



# Cultural Representation and Identity in the Wachowskis' *Sense8*

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# “If All the World’s a Stage, Identity is Nothing but a Costume”: Cultural Representation and Identity in the Wachowskis’ *Sense8*

## Introduction

“Who am I?”, a question posed by two of the eight main characters at the beginning of the second season of the TV series *Sense8*. One is a formerly closeted Mexican gay actor being interviewed at one of his film premieres and the other is a Kenyan bus driver from Nairobi being questioned on why he idolizes a Belgian action hero, Jean Claude Van Damme, even though he is not white. The sequence continues with the rest of the main cast joining in and making their own guesses as to what constitutes identity and what can define someone in the eyes of the public. Is it the colour of one’s skin or the people they love? Is it what they do or what they dream about? Or is it how they are seen by others? These are only some of the questions explored in *Sense8* (2018), created by Lana and Lily Wachowski and J. M. Straczynski, a show belonging to the subgenre of biological science fiction, about eight characters from all around the world that become psychically connected after their rebirth as “sensates”. As the word implies they develop a shared consciousness and throughout the show appear into each other’s lives, share their thoughts, languages, emotions and senses and together they try to fight a corporation bent on destroying them. The show’s first season was filmed in nine countries, the second in eleven, spread across five continents, and it has been applauded for its racial and ethnic diversity but mostly for its inclusion of characters from all areas of the LGBTQI+ spectrum. Themes of identity, diversity and representation are central to the show in many ways.

## Literature Review

To begin with, there is an array of pre-existing academic literature on the series which indicates how it has been received not only by critics but also by the academic community.

*Sense8* was originally released on Netflix in 2015 and cancelled shortly after the release of its second season, even though a final two hour special was released in 2018 after fans reacted to the news of its cancellation. Due to the plethora of themes it touches upon, it has been a topic of discussion and debate regarding the exploration of sexual and gender identity, the representation of cultures and the strides it makes for the science fiction genre. Some of those scholars are discussed here since their research has become the foundation for further questions. First of all, cultural theorist Cael M. Keegan, who has extensively studied the Wachowskis' work, in his essay "Tongues without Bodies: The Wachowskis' *Sense8*", explores the representation of "trans" concepts and identities such as transgender and transnational while also suggesting that the series "attempts to visualize a global imaginary" in a new way (605). This concept is central to the show since its creators and one of the main characters identify as "trans". On the other hand, "Sexy Birth: Breaking Hollywood's Last Taboo" by Natalie Jolly focuses on the depiction of childbirth in media and TV using *Sense8* as one of its examples and she engages with issues like heteronormativity and gender representation. Laura Fernández in her "Transnational Queerings and *Sense8*" contributes to the discussion about queer identity and nationality. She does that by focusing on Lito, one of the eight main characters, who is a Mexican gay man and explores the Latin American stereotypes he embodies and, as she argues, fails to break away from by the end of the second season. On the contrary, "*Sense8* and the Praxis of Utopia", by media and communications scholar Dilyana Mincheva, approaches the show from a broader point of view and discusses how it figures as a utopian text as well as how it relates to concepts such as heteronomy, community and autonomy. Finally, "Colour in Variegated Contexts: The Wachowskis' *Sense8*" by Bert Olivier, who is a psychoanalysis scholar and philosopher, approaches the show from the perspective of theories such as Deleuze and Guattari's theory of 'affects' and 'percepts' in art (18). Through this perspective and by analyzing particular sequences, the

essay examines the use of colour in *Sense8* both in a literal and in a metaphorical sense and how that pertains to race and sexuality. Based on this representative literature, most scholars have focused on particular characters or one of the themes, mostly related to sexuality and gender. Although much of the previous literature touches on the issue of representation and discusses one or more of the featured cultures, my focus will be on how these cultures are shaped in the show and how their representation contributes to the formation of a global identity where multiple cultures coexist and try to transcend separations and divisions based on race, ethnicity or sexual and gender identity.

### Research Question

Furthermore, this paper will focus on cultural representation, how cultural identity can be formed on screen and how stereotypes are presented, relied upon or subverted in film and television. It is my claim that *Sense8* on the one hand relies on certain cultural and genre clichés to construct its characters but it simultaneously creates a different type of character and representational model through a narrative that opposes mainstream representation. The research question that arises is: “How do the stylistic and ideological differences in the representation of cultural identity regarding each of the eight cultures in the Netflix TV series *Sense8* (2015-2018), created by Lana and Lily Wachowski and J. Michael Straczynski, construct a multicultural and transnational type of identity through the depiction of cultures?” Moreover, the main question leads to the following sub-questions:

- What are some of the cultural elements or stereotypes present in the show?
- How are these cultural elements represented through the medium of film?
- Is a new type of multicultural identity constructed and what are its characteristics?

With these questions, there will be an attempt to interpret the TV series through the perspective of cultural representation and identity.

The primary source of this thesis can be found and streamed on Netflix with a standard Netflix subscription. The secondary sources that formed the literature review were accessed from online databases such as Google Scholar and JSTOR and were chosen based on their relevance to the question and themes and their accessibility online. Further secondary sources for the literature review as well as the theoretical and methodological framework were found on RuQuest and the Radboud University library.

### Theoretical Framework

In the course of my research I will attempt to engage with specific theories and scholars in order to explore the complex and broad topic of representation in film and the construction of new narratives and identities. The main research fields necessary for the examination of my question are the fields of cultural studies and of film and television studies. The following theories will comprise the theoretical background around which the analysis will be conducted and through which *Sense8* will be examined and interpreted. One of the theoretical frameworks derives from the cultural theorist Stuart Hall and his exploration of representation specifically in his work *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* where he asserts that “we give things meaning by how we represent them” (3). The book is an examination of what the word “representation” implies specifically in a cultural context and it explores and defines concepts such as the “sign”, the notion of power and knowledge based on theories developed by Foucault and how stereotypes operate in a system of representation. The concept of ‘stereotyping’ needs to be elucidated further. Hall points out that stereotypes essentially reduce and simplify a person to a set of fixed characteristics (258). Moreover, he argues that they are the result of unequal power structures and that they result in the creation of boundaries and separation of one “imagined community” from the other, in other words they create the difference between “Us” and “Them” (Hall 258). Similarly, he examines the topic of binary oppositions about which he

argues that while they manage to capture “the diversity of the world within their either/or extremes, they are also a rather crude and reductionist way of establishing meaning” (Hall 235).

