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## **Convenient fictions: the disciplining mechanisms of screenplay structure**

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CONVENIENT FICTIONS: THE DISCIPLINING MECHANISMS OF SCREENPLAY STRUCTURE

A Thesis

Presented in

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Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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BY

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“As a house is built so the pattern of activity of those will be who live in it.”

—Patricia Highsmith, *Strangers on a Train*

## INTRODUCTION

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Over the past decade, there has been a progressive shift in on-screen and behind-the-scenes representation in popular entertainment. Along with the rise of affordable technology for the production and distribution of independent media, the generative power of social media movements like #metoo, #timesup, and #oscarssowhite has forced Hollywood to reckon with longstanding representational issues around the depiction of female/of color/queer and other marginalized characters and the stories they can embody. At the forefront of efforts towards gender and racial parity on television—where the most noticeable strides are being made—are female/of color/queer show runners like Ava Duverany (*Queen Sugar* and *When They See Us*), Jill Soloway (*Transparent* and *I Love Dick*), Tanya Saracho (*Vida*), and Phoebe Waller-Bridge (*Fleabag* and *Killing Eve*), all of whom have been lauded for centering series on women, hiring mostly female and/or of color directors, and creating unprecedentedly inclusive writing rooms. Further, their work has been held up as exemplary of the female gaze and, therefore, of progressive female/of color/queer representation.

Though more inclusive media now exists for audiences hungry for diverse representation, the most recent *Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment* from 2016 shows that we have a long way to go. In an examination of major studio releases and television series, the report found that racial, gender, and LGBTQ parity is much less than what anecdotal evidence suggests, most likely on account of the increased volume of media production for the streaming market, which yields proportionately more media

created by and focused on white, straight men. From film to broadcast to streaming, the ratio of males-to-females with speaking parts is 2:1, and the numbers get worse for LGBTQ people and people of color. On television, for instance, only “26.6% of series regulars were from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups;” less than 2% of characters were identifiable as LGBTQ, and of those, most were white.<sup>1</sup> More recent studies like GLAAD’s “Where We Are on TV Report” show slight improvement in the area of queer representation. GLAAD’s 2018 report highlights “a record-high percentage of queer characters on broadcast, cable and streaming television” coupled with “the rise of trans representation and the fact that LGBTQ characters of color outnumber their white counterparts for the first time.”<sup>2</sup>

While this is important and worth celebrating, the overall dominance of white, cis, straight male-centered media remains largely unchanged. It seems that despite the critical success of series like *Fleabag*, *Pose*, and *Insecure*—and the ways in which those series have fostered sorely-needed discussions around the female gaze, casting trans actors in trans roles, and adjusting cinematographic practices to light actors with dark skin—the majority of work being produced by Hollywood still lacks substantial diversity and inclusion in casting and representation. However, visible on- and off-screen representation in the form of writers, directors, actors, etc. of marginalized identities is only one part of the equation. Thus far, there has been little to no discussion of how industry-wide acceptance of traditional screenwriting structure and story development creates barriers to the telling of stories by and about marginalized people.

An analysis that favors quantitative and qualitative analysis over structural analysis risks obscuring the issues that undergird problematic representation. During the 2020 awards season, for example, many female/queer/of color media critics lamented the lack of recognition for Greta Gerwig’s lavish and clever adaptation of *Little Women*, Ava Duvernay’s scathing and

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1. Stacy L. Smith, et al. Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment. (USC Annenberg, 2016), 8-11.

2. Zoë Shacklock, “Queer Kinaesthesia on Television.” *Screen*, vol. 60, no. 4, (2019): 509.

deeply moving series vindicating the Central Park Five *When They See Us*, and Lulu Wang's crowd-pleasing *The Farewell*, among many other critically acclaimed and financially successful films and series helmed by marginalized creators. Instead, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Hollywood Foreign Press Association—in a move that seemed oddly regressive considering recent recognition for films like *Moonlight* and *Get Out*—rewarded old standbys, exemplified by epically long and antiquated tales featuring white men brutalizing one another throughout history in films like *1917*, *The Irishman*, and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. Progressive-minded critics scratched their heads in wonder: how could the Academy not see that *Hustlers* was on par with *The Irishman*? Though enigmatic, I'd argue that the question contains the answer: they can't see it because they can't see it. And they can't see it because—as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis—the signifying practices at the heart of screenwriting are designed to accommodate stories by/for/about straight, white men. In much the same way that homosexuality is deemed a poor imitation of heterosexuality, films made by female/of color/queer people are seen as “shadow[s] of the real.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, when a film is about women—even if they're also white and straight—it's much harder for audiences to accept that it's a viable, awardable screen story. If we want to improve representation in both quantity and quality, therefore, we must engage in a sustained interrogation and upending of the hegemonic storytelling norms that produced the idea that certain stories are originary and “real” while others are derivative.

Strictly qualitative measures can yield equally problematic results. When we focus solely on “positive” visible representation in the form of characters who embody specific marginalized identities, we may chip away at long-standing media stereotypes perpetuating white supremacy, misogyny, classism, fat-phobia, and the like, but if we want to upend those systemic biases, we'd be wise to plumb deeper into the ways that storytelling structures invisibly perpetuate the dominant culture. As Halberstam argues, often positive representation is assimilationist and, therefore, just as troubling as negative representation because the positive representation serves

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3. Judith Butler and Sara Salih, *The Judith Butler Reader*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 127.

to mimic and reinforce the status quo.<sup>4</sup> This means that even when a media text contains positive images of marginalized subjects, it may do so “without necessarily producing new ways of seeing or a new inscription of the social subject in representation.”<sup>5</sup> In building upon the “positive images debate” that consumes so much of media studies and popular criticism, we can enter a space that is more akin to transformative politics. Transformative politics asks us to move beyond “strategies built upon the possibility of incorporation and assimilation” because they unjustly make the status quo accessible “for more privileged members of marginalized groups, while the most vulnerable in our communities continue to be stigmatized and oppressed.”<sup>6</sup> Transformative storytelling practice, therefore, must be suspicious of assimilating queer/female/of color characters into traditional screen narratives, lest they become normalized, disciplined, and more in line with cis, white, heterosexist, patriarchal values.

One aim of this thesis is to supplement quantitative and qualitative media analysis with deep structural analysis. As a queer filmmaker and professor of screenwriting, I’ve often been frustrated by the ways that narrative constraints like three-act structure and the hero’s journey—with their lock-step patterning of plot points, midpoint reversals, and final resolutions—limit not only the types of stories that tend to be told, but the possibilities for representation within those stories. I argue that the standard screenwriting paradigms are not only inherently masculine—most obviously marked by Campbell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces*—but straight, in terms of linearity, causal reproductive logics, and structures of conflict that uphold binaries. Additionally, common strategies for character-building such as psychological realism, individualized subjectivity, and transformative agency are based upon long-standing notions of the universal white male that do not easily map onto marginalized characters and, therefore,

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4. Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, (Duke University Press, 2018), 185.

5. Teresa DeLauretis, “Film and the Visible.” *How Do I Look?: Queer Film and Video*, edited by Bad Object Choices. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 224.

6. Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (January 1997): 443.

might not offer the best strategies for telling the stories of people who've long been punished for existing outside of the status quo.

Towards this end, this project will analyze two contemporary television series that have been praised for progressive representation and storytelling, particularly at the intersections of gender and sexuality: *Killing Eve* and *Sense8*. Through an analysis of each texts' signifying practices—as embodied by contemporary screenwriting paradigms—I will demonstrate how *Killing Eve*'s (Phoebe Waller-Bridge) adherence to traditional storytelling standards around character-building, narrative structure, and genre inhibit the liberatory potential of placing two female characters (an Asian-American, straight woman and a white, queer woman) at the center of the typically masculine spy thriller. In contrast, I will show how *Sense8* (The Wachowskis) moves beyond progressive representation by not only centering the series around eight protagonists of varying genders, sexualities, and racial identities, but also expanding its emancipatory potential by subverting and reimagining the rules of character, narrative structure, and genre.

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## METHODOLOGY: TOWARDS A RADICALLY EQUAL CULTURAL IMAGINARY

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At the root of this thesis lies a fundamental conviction that all of life is deeply connected and relational, that to flourish along with the planet and one another, we must make profound shifts in how we relate to one another, the earth, and ourselves. Our current cultural, economic, political, and social system—based on white supremacist, cis-sexist, heteronormative, predatory capitalist logics and marked by massive income inequality, perpetual war, rabid anti-intellectualism, assaults against reproductive rights, the erasure of disability and aging, climate catastrophe, and an overall disregard for the suffering of the other—is not sustainable. Activists from all disciplines are rightly calling for progressive economic and social change centered around principles of degrowth, decolonization, social justice, the value of black lives, sustainable environmental policies, and the like. For some, concerns of this nature might be considered too political and thus outside the purview of the screenwriter. But as a queer, gender-variant screenwriter and educator who daily feels the pressing need for healing social transformation and who understands the unique power of storytelling, I disagree. We make the world through the stories we tell.

Due to their ubiquity and popular appeal, screen stories are central to how we understand ourselves—our agency, identity, and place in the world—as well as how we consider others with their unique identities, struggles, and grievability. As bell hooks writes in her inquiry into the possibilities of liberating black representation from the disciplining mechanisms of white supremacist cultural production: “[t]he emphasis on film is so central because it, more than any other media experience, determines how blackness and black people are seen and how other groups will respond to us based on their relation to these constructed and consumed images.”<sup>1</sup> Because screen stories influence the cultural imaginary from which the symbolic order derives its strength, legitimacy, and power, ethical screenwriters are in a unique position to

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1. bell hooks. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. (South End Press, 1992), 5.

reshape how stories are told and contribute to more equitable futures. As I will argue, pursuing a generative and inclusive imaginary geared towards human flourishing must be rooted in a “radical equality” that fosters interdependent relationality over self-mastery and individualism. For theorists like Judith Butler and filmmakers like Céline Sciamma, radical equality can, among other things, manifest through embracing our fundamental vulnerability to reflect “social relations that depend for [their] articulation on an increasingly avowed interdependency.”<sup>2</sup> An ethos rooted in radical equality shifts us away from the isolation of the bounded self and towards a relationality founded on our fundamental porousness. This requires “letting go of the body as a ‘unit’ in order to understand one’s boundaries as relational and social predicaments: including sources of joy, susceptibility to violence, sensitivity to heat and cold, tentacular yearnings for food, sociality, and sexuality,”<sup>3</sup> which we’ll see play out beautifully via the interconnected characters of *Sense8*. In pursuit of an imaginary grounded in radical equality, I turn to the ruthlessly critical and creatively constructive work of queer and feminist theory, as both are central to my analysis of how common narrative strategies reinforce and perpetuate the destructive imaginary underlying the status quo as well as my suggestions for how those narrative strategies can be adapted and innovated upon to alter screenwriting practice towards a more progressive and equitable future.

From queer cultural theorists like Sara Ahmed, who reimagined phenomenology to accommodate queer bodies and queer orientations so that “[d]epending on which way one turns, different worlds might come into view”;<sup>4</sup> to José Esteban Muñoz, who challenged the negative turn in queer theory by envisioning queerness as “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present”;<sup>5</sup> to traditional feminists philosophers like Adriana Cavarero, who “rescues” the maligned female figures of

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2. Judith Butler. *The Force of Nonviolence: an Ethico-Political Bind*. (Verso, 2020), 45.

3. *Ibid.*, 45.

4. Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. (Duke University Press, 2007), 15.

5. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (New York University Press, 2009), 1.

Western philosophy to inaugurate a uniquely female symbolic order:<sup>6</sup> the best work in queer and feminist theory combines the dual desire to resist the violences of the status quo and imagine new, more equitable worlds for all people. Such utopian longings develop in response to a world that is “not enough” and yet is all we have, a world where you sense that so much more is possible just over the horizon.<sup>7</sup> Threads from disparate scholarship in queer-feminist theory can be woven together to create a new path forward, soaring over the heads of those either long-dulled into accepting the status quo or who stand too much to gain from it to upend it. Through a blend of rigorous critique and a playful excavation of the quotidian, the backward, the non-productive, and the non-normative, queer-feminist theory “offer[s] us one method for imagining not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems.”<sup>8</sup>

It’s one thing to imagine a more egalitarian future, one defined not by violence and oppression but cooperation and mutual flourishing, but liberation requires more than imagination. The transformation of the dominant economic, political, social, and cultural systems necessary to eliminate hierarchies of human value requires what Cathy Cohen refers to as a “left analysis” or “left framework” that centers intersectionality and an awareness of the “interdependency among multiple systems of domination.”<sup>9</sup> As Audre Lorde says, “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained. Nor is anyone of you.”<sup>10</sup> By being inclusive of multiple vectors of oppression simultaneously, a “left framework” articulates the distinct intersections of oppression while building radically equal coalitions amongst groups that might not ordinarily see their causes linked.

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6. Adriana Cavarero. *In Spite of Plato: a Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. (New York: Routledge, 1995).

7. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

8. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*. (Duke University Press, 2011), 89.

9. Cohen, “Punks,” 442.

10. Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*. (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 132-133.

In addition to building intersectional coalitions, a radical queer-feminist politics seeks transformation of oppressive systems over assimilation into those systems. A transformational politics “does not search for opportunities to integrate into dominant institutions and normative social relationships, but instead pursues a political agenda that seeks to change values, definitions, and laws which make these institutions and relationships oppressive.”<sup>11</sup> This anti-assimilationist agenda is central to the exploration of screenwriting paradigms and their relationship to media representation that follows. An assimilationist position within the field of screenwriting might understand that “depicting minority difference [is] necessary to combat phobic discrimination and violence,” and, therefore, advocate for “the production of multiple and nuanced roles, narratives, and images” of minoritarian characters.<sup>12</sup> But in order to “pose critical alternatives, and transform our world views,” screenwriters who want to challenge the status quo must find ways of “shifting paradigms [and] changing perspectives.”<sup>13</sup> Without probing the normative values and assumptions undergirding storytelling structures, we risk lauding diverse casting and representation while obscuring “the structural, material inequalities that produce and maintain minority difference in the first place.”<sup>14</sup> It’s more than just the presence of bodies or occasional switched out lenses that are necessary; we need to completely and permanently change the way in which we define what a world is. Not tourism into new worlds or ways, but discovery and incorporation of those ways into the world we live in.

