual agency under the guise of consumer choice: neoliberal free market ideology may present the consumption of goods and services as up for individual freedom of choice, while in reality there are societal pressures behind these choices, or barriers such as discrimination or a lack of accessibility. Precisely because of the emphasis on individual freedom of choice that pushes people to “choose” whatever fits best into the system, a neoliberal system can be maintained that is geared towards maximum productivity and that is resistant to social change.

Newspaper discourse and *Dollhouse*

Even if they do not utilize the academically established term “neoliberal eugenics,” many articles in newspapers present similar arguments against notions of human enhancement, and thus such arguments have been in the public eye for decades. For practical reasons I will focus on twenty-first-century articles – not only because *Dollhouse* is a twenty-first-century cultural product, but also because of two specific new developments: Inheritable Genetic Modification (IGM) and the CRISPR-Cas9 technique, successfully applied in 2001 and 2013 respectively. Both of these developments are aimed at altering the germline and therefore have the pragmatic potential to let parents decide their offspring’s physical and intellectual characteristics. In the following sections, I aim to present two distinct parallels between public newspaper discourse on the taboo of neoliberal eugenics and themes in *Dollhouse*, using key scenes or episodes, while also referring to the overall course of the narrative. First I will explore the ethics of (commercial) enhancement and the fear of resulting class divisions, after which I will shift my

focus to the contingencies that arise from new technologies and their possible implications.

The ethics of (commercial) enhancement and (corporate) control

According to ethicist Mark S. Frankel in his 2003 article *Inheritable Genetic Modification and a Brave New World*, published in *The Hastings Center Report*, IGM offers “the promise that genes associated with characteristics found to be undesirable (or less desirable) could be replaced by those linked to desired traits” (33). It is in response to such ideas around genetic (un)desirability that parallels have been drawn between genetic modification and eugenics, not only in academic literature, but also in journalism. In a 2003 *The New York Times* article called *The New Eugenics*, for example, Nicolas Kristof writes that “[m]any disability activists argue that we’re moving toward a new eugenics, and I’m afraid that they could be right” because “[a]s even proponents acknowledge, the line [in genetic engineering] between repair and enhancement is too murky to be meaningful” (n.p.). It is worth noting that around this time there were already websites for fertility clinics where couples could select preferable characteristics regarding height, hair colour, and even IQ (Frankel and Chapman 1303). Discussing his 2002 book *The Case Against Perfection* in a 2004 article in *The Atlantic*, political philosopher Michael J. Sandel states that “the deeper danger [of human genetic modification] is that [it represents] a kind of hyperagency – a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires” (n.p.) (which is essentially Dollhouse’s sales pitch). Sandel adds that

[i]t is commonly said that genetic enhancements undermine our humanity by threatening our capacity to act freely, to succeed by our own efforts, and to consider ourselves responsible – worthy of praise or blame – for the things we do and for the way we are. It is one thing to hit seventy home runs as the result of disciplined training and effort, and something else, something less, to hit them with the help of steroids or genetically enhanced muscles (n.p.).

Lining up Sandel’s views with neoliberal eugenics, hyperagency will belong to those institutions that decide what genetic modification ought to be used for (e.g. capitalist endeavours, turning genetic modification into genetic *commodification*), while it undermines the (sense of) agency of those whom genetic modification is imposed upon. According to evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis, as quoted in

Mark Baard's 2003 Wired article *Will Genetic Engineering Kill Us?*, "[i]f humans create an offshoot of their own species (...) that act would represent a dramatic turning point in the evolution of homo sapiens. Such a split would necessarily mark the end of our species..." (n.p.). A college professor in the episode "Man On The Street" speculates that if the technology Dollhouse is secretly using actually exists and is abused to program people according to somebody else's whim, "we will be over. As a species, we will cease to matter." Whether implicitly or explicitly stated, in such discussions exists the notion that the possibility of genetic modification, used in a manner that serves another's purpose, could potentially result in an alteration of both power dynamics and our perception of what it means to be a (useful, productive, good, perfect) human being, which might indeed turn into what Comfort fears and come to inspire ideas about superiority and inferiority.

One scene from *Dollhouse's* episode "Omega" in particular deals both with the notion of a "superior race" and with the loss of individuality and individual agency suggested by debates around "neoliberal eugenics." Alpha, a Doll who, due to a severe technical problem, turned violent and out of control, imprints Echo with thirty-eight personalities to make her into what he calls an "ascended being" and argues that this is what makes them both divine:

Echo [in disgust]: "You think we're gods?"

