

‘Bodies, Connections and Defying the System’: Gender and Sexuality in the Wachowskis’ *Sense8*

Marc Baltà Lupión

© Marc Baltà Lupion, 2018



1. Introduction

Sense8 is an American science fiction drama created by Lana and Lilly Wachowski. The series narrates the story of eight individ-

uals across the globe who discover that they are psychically connected to each other. They were born on the same day, at the same time. They shared ‘their first breath’, which means they belong to the same ‘mother’. Conse-

NETFLIX ORIGINAL
sense8





‘Bodies, Connections and Defying the System’: Gender and Sexuality in the Wachowsks’ *Sense8*

quently, they form what it is known as a *cluster*. The problems begin when they become aware of this supernatural ability and condition as they discover that there is an organization called Biologic Preservation Organization (BPO), led by someone whom they call ‘Whispers’, interested in eliminating them. The *sensates* will have to deal with this danger affecting all of them, as well as their individual problems. Yet, their ability to share their senses will make them become stronger individually and tighter as a group.

[In the series] Current society is characterized for following the rules established by patriarchy, in which heterosexuality is understood as the ultimate norm. Anything that escapes the idea of the ‘normal’ becomes understood as wrong or different.

The *sensates* belong to a post-human species called *Homo sensorium*. When a female sensate gives birth to a cluster of eight different individuals, this is done by means of mental power. Therefore, the children are born unaware of their exceptional condition,

as they are physically born all over the world. Clusters are then named after the day they were conceived. The main protagonists of the series belong to the August 8th cluster. This means they can share their feelings and emotions, as well as other physical capacities such as taste, sight or touch. Moreover, they are able to share their abilities and cognitive skills with one another.

Connection may be the first thing human beings aim to find whenever someone new enters their life. The desire for connection becomes the motor to establish unbreakable relationships between those who surround us. However, that does not regularly happen. In fact, it happens less than what we would like to. When these connections click in, an indescribable sensation surrounds those experiencing them. These connections are exclusively for very special people and perhaps, that may be what the Wachowskis aimed to portray with *Sense8*. The show undertakes an exploration without limits among human connections, both sensorial and physical. Matters such as gender, sex or race are automatically surpassed and become meaningless. The series is all and exclusively about human beings and how they connect.

Current society is characterized for following the rules established by patriarchy, in which heterosexuality is understood as the ultimate norm. Anything that escapes the idea of the ‘normal’ becomes understood as wrong or different. Some would argue this last statement is either radical or not a hundred percent true. However, saying that we live in a society which fully accepts those who are different, would be lying. Perhaps, the best thing to say would be that society is slowly starting to change certain retrograde beliefs, although there still is a long way to go. “Your life is either defined by the system,



‘Bodies, Connections and Defying the System’: Gender and Sexuality in the Wachowsks’ *Sense8*

or by the way you defy the system” says Nomi, one of the main characters in the series. And that is exactly what *Sense8* is about. The Wachowskis created a fictional universe that offers a utopian reality, away from heteronormativity, the patriarchal system and the gender binary, in which their characters are able to explore the boundaries of gender and sexuality, either by means of sensorial orgies or their daily-life experiences.

2. Identity and self-acceptance

As it has been mentioned above, all the *sensates* are somehow part of a same psychic being, which has been divided into eight different bodies. However, through the development of the series, each of them finds someone within the cluster they sympathize or identify with more closely (either because of their present or their past situations and experiences). Hence, there is an evident division into ‘couples’ within the cluster.

Will Gorski (Brian J. Smith) and Riley Gunnardottir (Tuppence Middleton) are the first to acknowledge their ‘sensorial’ condition, as well as the first ones to meet in real life. Will is a police officer at the Chicago Police Department, who is obsessed with an unsolved murder his father was assigned to investigate when he was just a child. Riley is an Icelandic DJ who ran away from home. Highly tormented by her past and trying to escape it, she eventually moved to London where she found herself involved in drug trading. They share very intense moments through the development of both seasons and end up falling in love and having a relationship. Wolfgang Bogdanow (Max Riemelt) and Kala Dandekar (Tina Desai) are totally opposite characters and yet they cannot help feel-

ing a very strong sexual and emotional attraction to each other. Wolfgang is a German locksmith and safe-cracker living in Berlin who has unsolved issues with his father. He is involved in heists and organized crime. Kala is an Indian pharmacist and a pious Hindu working at a very successful pharmaceutical company in Mumbai. She sees herself immersed in a cycle of doubt over her love life after being engaged to, later married to Rajan Rasal (Purab Kohli). The relationship between Sun Bak (Doona Bae) and Capheus Onyango’s (Aml Ameen in season 1 and Toby Onwumere in season 2) grows thanks to justice. Sun is a South Korean business executive living in Seoul, as well as a burgeoning

The Wachowskis created a fictional universe that offers a utopian reality, away from heteronormativity, the patriarchal system and the gender binary, in which their characters are able to explore the boundaries of gender and sexuality.