Secondly, it is imperative to peruse ideas from the area of film theory especially in conjunction to culture and the cultural aspect of filmmaking so that more stylistic aspects of *Sense8* can be analyzed since they are the medium of representation. One such example that provides a theoretical background to film theory is *Film Art: an Introduction* by film theorists Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, which concerns stylistic and technical elements of filmmaking and films and provides the language and vocabulary to analyse elements such as editing, narration and mise-en-scene. In particular, in this book, the authors focus in great detail on two aspects of the art of film: form and style. According to them form concerns “the overall patterning of a film” and style “the film’s use of cinematic techniques” (Bordwell, Thompson, Smith 3). Since most interactions between the eight main characters happen when they are not on the same physical space, their “sensate” experiences are shown through editing and filming techniques which is why film theory is important for the analysis of *Sense8*. When it comes to the filmmaking aspects of the show and how they illustrate cultural difference one has to take into consideration that different directors worked on different locations instead of working on entire episodes which means that the stylistic differences between them are also the result of the separate teams that worked on them in each location.

Another theory that is vital for the examination of the research question, which combines the main points of the previous two theories, will be borrowed from film and media studies theorist Charles Ramírez Berg’s discussion on stereotypes and their subversion in his work *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion and Resistance*. In this book, he attempts to define the limits and aspects of the word stereotype and he brings attention to the distinction between “mental images” and “mediated stereotypes” where he highlights the

difference between the images that exist privately and individually and the images that can be seen “on the screen as a public commodity” (38). The difference lies in the fact that in a mental image, negative traits are applied to people in “lived experience” while the mediated image is an accumulated combination of a number of traits that create the stereotype presented on screen (39). In other words, he states that “the mediated stereotype is a concrete depiction of the Other”, and continues by stating that “[a] mediated stereotype, then, operates by gathering a specific set of negative traits and assembling them into a particular image” (Berg 39). These images “can become familiar to the point that they eventually seem normal, even ‘natural’” and in this way they shape how a group is expected to behave (Berg 18).

## Methodology

In order to have a direction in the analytical process, a methodological approach is necessary and it will be borrowed from Berg’s work and from film analysis in Bordwell, Thompson and Smith. In each of the two following chapters, I will first discuss ideas that pertain to the concept of cultural identity and representation by bringing up examples of scenes, dialogues or events from different episodes. The themes that will be discussed in those sections relate to language and discourse, art and religion, culture and place and others. Subsequently, in each chapter, I will analyse one sequence in greater detail in order to highlight how the choices in filmmaking affect or shape cultural representation. More specifically, I will examine those sequences from a technical perspective, analyzing elements including editing, shot selection and duration, sound and music. In his book, Berg shares a close analysis of a scene where he evaluates and examines all its individual components and interprets their role and impact in shaping a view of Mexican culture. Concerning the topic of narration when it comes to stereotyping in film, Berg states that with the repetition of certain images “narration becomes representation” and vice versa (Berg 19). Due to this, close attention needs to be paid to how the narrative unfolds and the aspects that are part of it, in



other words the style and plot that constitute it. This methodological approach combines the visual analysis of scenes and Berg's model of stereotypes in film and it will be the lens through which the analysis will take place. At the end of the first chapter the examined scene will be a musical montage in order to focus on the role music plays in the show. Whereas, in the second, the analysis will focus on a montage that is significant from a stylistic point of view as well as for what the show believes about identity. In addition, the common criterion for both scenes is that they include interactions between two or more of the main characters. This is a crucial part of *Sense8* because characters do not only interact when they share the same physical space but also when they "visit" and those scenes are shot in a way that makes them look feasible and natural. Shooting every scene with more than one member of the cluster in more than one location is what differentiates *Sense8* from other TV shows with a diverse cast of characters.

## Chapter One

### Cultural Background and Character Building

Early on in the show, one of the sensates, Nomi, barely even understanding the extent of her statement at that point since she is not yet fully aware of her new identity, states in her blog that “I am also a we” as she is preparing for the San Francisco Pride parade.

Nevertheless, the statement applies to one of the core messages of the show and more literally to the reality of the sensates. It is also important, though, to question who the “we” that is being represented is. Could it exclude some and include others? Who is it referring to? One of the secondary characters, an Indian man named Jonas who helps the sensates learn about their new identity expresses a particular view about their world, which reflects the show’s beliefs as well, when asked who is “us” and who is the “them” that keeps getting brought up. To this he replies that “Who we are is less relevant than what we are. And what we are is different from them”. Therefore, this suggests that perceived or actual difference is the catalyst that creates dichotomies and creates opposing groups and Others. This first chapter will focus on how the eight main characters were initially established and on the role of language and discourse. Despite *Sense8*’s claim that a universal ‘we’ can and does exist, one can argue that not all of the characters begin with the same level of depth or meaning attached to them. Stuart Hall poses a pertinent question regarding the topic of representation specifically concerning positive images that *Sense8* often attempts to use:

Do these images evade the difficult questions, dissolving the harsh realities of racism into a liberal mish-mash of ‘difference’? ... Or are they genuinely a political statement about the necessity for everyone to accept and ‘live with’ difference, in an increasingly diverse, culturally pluralist world? (273-4)

