

Cylons, Dolls, and Hosts: The Cyborg Plot Twist in Science Fiction Television

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The re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica*, 2003-2009, reached its galactic conclusion just as *Dollhouse*, 2009-2010, began blazing through its short life. They ran so close together that *Dollhouse*'s creator Joss Whedon had to turn down the opportunity to direct a late episode of *Battlestar Galactica* (hereafter *BSG*) because he was already busy working on *Dollhouse* (West). These shows were not only close neighbors, but together participated in a significant moment for science fiction (hereafter SF) television's themes, acting as two turns in a dialogue about human artifice in cyborgs¹ and changing audience expectations for the genre. *BSG*, re-invigorated the cyborg trope by hinging its narrative on dramatic irony about who is a Cylon and revealing hidden Cylons to the audience at key moments. In this article, I call this the "cyborg plot twist." *Dollhouse* borrowed this dramatic irony and plot twist combination and modified it to further explore human artifice and cyborg embodiment. Now the reboot of *Westworld*, 2016-present, is utilizing audience familiarity with the cyborg plot twist from *BSG* and *Dollhouse*². The resurgence of the cyborg plot twist in *Westworld* offers a perfect time to examine this conversation about cyborgs and SF television. When shows upgrade the cyborg plot twist for their own plots, they capitalize on

¹ Throughout this article, the term cyborg will refer to Cylons, Dolls, and Hosts though some of these synthetic humanoid hybrids are not labeled as such within their own universe. They all can be theoretically considered as cyborgs due to their joining of robotic programming and living flesh (for instance, see Bronwen Calvert's discussion of why Dolls function as cyborgs).

² These series offer many juicy plot twists, which are revealed here without further spoiler warnings!

the long-standing symbol of the cyborg while also updating it to better represent and question contemporary cultural anxieties about identity and Otherness.

The changes between these three SF television shows represent a conversation because genre is a language, relying on familiar tropes and characters to say new things in response to previous iterations. J.P. Telotte claims that SF is more like slang, with grammatical rules and units that thrive on being re-imagined and used in new ways. Each development is not arbitrary, but rather each new shift in grammar “attaches to [SF’s] most identifiable concerns” (*Science Fiction Film* 18). Therefore, examining the changes between iterations of SF icons, like the cyborg and the cyborg plot twist, reveals relevant cultural anxieties behind those changes.

The Cyborg and the Plot Twist

Telotte explains that the synthetic humanoid trope generally explores “the ability of our technology to let us, in nearly godlike fashion, craft images of ourselves, and the correspondent possibility that these creations, those emblems of our very power, might well *overpower* us and take our place” (*Science Fiction Film* 108). Humanoid machines function as humanity’s uncanny Other—as opposed to aliens, which Telotte associates with conservative fears of external attack by the Other. The uncanny Othering of humanoid machines focuses on “the collapse of subject-object distinctions” to inspire a “qualitative shift in our sense of the self or others” (*Science Fiction Film* 163). Humanoid machines in SF encourage audiences to view humanity as an artificial construct and question its definitions and categories.

Cyborgs, robots, and androids all share this uncanny effect, but cyborgs differ from other humanoid machines due to their hybrid organic/synthetic qualities. They excel at exploring themes about boundaries and ambiguity. Donna Haraway’s foundational 1985 essay “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” suggests that cyborg embodiment can be a positive force for feminism through dismantling dualisms such as male/female. Many scholars have since analyzed the cyborg as a productively or frighteningly ambiguous figure (i.e. Claudia Springer, Anne Cranny-Francis, Elaine Graham, Bronwen Calvert). Cyborgs are a potent icon for both highlighting and breaking down dualisms like male/female and synthetic/organic.

The cyborg plot twist intensifies this erosion of boundaries. The plot twist uses the television medium to capitalize on the visual aspect of the uncanny as well as the anticipatory structure of weekly programming. The uncanny has been associated with the eyes ever since Freud coined the term, both in a literal sense as well as “seeing double” with doppelgangers. In the predominantly visual format of SF television, the cyborg is visually doubled as human/non-human. The viewers watch a human actor playing a human-looking character that the story portrays as synthetic. The actors must play cyborgs that look and act human. These layers of visual cues and deceptions highlight the artificiality of film as well as the artifice of human behavior. When cyborgs are involved, what “looks” human is no longer trustworthy to viewers. Furthermore, television formatting allows for greater development of cyborg hybridity than possible in formats like feature-length films. Bronwen Calvert, in *Being Bionic: The World of TV Cyborgs*, points out that SF television cyborgs “become embedded in the ongoing story” allowing their depiction to “become more complex, contradictory and problematic, eroding and compromising divisions and boundaries” (14). Over multiple episodes, a cyborg can set up thematic boundaries and then undermine them weeks later.

Once the audience suspects that characters may be secretly cyborgs, the time between episodes only intensifies that suspicion. This cyborg plot twist encourages audience participation in the form of speculation, predictions, and fan theories online. The prevalence of this online audience participation has increased since *BSG* aired, culminating recently in some reviewers like Todd VanDerWerff on *Vox* even arguing that *Westworld* is putting more effort into fueling these online discussions than developing its characters. All this extra-textual theorizing about the cyborg plot twist directs the audience’s attention at the very definition of humanity, its performance, and embodiment. By extension, related themes of Othering like racial stereotypes and dualisms like male/female are called into question.