In this spirit, the cohesive force of this thesis is bound together by positioning the destabilizing, intersectional, and radical potential of queer-feminist theory as a creative strategy for analysis and disruption.

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11. Cohen, “Punks,” 445.

12. Summer Kim Lee, “Too Close, Too Compromised: Killing Eve and the Promise of Sandra Oh.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*. December 4, 2018. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/close-compromised-killing-eve-promise-sandra-oh/>.

13. hooks, *Black Looks*, 4.

14. Lee, “Too Close”.

## TOWARDS A CRITIQUE OF SCREENWRITING

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### INHERENT BIAS AND THE UNIVERSAL NEUTRAL IN SCREENWRITING

To fully understand the development and codification of standard screenwriting paradigms, one must understand the symbiotic relationship between film production and film criticism within the Hollywood studio system. In the early days of film, for example, genres developed through a system of trial and error in what Rick Altman calls the “Producer’s Game,” wherein producers and studio heads broke down financially lucrative films into their component “successful” elements, studied those elements, and then reproduced them in different arrangements in new films, all with the goal to replicate financial success. For Altman, this approach to filmmaking puts “studio personnel in the place of the critic,”<sup>1</sup> a highly analytical mode that constrains the possibilities for production by locking it in a cycle of imitation and replication. Thus, film genres—and by extension styles and paradigms—“begin as reading positions established by studio personnel acting as critics, and are expressed through filmmaking conceived of as an act of applied criticism.”<sup>2</sup>

The rules of screenwriting developed in much the same way. The most well-known authors of screenwriting texts—Syd Field, Robert McKee, and Christopher Vogler—were studio readers or development executives before formally systematizing their screenwriting paradigms. In the early 70s, for example, Field was a studio reader for Cinemobile Systems where he read hundreds of screenplays with an eye towards cost, quality, and budget. During that time, he began to question and then formulate his ideas about what made some scripts worth passing on to studio heads and other scripts worth tossing in the garbage. Through reading, studying, and green-lighting screenplays for now classic films like *The Godfather*, *Chinatown*, and *American Graffiti*, Field gleaned the core tenets of screenwriting success that informed the courses he taught and the manuals he wrote, all of which eventually became “totally embraced by the film

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1. Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*. (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 43.

2. *Ibid*, 44.

industry.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, in the 80s, while Christopher Vogler worked at Disney as a story consultant, he wrote a seven page memo that took Hollywood by storm. Using the emblematic *Star Wars* as a guide, Vogler distilled Campbell’s Hero’s Journey into a simpler set of steps for writing a successful film. In playing the Producer’s Game, people like Field and Vogler perpetuate the system of studying movies to make movies in a cycle that replicates and repackages what is deemed successful (ie., financially lucrative), and will be produced—at least by major studios.

While there are critiques to be made regarding the effectiveness of the Producer’s Game in selecting and emulating successful tactics, my analysis will move us in a different direction. In distilling the elements of successful screenwriting into a set of coherent, permanent, and universal rules that can theoretically be followed by anyone hoping to write a screenplay that sells, at least two related problems emerge: 1) the masculine biases and privileges of the men establishing the paradigms are rarely, if ever, acknowledged or interrogated; and 2) the Producer’s Game establishes paradigms that rely on a universal, mythical norm that does not account for minoritarian difference. In the following paragraphs, I will draw out how the white, masculinist, heteronormative bias inherent in the Producer’s Game yields a mythical norm that leaves many stories unthought and untellable.

Despite the fact that Field, McKee, Vogler, etc., are all white, straight men, the screenplay gurus rarely acknowledge how their gender, race, class, sexuality, historical context, or point of view influence how they select, interpret, and evaluate films to identify the paradigmatic patterns they espouse. Likewise, the fact that the successful films from which they’ve extracted the successful tenets of screenwriting share writers, directors, and stars from their same demographic remains largely unexamined. Each paradigm thus operates through the unquestioned assumption of the naturalness of white, male-centric narratives as representative of all of humankind. Before I examine the implications of baking such assumptions into narrative design, it’s worth exploring how these standard-bearers’ identities—and the implicit

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3. Syd Field, *Screenplay: the Foundations of Screenwriting*. (Bantam Dell, 2005), 12.

and explicit commitments shaped by those identities—present themselves and influence the ethos upon which the manuals depend.

To begin at the most basic level of language and gender, in Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*—in both the original printing in the late 90s and its most recent revision in 2006—he opens with a short “Notes on the Text,” where he blanketly dismisses all but male pronouns. By way of justification, he explains that he’s avoiding distracting constructions “such as the annoying alternation of ‘she’ and ‘her’ with ‘he’ and ‘him,’ the repetitious ‘he and she’ and ‘him and her,’ the awkward ‘s/he’ and ‘her/im,’ and the ungrammatical ‘they’ and ‘them’ as neuter singulars,” and instead uses “the nonexclusive ‘he’ and ‘him’ to mean ‘writer.’”<sup>4</sup> Though framed as a minor housekeeping issue, McKee centers the masculine and unwittingly suggests that men are writers while women (and non-binary ‘neuters’) are not. The implications of this are deep and heavy, influencing the reader’s perception of what a writer is in the same way that only seeing doctors, engineers or world leaders as male on television influences who both men and women think can hold those roles, and those who seek the education and certification to do those jobs. The very real effect of media on perceptions of who the public sees as qualified to hold certain jobs, as evidenced by the number of think pieces earlier in this U.S. election year on whether we, as a nation, are ‘ready’ for a female president, plays out in every major industry: STEM, medicine, politics. And as we know from even the most cursory review of the history of Hollywood film and television, this tends to play out in much larger percentages of men being hired as screenwriters, and, therefore, how men and women are depicted in screenplays.

When it comes to screenplay manuals and the assumptive centering of masculinity, McKee is not the exception, but the rule. In *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, Field links the development of his screenwriting principles to his rise from Hollywood tough guy (who, he proudly claims, inspired characters in *Rebel Without a Cause*) to screenplay guru.

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4. Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. (Regan Books, 1997) xi.

Field's privilege placed him in the position to find mentorship from filmmaking legends Jean Renoir (son of another legend, impressionist August Renoir) and Sam Peckinpah, who, in the 70s, modernized the Western, infusing it with his unique brand of rugged individualism and violent masculinity. As Field tells it, Peckinpah's script for *Major Dundee* led to his core insight that writing a good character requires a "strong and defined dramatic need,...an individual point of view, [and] some kind of change, or transformation."<sup>5</sup> Rooting his paradigm in Peckinpah's *Major Dundee*—a film depicting a cowboy's psychotic quest to avenge an Apache raid by slaughtering indigenous people—is not neutral, even as it is abstracted into general principles like having a "dramatic need." What so often gets lost is that at its core, Field's paradigm originated with a particular film, one saturated with white supremacy, toxic masculinity, stark binary oppositions, and a linear (and genocidal) progress narrative that lays waste to the collective in favor of the individual. Seen in this way, we begin to understand how the presumed neutrality of abstraction masks particular identities and proclivities.

