

## **Sherry Ginn: Red Rooms, Conditioning Chairs, and Needles in the Brain: Brainwashing and Memory Manipulation in the Whedonverses**

The notion that someone can play around with your brain or mind, without your knowledge, is a scary thought. Human beings pride themselves on their strength of character and ability to resist undue influence. The average person does not understand or acknowledge the various ways in which their behavior is manipulated every day. Such manipulations do not just occur in television advertisements via what social psychologists call the “peripheral route” of persuasion. They may also occur during news broadcasts, watching television series or films, listening to the radio, or texting friends. Our brain increasingly automates many of the activities in which we engage daily and such automation can be considered brainwashing. However, when the average person hears the word brainwashing, they think of *The Manchurian Candidate* and reports from Korean War veterans of techniques used by the Chinese on American prisoners-of-war, techniques that have been adopted by countries, including the US, to program counter-intelligence operatives.

In this paper I will briefly discuss the ways in which “brainwashing” can occur, specifically in relation to the education and training of Natasha Romanoff, the Black Widow. However, I will also discuss other characters in the Whedonverse who have been subjected to “brainwashing,” including Dottie Underwood on *Agent Carter*, River Tam in *Firefly/Serenity* and the Dolls/Actives of *Dollhouse*. Other examples in the Whedonverse include Maggie Walsh’s experiments in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.