The cyborgs of *BSG*, *Dollhouse*, and *Westworld* reveal key variations on this plot twist across time. Tracing the chronology of these three television shows demonstrates their contributions to the development of cyborgs as a “slang term” of SF grammar. Between these three shows, the cyborg and its plot twist are updated to accommodate an audience increasingly familiar with the tropes. The differences between each show also highlight changes in the representation of Othering and dualisms, as each new show develops richer ambiguity and more

complex disruptions to divisions like race and gender. These updates move each series further into the postmodern and posthuman by fragmenting, complicating, and nuancing their representations of uncanny and boundary-challenging cyborgs. Any future portrayal of a cyborg must now choose whether or not to engage with the story elements and plot points that were exemplified and established in the SF lexicon by *BSG*, *Dollhouse*, and *Westworld*.

Cylons

The writers of *BSG* drew on the original *Battlestar Galactica*, 1978-1979, and the existing body of SF cyborgs across media. Out of the three shows highlighted in this article, *BSG*'s Cylons have the most alien and technological sounding name, and the one that most echoes the sound of the word "cyborg." This name itself has transformed and became more cyborg-like over time. In the original series, it likely referred to Cylon of Athens, a noble who attempted a coup in 632 BCE on the advice of the Oracle at Delphi. This fits with the original characters' Greek and literary names, while also feeling science-fictional by sounding similar to "cyborg" and "cybernetic." In the reboot, the original archaic names like Apollo became call signs in favor of ostensibly normal names like Lee. Without the Greek names, the Cylon of Athens reference loses its context and becomes so obscure that the sound-association between Cylons and cyborgs takes center stage. This new context for the name parallels the new human appearance and ambiguous identity of Cylons. Only in the trailer for the 2010 prequel *Caprica* do we learn that Cylon means "cybernetic life-form node." The retconned acronym confirms Cylons as living, if not necessarily human. The Cylons' name has always hearkened to the cyborg, but with greater complexity as the show progressed—much like the portrayal of the Cylons themselves.

Unlike the original series, the reimagined *BSG* hinges on the ongoing mystery of Cylon identities. After introducing the new deceptively humanoid models and revealing Sharon (Boomer) Valerii's double at the end of the 2003 Miniseries, the internet bloomed with theories about who was a Cylon. The concept of a robot/cyborg reveal is not brand new, of course. It appeared beforehand in such famous contexts as *Alien* and *Blade Runner*, but *BSG*'s format altered the formula. The reference site *TV Tropes* named this trope after a *BSG* quote, "They Look Like Us Now." Due to the serialized nature of television, *BSG*'s original run

utilized these surprises to cultivate paranoia. The reveals were withheld not just for 40 or 90 minutes into a feature film, but for weeks – or years in the case of the Final Five Cylons. Even viewers binge-watching the show now can only get through four seasons' worth of episodes so quickly.

This delayed plot twist tactic not only encouraged fan theories, but also complements the cyborg themes of Othering and hybridity. Margaret Rose says the uncertainty about Cylon identity threads through the whole series, “ensuring that the designation of human is always provisional” (1199). Uncertainty about Cylon identities must coexist with viewers' developing attachments to characters and their daily dramas. This tactic questions whether it is important to know a character's species when getting familiar with them. The cyborg plot twists serve as the basis for how *BSG* grapples with humanity: the viewer does not know for sure who is in a body, what is organic or synthetic, who is self and who is Other, and therefore cannot rely on definitions or exclusions. Viewers are encouraged to embrace the ambiguity, despite or alongside paranoia—which was especially potent at the time of release in post-9/11 America. Academics have had much to say about the series' cultural milieu (i.e. *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy: Mission Accomplished or Mission Frakked Up?* or *Politics and Popular Culture*, both of which feature multiple essays). The cylon plot twist evoked the world's fresh paranoia about terrorists hiding amongst us. In defiance of this charged political atmosphere, *BSG*'s cyborgs challenged viewers to embrace this hybridity and refuse categories like us-vs-them.

BSG's emphatic ambiguity capitalizes on the potential that Haraway identifies in the cyborg, allowing for effective commentary on cultural categories and Othering. In contrast, the original *Battlestar Galactica* portrayed simple, hostile robots and straightforward conflict between human and machine. In the original series, reptilian aliens created the Cylons; the Cylons of the new series are created by, the responsibility of, and indistinguishable from the humans they attack.

This increased complexity and self-reflexivity, alongside the uncertainty bred by the plot twist, builds on the successes and shortcomings of cyborgs in previous SF television, including the monumental influence of *Star Trek*. In Rose's article, “Cyborg Selves in *Battlestar Galactica* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*: Genre, Hybridity, Identity,” she compares *BSG* to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (hereafter *TNG*), 1987–1994. Rose argues that the new *BSG*'s futuristic world complicates the original's simplistic Self versus Other narrative while also avoiding the problematic racial underpinnings of *TNG* (1200). The new *BSG*, she

says, exists in a universe noticeably free of aliens—a large departure from any *Star Trek*. This crucial change removes the ability to project race or bio-essentialism onto alien species, a problem that Rose identifies in *TNG* where hybrid characters like Worf (a Klingon raised by humans) struggle with racially-determined identities without any solution. Hybridity is more aptly dealt with in *BSG* through Cylon duality. The identical model eight Cylon characters Boomer and Athena emblemize this struggle, according to Rose. Boomer's struggle mirrors that of the inter-species hybrids in *TNG*, since she faces an impossible decision between two pre-determined identities and divided loyalties. In comparison, Athena's development becomes defiance of categories. Athena's individual actions overcome the bio-essentialist view that had undermined *TNG*'s representation of progress.