Alpha: "We're not just humans anymore. We're not multiple personalities, we're many personalities." [...]

Echo: "We're not gods."

Alpha: "Fine! Übermensch. Nietzsche predicted our rise. Perfected. Objective. Something new."

Echo [sarcastically]: "Right. New, superior people. With a little German thrown in, what could possibly go wrong? We're not new. We're not anything. We're not anybody, because we're everybody. I mean, I get it. I understand it. I'm experiencing like thirty-eight of them right now. But I somehow understand, that not one of them is me. I can slip into one. Actually, it slips into me. They had to make room for it. They hollowed me out. There's no me, I'm just a container."

Alpha believes that when human beings have complete control over their own personalities (or "when we have full control over human genetics"), they become superior. Echo however, states that "they," Dollhouse, hollowed her out, and that personalities "slip into her" instead of the other way around. This change from the

active voice to the passive voice is important, because it highlights the loss of individual agency experienced by Echo as she finds herself controlled by another entity, which uses her as a “container” to be filled with whatever they deem fit for their own purposes. Echo is made to fulfil *somebody else’s goals*, and she realizes that she is not, unlike what Alpha suggests, in control of herself, but rather acting to fulfil Dollhouse’s commercial goals.

Concerns regarding the implications of the commercialism that is at the heart of neoliberal eugenics are found in a number of articles. As reported by the *LA Times* for instance, in the 2001 article *Will Companies Hold Control of Life Made in a Petri Dish?*, economist Jeremy Rifkin argues that “[s]tem cell research brings us face to face with the prospect of fashioning a commercially driven eugenics society in the 21st century” and that “[w]e are on the cusp of a commercial Eugenics Era.” (n.p.). In her 2000 article *A Genetic Future Both Tantalizing and Disturbing: A Small Leap to Designer Babies*, *The New York Times* journalist Sheryl Gay Stolberg writes: “[i]n the last century, eugenics was about the exercise of power and ideology. In the next, it may be about money” (n.p.). Stolberg furthermore quotes molecular geneticist Dr. Lee M. Silver, who argues that the problem with commercialism and the free market is that “it is people with money who will be able to not only give their child a better environment, but also better genes” (n.p.). Beard adds the following to the conversation:

Bioethicists and scientists are contemplating the future fear that genetic engineering and other technologies are going to divide human beings into classes that may one day try to destroy one another. Rich, powerful people will use technology to make their kids smarter, they say. The poor and the disenfranchised, meanwhile, will become a kind of subhuman servant class (n.p.).

In a 2016 *NPR* article by journalist Rob Stein called *Breaking Taboo*, head of the Center for Genetics & Society Marcy Darnovsky is quoted as follows:

If we’re going to be producing genetically modified babies, we are all too likely to find ourselves in a world where those babies are perceived to be biologically superior. And then we’re in a world of genetic haves and have-nots. (...) That could lead to all sorts of social disasters. It’s not a world I want to live in (n.p.).

In essence, the creation of an enhanced class is similar to what Alpha has in mind. His own ideas do not involve commerce, nor are they specifically about *dividing* people; they are about creating an entirely new species of human beings by enhancing the *whole* of humanity, while killing those who are in the way. The scene from *Dollhouse* quoted above in that sense resembles old eugenics more literally and directly than it does neoliberal eugenics. However, Alpha is able to *subvert* a type of technology that (viewers are led to believe) has been created purely for commercial ends: to garner profit for Dollhouse. Up until the final episodes of the series there is no reason to believe that the technology has been created for a different reason, as it is very clear that many people profit financially and are mainly concerned with the profitability of the Dolls. As is revealed in one of the final episodes, however, as one of the series' many plot-twists, the wiping/imprinting technology was initially developed by Dollhouse's parent company, Rossum, in order to exercise political control by replacing government officials with Dolls. Such a display of a corporation's ulterior motives can be read to criticize neoliberal capitalism to an extreme extent: it seems to say that large corporations have the inherent ability to subvert the free market ideology (and thereby that the free market inherently affords subversion) by creating power through acquired wealth and that neoliberal capitalism will inevitably lead to corrupt power dynamics. As Comfort states: "elites justify increasing inequality with a libertarian rhetoric of individual freedom" (182). Comfort and the bioethicists quoted above do not view commercialism and free-choice consumerism as part of an ideal liberal free market that protects us from authoritarianism or class divisions and inequality, but rather point out the inherent possibility of the subversion of the free market ideology that can lead to "new" or neoliberal eugenics. These ideas are supported by *Dollhouse's* narrative, which shows a two-way subversion: one that explicitly leads to "old" eugenics because the technology falls into the wrong hands, and one that leads to neoliberal eugenics because a large company tries to establish authoritarian power over people's behaviour, while pretending that there is merely a commercial goal and that they are operating under the free market values of demand and answer, albeit in secret. According to *Dollhouse's* final episodes, such a system, in Marxist fashion, will collapse under its own contradictions, in this case into anarchy.