In a similar, if crasser, vein—as if the title of Jeffrey Schechter's screenplay guide *My Story Can Beat Up Your Story: Ten Ways to Toughen Up Your Screenplay from Opening Hook to Knockout Punch* doesn't exude enough toxic masculinity—it doubles-down with chapter titles like, "My Hero's a Winner, Your Hero's a Weiner" and "Your Bad Guy Punches Like My Sister," all of which rely on violence, bullying, and bashing the feminine. In the introduction, Schechter writes, "I know it's hard to believe, but there was once a time when stories would kick sand in my face. Sadly, these were my stories. I was such a weakling that my own stories could pants me and shove me into a locker."<sup>6</sup> The self-deprecation at the heart of this admission, while meant to endear the audience to the writer, only compounds what screen stories mean for the male perspective: the violent fantasies at the heart of hero stories operate as redemption fantasies for weak (feminine) pasts. Marginalized writers are well aware of the toxic masculinity that pervades our society without having this imagery shoved in their faces by insecure mentors such

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5. Field, *Screenplay*, 63.

6. Jeffrey Alan Schechter, *My Story Can Beat up Your Story! Ten Ways to Toughen up Your Screenplay from Opening Hook to Knockout Punch*. (Michael Wiese Productions, 2011), 1.



as Schechter who perform self-flagellation thinly disguising braggadocio. (Lest I seem harsh, if Schechter and McKee can get away with this kind of crude and offensive masculinist voice, I feel no need to soften my own queer feminist perspective, especially when I—and countless others like me—are forced to endure their misogynistic and cis-centric metaphors as ‘endearing.’) Schechter’s the-bullied-becomes-the-bully journey only serves to warn others that he’s the star quarterback right now, and he’ll let you know if you’re invited to the frat party later. (Spoiler alert: you’re not.) Schechter’s advice steers not only his protégés’ learning but their output, more deeply embedding the dysfunction and perpetuating these troublesome views in their scripts, in the films created from them, on the sets on which those films are shot, and within the minds of the audiences who watch them. The lessons of *Major Dundee* and the lie of the abstract universal strike again.

In contrast with his peers, Vogler attempts to acknowledge the issue of perspective. In the preface to *The Writer’s Journey*, though he claims that an essential humanity beyond gender difference lies at the heart of the hero’s journey, he cites feminist criticism of the monomyth as a “masculine theory, cooked up by men to enforce their dominance.”<sup>7</sup> He goes on to admit his own bias, stating that as a man he “can’t help seeing the world through the filter of my gender.”<sup>8</sup> To remedy the masculinist bent of his text, he includes a brief account of how the heroine’s journey might differ from hero’s journey by virtue of being more cyclical and internal as opposed to linear and external, advising (female) readers to seek out external texts like *The Heroine’s Journey* and *Women Who Run With The Wolves* for alternative theories on the woman’s journey. This brief concession, while refreshing in its acknowledgement of gender difference, simultaneously reifies existing stereotypes about femininity and masculinity and, in sending women elsewhere, Vogler absconds responsibility and re-centers his paradigm as authoritative, placing the work of ‘helping’ female screenwriters on other female writers, a time-tested “go talk to your mother” strategy that dumps the load off oppressors and onto the oppressed. Instead of

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7. Christopher Vogler, *The Writers Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007), xxi.

8. Vogler, *Writer’s Journey*, xxi.

allowing that the heroine's journey might be an equally viable paradigm, he concludes the preface stating, “I believe that much of the journey is the same for all humans, since we share many realities of birth, growth, and decay,”<sup>9</sup> basically negating anything he’d said previously about the possible value of a feminine version of his masculine-centered advise. He was so close (on one tiny front), but in order for the center to hold, the center must be held.

From this brief sampling (which represents the cemented center of current screenplay curricula), the masculine commitments of the screenplay gurus should be apparent. If there was a screenplay writing tome written by someone who wasn’t white, straight, and male that was as universally lauded, gifted to anyone who utters the phrase “I’d love to write a movie someday,” and taught in film schools, it would have been included here. Though I have focused primarily on gender difference, in the following paragraphs I will demonstrate how masculinist commitments also contain and perpetuate other dominant normativities, such as whiteness and heterosexism. Further, I will explore how white male bias yields a commitment to universal, neutral norms for screenwriting that obscure how the daily conflicts that white, straight men encounter and overcome can often be quite different than the aggressive antagonism and gratuitous violence faced by marginalized people. In short, I argue that universal story structures neglect the structural racism, sexism, etc., that at once allow white, straight men the privilege to excel in stories predicated on paradigmatic models, while impeding such possibilities for stories based around minoritarian perspectives.

As I discussed earlier, through the Producer’s Game, films like *Star Wars*, *The Godfather*, and *Chinatown* became the prototypes for popular screenwriting paradigms. In abstracting the rules for character and structure from films that follow male protagonists on archetypal journeys, we begin to see how unchecked male bias assumes “the universal man as ordinary.”<sup>10</sup> Whether it’s Field claiming that “[a]ll stories...embody the same dramatic

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9. Ibid.

10. Adriana Cavarero, “Towards a Theory of Sexual Difference” in *The Lonely Mirror*, edited by Sandra Kemp and Paola Bono. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 192.

principles,”<sup>11</sup> McKee stating that “[t]he archetypal story unearths a universally human experience,”<sup>12</sup> or Vogler insisting that “[t]he pattern of the Hero’s Journey is universal, occurring in every culture, in every time,”<sup>13</sup> popular screenwriting paradigms advance what feminists have long critiqued as an abstract universalism that establishes the founding figure of the human [as] masculine.”<sup>14</sup> Masculinity, however, is not the only dominant trait hidden under “universalization of the finite.”<sup>15</sup> Audre Lorde expands the concept of the universal neutral familiar to many white feminist scholars into what she calls the “mythical norm.” Defined more expansively to include innumerable dominant identities that hold “the trappings of power” in society, Lorde defines the mythical norm as “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure.”<sup>16</sup> Though Lorde’s mythical norm addresses a larger cultural specter, it’s not difficult to see that she essentially describes the primary protagonist of most films and television series.

In addition to consolidating power through abstract neutrality, a paradigm that relies on the mythical norm runs the risk of eliding human variety, cultural difference, and historical change in favor of normalization and conformity. Put simply, in disregarding human plurality, we not only erase complexity, but shunt human experience into singular forms. This is not completely lost on the screenwriting gurus. To ward off critiques of this nature, McKee argues that a universal paradigm is a value-free system that can accommodate an infinite variety of characters and stories. He writes, “[t]he archetypal story unearths a universally human experience, then wraps itself inside a unique, cultural-specific expression.”<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, a writer could plug the “culturally-specific expression” of a disabled, Latinx female

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11. Field, *Screenplay*, 3.