‘Bodies, Connections and Defying the System’: Gender and Sexuality in the Wachowsks’ *Sense8*

star in the underground kickboxing world, whose public image becomes soiled to save her family. Although she finds herself trapped in prison most of the series, she is always there for Capheus and the rest. She shares with him her martial arts abilities and knowledge and she becomes his ‘helping spirit’. Capheus is a young man living in Nairobi, Kenya, known as ‘Van Damme’ in honor to the martial artist and actor. He works as a bus driver in order to earn money to buy medication for her mother, who suffers from AIDS. Last but not least, Nomi and Lito’s relationship becomes tighter and stronger as a consequence of the similarity between the problems they have had (and still have) to overcome regarding their sexuality and gender performance. Thus, they are the ones who challenge the boundaries of sex and gender most thoroughly.

Nomi Marks, played by transgender actress Jaimie Clayton, is a transwoman hacktivist and blogger based in San Francisco. She dates Amanita Caplan (Freema Agyeman), whose unconditional love and affection help her overcome any problem she might face. In addition, Nomi is still suffering from her family’s rejection, in particular, her mother’s. Although a long time has passed since Nomi became the woman she always wanted to be, her mother keeps on using the masculine when talking to her. She refers to her as Michael or simply ‘her son’. Nomi, however, seems to be very proud of who she is. Although past traumas still affect her, they seem to work as a motor for her to grow stronger and more confident. Also, it must be considered that Amanita might be one of the reasons why Nomi has reached a somehow comfort zone being a woman. In the series final episode *Amor Vincit Omnia* (2x12), the Wachowskis made the decision to give these

characters a happy ending. Nomi and Amanita finally get married at the top of the Eiffel Tower, in one of the most emotional scenes of the whole series. Nomi is able to fulfill her promise of making Amanita her wife but most importantly, her mother finally acknowledges her daughter as the woman she is, calling her Nomi for the first time. Therefore, *Sense8* is both sending a message of hope, as well as contributing to lesbian and transgender visibility. However, weddings are generally seen as a traditional heteropatriarchal event, so including one in a show that is constantly trying to escape such behaviours may arouse mixed feelings among the viewers. Nevertheless, it seems that the wedding scene works as the commemoration of Nomi and Amanita’s love, by far the most intense and real in the whole series. Additionally, the wedding is anything but conventional.

Nomi Marks, played by transgender actress Jaimie Clayton, is a transwoman hacktivist and blogger based in San Francisco. She dates Amanita Caplan (Freema Agyeman), whose unconditional love and affection help her overcome any problem she might face.



‘Bodies, Connections and Defying the System’: Gender and Sexuality in the Wachowsks’ *Sense8*

Nomi becomes crucial for Lito’s development as a character and a person. When the viewer first meets Lito Rodriguez (Miguel-Angel Silvestre), he is presented as one of the most famous actors in Mexico (though of Spanish origin) and fully stereotyped. He acts as everyone’s idea of the prototypical Latin hetero-patriarchal man. However, he is not like that at all. By day, he wears a mask and fakes being the man everybody expects him to be. At night, he goes home to meet his boyfriend, Hernando Fuentes. The reasons why Lito hides his sexual orientation are understandable at first. He is afraid that coming out as gay, being an actor and living in Mexico, could cost him his career. Notwithstanding, this fake reality collapses when Hernando, tired of hiding their love, gives Lito an ultimatum. It takes some time for Lito to fully understand Hernando’s position. In *Doesn’t Let You Say Goodbye* (1x09) Nomi and Lito share, for the first time, their deepest feelings. Lito finds himself in the museum where he had sex with Hernando for the first time and he shares with Nomi the experience: “Our first kiss was over there in the bathroom. It was for me a religious experience. I went to my knees. And took him into my mouth like I was taking Holy Communion”. The fact that he compares a sexual practice between two men with a ‘religious experience’ is one of the toughest acts of criticism in the series. Nomi finds no other way to help Lito find courage than sharing with him her experience:

I love dolls. My father could never forgive me for that. When I was eight years old, my father made me join a swim club. He’d been on the same club and he said that the things that he learned in that locker room were the things that made him the man that he is today. I hated that locker room.