At this point, a short synopsis of the show is necessary before the task of analysis. As mentioned before, *Sense8* centers around eight characters from all around the world as they

develop a physical, emotional and mental telepathic bond that connects them. The cast of characters includes: Sun, a Korean businesswoman from Seoul that is also well versed in martial arts; Will, a cop from Chicago; Lito, a famous Mexican actor who is secretly gay; Kala, an Indian woman devoted to her faith who is also working in a pharmaceutical company; Nomi; a trans woman from San Francisco that is a talented hacker; Capheus, a Kenyan *matatu* driver that is struggling to find medicine for his sick mother; Riley, a DJ from Iceland who is working in London; and Wolfgang, a German gangster involved in Berlin's crime scene. After their 'birth' as sensates these characters start to interact with the other members of their 'cluster' and the plot of the first season involves their first shared experiences as well as the start of their fight against a corporation and its evil representative, a sensate named Whispers, keen on hunting down the members of the cluster to lobotomize them as part of a secret scheme. Moreover, this season follows a well-defined structure. The episodes chronicle the eight characters' lives as they start to navigate their new reality. The first episode is about their second 'birth' and the second about their first sensory experiences of interacting with each other, such as hearing the Berlin rain in a busy restaurant in Mumbai, India or loud DJ music in a small apartment in Chicago, US. In the third episode, the characters start being aware of what they are seeing and feeling and by the fourth and fifth they begin to navigate their shared language. In episode six, they highlight their shared physical experiences by a group love sequence shared by multiple members of the cluster. This development seems to mirror a child's and then an adolescent's developmental stages but adapted to the show's new species 'homo sensorium'. Further on in the season the characters become increasingly aware of their new reality and willingly step in to help each other in times of need as well as to have conversations about their beliefs on life, religion and morality. What they all seem to experience, share and develop more during the show is a connection through empathy.

To begin with, all characters initially develop a distinct perception of what being a sensate implies based on their cultural reality and identity. Their reactions or explanations differ widely and highlight how each of them comes to similar conclusions by taking a different path. Even though they come from different backgrounds, Nomi and Will, the two characters from the US, immediately jump to the conclusion that they must be going crazy. Moreover, Nomi is hospitalized and nearly lobotomized when she enters a hospital and they examine her brain. Will, on the other hand, is scared of losing his mind; a feeling that is strengthened because of the reactions people around him have when he acts out of the ordinary. This mostly highlights the fear of madness that is intrinsic in Western society as well as the fear of being judged for being ‘crazy’. Other characters have an entirely contrasting experience of this new identity. Capheus initially believes that Sun, who helps him in a fight, is the “spirit of Jean-Claude” which is a reflection of spirituality in African cultures and religions as well as a possible reminder of the colonial past. Kala, a devout follower of the Hindu God Ganesh, perceives her experiences as a “miracle” since she can experience two types of weather and various emotions at the same time. Contrary to that, Wolfgang does not go into depth about how he explains his new abilities but he makes it clear that he does not think it comes from God or another supernatural power. Lito does not really express what he believes his new “visions” are but his reactions are usually dramatic and over the top. For instance, he cries and shouts in pain or frustration many times. Lito is portrayed as expressive, passionate and overly dramatic as well as a great liar and this paints a particularly limiting picture of Mexican men. Moreover, Lito is torn between two worlds one being the front he has to maintain to keep his career as an action movie star and the other being his secret life with his boyfriend Hernando. The implication is that his secret life is the one that represents the truth and he seems to be trapped in levels of truths and lies about his life. Regarding this, Fernández highlights how Lito “is at once the hyper-masculine macho (at least in his films)

and he is also the hyper-sexualized Latin lover” which can be observed in many of his scenes and plot lines (225). In his book, Berg includes an analysis of the stereotype of the Latin Lover, which in his view contains characteristics such as “eroticism, exoticism, tenderness tinged with violence and danger, all adding up to the romantic promise that, sexually, things could very well get out of control” and Lito embodies quite a few of these characteristics (76). For Riley her first experiences with her new cluster are thought to be hallucinations caused by a drug she had taken that day, even though her very first sensate experience had happened during her childhood in Iceland and was understood as a message from the “hidden people” that are based on an Icelandic myth. Finally, Sun is more guarded against those new experiences and even though she is eager to help others and fight when necessary she does not really want to explore her feelings with someone else or to open up emotionally and Korean culture is portrayed as closed off compared to the others.

#### Language and Discourse

Another way to approach the topic of cultural representation as it relates to power and knowledge is by examining language and discourse and the implications of using English as a lingua franca among the sensates. It has been argued that “[d]iscourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But ... since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect” (Hall 44). In his discursive theories Foucault argued that “discourse defines and produces the objects of our knowledge” so that meaning is generated “within discourse” (Hall 44). Based on this perception of language, the main characters in *Sense8* become known and acquire meaning through their words as well as their actions. This is important in *Sense8* since it attempts to bridge the gaps languages create by introducing the idea that all sensates can speak each other’s languages. However the language spoken by all of them is English, for practical reasons, which still creates a power imbalance and places the characters whose first

language is not English on a different level of being known to the audience. Language is an integral part of any culture, so for the characters as well as the actors, the almost exclusive use of English could limit their expression or level of depth in the representation of the culture. The reason behind using English does not necessarily lie in a power imbalance but the translation costs and the practical reality of all the actors not speaking all the languages which would be nearly impossible in the context of a TV show production. Moreover, the use of English promotes the idea that language does not have to be a barrier in the communication and interaction between cultures and that people with different native languages can find common ground by using an otherwise imposed lingua franca. Finally, *Sense8* tries to transcend language all together. The sensates are empathetic towards each other regardless of whether they understand each other's words because they have come to a deeper understanding where they do not need to speak to explain their thoughts and emotions. This attempt to move beyond language is also aided by the use of music and other sensory experiences that in a way replace the need to communicate through words but instead places value on emotions and feelings.