12. McKee, *Story*, 4.

13. Vogler, *Writer’s Journey*, 10.

14. Butler, *Nonviolence*, 37.

15. Cavarero, “Sexual Difference,” 192.

16. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 116.

17. McKee, *Story*, 4.

character into the hero's journey just as easily as an able-bodied, white male character with no alterations to the narrative required. While technically possible, there is no acknowledgement of how one's life experience or "culturally-specific" identity might impact the possibilities for one's narrative trajectory.

Because most screenplay gurus ignore the role that the particularities of gender, sexuality, race, and other forms of marginality play in shaping their perspectives, screenplay paradigms tend to unwittingly perpetuate straightness, whiteness, and masculinity by virtue of their positioning as universal. Whether the issue is that of finding "a masculine subject which raises itself to the universal,"<sup>18</sup> unmarked whiteness perpetuating itself through "dailiness,"<sup>19</sup> or the unchallenged acceptance of "compulsive heterosexuality,"<sup>20</sup> what you end up with is a series of masks for maleness as a gender category, whiteness as a racial category, and heteronormativity as the default mode of sexuality and family-making. Put another way, the universal has a normativizing function that dilutes and erases particular identities and ways of being by foreclosing the possibilities for thinking your self, your subjectivity, or your life into existence. Instead you have the straight, white male hero who is at home everywhere, making history via narrative.<sup>21</sup> As Cavarero writes:

And here lies the crux of the problem: I, like every woman, am now writing and thinking in the language of the other, which is simply the language, nor could I do otherwise. This language, since I happen to be a woman, denies me as a subject, it stands on categories which compromise my self-identification. How, then, can I speak myself through that which, structurally, does not speak me? How can I think sexual difference through, and in, a system of thought which is founded on not thinking it?<sup>22</sup>

Cavarero illuminates the difficulty of narrating a subject *who has not been thought*, who has never been given a language—let alone a narrative—centered on the authentic truth of one's

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18. Cavarero, "Sexual Difference, 190.

19. Raka Shome, "Race and Popular Cinema: the Rhetorical Strategies fo Whiteness in City of Joy. *Communication Quarterly*, vol 44, No. 4, (Fall 1996), 503.

20. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631.

21. Shome, "Race and Popular Cinema," 514.

22. Cavarero, "Sexual Difference," 194.

specific, cultural, and socio-historical experience and positionality. In short, because the paradigms were created in man's image, they tell men's stories. Men simply are not asked to see themselves in the lives or stories of the other. Instead minoritarian audiences and creators are expected again and again to contort ourselves into a template not designed to account for the paths our lives take. As long as the paradigm doesn't change, neither does the world. While it might be enough to say that universalism leaves most stories unthought, I intend to demonstrate how designing a paradigm out of a general and normative subjectivity actually perpetuates the ideology supporting that subjectivity. This is especially true when shunting minoritarian characters into majoritarian archetypes.

### **THE IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SCREENWRITING**

Often referred to as a blue-print for the final film, screenplays are the most strictly codified of all the literary arts in terms of formatting and structure. Highly capitalistic from the start, the film industry developed and modeled itself after the Fordist factory system of the early twentieth century, which was built for efficiency and mechanization. As a result, there are precise rules about margins, spacing, font type and size, as well as the way character names, sound effects, and slug lines, etc., are formatted. Courier 12, for example, is the only permissible font for a screenplay because—as a fixed-pitch font—one page of text translates roughly into one minute of film. This often seems unduly onerous to aspiring screenwriters, but because filmmaking is premised on a strict division of labour that facilitates the coordination of large casts and crews, it is necessary so that producers can do jobs as diverse as hiring skilled technicians, making budgets, ordering craft services, and securing locations in an efficient manner.

At the same time that strict formatting guidelines allow for a factory model of storytelling inside of which an ideology sympathetic with industrial capitalism resides, they also work as a gatekeeping device. The uniformity on the page leads to uniformity of those writing (and reading) those pages. In this way, we start to see that the form can impede the potential of the

content—not just in terms of gatekeepers who decide who gains admission to the studio-palace, but in terms of the creative possibilities of the screenplays. Much like the military, only those who follow ‘the rules’ get to move ahead, as determined by the ‘leaders’ who have ‘paid their dues’ and are looking for ‘bright new recruits,’ who invariably think, sound, and act just like them. The cycle maintains itself through replicated formations.

While the exacting and gatekeeping format requirements of screenwriting are certainly problematic, I will not take issue with them here. In many ways screenwriting format is akin to the rules of a sonnet, which dictates the physical properties of the text more than its content. Both are technical constraints into which an infinite variety of content can be inserted. Raymond Queneau—the French poet and member of the Oulipo (a group of writers who innovated literature through constraint-based writing, including algorithms, palindromes, and lipograms)—famously demonstrated this with his *One Hundred Thousand Billion Sonnets*. Based on 14 groups of 10 lines of poetry, this arduous work exploits the form of the sonnet to yield  $10^{14}$  unique sonnets. Through this extreme example, we can see that formal, technical constraints—while they may influence the length, shape, or size of a work of art—do not necessarily dictate the content of the work. What the poems are about in terms of character, setting, and theme depends on another set of factors. Thus, in this project, I do not quarrel with the mechanical and formatting constraints of the screenplay, but rather with the conceptual limits and ideological commitments of the structural elements of storytelling: character, narrative structure, genre, setting, point of view, theme, and tone. Though screenwriting paradigms address all of these issues, to limit the scope of this thesis, I will primarily address the bulk of what most manuals concentrate on: character, conflict, and narrative structure.

#### CHARACTER, CHARACTERIZATION, AND CONFLICT

Within screenwriting paradigms, the definition of character is conceptually limited on account of a common distinction between character and characterization. In film and television,

a character is someone who “wants something badly and is having difficulty getting it.”<sup>23</sup> Character is the end result of the tension between external wants and unresolved internal needs, and a character only comes alive on the page through the visible actions, reactions, and “creative choices” they make as they stumble through the obstacles placed in their path via the narrative.<sup>24</sup> Characterization, on the other hand, is defined as “the sum of all observable qualities of a human being, everything knowable through careful scrutiny: age and IQ; sex and sexuality; style of speech and gesture; choices of home, car, and dress; education and occupation.”<sup>25</sup> Embedded in this dualism is a hierarchical belief that a character's true essence emerges only when put under pressure and that one's essence is neither related to the context of their lives nor singular aspects of their identity. Often this means that a character's essence boils down to general virtues or vices, such as generosity or stinginess as opposed to specific aspects of one's history or identity and how those might shape the way a character experiences the pressures of living.