To address in more detail the question of whether it is possible to maintain individual agency and act on free choice under neoliberalism, we can look at one episode in particular that grapples with the relation between agency and the power of wealth. The episode, fittingly titled "Belonging," shows us that one of the main characters, Priya, was placed inside Dollhouse because she rejected a powerful, rich art collector (Nolan). This is also one of the episodes that challenges the extent to

which the five-year contract is signed voluntarily. Other examples include Echo herself, who in her pre-Doll life as Caroline is unable to live with herself after a mistake on her part that left someone seriously injured, and Anthony, Victor in his Doll state, who in his pre-Doll life left the army with PTSD and is unable to process this. They both consider Dollhouse to be their only hope and are driven there because the company possesses the technology to remove memories and mental health conditions. In Priya's case, she is forcibly "admitted" to Dollhouse by a man who happens to have the wealth and connections to pull a few strings. In Dollhouse she becomes Sierra and is consequently programmed, at Nolan's request, to display behaviour that is more "desirable" in his eyes (i.e. being submissive to him), making her commercially viable for Dollhouse, as the company can now rent out her services to him. Originally, Priya was an aspiring artist from Australia. Nolan was interested in her, but she never reciprocated; with the help of Dollhouse's parent company Rossum, he orchestrated an art gallery for her filled with Dolls who were supposed to manipulate her into wanting to be with him. The following conversation between Nolan and one of Rossum's employees, Harding, explains his sentiments towards her:

Harding: "This is an elaborate, expensive seduction, Nolan. I mean, it's the least Rossum can do after all your work with us, but couldn't we just buy her a necklace or a boat or something?"

Nolan: "I've tried all that, but she's an artist. Free spirit, Harding. She can't be bought."

Harding: "Ah. But she *can* be lured."

Nolan: "We'll see."

Harding: Why don't you let us *build* the woman you want? The perfect woman. We have all types available."

Nolan: "I don't want a Doll, Harding. I want her."

When Nolan's initial plans fail, he resorts to physical force to try and have her come home with him. Priya lashes out by saying: "You disgust me, nothing in this world could ever make me love you." The scene is immediately followed by a transition shot that shows Nolan standing in the exact same spot with the text "present day" at the bottom of the screen, while Priya, who is now an imprinted Sierra, runs over to him and kisses him. A year has passed since his humiliation at the art gallery, and since then he has orchestrated an intricate scheme that has led to Priya's forced Dollhouse admission. Being a powerful owner of a mental health clinic, he convinced his doctors to admit Priya for psychosis, for which she started to receive

medication. When her mental condition became worse and unmanageable, he “saved” her from the clinic and her own psychotic state by declaring her condition untreatable and handing her over to Dollhouse, which he presented as a last resort and as the only way Priya could finally have some peace of mind. When she became Sierra, Nolan then proceeded to hire her services so that he could finally have (his modified version of) Priya to himself. Topher, the scientist working for Dollhouse who is responsible for the Doll’s wipes and imprints, discovers that Priya “wasn’t psychotic despite her heavy medication, she was psychotic *because of it.*” When the head of Dollhouse, Adele DeWitt, finds out Nolan’s involvement, she invites him into her office to tell him his engagements with Sierra or any other Doll are permanently over. She wants nothing to do with him, calls him a rapist, and sees him as an outlier who has managed to abuse the system. However, Nolan is able to go over her head and permanently buy Sierra because of his wealth and his financial connections to Rossum. Feelings of guilt and moral duality, which are new to him as he has previously regarded Dollhouse as one big playground, motivate Topher to try and help Priya: rather than imprinting Sierra with the Priya that Nolan designed, Topher imprints her with her original personality which includes her memories of Nolan and what he did to her. When she finally confronts Nolan, he attacks her, but she is able to fight him off and kills him. Both Topher and DeWitt, with the help of another Dollhouse employee, get rid of the body and of any evidence and take Sierra back to the house, where she voluntarily returns to her Doll state to finish the contract, since she has nowhere else to go and wants to forget everything that has happened. Because Topher and DeWitt are usually portrayed as firm (and in Topher’s case mostly indifferent) advocates of Dollhouse, their disgust at Nolan’s motivations and the care they suddenly display for Sierra/Priya highlights their awareness of their position in a morally grey area. This sets in motion their doubts about the work that they do and they both end up having crucial roles in the destruction of Dollhouse and Rossum from within. What is important here though, is that they cannot act upon these doubts at first, as they are being threatened by Rossum to keep obeying their orders and continue business as usual, and with Sierra’s return to Dollhouse, everything seems to have resumed its status quo. On the surface, nothing appears to have changed.