In addition, Foucault as presented in Hall suggested that “the production of knowledge (rather than just meaning)” happens “through what he called discourse (rather than just language)” (43). Based on this perspective language and discourse, and not just the senses, is the medium through which the characters become known not just to the audience but also to each other. Taking as an example some interactions between Capheus and Riley, this idea can be explored further. In episode seven of season one, while Riley is on a plane on her way to Iceland to see her dad, she and Capheus have a conversation about her fears. Whenever two sensates connect or “visit” another person without trying to, it is because they connect on some level or because they are going through a similar experience. In this case they connect because they have both experience the loss of close family members and they are both

worried that their choices could lead them to more loss. In this context, when Capheus first appears, he is ecstatic over the fact that he is on a plane since he has never been on one before and he is amazed at seeing the clouds from above. Riley is afraid of something terrible happening when she gets home due to her past there, but Capheus remains as optimistic as always and reminds her that the world is beautiful and that she is actually lucky to fly on a plane but also to still have her father. In this scene, what Riley says demonstrates some of the things that Capheus as well as the audience is supposed to learn and know about her. On another level, it is also a way for the audience to hear what the show itself supports. One of those things is Riley's reply to Capheus that she is "privileged, not lucky" ("*Sense8*" 00:10:42). This interaction indicates that privilege is what gives Riley opportunities like flying or other practical differences she might have with Capheus while luck the fact that her father or Capheus' mother are still alive and they are able to see them. With this interaction the show suggests that there are certain things that indeed separate its characters and these differences should not be ignored. Simultaneously, it suggests that the factor of luck is always there and privilege does not play any role when it comes to the death of a loved one, which is universal experience. In fact, Riley admits that "[d]eath doesn't let you say goodbye" and that applies to everyone ("*Sense8*" 00:42:35). On the other hand, during the conversation on the plane, Riley responds to Capheus' optimism by wishing she "could see the world that simply". This implies that Capheus' worldview is more "simple" than Riley's and since he is a representative of his country or race it promotes the idea that simplemindedness is a cultural trait of Kenyans (or Africans in general). Capheus maintains his childlike innocence and optimism throughout the first season without major changes to his character even when terrible things happen to him, his family or his cluster. Similar to Lito, who balances between two opposite types of the Latin American man, during the first season, Capheus embodies a set of character traits such as blind optimism, kindness and a naiveté about ideas like courage

that place him to one end of a binary opposition. On the other side of the binary, represented by the thugs that attack him as well as by a secondary character, Silas, there is the aggressive and hyper masculine guy that resorts to and justifies the use of violence. These are the two representations of Kenyan men that feature in the show's first season. Thus, both Lito and Capheus are trapped by the "binary structure" of the stereotypes they portray which according to Hall are usually "split between two extreme opposites" (263). Hall even argues that even when positive representation exists it "does not necessarily displace the negative. Since the binaries remain in place, meaning continues to be framed by them" (274).

### Analysis of Musical Montage

At this point I will analyze a musical montage from the final episode of *Sense8* "Amor Vincit Omnia." In the show, there are several scenes where music is used to convey certain emotions or to unite the characters when they are all over the world. Most notably, one of the first instances of that was a scene with the song "What's Up" by 4 Non Blondes while the entire cluster was singing along. To begin with, it is useful to illustrate what the word montage implies and how it functions in *Sense8*. According to Bordwell, Thompson and Smith a montage sequence is defined as "[a] segment of a film that summarizes a topic or compresses a passage of time into brief symbolic or typical images" (G-4). Such sequences are used in *Sense8* often, usually accompanied by music or a song, either to summarize its characters' experiences all around the world or for the compression of space, rather than time. They also reflect the cluster's emotional state for instance their joy and excitement during their birthday and their awe, joy and nostalgia of re-experiencing their birth. Moreover, because of the fact that "montage sequences usually lack dialogue, they tend to come wrapped in music" and this is exactly what happens in this case (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith 252). This sequence takes place between 1:26:56 – 1:29:06 of the finale, when the entire cluster along with their friends and allies are on their way to Naples where they will go after



Whispers. Even though at this point they have all met up in real life, they are not all in the same physical space; some of them are on the train, some in a car and some in a van.

The sequence starts on the train when Riley puts the song “I Feel You” by Depeche Mode on her phone and Will, Lito and Sun start nodding their heads to the rhythm. Lito’s friend, Daniela, who is just learning about what it means for Lito to be a sensate and is surprised to find out that he can listen to the music Riley is listening with headphones on so Riley gives earphones to the rest of the group that is not a sensate. Genuine human connection and a sense of inevitable community is what separates sensates from the human species but it is not limited to them which is exemplified here as everyone can share the music even if it is not inside their heads. The second group with Kala, Capheus and Wolfgang along with Rajan is in a convertible car and they start listening to the song on the radio while Nomi and her friends are driving in a van and also start playing the song. The rest of the sequence includes the cluster having fun and singing along to the song either on the train or on the convertible car.

Sound

The element of this montage that will be the focus of this section is sound and music, since it is a musical montage. At this point it is crucial to distinguish between diegetic and non-diegetic sound. Diegetic sound “has a source in the story world” while non-diegetic sound is “coming from a source outside the story world” (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith 285). For example, according to Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, “[m]usic added to enhance the film’s action is the most common type of nondiegetic sound” in a film (285). In this sequence, there are various types of sound. The main type is the song but there is also a bit of dialogue. To begin with, when Riley puts on the song it is a clear case of diegetic sound as it comes from her phone. As the other two groups turn up the volume though the song takes over and when Capheus turns up the volume in the car radio the sound quality changes and

that suggests that the song is now diegetic as well as non-diegetic. It is diegetic because the source is known to be in the story world and non-diegetic because it acts like the song in a montage or a music video the plays in the forefront while action happens in the back. In that part, the characters sing along but their words are not heard. There is another noteworthy moment that happens in the sequence when there are cuts between scenes that show the train as it is in reality or as it is in the minds of the sensates (Figure 1). In the part where the cluster fills the train corridor the music can be heard on full blast but when the corridor is empty and everyone is on their seats the music can only be heard faintly from the headphones. In this sequence, the use of sound not only connects the cluster but also their friends and it shows that the importance in human connections lies in shared experiences of joy and empathy.