In a lengthy illustration from McKee, he describes a potential film scenario in which an “illegal alien” and a neurosurgeon happen upon a terrible car accident and rescue some children trapped inside a burning car. For McKee, these characters represent complete opposites in terms of characterization, but are identical in terms of character. Though they are “[t]wo people who have utterly different backgrounds, beliefs, personalities, languages,” they demonstrate “an identical humanity” because they choose courage over self-interest.<sup>26</sup> Though the housekeeper and the neurosurgeon make the same choice, equating their humanity is a stretch. The white male doctor, while putting himself at risk, is merely doing his job, whereas the housekeeper, because she has far more to lose, demonstrates a different brand of heroism. And, yet, considering the housekeeper's circumstances, might the story not be more reflective of the

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23. David Howard and Edward Mabley, *The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer's Guide to the Craft and Elements of a Screenplay*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) xii.

24. Field, *Screenplay*, 55.

25. McKee, *Story*, 100.

26. *Ibid.*

difficult life choices inherent in the lives of the undocumented if she opted instead to protect her family and call for help instead of martyring herself to play the hero? To take it further, who is to say that if the housekeeper ignored the accident and returned home safely that she hasn't made a heroic decision...for the benefit her children? In distinguishing between character and characterization, the screenwriting gurus return us once again to a universal neutral person who embodies universally neutral values, while eliminating differences in history and identity as key factors that informs a person's ability to make choices under pressure. As if having a speech impediment, being old, being queer, being black, being undocumented, or a whole host of other "observable qualities" doesn't shape how one moves in the world and how the world reacts in turn. In adhering to the idea of the universal human as a template for good characters, what is lost is an understanding that "[w]hat bodies 'tend to do' are effects of histories rather than being ordinary."<sup>27</sup>

Though screenwriting manuals don't consider history or context essential to a character's essence, screenwriters are encouraged to write detailed character biographies. These biographies are considered part of the character's interior life-world and serve to inform the character's definitive actions while potentially remaining unknown to the audience. "The *interior* life of your character takes place from birth up until the time your story begins. It is a process that *forms* character. The *exterior* life of your character takes place from the moment your film begins to the conclusion of the story. It is a process that *reveals* character."<sup>28</sup> The biography is thus necessary to create an internal road-map that might influence a character's outward behavior in terms of key decisions, actions, and reversals. Toward this end, prompts like "is your character male or female," "is your character married, widowed, single, separated, divorced," and "[e]xamine his/her career, relationships, dreams, hopes, and aspirations"<sup>29</sup> guide the screenwriter in creating a legible and coherent backstory for their character. Grounded in

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27. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. (Duke University Press, 2007), 56.

28. Field, *Screenplay*, 48, (emphasis added).

29. *Ibid*, 49-50.



linear chronologies of education, career, and marriage, or rigid gender binaries and biological family lineages, these prompts seem to actively court heteronormative assumptions in ways that uncritically emphasize normative modes of being and perpetuate what queer theorists refer to as the straight line of “straight time.”

Building a character who adheres to straight (reproductive) time supports capitalist and colonial logics by way of emphasizing birth, gendered existence, maturing in accordance to one’s assigned sex at birth, heterosexual mating rituals, marriage, reproduction, work, and inheritance.<sup>30</sup> Left untroubled, writing prompts that revolve around these normative schedules seem natural and inevitable: as if one’s life trajectory from birth to death operates according to natural laws like gravity or entropy. But all lives don’t follow the same schedule: sometimes on account of cultural differences and histories, other times on account of the antagonisms wrought on non-normative bodies by normative systems. Thus, when faced with questions about a character’s backstory, it’s essential to remember that because all lives don’t follow the same normative schedules, then all character’s lives can’t either.

To illustrate how normative questions can be problematic, let’s examine the assumptions inherent in biographical lines of questioning that ask for a coherent, chronological, and gendered trajectory from birth through death. Queer and trans\* theory challenge development narratives by questioning whether the achievement of maturity arrives with adult masculine or feminine binary gender, critiquing notions of time and memory and their relationship to subjectivity, and privileging fragmented and non-linear narratives that more accurately account for felt gender, felt maturation, and felt experience. Here, in line with trans\* theorists, I use trans\* as a way of expressing the open, variable, and expansive possibilities of trans-ness—in terms of embodiment, sensation, ways of knowing, etc. The asterisk indicates a way of moving beyond the normative affects of naming and classifying, which tend to collapse the complexity of life into precise definitions, medical pronouncements, and fixity in time/space. In contrast,

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30. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. (New York University Press, 2005) 5.

trans (minus the asterisk) refers to one who identifies as transgender.<sup>31</sup> As such, amongst other things, trans\* temporality rejects cis-normative constructions of medicalized, trans histories that adhere to linear transitions from one gender to another because they preserve gender binaries and developmental notions of progress.

In “Revisitation: A Trans Phenomenology of the Media Image,” Cael Keegan dissects how the gender dysphoria common to trans people creates altered internal histories, ones that don’t jibe with normative straight time, nor normative modes of subjectivity. As a child in the 80s, the “Milk: It Does a Body Good” campaign transfixed him in a way that he didn’t understand until he transitioned. In the ad, a young boy laments his scrawny body in a mirror, only to be reassured by the image of his future muscular, masculine self (made possible by milk). For Keegan, while this media text perpetuates normative constructions of masculinity, it unintentionally hailed his transgender self by calling attention to his obsession with mirrors and the dysphoric self-image that fed that obsession. In revisiting the text as an adult, he realized that “I now occupy both sides of the encounter, reaching across the distance of time to my younger self, insisting that becoming a certain type of man is, in fact, possible” and that “traversing this impossible leap between points, this circuit within myself, I never fully leave behind the dysphoric child, never fully arrive as the hegemonic ideal.”<sup>32</sup> What Keegan describes is not a linear progression of development based on a chronology of gender. Instead it suggests a kind of asynchronously gendered life narrative, marked by a rupture between past and present, one that yields a split subjectivity that exists in a sort of “‘pleated time’ that mimics the folded-back temporality of gender transition, in which memory is experienced across differentially gendered versions of the self.”<sup>33</sup> Cis white men may seamlessly occupy linear progress narratives where they triumph over adversity while maintaining a coherent sense of self and history, but

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31. Jack Halberstam, *Trans\*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. (University of California Press, 2018), 4-5; Cael M. Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*. (University Of Illinois Press, 2018), 5.

32. Cael M. Keegan, “Revisitation: a Trans Phenomenology of the Media Image.” *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*, vol. 32, no. 61, (2016) 34.

33. Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*, 15.

for those on the margins, fragmentation and multiplicity is more common. To be clear, these are not just issues for queer and trans people: such multiplicity is common for those who survive by code-switching, those who thrive only by passing, and those who live within decolonial and indigenous frameworks. Thus, if screenwriting is to make room for progressive and inclusive representation, instead of replicating normative chronologies and life histories, a conscious effort must be made to create characters through non-dominant framings and alternative temporalities such that something like “[q]ueerness’s ecstatic and horizontal temporality” could be used as “a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world.”<sup>34</sup>

Short of creating new sets of questions that open up space for non-normative lives, which is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is also possible to eschew such exercises altogether, as French filmmaker Céline Sciamma (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*) suggests in a 2019 BAFTA screenwriting lecture tentatively titled “Ready for the Rising Tide.” Sciamma claims that when writing a screenplay she doesn’t think about her characters outside of the timeline and context of the scenes. She says, “I don’t think about back-stories for them, I don’t even give them surnames. When I’m asked about the future of my characters, I honestly answer that they don’t exist.”<sup>35</sup> While this may seem like some surly French posturing, it’s worth noting that *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* won best screenplay at Cannes and, along with *Parasite*, was one of the most critically-acclaimed international releases of 2019. Sciamma rebukes traditional screenplay methodology precisely for the reasons I’ve outlined above: she writes about characters on the margins, those whose freedom, subjectivity, and agency are curtailed by the status quo. In her words, because women have been “objectified by fiction and by the patriarchal lore throughout history” in order to give them back their subjectivity, she allows them to exist only within the space of the narrative she creates. In the case of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the narrative space

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34. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 25.

