

## **Madeline Muntersbjorn: Alterity, Ambivalence, and Artificial Intelligence**

In DVD commentary to S6.2, Marti Noxon predicts that the scene where a recently resurrected Buffy watches as her mechanical alter is drawn and quartered will provide 'fodder for academic symposia'. Indeed, several scholars have examined the symbolism of the Buffybot's graphic demise as a pivotal point in the heroine's journey. But neither Scoobies nor scholars regard the Buffybot as an end in herself. As the tropers note, "It's not entirely clear how sentient she is, but the Scoobies seem a little unnervingly cavalier about how they treat her." The Buffybot endures grisly ordeals that could not befall the really real Buffy, partly because the decapitation or dismemberment of a human body would be too bloody for prime time. Viewing the Buffybot as a non-person is not only a means to put censor-friendly ultra-violence on the small screen, but also a problematic narrative device with deep roots in sexism ("men like sandwiches") and racism ("she's the descendent of a toaster oven"). This talk considers the Buffybot alongside arguments against the possibility of artificial intelligence, from Nagel's (1974), "What is it like to be a bat?" to Sullivan's (2006), "What is it like to be a bot?" Both argue we could not create machines that possess what we don't understand, namely self-consciousness. The ambivalence many feel towards sentient machines is a revealing rule with notable exceptions, in Season 7 and beyond. For example, Penny Polendina of RWBY is a robot girl who denies she's "real" until Ruby Rose scoffs: "You think just because you've got nuts and bolts instead of squishy guts makes you any less real than me?" Ruby can sense Penny's heart and soul, not because her creator has cracked the "hard problem" of consciousness, but because Ruby embraces Penny as a friend rather than dismisses her as a machine.