**FIGURE 1. ON THE WAY TO NAPLES**

## Chapter Two

Having considered elements such as language and discourse and how cultural elements can manifest in character development, it is time to consider how other factors contribute to the representation of culture in film or, in this case, television. Apart from language, communication and character traits, the depiction of a culture is also defined by the place as well as views on art and religion. In this chapter, there will be an analysis of how locations function in *Sense8* and how ideas about art and religion contribute to the construction of identity.

### Place and Culture

To begin with, the visibility of a location in cultural representation is crucial and monuments or places of significance can function as cultural signs. Having been filmed across five continents and in twelve countries, *Sense8* contains many such signs and it is, therefore, useful to examine them from the perspective of cultural representation. According to the short documentary about the making of the first season, *Sense8: Creating the World*, the filmmakers made an active effort to include authentic elements and experiences of each culture and tried to create a realistic depiction of each place. One way to do this was by hiring local actors as main characters and a local supporting cast and crew in each place. This was done in all cases with the exception of Miguel Ángel Silvestre (Lito) who is Spanish and not Mexican, and Aml Ameen and Toby Onwumere, the two actors that interpreted the role of Capheus who are British and American respectively. Moreover, Tuppence Middleton (Riley) is not from Iceland but from the UK, but her character is based in London during the first season. The characters, however, are not the only representatives of their culture because the diversity in locations plays an important role in a show like this.

There are four distinctions that can be made between the types of locations present in the story. The first type is the locations of personal meaning to each character and their

everyday life. These are their apartments or houses as well as the places they usually frequent at such as the Hindu temple that Kala often visits to pray for help and advice, the streets of Nairobi that Capheus drives around in his bus or the park in London where Riley often goes for peace and quiet. A second type of location is the places that play a cultural role in the lives of the characters but also in the culture of their city or country. These include the historic Castro Theater in San Francisco, iconic music venues in Amsterdam and London, Paradiso and KOKO, where Riley holds DJ sets that were filmed live, attending a Lucha Libre wrestling match in Mexico City, or Reykjavik's Harpa Music Hall where Riley's father performs in a classical concert. The third type is not a location per se but a cultural event that defines a place and that was filmed for the show when the live event was taking place. These were the Ganesh Chaturthi festival in Mumbai, the San Francisco and Sao Paulo Pride parades and the Fourth of July celebrations in the US. Finally, the fourth type was filming in locations like recognizable monuments such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Jewish Holocaust memorial in Berlin and museums like the Diego Rivera Museum in Mexico City or the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. In both museums, the characters were engaging with the art and having conversations about it. A significant omission, during the first season, is the absence of these events or monuments in Nairobi and Seoul since most scenes there take place in streets that are sometimes well known but not marked in a special way. Additionally, Sun spends most of the first and some of the second season in prison so her city cannot really be seen like the others. The daily life in these places is still explored to an extent but it is mostly tied to places that have a personal meaning to the characters.

Based on this categorization of locations used in the show, one can deduce that a lot of attention was paid into developing each place as a layered and realistic depiction. The inclusion of events, cultural institutions like museums along with each character's personal spaces paint a picture of what life is like in a slum in Nairobi, in an Indian metropolis or in the

crime world of Berlin. These depictions may be very specific or lack the depth that would be a result of a sole focus on one place but they are also small pieces not only of one culture but of humanity as a whole. Those locations become the grounds not only of action and science fiction but also the spaces where humans from different parts of the world have conversations about the dichotomy between religion and science, about life and death, about love and art. The members of the cluster experience the memory of their birth while attending a classical concert where Beethoven is performed. They dance together in long party sequences that do not advance the plot but create a representation of shared joy and love. In one of the show's final scenes, Nomi, a trans white woman and Amanita, a lesbian woman of colour, get married on the Eiffel Tower in Paris. The tower that has stood as a multifaceted symbol for more than a century now adopts yet another new symbolical meaning; one that stands as a symbol of celebrating difference in a big diverse group of people.

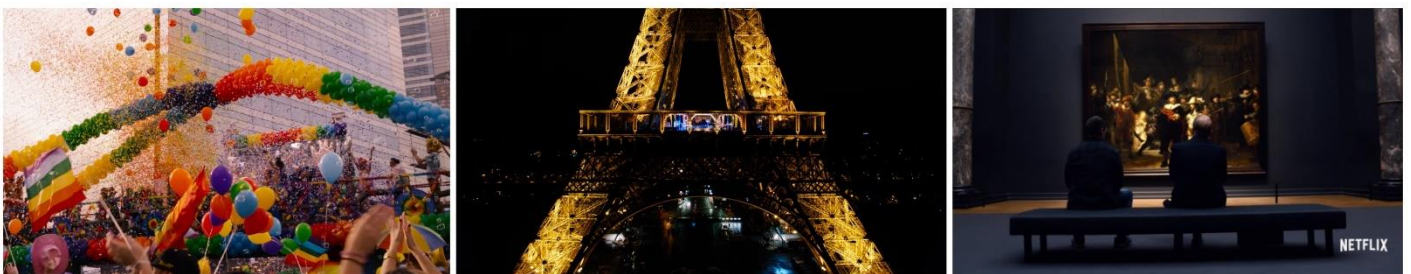


FIGURE 2. FROM THE LEFT: SAO PAULO PRIDE; EIFFEL TOWER; RIJKSMUSEUM.