35. Céline Sciamma, “Ready for the Rising Tide.” *BAFTA Screenwriters’ Lecture Series*. 4 Feb. 2020, <http://www.bafta.org/media-centre/transcripts/screenwriters-lecture-series-2019-celine-sciamma>.

excluded heterosexist patriarchal characters for the majority of the film, and in this way, Sciamma was able to give her main characters “back their desires.”<sup>36</sup>

Regardless of how one addresses the character biography issue, we still must contend with the issue that characterization is considered secondary to the formation of character, that actions under pressure supposedly reveal more about a character than actions under a state of equilibrium. For once the screenwriter has a complete picture of the history of their character, they are encouraged to invent a series of obstacles that will ultimately reveal the true self hidden beneath their “observable qualities.” As Field writes, “[a]ll drama is conflict. Without conflict, you have no action; without action, you have no character; without character, you have no story; and without story, you have no screenplay.”<sup>37</sup> In this formulation, conflict is central to the existence of a screenplay. Put another way, “[a] protagonist and his story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them.”<sup>38</sup> Not only is conflict central to the creation of character and story, conflict is what makes a screen story interesting. McKee contends that his theory of character is corroborated by the fact that humans are fundamentally “conservative,” by which he means something akin to passive. He claims that people always choose the “easy way,” unless pressed to do otherwise. Thus, to create fully realized characters requires the writer to enhance the “negative side of the story,”<sup>39</sup> ie., the forces in opposition to the protagonist.

There are several issues with this line of thinking. For one, the claim that humans are fundamentally apathetic and in need of manufactured conflict comes from a position of privilege, one that has never had to deal with the ever-present specters of racism, sexism, ableism, and a whole host of antagonisms that plague the lives of the marginalized. At the same time that McKee ignores the antagonisms built into the dominant culture, he fetishizes conflict

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36. Sciamma, “Ready for the Rising Tide.”

37. Field, *Screenplay*, 25.

38. McKee, *Story*, 317.

39. *Ibid.*

by suggesting that one's true character can only be found in hostile confrontation rather than moments of idleness or equilibrium. This reeks of the protestant work ethic and the way that "many 19th century Christians saw all forms of idle activity as evil, or at least a breeding ground for wrong-doing."<sup>40</sup> In much the same way that character ranks higher than characterization, conflict is prized over composure. But what about moments of solitude engaged in contemplation and reverie? Are they not valuable and formative? The answer to these questions, according to most screenwriting methodology, is that action is exciting and passivity is boring. And, yet, don't we miss so much of life—and thus the possibilities for dramatizing it—if we reject its quieter moments? Isn't it possible to recognize and heighten the "boring" moments of equilibrium that are normally eliminated as narrative fluff? If we look to filmmakers outside the studio system, answers in the affirmative are more the norm. Chilean filmmaker Raúl Ruiz, for example, rejects Hollywood's reliance on what he calls "central conflict theory" because it reduces the possibilities for storytelling by expelling narrative excess. For Ruiz, when screenwriters learn that screenplays are like suspension bridges "with one end anchored in what the protagonist wants, and the other end anchored in the disclosure of whether or not he gets it,"<sup>41</sup> character-building ends up revolving entirely around conflict, which yields linear causal narratives that pit protagonist against antagonist in a series of battles that emphasize the role of dominance, violence, and ambition as the basis for human existence. In contrast, Ruiz sees the "boring" moments as rife with life and possibility. Thus, when we eliminate them in favor of conflict and hostility, we lose opportunities for full artistic expression, and instead normalize a patriarchal and "predatory worldview."<sup>42</sup>

Sciamma goes even further, explaining that at the core of her screenwriting process is desire, both her own desire and the desire of her characters. In writing *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*—a film that depicts a brief love affair between a female painter and her female muse in the

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40. hooks, *Black Looks*, 91.

41. Howard, *Tools*, 45.

42. Raúl Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema: 1*. (Paris: Editions Dis Voir, 1995) 11.

early nineteenth century—Sciamma refuses conflict in favor of “radical equality.” To accomplish this, she set most of the film on a secluded island where the lovers live amongst themselves and a maid. In this way she eliminated the pervasive pressures of patriarchy and heteronormativity, as they would be waiting for the lovers once they leave the island and return to society. Free from outside conflict, the film focuses on the development of their relationship, on the ways the women recognize and act on their desires. They encounter no obstacles to their love affair, only the burgeoning of desire. Some of the most riveting scenes in the film are completely quotidian, such as a short scene where the muse cooks, the maid embroiders, and the painter serves wine. Even the social hierarchy is eliminated as the maid acts as artist and the women she ordinarily waits on act as servants. Contrary to the proclamations of the screenwriting paradigms, the scene is not boring, but crackling with possibility. Here Sciamma is worth quoting at length:

Lack of conflict doesn't mean lack of tension; lack of conflict doesn't mean lack of eroticism; lack of conflict actually means new rhythm because of a dialogue not built on bargaining. Lack of conflict actually means new power dynamics that allow new surprises and suspense. That's what is at stake in a story with equality actually. Equality brings unconventional power dynamics to the screen. So basically as a viewer you don't know what is going to happen, which is the base of being both entertained and committed to a story.<sup>43</sup>

Likewise, in two other recent queer films, *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015) and *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016), a similar dynamic occurs. During the second act (the container for the bulk of a film's conflict) of the film *Carol*, would-be lovers Carol and Therese take a road trip through the midwest, where the natural antagonisms of their daily lives within 1950s heterosexist patriarchy fall away and they are free to pursue their mutual desires without hindrance. In *Moonlight*, in all three sections of the film, the main character can only express himself—his quiet nature and/or his queer desires—when he is safe in a conflict-free zone, either with his chosen family of Juan and Teresa or with his would-be love interest, Kevin. In the final scene of the film, an adult Chiron (now called “Black”)—buff, gold-toothed, and emulating the toxic masculinity he grew up being bullied by and, thus, into—joins Kevin in his home after the two have shared a meal at the

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43. Sciamma, “Rising Tide.”

diner where Kevin works. Absent the outside world that has exacted untold punishments on the two men for being black and queer, Chiron finds comfort in Kevin's arms. It is not sexual, but sweet: a moment of peace and vulnerability that highlights that Chiron's outer tough-guy stylings are a mask he wears to survive in an antagonistic world. In direct contrast to Hollywood's central conflict theory, queer/female/of color characters need spaces free from conflict in order to become themselves.

