

Michael C. Gilbert and Sofia Gieysztor: Point of View as Identity: Themes of Mindfulness and the Power of the Container in Whedon's *Dollhouse*

Cynthia Masson once made it clear just how profoundly Joss Whedon's work invites the reader to gloss the text. In this paper, we accept that invitation and gloss the text of *Dollhouse* through the heuristic concept of 'mindfulness'. In so doing, we offer what may be a slightly new interpretation of the notion of identity in a show that is rich with such notions. We propose that what Susan Quilty described simply as "negative space" is more than just the mysterious background left after the mind is removed. In applying the concept of mindfulness, we assert a specific, powerful, and identity-building role for the body, the supposedly empty container of the mind: the role of observer.

The concept of mindfulness tells us that it is the container itself that is either mindless or mindful — the latter only to the extent that the constructs of the mind are observed, rather than merely obeyed. Observing the mind (or minds, in the case of Echo) IS mindfulness. More importantly, mindfulness, not the mind, is the true inviolable core of identity. Some of the groundwork for this view was laid by Susan Quilty in "Negative Space in the House" and, importantly, by Sharon Sutherland and Sarah Swan in "There Is No Me; I'm Just a Container - Law and the Loss of Personhood in *Dollhouse*." Hugh Davis pushed us further in this direction with his notion that masks (or personas) are a state of mind. And Bronwen Calvert opened the door to the vast array of cyberpunk glosses, many of which also point in this direction. Outside of the literature, many cross-cultural philosophical, scientific, religious, and psychological disciplines — including European Existentialism, American Humanism, and Asian Buddhism — offer similar themes about mindfulness and not mind itself, as the supreme identity.

We will explore as many themes of container-as-identity as possible in a twenty-minute paper presentation. At the least, we intend to explore at least these three themes: (1) Echo's story provides the core justification for our gloss. Her arc is precisely the story, not of some core identity coming out of some corner and taking over, but of the growing power of mindfulness. Echo's specialness emerges specifically from her ability to control her minds, rather than be controlled by them. It is through her ability to observe them that she avoids merely becoming them. (2) The physical dollhouse itself (the building) is also a container, built to assert its control over the minds within, primarily through its powers of observation. As one might expect from the always meaningful spaces in Whedon's work, the surveillance architecture of the *Dollhouse* provides dozens of direct comparisons with the architecture of mindfulness. (3) Last but not least, the show's audience is itself a kind of engine of awareness, yearning for the dolls in the story to not be consumed by the minds installed in them. We the viewers provide, in the context of the narrative experience, an embodiment of the vast potential of awareness of mind.