At that age, I was really uncomfortable with my body. I didn’t like to be naked, especially in front of other boys. (...) And the boys would tease me, but I would try to hurry and ignore them, and it... it worked for a while. And then one day it didn’t. I still have scars on my stomach from the second-degree burns. That locker room might have made my father the man that he is, but it also made me the woman that I am. (30:51-33:00)

This last sentence shows, not only how empowered Nomi feels a woman, but also how she is able to use her experience to challenge and criticize the heteronormative and patriarchal system that oppressed her. As Keegan states, “*Sense8* seeks to aesthetically translate transgender as a form of consciousness—a way of perceiving or knowing that occurs between and across bodies, cultures, and geographies” (2016: 606).

In *Happy F*cking New Year* (2x01) Lito, Hernando and Daniela Velazquez are trapped in a car when an avalanche of paparazzi take pictures of them. While these happens, all of the *sensates* experience a moment of true anxiety, as they all empathize with Lito. Each of them can read *their* ‘label’ imprinted on the front glass of the car; the labels that have tormented them for ages: *Virgin* for Kala, *Faggot* for Lito, *Freak* for Nomi, *Slut* for Riley, *Pig* for Will, *Nigger* for Capheus, *Nazi* for Wolfgang and *Bitch* for Sun. “This is the twenty first century people, get over it” says Kala. Once again, the Wachowskis’ criticize how labeling one another has become habitual and fully accepted, while no one realizes the harm this causes. Therefore, as Aguado-Peláez states, it could be agreed that *Sense8* goes beyond the mere challenge and criticism of gender and sexuality. The stereotypes and



‘Bodies, Connections and Defying the System’: Gender and Sexuality in the Wachowsks’ *Sense8*

the problems regarding the characters’ class, ethnicity, nationality (among others), are also taken into account, and therefore criticized:

Si hacemos una breve mirada al conjunto de *sensates* se puede observar que hay una ruptura con la conceptualización del sujeto universal y homogéneo ya que, pese a repetir ciertos ejes que consolidan esta idea de privilegio—apariencia, idioma, independencia, juventud, roles binarios de género—, se da un cambio en las fronteras de la alteridad en muchas otras matrices—clase, etnia/raza, identidad de género, nacionalidad, orientación sexual, profesión. (2016: 49)

Later in the episode, Amanita and Nomi talk about some pictures of Hernando and Lito having sex that are circulating on the internet. Amanita wonders: ‘When I look at those pictures of Lito and Hernando, I think, “That’s hot”. I just don’t get it. Why can’t the rest of the world see what we see?’ And that is precisely the question. Why cannot the world accept two men in love, who enjoy painting their nails while wearing a pink coat? Just like the image of Hernando, Lito and Daniela that follows Amanita’s intervention.

3. Sex, bodies and sensorial orgies

Sex scenes become crucial in the challenge of gender and sexuality in *Sense8*. If one thing characterizes the series, this is the explicitness in the representation of the orgies both from season one and two. In *Demons* (1x06) *Sense8* presented its first explicit orgy. Wolfgang is the one who leads the orgy. He finds himself in a sauna, completely naked.

Sex scenes become crucial in the challenge of gender and sexuality in *Sense8*. If one thing characterizes the series, this is the explicitness in the representation of the orgies both from season one and two.

At the same time, both Lito and Hernando, as well as Nomi and Amanita, are about to have sex. Lito and Hernando are in Lito’s apartment and Nomi and Amanita are lying in Amanita’s bed. Meanwhile, Will finds himself in the gym when the orgy begins and the *sensates* explore a whole new different field of their connection. The scene goes on as they all give pleasure to one another, almost as if their brains functioned as their shared sexual organ. Characters such as Wolfgang and Will, initially presented as heterosexual, explore the boundaries of their sexuality as they kiss each other, fully bare, without hesitation. Moreover, there is no doubt they both enjoy the experience. Some critics label them as bisexual after the experience:

La realidad heterosexual de Will se ve truncada por comportamientos bisexuales que a él mismo le pillan totalmente desprevenido, pero que no le suponen ningún tipo de conflicto consigo mismo, más allá de una ligera expresión de sorpresa cuan-



‘Bodies, Connections and Defying the System’: Gender and Sexuality in the Wachowsks’ *Sense8*

do Lito le dice, “we are having sex”. (...) Wolfgang (...) es responsable de la orgia en la que se ven inmersos seis de sus ocho compañeros, ya que atraídos como un imán terminan formando parte del momento. (Fernández, 2016: 338 — 339)

Notwithstanding, if it were necessary to label their sexual orientation, perhaps *queer* would be the best option:

Queer theory opposes those who would regulate identities or establish epistemological claims of priority for those who make claims to certain kinds of identities, it seeks not only to expand the community base of antihomophobic activism, but, rather, to insist that sexuality is not easily summarized or unified through categorization. (Butler, 2004: 7).