Nolan’s treatment of Priya resembles the eugenics practice of getting rid of people who are “undesirable” because they cannot or do not want to perform in the way that those in power want them to. Additionally, Priya did “choose” to return and is now still in the possession of Dollhouse/Rossum. In that sense, this forced return to the status quo in which everybody has no choice but to resume their initial positions as employer or employee, represent what Comfort has referred to

as a (genetically) stratified society “resistant to social change” (Comfort 185) – all still under the guise of voluntary employment, voluntary contracts, and a system of demand/answer, while it is in fact the people with wealth and connections who hold the most power and can therefore strip people of their autonomy and agency. This abuse of the wiping/imprinting technology and the power that Rossum has built through it were unforeseen features to the unknowing Dollhouse employees, both to the people who signed up to become Dolls and to people like Topher and DeWitt. In fact, Rossum’s technologies regularly display contingencies, although they manifest themselves chaotically: they do not choose sides. Many times, they are to the disadvantage of our main characters – those who try to destroy Rossum – but sometimes they can be used favourably by them.

Technological contingencies

In his article, Frankel comments on the issues following the inherent contingency of IGM techniques. For instance, with the successful transmission of modified DNA, “both the donated mitochondrial DNA and that of the birth mother were found in all the cells of those babies born by this method” (33) meaning that the children technically have one father and two mothers, resulting in public ethical questions. Another such unforeseen consequence was the fact that two children, one in 2002, the other in 2003, had both developed leukaemia as a result of somatic gene transfer technology. Cases like these have been reported by major newspapers such as the *LA Times* (2002), *The New York Times* (2002) and *The Washington Post* (2005), all of which acknowledged in their articles that these occurrences contributed to an already weakened faith in gene therapy. Where the events themselves discouraged people working in the field of genetics, the news coverage arguably affected its lay readers in the same way, creating an aura of distrust around gene therapy and human genetic modification among the general public. The mentioned newspapers furthermore featured people from the field addressing the fact that with new technologies, risks and unforeseeable issues are involved. The same dr. Anderson who was interviewed for Stolberg’s *New York Times* article, states, as paraphrased by the *LA Times*, that “researchers have long feared that adding a gene would cause problems, because there is no way to control where in the DNA the new gene will land” (n.p.). He is further quoted as saying that “[g]ene therapy should only be used in the treatment of serious diseases, because there are risks” (n.p.). *The New York Times* reports dr. Savio Woo, former president of the American Society of Gene Therapy, as saying, in reference to the CRISPR-Cas9 technique: “[t]his is a new enemy that we have discovered. We know that there is a theoretical possibility, but it has never been seen before” (n.p.). In Rob Stein’s *NPR*

article mentioned earlier, Marcy Darnovsky states that “[w]hen you’re editing the genes of human embryos, that means you’re changing the genes of every cell in the bodies of every offspring, every future generation of that human being (...). So these are permanent and probably irreversible changes that we just don’t know what they would mean” (n.p.).

In *Dollhouse*, most of the major plot lines rely on unforeseen technological errors or side effects, and they are the driving force that leads the narrative to its anarchic ending. Alpha’s violent disposition was a result of technological errors. Echo’s personality and motivations rely on unforeseen side effects, as she maintains a residual persona that somehow takes offense at Dollhouse’s practices. Topher states that the Dolls “shouldn’t be adaptable [to their missions], they should be predictable” (“True Believer”), but at the same time it is recognized several times throughout the series, that with new technologies, risks are involved. For example, DeWitt argues almost verbatim to the quotes above that “science is seldom exact, there are risks,” after a mission almost fails due to errors in the imprinting technology. These risks however, do not stop Dollhouse from operating; monetary gains still hold priority over absolute safety. Other times, contingencies can be sought out and subverted: Echo’s residual persona, while first being a reason for concern for Dollhouse, is ultimately protected and recognized by Topher and DeWitt as a means to rebel.