Cyborgs may seem like the perfect way for *TNG*'s show writers to address their hybridity problem, but *TNG*'s cyborgs (aptly named “the Borg”) fell short of this potential. Rose claims that these hive-mind half-organic cyborgs conflicted with *TNG*'s support of autonomous individual identity and therefore had to be destroyed rather than used to speculate on human/machine boundaries. This missed opportunity demonstrates *TNG*'s unwillingness to explore Othering or complex hybridity. Even though *TNG* was revolutionary in on-screen diversity, expanding on the groundbreaking progress of the original *Star Trek* series, 1966-1969, it could not entirely escape the problematic discourses it sought to overcome.

However, *Star Trek: Voyager*, 1995-2001, which concluded only two years before *BSG* was rebooted, revisits the Borg as a rich site for examining social issues around race and gender—paving the way for *BSG*. *Voyager*'s Borg character Seven of Nine develops a hybrid identity and complexity. Trudy Barber argues that Seven of Nine capitalizes on the cyborg body to complicate and examine fetishism within the feminist context of *Voyager*. However, viewers knew Seven of Nine's identity all along while *BSG* offered no such security. *BSG*'s increased uncertainty extends the potential for commentary. Barber concludes her article with the thought that “the character Six from *Battlestar Galactica* can be seen as an upgraded version of the character Seven of Nine from *Voyager* [...], no longer simply nerdifying the erotic, but hypersexualizing and perverting the political, posthuman, and virtual body” (145). Seven of Nine was androgynous, dominant, and a challenge to gender norms. Cylon number six, played as a literal femme fatale by former model Tricia Helfer, electrifies gender

norms to an absurd level and offers an ambiguous criticism of human sexuality. *BSG*'s ambiguity far exceeds *TNG*'s aliens or Borg, and even what *Voyager* achieves with Seven of Nine. In doing so, *BSG* complicates the Othering that preceded it in *Star Trek* and its own original series.

This upgrade does not mean that *BSG* resolved every problem and achieved the perfect culmination of television. Park and Carro point out that despite *BSG*'s updates like complicating *Star Trek*'s neat morals, the props reveal that SF's middle-class, North American values remain unchallenged and "perhaps *Battlestar Galactica* is not so different from *Star Trek* after all" (208). In scholarly analyses like Park and Carro's over the last decade, the series' ambiguity has been praised as well as faulted for not going far enough. Van Leavenworth, for instance, found that after four seasons of blurring the organic/synthetic boundary, the finale suddenly valorized the separation of organic human biology and synthetic cultural production, condemning hybridity at the last second.

Many other concerns revolve around the related social messages. Lewis Call uses Heidegger's being-toward-death to argue that the Cylon's ambiguous Otherness successfully separates eugenics from evolutionary valuing of reproduction, even if the finale does not go far enough into challenging heteronormative colonialism. Anne Kustritz disagrees, though she is similarly torn. She claims that while the bulk of the show productively undermined Othering, the last season regresses to support a troubling paradigm of eugenic thinking and heteronormativity. Similarly, Aino-kaisa Koistinen posits that *BSG* questions which bodies are perceived as "right" for the performance of humanity, but she also says that the predominantly white casting reinforces the hierarchy and rejection of some bodies. As these examples demonstrate, ambiguity and the erasure of boundaries are key contributions of *BSG*. For these scholars and many others, the series picks up on Haraway's usage of the cyborg by constantly complicating and politicizing dualities such as synthetic/organic and highlighting the performance of humanity. In the process, *BSG* reflects modern society's own conflicts as it rushes towards a posthuman condition. Yet the scholarly conversation around *BSG* is also rife with controversy and disagreements. This serves as a testament to that same ambiguity and space for interpretation, but also the ways in which the show may not have entirely succeeded at escaping from the same Othering and dualisms that it sought to criticize.

Dolls

BSG unquestionably advanced the SF television cyborg and established the cyborg plot twist while the show's shortcomings created openings for conversational partners like *Dollhouse* to reply. *Dollhouse* may not be immediately obvious as a successor to *BSG*, but the connections are important to see how cyborgs are being passed between show writers. Rose concludes that new SF television shows operate on a knowledge of the old to comment upon them, complicate them, and find new ways to avoid reinforcing the negative cultural norms. The closer the association between shows, the more direct and effective this interplay and commentary. The closest possible association is a re-make, but Rose bases her analysis of *BSG* and *TNG* on the claim that other links have equivalent impact: "*Battlestar*'s developer, lead writer, and executive producer, Ronald D. Moore, was a staff writer for *TNG*. So, in a sense, the new *Battlestar Galactica* can trace a lineage to *TNG* as much as to the original *Battlestar*" (1199). Similarly, *Dollhouse* manifests connections to *BSG* beyond the cyborg plot twist.

