

“I prefer ‘man-reaction’”: Exploring representations of doll (hetero)sexuality and desire in *Dollhouse*

Hélène Frohard-Dourlent

Dollhouse garnered much attention due to the questions that its premise (human beings wiped of their personality so they can be imprinted with new ones and sent out on assignments) raises about human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Yet the often sexual nature of the assignments on which the imprinted dolls are sent is only one aspect of the show's narrative about sexuality.

In this paper, I explore the way that the show engages with the topic of sexuality and desire when the dolls are in their childlike, unimprinted state in the *Dollhouse*. As Wilcox (2010) notes, when sexual abuse comes up in this context (i.e., when Sierra's handler sexually assaults her), the show is much less ambiguous in its condemnation. Thus I am interested in the way that the *Dollhouse* as an institution is invested in the asexuality of unimprinted dolls, and what this can tell us about societal anxieties around the idea of children as innocent, asexual beings. The tension between adult bodies and childlike personalities in unimprinted dolls becomes particularly perceptible with Victor and Sierra's sexual and romantic attraction to one another (which persists despite programmer Topher's efforts to wipe it out of their system).

Sierra and Victor's relationship questions not only our perceptions of childhood sexual innocence, but also the show's underlying notion that we can be programmed at will. By portraying Sierra and Victor's desire for each other as hardwired and resistant to external forces, the show draws on contemporary narratives of sexual desire as innate and thus works to naturalize (hetero)sexuality (played out, significantly, as heterosexual love). In turn, I argue that this undermines some of the show's queer underpinnings and its anti-essentialist messages (Boulware, 2013).