“The Attic,” too, is subverted in its use; this is a neurological space invented by Rossum in cooperation with Dollhouse to store defective Dolls who can no longer be used for monetary gain. Once again, the Attic, along with the Nolan/Priya story arc mirrors the practice of eugenics – or, in the equivalent of neoliberal eugenics, it mirrors getting rid of people who are unfit to fully participate in the free market economy. Dolls in the Attic are kept in suspended and connected consciousness. With Rossum believing that DeWitt is still loyal to them, DeWitt is able to pretend to banish Echo to the Attic, who in turn can infiltrate this “hive-mind” so that she can wake up its victims. Ultimately, Echo and her fellow rebels bring down Rossum, but not after the wiping/imprinting technology has been hacked, stolen, and turned into a mechanism to remote control human beings, all through unforeseen flaws in the security system and within the technology itself. Arguably, then, new technologies are neither essentially good nor evil, but, as was already said, can be *chaotic*, and it is ultimately what is done with them that can help determine how their consequences manifest themselves. In line with the arguments presented in the articles mentioned above, there is simply no way of exactly predicting the future of new technological developments. That is why they need to be examined carefully, not just in terms of whether they work as intended

or not, but also in terms of the potential they carry for societal impact: in what ways can they be utilized by those in power? How will they change the ways we regard ourselves, others, and the society we live in?

Conclusion

Dollhouse can be read to argue that the taboo around genetic modification, in light of neoliberal eugenics, is justified. It does so by being critical of Dollhouse's practices and by revealing that its parent company Rossum has ulterior motives. First presented by Adele DeWitt as merely a service that answers a demand representing the free market, Rossum's wiping/imprinting technology shows what corporate control and the subversion of the free market and consumer choice ideology can mean. On an individual level it shows the loss of autonomy over one's own body. This includes both Echo's and Priya's story but ultimately also *all* people who come to work for Dollhouse. They are essentially lured there under the guise of free choice, but most of them feel that, because of their own personal circumstances, they have no other option. There is no place for them in society, which apparently lacks proper support, and forces them to rent out their bodies to a company that modifies them so that they can forget and be productive again. In line with what Frankel says about the dangers of IGM, this system removes what are deemed to be undesirable traits that threaten normalcy and productivity and replaces them with desirable ones, rather than replacing undesirable aspects of society itself (e.g. social barriers and the lack of a safety net).

On a larger scale the narrative progression of *Dollhouse* demonstrates that neoliberalism inherently allows for the subversion of technologies under the free market ideology. This is exemplified through Alpha's desire for a superior race and Rossum's desire for authoritarian power and control over the individual's behaviour, which the company hides behind a façade of demand and answer, or as their initial spokeswoman and advocate Adele DeWitt puts it, of "giving people [i.e. rich costumers/consumers] what they want." According to Comfort, such corruptible free market and free choice ideologies can lead to stratification through unequal access to genetic modification technologies or the unwillingness to use them, and resistance to social change because they hide societal pressures to choose whatever will benefit the neoliberal system.

The final episodes of *Dollhouse* show the unsustainability of a neoliberal system that allows for such corruption and the abuse of power. The narrative's events culminate in the onset of Rossum's explicit corporate control as opposed to their initial implicit secret operations away from the public eye. This control evokes

the fierce resistance of groups that band together to fight the corporation, leading to Rossum's collapse and eventually to an uncontrolled, lawless space of anarchy.

Ultimately, the show's overall developments can be seen as reflecting the fears of the commodification of human beings through neoliberal eugenics. What happens when genetic modification becomes commercialized and subject to free market forces? Are consumers really able to choose freely under neoliberal capitalism or is there an ulterior motive hidden behind this ideology – a motive that seeks to create highly productive and non-agential members of society in order to maximize profit and power? Such dangers of corporate control and the unbridled progress in technological developments are captured in *Dollhouse* through its science fictional exaggeration of current societal trends. At the same time, the series adds to the ethical discourse around genetic modification by showing its audience what could happen should the taboo of genetic modification be broken: if the technology is installed in society as a commercialized and normalized practice, we first have neoliberal eugenics to fear, and then revolution and anarchy to look forward to.

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