## Art and Religion

There are several themes that run through multiple storylines in *Sense8* and some of those are the relationship between religion and science, how the power of scientific discovery can be abused and how art shapes life and love. These two topics are explicitly interconnected in the show because in one of Lito's movie sets, a character states that "art is like religion" in the fifth episode of season one (*"Sense8"*00:32:25). Not only that but Hernando associates art with love as well when he says that "[l]ove is just like art: a force that comes into our lives

without any rules, expectations or limitations. ... Love like art, must always be free.”

(“*Sense8*” 00:21:47-00:22:21). These ideas seem to merge or at least relate these three topics as having something in common or as a kind of force that can change one’s life.

When it comes to the subject of religion, it is mostly represented by Kala’s character who regularly visits a temple in Mumbai but also by all the churches and temples that are present in the show even if they do not constitute places of worship. Kala is the only member of the cluster that is religious and actively believes in Hinduism or more specifically the God Ganesh she asks for help or guidance and is comforted by the presence of her faith in her life. This is an case where an Eastern belief or way of thinking is more dominant than the Western as no other sensate expresses a strong religious belief even though most of them celebrate Christmas. To Kala, the connection she has with her cluster can be considered miraculous as well as by science. In fact she frequently has conversations with Wolfgang regarding the nature of her faith and morality. In addition, the temple Kala’s visit becomes a clear manifestation of her personal but also general struggle between the old and the new in India when some religious fanatics attack her father in law who is strong believer of modernization and wants to demolish the temple. Regarding the presence of temples or churches in *Sense8*, it needs to be noted that several pivotal events take place in them. First of all, the show’s opening scene takes place in an abandoned church in Chicago where the mother of the cluster, Angelica, whose name alludes to a spiritual person or presence, “gives birth” to the cluster and then commits suicide to protect them. Two more abandoned churches exist in the show, one where Will and Riley take refuge in while running from Whispers and an abandoned abbey where the cluster is called to meet the a community of sensates that will help them in their goal. The emptiness of these churches signifies that religion is not the strongest force that binds the cluster together but rather empathy and love. Of course, religion is not

synonymous with faith and that is another broad area of discussion, however for the purposes of cultural representation religion does not play a significant role.

Furthermore, art, like religion, covers quite a broad range of ideas and artistic expressions therefore it is necessary to specify how it is included in *Sense8*. One way is through conversations or monologues usually by secondary characters, by references made to famous or classic pieces of art or by attending an artistic event like a classical concert or a theatrical play. In the conversations about art, the common theme that emerges is the theme or perspective and of “seeing”. Hernando is a professor of art in a university in Mexico City and reveals his ideas that art is a “language of seeing and being seen”. In the context of the show then, language adopts an even bigger spectrum as art takes its place next to music and the senses as a means of communication. There is an element of self-awareness that characterizes the conversations about art as *Sense8* brings attention to its existence as an artistic object that is being viewed. Hernando, in “Happy F\*cking New Year”, after being confronted by the publicized images of him and Lito during his lecture, goes on to say that:

This is where the relationship between subject and object reverses... And what was seen, now reveals the seer. Because the eyes of the beholder find not just beauty where they want but also shallowness, ugliness, confusion ... prejudice. (“*Sense8*” 00:13:52-00:14:13)

In episode three of the second season “Obligate Mutualisms”, Will meets a BPO representative, Richard Croome, at the Rijksmuseum and they have a similar conversation about “seeing” that is centered on *The Night Watch* by Rembrandt. Croome, while explaining how the perception of this particular artwork evolved over time, suggests that “[h]ow we see changes... Because our senses, including our common sense, are evolving” (00:43:38-00:44:02). What these two instances reveal about the role of art is that it is closely tied with the question of perspective. Moreover, art is also present in the form of references to authors

either by name, for instance Proust, or by incorporating lines in episode titles or within episodes. For instance, season two episode ten is called “If All the World’s a Stage, Identity is Nothing but a Costume” which is a reference to Shakespeare’s famous line from *As You Like It* and rephrases it to capture a message that is supported by the show. Finally, the show’s last episode is named after Virgil’s quote “Amor Vincit Omnia” which is Latin for “Love Conquers All” and it also encapsulates the spirit of the show. Art, therefore, is used as another way to enhance meaning or to communicate. What is more, it is then in the hands of the audience how it will be seen or perceived and the same goes for *Sense8*. It is also worth noting, that all these interactions take place in institutions of art or education and are also limited to artworks that are product of a more Western perspective. Once again, the difference in representation is mostly observed in what is omitted or excluded.

### Analysis of Montage

Finally, there will be a detailed analysis of another sequence, a montage, from the second episode of the second season, titled “Who Am I?” After exploring all the elements that lead to the construction of identity for the characters in *Sense8* and for the view of humanity that it represents, the scene that has been chosen for analysis contains the explicit representation of what this identity is based on. The sequence involves Capheus being interviewed about his alias “Van Damme” by a reporter who questions what she perceives as his idolization of “white courage” and Lito being interviewed at a movie premiere and asked questions regarding his sexuality by a rude interviewer. The sequence takes place in two locations, switching between the busy street outside of Nairobi Railway Station and the movie premiere at Cinépolis Plaza Carso, Mexico City. Here, there will be a brief introduction of the scene and then its analysis through the lens of editing and shot duration as well as continuity and discontinuity editing. (See appendix for dialogue transcript)



## Editing and Shot duration

The entire sequence lasts from 00:07:05 to 00:13:09 but the montage takes place between 00:10:23 to 00:12:34. The beginning of the sequence is marked by the first shot inside Capheus' *matatu* which is a close up of a Van Damme decoration which sets up one of the themes of the scene. The sequence starts by showing the two main settings, the busy road in Nairobi and Lito's movie premiere with two establishing shots. The sequence primarily follows a shot and reverse shot pattern that alternates between Lito and Capheus and the women that are interviewing them, Mariana and Zakia respectively. It also shifts between the locations and as the scene progresses the interviews merge and both men are in both locations answering the same questions. *Sense8* often contains parallels between two or more of its characters where they experience something similar simultaneously. This pattern is maintained in the whole sequence apart from the montage which starts when the other sensates of the cluster become part of the scene. Nomi is the first to appear at 00:10:23. Even though it lasts around two minutes, there are approximately eighty cuts in this montage which is characteristic of such a sequence but still a large number. The fast succession of shots and hard cuts give an accelerated pace and rhythm to the scene and create a particular emotional effect. The rapid pace with which all the images are presented can be overwhelming but at the same time it almost overlaps one shot with the next which creates the illusion that it is fluid rather than a disjointed collection of shots.