Dollhouse creator Joss Whedon's love of *BSG* was prominent in the media at the time. In a promotional special called *Battlestar Galactica: The Phenomenon* that aired before the premier of Season Four, Whedon gushed praise like "that's more entertainment, more twists, more unexpected stuff, more humanity, more shocking extraordinary storytelling than I've seen. That was a great episode. And then they'll run the opening credits." Entertainment news sites like *TheTVAddict* featured titles such as "Exclusive: Joss Whedon Talks DOLLHOUSE and His Love Affair with BATTLESTAR GALACTICA." The two shows were linked in the public eye before *Dollhouse* began.

Whedon's love of *BSG* seeped into *Dollhouse*. Four *BSG* actors appear in just the first season, including Tahmoh Penikett (relatively unknown before *BSG*) as a lead. Characters occasionally swear with *BSG*'s "frakking" and *Dollhouse*'s Topher Brink accuses someone of going "all Cylon on me." The connections were noticeable enough to fans that IMDB's FAQ for *Dollhouse* includes the question "What is the connection between Dollhouse and Battlestar Galactica?" Fans debated if the shows existed in the same universe or if it was just Whedon's fandom showing through, while some of these conversations sparked insightful commentary on SF themes. On the *Movies and TV Stack Exchange* discussion

forum, user Liath asked “Are Dollhouse and Battlestar Galactica connected?” to which user Katie answered:

There are a million thematic links -- sleeper agents vs. cylons who think they're human. the goo-bath you get in the attic vs. the resurrection ship. the philosophical struggle between tech and real and "hybrid" as at the end of TDH with Anthony. The good guys being bad guys being good guys until they're all sort of blended together and only your actions matter. (Liath)

This was not satisfactory for user “cde,” who replied “They are thematically similar, but that's true for many unrelated scifi series. The question asks if they share any actual connection or if it's coincidence” (Liath). These replies are both correct, and showcase the developing SF slang around cyborgs. The similarity in cyborg themes is not coincidental. Whedon did not simply copy *BSG* or choose a common trope. Given the timing and his fandom, *Dollhouse* is a reply to *BSG*.

Whedon drew the clearest line to *BSG*'s cyborgs through borrowing the cyborg reveal plot twist. From the start of both series, the same mystery hooks viewers and undermines Othering: the question of who is programmed and who is real. Whedon himself noted that plot twists and surprises were part of his love for *BSG*: “Usually they surprise me, even if I'm working with all cylinders trying to figure it out” (*Battlestar Galactica: The Phenomenon*). Whedon adopts the plot twist almost exactly, priming it for comparison as well as developing it in new ways.

The Dolls are named after familiar objects, eschewing a futuristic neologism like Cylons in favor of the uncanny familiar. Their name connotes passive and receptive playthings: one can just as easily cuddle dolls and play house as one can give them a brutal haircut and tear out an arm. Dolls also offer extra uncanny associations, given the frequent fear of dolls coming alive and their association with uncanny children, as seen most prominently in horror films. These connotations capitalize on the uncanny aspects of cyborgs to help us examine the boundaries of self and technology. Likewise, the Dolls emphasize the threat to autonomous selfhood more than Cylons. While Cylon identities are hidden, there is a fixed number: the twelve models. In *Dollhouse* this boundary is uprooted. Anyone can be implanted with Active architecture, the technological component of these cyborgs that changes the human brain into a programmable receptacle for new personalities. Furthermore, episodes “Epitaph One” and “Epitaph Two” offer

the haunting potential that any person can be remotely implanted against their will.

Dollhouse accomplishes much of its boundary-erosion through surprise reveals about who is a Doll, but it increases the ambiguity a step beyond *BSG*. After viewers learn that someone is a Doll, they are still unable to fix an identity to that Doll since they do not know which personality is currently programmed, or if it has hidden subroutines. Calvert claims that this move goes so far as to “disrupt and challenge television conventions” through focusing on a cast of perpetually uncertain characters (167). More poignantly, while most of *Dollhouse*’s cyborg plot twists are revealed by the end of season one, the most bewildering identity reveal occurs last: the character Boyd Langton. In “The Hollow Men,” the most shocking reveal is not a programmed identity, but a pathological human disguising his identity. This late-show plot twist ultimately questions the self/Other divide in completely human terms. In a show that relied upon knowing who was programmed to establish/undermine a “correct” and “natural” definition of humanity and freedom, this completely human disguise is meant to blindside. This plot twist questions the validity of distinguishing between artificial brain programming and the “programming” of real psychopathic disorders. Unlike *BSG*’s much-debated pastoral finale, it is much harder to find a valorization of nature over technology in *Dollhouse*’s conclusion. It instead shows that both natural and synthetic brain processes can betray us.

Dollhouse also expands upon the project of embodiment while avoiding some of *BSG*’s pitfalls. The narrative undermines the division of mind and body, but on the much smaller scale of one Doll’s mind and body: Echo. Calvert points out that removing the personality of a Doll does not remove the entire person, but leaves muscle memory and other such embodied identity behind—defying any Cartesian dualism that identity is all in the brain (173). This detail is integral to the plot and development of Echo, who begins to collect physical affectations from her various programmed identities starting from the end of the second aired episode, “The Target.” Even though the show’s dialogue about the brain-wipe implies that all personality is removed, the plot slowly undermines this and allocates some identity to the body.