The first orgy scene in season one ignored three of the eight *sensates*, so that might be the reason why the Wachowskis included another one in season two. *Happy F*cking New Year* (2x01) includes an orgy in which all the *sensates* are included.

On the other hand, it is necessary to mention that these orgies happen both in the physical and the telepathic world. Hence, while some characters are having real sex, some are just feeling what it is like as if it all was in their imagination.

Nevertheless, the first orgy scene in season one ignored three of the eight *sensates*, so that might be the reason why the Wachowskis included another one in season two. *Happy F*cking New Year* (2x01) includes an orgy in which all the *sensates* are included, as well as Amanita and Hernando. The scene comes as a conclusion to Sun and Kala’s conversation, after Kala confesses to Sun that she is afraid of having sex with her husband Rajan, as it would be her first time: ‘We exist because of sex. It’s not something to be afraid of. It’s something to honor, to enjoy’, Sun says. This is indeed one of the most revealing statements in the whole series. In addition, this second orgy goes far beyond the limits of gender than the first one. On the one hand, there are some instances in the orgy in which the viewer cannot clearly identify to which characters the bodies belong to. As a result, attributing a specific gender to those bodies becomes senseless. As Torras states: “El sexo-género ha sido hasta anteaer un atributo indisociable del cuerpo” (2017: 11). The question, however, is whether there is really a need to maintain such a differentiation. If the answer is no, why instead of being men or women, don’t we simply call ourselves *human* or *people*? For, after all, “¿Es un cuerpo una evidencia?” (Torras, 2017: 11). On the other hand, attributing to the *sensates* a fixed sexuality while they are immersed in the sensorial orgies, becomes absurd. As De Lauretis observes, “Sexuality, then, is not a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings” (1987: 35). And considering



‘Bodies, Connections and Defying the System’: Gender and Sexuality in the Wachowsks’ *Sense8*

Foucault’s understanding of this concept, then “Sexuality is the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviours and social relations by the deployment of “a complex political technology.” (in De Laurantis, 1987: 36), This reinforces the idea that gender is culturally determined and that we become gendered through socialization into gender roles, also called ‘sex roles’.

Nevertheless, it is not until the last sequence of the show, in the series finale *Amor Vincit Omnia* (2x12), that the *sensates* experience the culmination of their sensorial and sexual connection. Throughout the second season, all *sensates* either find someone or reinforce the relationship with those whom they share their emotions, thoughts and experiences. Not only within the cluster, but outside it as well. Cepheus falls in love with a journalist named Zakia Asalache (Mumbi Maina) and Sun finally breaks her emotional barrier and finds love in Detective Mun (Sukku Son). Meanwhile, Kala is able to share her exceptional desire for Wolfgang with her husband Rajan. After Nomi and Amanita’s wedding, all couples find themselves having sex at the same time, as it had already happened eleven episodes before. However, this final orgy has nothing to do with the second one. In fact, as noted before, it is the pinnacle of connection, as not only all the *sensates* are participants in it, but also their respective couples. What is more, for a moment couples stop existing as such and the only thing the viewer can appreciate is a collection of individuals, celebrating life, love and freedom. As VanDerWerff observes:

What’s notable about this final sequence is how the various permutations of connections within the orgy—because the various members of the sensate cluster share con-

sciousness, they can also more or less pull their lovers into this gigantic sea of sex—take such different forms. There are poly-amorous triads and quartets. There are heterosexual partners and homosexual partners. (...) It becomes a mass of naked bodies, giving and receiving pleasure, a sort of Platonic ideal of the Wachowskis’ view of humanity’s potential to do more than kill each other. (2018: website)

The *sensates* spend most of the series fighting in order to avoid being killed and eliminated by the BPO. Orgies are the moment in which the *sensates* feel more alive and in peace.