## Continuity editing

In this sequence, an unusual kind of spatial continuity is maintained. In film studies, narrative continuity "aims to transmit narrative information smoothly and clearly over a series of shots" (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith 230). More specifically, filmmakers use techniques to achieve continuity both in space and time, in order to tell a coherent story. Therefore, in order to achieve spatial continuity, filmmakers work on what is called an "axis of action"

which “determines a half-circle, or 180° area, where the camera can be placed to present the action” (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith 231). Typically, these sequences start with an establishing shot. In this case, these are the shot of Capheus’ *matatu* stopping in a busy street in Kibera and the shot of Lito arriving in the premiere with Hernando and Daniela. Then follows a medium shot of the two participants in the conversation in profile; here Lito and Mariana at 00:08:38 and Capheus and Zakia at 00:09:04. These are preceded by some over the shoulder medium shots. The axis of action is on the 180° line with over the shoulder shots (usually close ups) which is what happens in this case. With the camera on Lito and Capheus or their interviewers and moving on the line of action, spatial continuity and shot consistency are achieved. The sequence continues like this alternating between the two places and two events with medium profile shots or over the shoulder shots until the beginning of the montage, where the axis of action is maintained but Nomi takes Lito’s place which breaks continuity. This also happens with Capheus and Sun when he starts a phrase and she finishes it. In order to do that the camera remains static and when someone passes in front of it Sun takes Capheus’ place and finishes what he was saying (Figure 3). From that point onwards, the rest of the cluster start taking Capheus and Lito’s places and they start appearing in each other’s interviews as the interviews merge and their answers are the same. Typically, violating the axis of action or continuity creates a sense of displacement. Here, however, the scene maintains its coherence and feels like a natural progression.



**FIGURE 3. CAPHEUS IS REPLACED BY SUN**

## Discontinuity editing

Even though the previous part of the sequence maintains continuity, once the montage starts the scene displays typical discontinuity editing. Discontinuity editing, according to Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, is “[a]ny alternative system of joining shots together using techniques unacceptable within continuity editing principles” (G-2). These techniques include “mismatching of temporal and spatial relations, violations of the axis of action, and concentration on graphic relationships” (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith G-2). Quite a few of these techniques are implemented in the montage sequence. There is a mismatching of spatial and temporal relations because there are references to previous episodes from the last season or from flashbacks and the characters that stand in front of the interviewers are actually in totally different places in the world. The montage is a compilation of moments that define the characters and match with what is being spoken at the time thus coherence is maintained through the dialogue (or rather monologue) in which all the characters participate. Every question that is posed about identity has a corresponding group of clips that refer to one of more of the sensates’ lives. For instance, when they ask “do you mean where I’m from?” there are short shots of a forested area with a waterfall where Capheus had been at as a child or a cave in a black sand beach in Iceland near where Riley grew up. It is a collage of all their separate and combined, past and present lives, a culmination of “who they are”. The disruption in spatial continuity is presented as something fluid and natural and the displacement as something that does not create unease but rather familiarity, connection and understanding. The transcendence of the physical boundaries of space is one of the biggest consequences of being a sensate and of the editing style of the show as well.

## Conclusion

To conclude, there needs to be an evaluation of the research process and of the questions that were posed in the beginning. All in all, the scope of this thesis was the examination of the subject of cultural representation in the TV show *Sense8*. The previous scholarly literature on the topic mostly covered the diversity and representation in matters of gender and sexuality or its relation to utopian ideas and the effect that technical elements, such as colour, can have in the viewing of a film. The research question was focused on whether or not the stylistic and ideological differences in cultural representation in *Sense8* create a new type of identity based on multi-culturalism.

The answer to the question, as well as the analysis that was conducted, contains many layers. Ultimately, *Sense8* manages to portray a new perspective on identity; one that cannot be limited to one word or label but instead it is the result of answering a series of questions. This is not a new idea; however, the show illustrates the multiplicity and multicultural nature of identity in a concise manner and produces a meaningful plot in the process. Moreover, identity in *Sense8* is not only broad but also fluid as its characters swiftly traverse this new world without losing their individuality. As it has been stated earlier, stereotypes are based on fixed meanings that reduce someone to a group of set traits. Thus, by its nature, *Sense8* manages to resist a stereotypical depiction of identity. However, the depiction of cultural identity is still marked by differences depending on where the characters were from. This element of difference does not refer to the natural differences and diverse stories that are an inevitable part of reality and of any portrayal but there is a difference in their portrayal. The differences that were observed through my research were mostly found in Lito, Capheus and Sun and usually in the matter of plot content, visibility and character depth. This is a significant finding because the creators come from an American or Western background and this creates ground for these characters to be perceived as the Other. Furthermore, stylistically

all characters are presented in the same way since they constantly get to quite literally step into each others' shoes. Thus there are no stylistic differences that lead to difference in cultural representation. On the contrary, *Sense8* presents stylistic elements, mostly in editing and use of montages, that differentiate it from other shows on television and that create a unique imaginary.