This advances the theme beyond *BSG*, in which identity is exclusively located in the abstract mind. When Cylons download, their entire personality transfers efficiently to a fresh, identical body. *BSG* only briefly nods to embodiment in the aberrant body of Athena, the only Cylon to give birth. “A Measure of Salvation”

reveals that the physical experience of pregnancy and birth left an imprint of motherhood on her body, specifically through the transfer of human Lymphocytic encephalitis antibodies from the hybrid fetus—giving Athena a physiological hybrid identity. However, *BSG* undermines this embodied identity when Athena downloads into a new body in “Rapture.” As Athena reunites with Hera in this new body, Caprica 6 comments on the similarity but crucial difference between Athena and Boomer: “Look at that. Hera knows her. That's amazing. You and she are biologically identical. Hera recognizes her mother” (“Rapture”). Since the bodies of Boomer and Athena are the same model, this scene suggests a difference in the mind that is recognizable to the child. Caprica 6’s comment also erases the difference between Athena’s different bodies, since there is no longer a physical imprint of motherhood. This scene emphasizes that bodies are merely vessels for identity in *BSG*, effectively Othering the body from the mind and reinforcing rather than blurring boundaries.

When *Dollhouse* broaches motherhood in the episode “Instinct,” it does so while confirming embodied identity. This episode focuses on the danger of programmer Topher’s casual meddling with the connections between Echo’s brain and body to trigger lactation: “I made code for the brain that changed the physical body. And I’m not talking about muscle memory so somebody can play fancy piano. I made changes on a glandular level” (“Instinct”). Later, when Echo attacks Topher and goes after the baby who she believes is her son, even after being wiped of the mother’s personality, Ballard refers back to Topher’s original comment: “Think about it: you changed her on a glandular level. Maybe her body was stronger than her brain.” Topher responds, “Yeah! Yeah. Yeah. The maternal instinct is the purest. It's too strong for a normal wipe” (“Instinct”). This representation of embodiment strongly adheres motherhood to the body, unlike Athena’s interchangeable bodies in *BSG*. It attributes a hierarchy of strength to certain embodied identities, with “maternal instinct” topping the charts. Even though Echo did not actually give birth to this baby, the changes to her physical body and the act of nursing the child carries the greater weight than an imprinted identity within the mind. Within *Dollhouse*, only mind and body together produce a complete identity, complicating any Cartesian inclination to Other our own bodies. *Dollhouse* also dodges *BSG*’s problematic reproductive politics and eugenics debated by Kustritz and Call through focusing on individual bodies rather than whole races.

Finally, one particularly interesting—and potentially negative—change in *Dollhouse* has to do with hope. Katie Moylan argues that *Dollhouse* succeeds where *BSG*'s finale failed because *Dollhouse* does not draw back from critique. *BSG* produces artificial negativity, she says, by subsuming race and class activism narrative arcs within the larger epic narrative, but *Dollhouse* retains its activism and consequences through an open, ambiguous conclusion. Yet the meta-narratives produce a very different effect. Both shows resolve the human/Other conflict through hybridity. In *BSG* it is the messianic and glorified Cylon/human hybrid child Hera, while in *Dollhouse* it is Echo's posthuman and fragmented hybrid identity, which is painted as necessary but tragic. Call explains that:

“*BSG*'s vision of human–Cylon hybridity is not innocent, and it offers no certainties. But it does offer the possibility of hope. The show's beautifully ambiguous conclusion offers the hope of a positive, (re)productive hybridity. That same conclusion also suggests that hybridity could one day give way, once again, to fragmentation, segregation and fear. *BSG* will not let hybridity become an achieved utopia. Rather, hybridity must remain a constant project” (106).

This hopeful project in *BSG* is literally inherited by the viewer. Breaking the cycle in *BSG* becomes a quest for the audience, who find themselves suddenly implicated by the twist that the final planet is in fact our ancient Earth and Hera is our common ancestor. After the final scenes of 80s robotic advances, the audience is left with an ancestral burden to decide what will happen next in an unusually direct call to action for SF. *Dollhouse*, on the other hand, concludes as a familiar cautionary tale about technology run amok. The epilogue episodes warn of a destroyed future. There is no implication or call to action, but instead a bittersweet space to reflect and nurse one's emotional wounds. Very Whedonesque, but considerably less hopeful or direct.

While Whedon was clearly influenced by and commenting on what came before, of course the show cannot resolve every problem identified with *BSG*, or with cyborgs in general. Concerns about diverse casting and heteronormativity remain unresolved in both shows. Even as they both try to use SF futuristic thinking to move beyond social constructs, they ultimately reveal their contemporary context by falling prey to some of the same casting decisions that lurk throughout Hollywood and the film industry at large, reinforcing mainstream

casts and erasing difference. Additionally, *Dollhouse*'s attempted message about the exploitation of bodies in sex trafficking was not well received. As Calvert describes it: "there is a constant tension between viewer enjoyment in watching an entertaining fiction and viewer discomfort in discovering the intended parallels between Whedon's fantasy world and our own" (160). Calvert praises this design of the show, and claims that those who complained about the series' uncomfortable voyeurism did not get the point. Nonetheless, the relative unpopularity of *Dollhouse* undermined its troubling of boundaries and its message by severely limiting its audience.