Therefore, and as VanDerWerff highlights in his review, “the final sequence leaves viewers with the idea that love might save the world” (2018: website). The *sensates* spend most of the series fighting in order to avoid being killed and eliminated by the BPO. Orgies are the moment in which the *sensates* feel more alive and in peace. It is not just sex per se, it is an act of liberation, empowerment as individuals, and extreme pleasure and joy. Moreover, sex is the only safe space for them to express themselves without the constant fear of being judged. On the whole, the orgies in *Sense8* become a moment for the *sensates* to explore the limits of their sexuality. Meanwhile, they create a



‘Bodies, Connections and Defying the System’: Gender and Sexuality in the Wachowsks’ *Sense8*

utopian parallel reality, away from heteronormativity and the gender binary in which taboos and boundaries do not exist. As Lothian writes:

The intensity of *sensate* communication means that each member of the cluster has no choice but to recognise every other member as an equal with whom they can empathise fully. Rather than a world with ‘no race ... no genders ... no age’, the utopia of *sensate* connection seems to offer an alternative vision for globalization (...) (2016: 94)

Finally, it must be born in mind that although the idea that it does not matter who you have sex with seems irrefutable, it is not as simple as that. The handicap in *Sense8* is precisely that the show offers a reality only conceivable, as it has been mentioned above, in the shape of a utopia. Which means that, despite the beauty of the series, such portrait of love and human relationships is still neither valid nor possible in present-day society. However, this does not mean that the final message of the series must be forgotten. Believing that love, in all its freedom, is the perfect weapon to heal the world, might be naïve and clichéd for some people but it may also be exemplary and courageous in the eyes of others.

Conclusion

As it has been argued, *Sense8* manages to challenge and collapse the boundaries of, not only sexuality and gender, but any of the social boundaries in which us, humans, deal with every day. We live in a society in which there will always be something in your per-

sona that can be turned against you. *Sense8* gives an alternative non-normative reality for everyone to see what the world could be like if there were no labels. A reality that eliminates the gender binary, understanding everyone as an equal. A reality in which normativity does not exist, and therefore, patriarchy and heteronormativity fail and collapse.

Through the development of the leading characters, the show provides a realistic approach to how harmful society can be. *Sense8* gives a voice to those collectives that have been silenced for a long time. Moreover, the show itself is a constant shock therapy. The spectator is given a great amount of information to consider and to think about. Personally, I am glad and thankful for having series like this in which the idea of simply being *people* or *human* instead of ‘men’ or ‘women’, becomes normal and plausible. And that loving and having sex with who we want does not become a sin. Likewise, the show contributes to the idea that human connections and love are stronger than these social boundaries and that therefore, feeling physical and mental attraction towards a person regardless their gender or sexuality, should be highly accepted and understood in current society.

Through the development of the leading characters, the show provides a realistic approach to how harmful society can be.



‘Bodies, Connections and Defying the System’: Gender and Sexuality in the Wachowsks’ *Sense8*

Works Cited

- AGUADO-PELÁEZ, Delicia (2016). “Los Cuerpos como Cartografía de Resistencias: Análisis Interseccional de *Sense8*”. *Arte y Políticas de Identidad*, 15: 39-58.
- BUTLER, Judith (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.
- DE LAURETIS, Teresa (1987). *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- FERNÁNDEZ, Antonio Rafael (2016). “Género, Cultura y Territorio en la Didáctica de las Ciencias Sociales. La Deconstrucción de los Estereotipos Sexuales en la Serie *Sense8*”. B. Andreu Medeiro, A. Arroyo Dores-te & Carmen R. García Luis (eds.) *Deconstruir la Alteridad desde la Didáctica de las Ciencias Sociales. Educar para una ciu-danía global*. Las Palmas: AUPDCS, 331-343.
- KEEGAN, Cáel M (2016). “Tongues without Bodies: The Wachowskis’ *Sense8*”. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1.3-4: 605-610.
- LOTHIAN, Alexis (2016). “*Sense8* and Utopian Connectivity”. *Utopia Symposium: Science Fiction, Fiction Film and Television*, 9.1: 93-95.
- TORRAS, Meri (2007). “El Delito del Cuerpo”, Meri Torras (ed.), *Cuerpo e Identidad*. Bellaterra: Ediciones UAB, 11-36.
- VANDERWERFF, Todd (8 June 2018). “No Other Show on TV would End its Series Finale the Way *Sense8* Did”. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/6/8/17438422/sense8-finale-recap-review-netflix> (Accessed: 23 September 2018)