The method that was used to assess the research question was mostly advantageous to its nature. The reason for that is that it was drawn from a combination of theories (cultural studies and film studies) and so it included the potential to explore all the different layers that were vital in the process of exploring *Sense8* through different lenses. However, one of its pitfalls was that it provided no clear or strict structure which resulted in uncertainty with how to proceed in analyzing and on what the focus on each chapter should be. It also did not account for themes such as the effect or reactions it gathered from audiences or the feelings it can create since it is a show largely focused on emotions which means that a strict academic method cannot possibly cover the entire scope of the product. When it comes to the theory, it was very applicable and close to the themes suggested by the question and it provided the best possible context and framework. Moreover, the initial research question was very broad as well as open to various interpretations and analyses that in hindsight could not possibly fit in the thesis due to space restrictions. Future research could potentially focus on exploring each culture or gender expression individually or examining some of the other themes central to the show alone or in combination with each other.

As for some closing remarks, *Sense8* is a show that celebrates empathy and understanding regardless of who someone is. It highlights the importance and power of human emotions which can sometimes be rare in television. Thus, in the end, it provides new perspectives not only in academia but mostly for the audience that feels seen and accepted.

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## Appendix

### Transcript 1 – Capheus and Riley on the Plane

Episode Seven, Season One: “WWN Double D?” – 00:10:21 – 00:11:44

CAPHEUS: Oh my God (laughs)! Clouds! Look at them! So close! Beautiful!

RILEY: (nods)

CAPHEUS: (looks around) How amazing is this huh? I’ve never been on a plane. You are so lucky!

RILEY: No, I am not lucky.

CAPHEUS: Of course you are! You are flying ... above clouds!

RILEY: Privileged, not lucky.

CAPHEUS: You are lucky cause you are still able to see your father. That is something I dream about but will never happen again,

RILEY: I’m sorry.

CAPHEUS: It’s okay. I lost my father, but I still have my mother.

RILEY: I wish I could see the world that simply

CAPHEUS: Riley! Look out of the window! Those are actual clouds!

RILEY: But what if something terrible happens because of me going back?

CAPHEUS: What if something wonderful happens?

RILEY: (smiles)

CAPHEUS: First class huh? It’s nice!

### Transcript 2 – Who Am I sequence

Episode Two, Season Two: “Who Am I?” – 00:07:05 – 00:13:09

LITO (to fans): Thank you! Nice to see you guys.

ZAKIA: And reporting for “Kobe Kihara”

JELA: Hello, I’m Jela.

ZAKIA: Where can we find the man they call Van Damme?

JELA: The man you..? You’re sure not Jela?

ZAKIA: Van Damme

JELA: Okay. I will call Van Damme, just wait... Capheus someone is looking for you.

CAPHEUS: Who is it?



JELA: I don't know her name. I don't know who she is.

MARIANA: Lito Rodriguez! Long time, no see!

LITO: Mariana, thank you for coming!

MARIANA: What have you been up to?

LITO: Well I.. I am very excited about the premiere of this film, it's one of my favorites!

MARIANA: Would you care to comment on the scandalous photos of you that recently went viral on the internet?

LITO: (sighs) Mariana, not really chit chat. Right for the jugular.

ZAKIA: So you're the famous Van Damme.

CAPHEUS: I am. My name is Capheus. And what is your name?

ZAKIA: And this is your *matatu*?

CAPHEUS: Yes, yeah!

JELA: (pushing people away) Move, move you're blocking the bus.

MARIANA: Are you denying the photos are real?

LITO: No, no, no ... I ... I did not say that.

MARIANA: So are you ... a homosexual?

HERNANDO: It's okay, it's okay.

LITO: Can you explain to me why it matters?

MARIANA: It matters to your fans. If you are lying to them they have a right to know.

ZAKIA: So how is it that you are called Van Damme?

CAPHEUS: Have you ever seen Lionheart?

ZAKIA: No, I don't watch movies like that.

CAPHEUS: Movies like what?

ZAKIA: Movies that glorify violence. Movies where the white man saves the world.

CAPHEUS: Lionheart is not about any of those things. It's about courage!

LITO: I am very grateful to my fans. I know that as an actor, all I try to give them is something true, is something from my heart.

MARIANA: Then, you were lying to them before?

HERNANDO: Lito, come on. Let's go.

MARIANA: Is this your lover then? Sorry I didn't recognize him with his clothes on.

LITO: Do you ... you know what your problem is?

MARIANA: I don't have a problem, I just want to understand.

LITO: No you are not trying to understand anything.

MARIANA: Are you admitting you're gay or not?

LITO: No you are not trying to understand anything because...

NOMI: Labels are the opposite of understanding.

ZAKIA: But Van Damme is white.

CAPHEUS: He is.

ZAKIA: So even if it's about courage, it's about white courage.

CAPHEUS: I'm sorry, maybe I'm not understanding but what does courage have to do with...

SUN: ... the colour of a man's skin?

LITO/CAPHEUS: I was just a little kid, who loved movies and the heroes I watched made me feel like I was, braver than I was, funnier, smarter, they made me feel like I could do things that I ... made me believe I could do things I didn't think I could do. But that boy who watched TV with his mamma, and grandma and aunties... and aunties is not the man who became an actor, not the man who became a driver and that driver is not the same person you see standing here.

ZAKIA/MARIANA: And who is standing here?

LITO: Who am I?

CAPHEUS: Who am I?

ALL: Do you mean where I'm from? What I one day might become? Do you mean what I do? What I've done? What I dream? Do you mean what you see? What I've seen? What I fear? Do you mean who I love? And what I've lost? Who am I?

LITO and CAPHEUS: I guess who I am is exactly the same as who you are, not better than, not less than, because there is no one who has been or ever be exactly the same as either you or me.

ZAKIA: Did you get that? That was good.

LITO: Have a great night.

ZAKIA: Zakia.

CAPHEUS: What?

ZAKIA: My name is Zakia.

CAPHEUS: Pleased to meet you.