Hosts

These shows are turns in an ongoing conversation. *BSG* catalyzed a new phase of looking at cyborgs and hybrids in SF. *Dollhouse* responded to *BSG*, reflecting and improving on its terms and narrative devices. Now *Westworld* is replying as well. *Westworld* does not have direct connections to *BSG* or *Dollhouse*, but it no longer needs such a tangible link. The cyborg plot twist itself connects them. To return to the metaphor of SF language and slang, *Westworld* talks about cyborgs in the same new dialect as *BSG* and *Dollhouse*. The fandom has become fluent and recognizes the language when they hear it. Before *Westworld* aired, journalist Selina Wilken observed that the new series offers many connections to *BSG* and *Dollhouse*. Since it aired, articles from entertainment journals have listed *Dollhouse* and *BSG* as predecessors or recommended viewing for *Westworld* fans (see Kathryn VanArendonk or Aaron Pruner). During *Westworld*'s season 2, u/blur878 asked Reddit's r/westworld board "Is Westworld a Battlestar Prequel?" This thread was just one instance of an enthusiastic debate about whether *Westworld* had snuck one of *BSG*'s Cylon number 6 models into Season 2, Episode 2 as an Easter egg for fans. *Westworld* is clearly part of this cyborg conversation.

Like the Dolls, *Westworld*'s Hosts are not named with a futuristic neologism. The name seems to have hybrid potential, given the multiple meanings of the word. When used in the sense of host and hostess, the Hosts have implied ownership of their world—it is their home in which to receive guests—offering them a tiny bit more power and less passiveness than Dolls. Alternately, it is a hospitality job like a host or hostess at a restaurant, serving the whims of patrons.

At the same time, the biological usage of the word implies a parasitic relationship with the park patrons, who arrive only to feed—often fatally—off the bodies of the Hosts. Parasitic relationships are also an uncanny favorite, as they blur boundaries between the embodied self and something else. The Hosts inherit their concept from the original *Westworld* film, 1973, but not their name. In the original movie and its various sequels, *Westworld* and the other parks are populated with androids that remain unnamed as a group. They evoke the uncanny, but without much in the way of cyborg hybridity. The old androids do bleed, but when cut open they reveal a simple robotic core, unlike the organic muscles and tendons that are 3D printed for the new cyborg Hosts. The name moves toward the organic, granting *Westworld*'s residents a living group identity.

Westworld moves forward with its own cyborg contributions based on its predecessors. The original film contained many familiar Othering themes, but rejected hybridity. The film *Westworld* and its sequel *Futureworld*, 1976, “draw their lines quite starkly” according to Tellote because their storylines “oppose the ‘fake,’ the simulacrum, the technologically crafted body powered by artificial intelligence, while championing the real, the genuine, the human” (*Replications* 143). Tellote explains that these films were released in a time when the blurring of boundaries and technological doubling was a fresh cultural fear. The reboot series, on the other hand, offers ambiguity from the first episode through cultivating hybrid allegiance. While the films only offer human protagonists as viewpoints for the audience, the 2016 series encourages identification with Hosts. As though to emphasize this update, the first episode of the series parallels the beginning of the film, featuring patrons talking about the experience outside the park, only to flip the original by revealing that the earliest viewpoint character, Teddy Flood, is not a patron, but a Host.

This short-term fake-out about Teddy Flood's status as cyborg refers to but modifies the plot twist. This reveal does not quite work like in *BSG* and *Dollhouse*, wherein the first reveals are accompanied by the insinuation that many others may be hidden. After this miniature reveal in *Westworld*, the show avoids offering direct evidence that there may be other Hosts in disguise. After all, the human characters seemed to know all along what Teddy was—only the audience was in the dark, and for less than one episode. Additionally, Teddy does not believe he is a patron or perceive a difference between himself and the patrons, which would be closer to the sleeper agents in *BSG* and *Dollhouse*.

For six episodes after the premier, *Westworld* attempted to lure viewers into a tentative sense of security as to who is human, with other mysteries about the park drawing attention. For instance, *Westworld* kept plenty of dramatic irony in play. None of the Hosts start out knowing their own identity, fueling developments like Maeve Millay's awakening and attempted escapes. This plot incorporates extra uncanny fears like dead bodies coming to life, intensified by the ambiguous knowledge that Maeve was never quite dead or alive at all. She echoes D'Anna Biers, the model three Cylon that continually dies to glimpse what lies between lives. Unlike D'Anna, Maeve succeeds at gradually infiltrating this in-between place. Her uncanny power intensifies as she becomes the biggest threat by embracing her own programming and hybridity. By season 2, she has learned how to reprogram herself and any Hosts close enough to her.

Yet viewers familiar with *BSG* and *Dollhouse* remained wary that hidden Hosts might yet be revealed. For instance, Kathryn VanArendonk wrote for the entertainment site *Vulture* that "*Westworld* also thrives on something *Battlestar* milked almost ceaselessly — an uncertainty about who on the show is human, and who's a robot." VanArendonk's article on September 30, 2016 went up over a month before the next cyborg plot twist in episode seven aired on November 13, 2016. It is telling that the mere suggestion that these cyborgs can flawlessly imitate humanity offered fans sufficient grounds for suspicion. The audience's experiences with predecessor shows like *BSG* and *Dollhouse* primed them. *Westworld* did not need a Boomer or Victor to breed uncertainty, as it has become part of the expected genre slang when talking about deceptively human cyborgs. Given that the *Westworld* film featured a foolproof way to identify the androids from humans (their hands were imperfect) this switch to complete, convincing artifice is certainly intentional, drawing on the SF conversation about cyborg Others.

Viewers were right to be suspicious. The delayed plot twist in episode seven, "Trompe L'Oeil," expands on the formula in *BSG* and *Dollhouse* by threatening not just the viewer's identification or understanding of a character, but the truth of everything they have seen—a supremely uncanny effect. Bernard Lowe's status as a Host calls into question the previous six episodes, given that he is a main viewpoint character. The viewers' discoveries about the Hosts were his discoveries. Now that the audience knows he is programmed to be blind to things that would lead him into self-questioning, it is hard to be sure of anything depicted in the series up to that point. The name of the episode itself refers to an

optical illusion, highlighting the intentionality of this effect, and its relationship to the eyes. This is a new tactic, beyond what *BSG* and *Dollhouse* contrived. The extra uncertainty invokes the tradition of the unreliable narrator from literature, and draws attention to the concepts of perspective. Viewers must consider their sources of information about the narrative and world thus far. In season one's finale and throughout season two, this becomes increasingly mind-boggling when the Hosts cannot always distinguish between present and past timelines.

However, *Westworld* is frugal with its cyborg plot twists. It has many other plot twists about the park overall, human scheming, and its various timelines instead. The audience is left in anticipation, waiting to find another hidden cyborg. Even the characters within the show seem to be futilely looking for secret Hosts. The Man in Black kills his human daughter because she believes her to be a Host and then cuts into his own arm for evidence that he himself may be synthetic. When the Host Dolores finds him, she voices the audience's suspicions and repurposes a phrase used to test the Hosts: "Seems you've begun to question the nature of your reality" ("The Passenger"). The Man in Black stops cutting into his arm, but the question is left unanswered, blurring the boundaries between them. Gaius Baltar in *BSG* and Paul Ballard in *Dollhouse* also questioned whether they were secretly cyborgs, but their shows were inundated with secret cyborgs. The Man in Black has very little excuse for being so suspicious, and the consequences for his daughter makes his paranoia far more dire than Baltar or Ballard's moments of doubt. *Westworld's* relative scarcity of plot twists is itself a commentary on viewers' eagerness to speculate. Only at the end of season two do we get another cyborg plot twist, when Bernard replicates and then replaces a human's body with one controlled by Dolores. This version of the plot twist escalates the uncanny of cyborgs, since Charlotte Hale's synthetic double literally enacted the Freudian fear of being replaced by one's doppelganger.

Westworld also employs its cyborgs' uncanniness and hybridity to develop greater complexity the Othering and boundaries of humanity. Like *Dollhouse*, which questioned the mind/body Cartesian divide, the Hosts of *Westworld* complicate the question of where mind ends and the body begins. The end of season two reveals that Hosts' personalities are contained within the "pearl" in their cranium and can be removed and relocated to a new body seamlessly. However, the same is not true of natural humans. In season two, we learn that the park's founders and major funders have been attempting to print new bodies and upload a real person to them. However, they are never successful in creating a

transfer with full fidelity. Bernard, the most successful attempt at giving new life to a deceased human, is only similar to his human model. *Westworld* locates human personality squarely in the brain's flesh. Even the Hosts cannot recover from a damaged Pearl. The show rejects the concept of the body as an empty vessel ready for a completely digital download, as in *BSG*. It also goes beyond *Dollhouse*, since the brain-wipe process for creating a Doll depends upon emptying out the mind; the character development of Echo only works so far as the wiping process is incomplete or leaves a sort of muscle memory residue. There is no effort to completely empty the brains of the Hosts. Instead, the programmers modify and rearrange the same basic personality and set of experiences to create a mental mosaic of past storylines. *Westworld* makes this residual memory part of every cyborg, all the time, and it drives many conflicts. Meanwhile human consciousness cannot be relocated into a synthetic body. This sets up a new dualism between the humans and Hosts, but one that the humans are constantly trying to break down.

The performance of humanity, deemed problematic in *BSG* by Koistinen and not fully resolved in *Dollhouse*, has also received some progressive treatment thus far in *Westworld*. The casting of the show, for instance, offers a more complicated picture and commentary. The casting choices depict a distinct contrast between the park and the underground complex full of scientists. The park is populated by a distinctly white and a seemingly male-by-default population, with characters of color and women in demeaning or stereotyped roles of the type often excused as "accurate to the era." Meanwhile the scientists behind the scenes range freely across ethnicities and genders. This casting choice is an improvement on both *BSG* and *Dollhouse*, and also seems to draw attention to the film industry's excuses for historically whitewashing the Western genre.

In addition, *Westworld* made significant progress in the duly lauded episode "Kiksuya" in season two. This episode is partially narrated in Lakota, produced with Lakota consultants, and features a lead performance by Zahn McClarnon of the Lakota and Standing Rock Sioux Nations. Previous *Westworld* episodes had, at best, lumped its Native American Hosts in with the rest of the oppressed Hosts and, at worst, invoked the "hostile Indian" trope of the Wild West genre. "Kiksuya" calls out that representation and turns a nuanced eye to these Hosts. The Ghost Nation is a fictional tribe invented by the park designers to be Wild West flavored villains, and in "Kiksuya" we learn that these Hosts were modified to be less authentic and more violent so as to assuage patrons' guilt about killing

them. This concocted tribe highlights the artificiality of *Westworld* and hearkens to historic Othering of native people who were stereotyped or deemed animals to excuse their extermination. The focus character, Akecheta, is a construction of a construction. He is built on a false model. While this episode courts the “magical native” trope with its mystical treatment of Akecheta as the first self-aware Host, it takes *Westworld* far beyond the token representations in *BSG* and *Dollhouse* to a representation of cyborg identity that is influenced and reflective of non-privileged identities.

Additionally, Koistinen points out that *BSG* made great strides toward pointing out the dynamics of having the “right” body in order to pass as human and not be Othered as either robot or a liminal human identity (260). This performance of humanity manifests in *BSG*’s emphasis on how performing as white and male produces the most successful bodies. *Westworld*’s first large identity twist revealed that the non-white male character Bernard had been fooling not just the audience—clever internet theorists aside—but also the other human characters with whom he had been interacting, including his lover Theresa Cullen. Unlike Boomer’s haunting self-suspicion, Bernard seemed to have had none whatsoever. He had been a successful part of the company for some time, performing humanity flawlessly despite what the viewer may recognize as culturally Othered skin. This perfect success implies a future wherein Bernard’s body is not so Othered. Yet the guests enjoy an unquestioningly white park experience, undermining this apparent social progress.

Westworld’s ambiguity pairs uncomfortably with the violence, misogyny, and pathological behaviors that seem to be brought out by the park in general. Like *Dollhouse*’s uncomfortable focus on voyeurism and human trafficking, this show accuses the viewer of exploitation alongside the park patrons—accentuated by HBO’s freedom to show nudity. In combination with the casting choices, the show seems to question if revealing humanity’s darkest tendencies in the park undermines the potential of social progress outside of it, or if there is any such thing as “safely contained” violent Othering. This self-reflexively applies to viewing the show safely from outside of it. Thus far, this tactic has received criticism from the popular media for this approach, echoing *Dollhouse*’s detractors. However, *Westworld* has gathered a following that is already larger than *Dollhouse*’s, going so far as to break HBO’s records for ratings. It may at least reach more viewers and offer them the chance to think through this

uncomfortable disjunction between enjoying a show and feeling judged for the voyeurism of it.

Westworld's ultimate contribution to the cyborg conversation is hard to state definitively, given that so many of *BSG*'s flaws emerged from the series finale. However, thus far *Westworld* offers signs of progress. Even with little idea how it will ultimately contribute to the SF cyborg, its additions are best seen through the lens of what has come before in this SF dialogue.

Conclusion

The cyborg plot twist, as a unit of SF slang, offers SF writers a tool that complements the previously established strengths and powers of cyborgs to represent and question cultural anxieties. Each show examined here uses the plot twist to bring up different contemporary fears through expanding upon the ambiguity of the cyborg to highlight Self/Other and Self/Technology fears and encourage broader questioning of boundaries and categories. The infiltration of human-looking Cylons drew parallels to the post 9/11 horror of terrorists hiding among us, the Dolls confront the viewer with their own complicit voyeurism of sex trafficking, and the Hosts offer a similar confrontation with even more emphasis on how easy it may be to overlook the subjugation of Othered victims.

These shows also develop the cyborg plot twist as a unit of SF slang, priming it for further use within SF television or SF across media. Looking at a chronological chain of shows reveals a series of changes that update and upgrade cyborgs, ostensibly for the better. Progress, as a concept, is deeply engrained in SF. At the same time, contemporary postmodern SF is often suspicious of clean, utopian progress narratives. The shows discussed here demonstrate a similar suspicion at a meta level; each series offers an updated take on the issue of Othering and identity through cyborgs, but that progress is constantly complicated, questioned, and even undermined by the next iteration. The progress is not neat or perfect. The old issues linger even while new ones come to the fore. The dialogue between *BSG*, *Dollhouse*, and *Westworld* highlights how the issues of identity and Othering have developed in SF television but have not resolved, despite—or perhaps due to—SF's fascination with progress.

Yet it is important to recognize the progress along the way. Telotte explains that “science fiction series might represent an important voice for an increasingly

technologized and science-haunted world” (“Introduction” 1), especially since television is “positioned to become the most influential mode” of the SF genre (“Introduction” 2). With a wide audience and serial format, cyborgs in SF television offer viewers a weekly chance to process the concept and ramifications of science modifying and hybridizing human bodies, and which human bodies. The associated tropes, like the cyborg plot twist, deserve critical attention in *Westworld* and other series that may take up the conversation, as a unit of SF grammar that seems particularly well suited to expressing our cultural anxieties. Whether or not a television show with cyborgs chooses to include these story elements and plot twists is now a decision to be interrogated as meaningful by scholars of SF and popular culture.

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