At this point, I hope I've elucidated how normative and hierarchical conceptual frameworks around character, characterization, and conflict work together to perpetuate the mythical norm, as well as what it can look like to defy normative constructions in favor of authentic minoritarian perspectives. In the next section, I will build on these frameworks to show how they work in conjunction with classical structural paradigms to further entrench the status quo.

#### CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD STRUCTURE

Classical screenplay practice typically abides three-act structure, with different paradigms providing varying degrees of additional support via specific beats divvying up each act. No matter what paradigm a screenwriter adheres to, be it the 12 beats of Vogler's Hero's Journey or the eight segments of Guilino's Sequence Approach, all screenplays are expected to have a beginning, middle, and end. Whether the chronology of events unfolds in a linear or non-linear fashion—in puzzle narratives for example—the plot must move the story forward. As Field writes, “[y]our story always moves forward—it follows a path, a direction, a line of progression from beginning to end.”<sup>44</sup> To flesh out this line of development, each act contains a specific purpose: Act One sets up the world and the protagonist, Act Two bombards the protagonist with escalating obstacles and conflicts, and Act Three provides the climax and resolution to the problems of the prior two acts. Boiled down to its essence, “[t]he narrative progression of most

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44. Field, *Screenplay*, 91.

films move from equilibrium to disequilibrium to equilibrium.”<sup>45</sup> While there are many variations on this structure, especially between television and film, the basic building blocks remain the same regardless of medium. Therefore, rather than critique any particular paradigm, I will discuss the ideological underpinnings of screenplay structure, particularly as they relate to issues of transformation and resolution and their connection to whiteness and masculinity.

If we think about screenplay structure through the common metaphor of the blueprint, we might be persuaded to believe that the structure is as neutral as it is natural. As Field writes, “[t]he paradigm is a form, not a formula; it’s what holds the story together. It is the spine, the skeleton. Story determines structure; structure doesn’t determine story.”<sup>46</sup> All skeletons, however, are not identical, and if normativity thrives through repeated alignment with established frameworks, then examining the frameworks for whom and what they support—and whom and what they erase or malign—becomes important. By way of illustration, Sara Ahmed, using phenomenology to demonstrate how normativity operates as a “straightening device,” describes a scenario where one uses tracing paper to replicate an existing design. When the tracing paper and its markings are in alignment with the original design (in our case the screenwriting paradigm), the “lines of the tracing paper disappear” revealing one set of design-lines. She continues, “[i]f lines are traces of other times, then this alignment depends on straightening devices that keep things in line, in part by ‘holding’ things in place.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, the structural, repeatable components of a paradigm hold some things in place and not others. It is with this in mind that I ask, what—and, more precisely, whom—is held in place within current screenwriting structural paradigms?

In popular screenwriting methodology, the goal of three-act structure is the transformation of the central character or, short of that, the transformation of the world in relation to that character. If Act One focuses on character development and Act Two on conflict,

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45. Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. (Duke University Press, 2010), 26.

46. Field, *Screenplay*, 29.

47. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 66.



Act Three's purpose is to hold (and allow the audience to behold) the transformation of the central character and the resolution of the story's central problem. As McKee writes, "[t]he finest writing not only reveals true character, but arcs or changes that inner nature, for better or worse, over the course of the telling."<sup>48</sup> Here, McKee is more generous than others in making room for the negative trajectory of the anti-hero, a mode that is increasingly common, especially in television. Most paradigms focus on the positive: "[i]n any good story the hero grows and changes, making a journey from one way of being to the next: from despair to hope, weakness to strength, folly to wisdom."<sup>49</sup> Thus, the climax of Act Three emblemizes the (usually aspirational) transformation of the central character so that the story can finally wrap itself up in the all-important resolution. Resolutions aren't simply conclusions, though. As Field contends, "I think it's important to remember that resolution does not mean ending; resolution means solution."<sup>50</sup> Thus, the transformation of the central character can be seen as a strategy to solve a narrative problem. Or, inversely, the narrative problem exists to perturb the protagonist, forcing them to change. Here we're back to McKee's "conservative" characters who, unless prodded by excessive antagonistic forces, would remain static. Hence, transformation requires conflict.

If we're inquiring into what and whom is being held in place through classical three-act structure, especially as it is informed by the hero's journey, an examination of the transformation imperative and its reliance on conflict can help us understand how screenplay structure perpetuates hegemonic whiteness (particularly white heterosexual masculinity). Within studies of whiteness, it is most common to see whiteness analyzed in terms of both its invisibility or "dailiness"<sup>51</sup> and in relation to racialized, non-white bodies. Just as concepts of the universal male hide the power of patriarchy, the invisibility of whiteness naturalizes whiteness

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48. McKee, *Story*, 104.

49. Vogler, *Writer's Journey*, 13.

50. Field, *Screenplay*, 26.

51. Shome, "Race and Popular Cinema," 503.

and white supremacy while naming, classifying, corralling, and denigrating non-whites. For writers like Toni Morrison, for instance, white masculinity operates as a double void (invisible in terms of masculinity and whiteness) and is thus reliant on the presence of black people to form their subjectivity.<sup>52</sup> Black characters act as surrogates for white identity; they are “[t]he vehicle by which the [white] American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny.”<sup>53</sup> Within such narratives, the other comes to be seen as an antagonistic force, grotesque and in need of discipline, which the white male hero must conquer and educate “for their own good.”<sup>54</sup> Cinema and television is chock-full of white male (anti) heroes, from Ethan Edwards to Rambo to Walter White, who maintain superiority through progress narratives that entail individual, white males conquering and disciplining non-white bodies—usually bodies of color, but also non-American bodies, female bodies, queer bodies, and non-traditionally educated or poor bodies—who are depicted as savage and uncivilized.<sup>55</sup> Here we begin to see ways that the ideal of whiteness is deeply connected to what Richard Dyer terms “enterprise.” According to Dyer, whiteness is not only connected to Christianity in the form of the mind/body split, but to colonial enterprise and its related concepts of the rugged individual, material achievement, order, extraction, progress, and transformation. He writes, “[t]he white spirit organises white flesh and in turn non-white flesh and other material matters: it has *enterprise*.”<sup>56</sup>

Viewing whiteness through the lens of enterprise and its expression in colonialism and imperialism reveals that whiteness is deeply connected to the will, “the control of self and the

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52. Toni Morrison. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. (New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., 1992), 5.

53. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 51.

54. Shome, “Race and Popular Cinema,” 510.

55. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 5; Shome, “Race and Popular Cinema,” 510.

56. Richard Dyer, *White*. (New York: Routledge), 1997 15.

control of others."<sup>57</sup> (What is the cowboy hero ideal of the Western if not willful?) To hold whiteness in place, then, is not simply a matter of centering white bodies on screen: it is a structural, conceptual framework built around various projections of individuality, willfulness, progress, accumulation, and violence. It is a way of seeing and being in the world, one that sees the self as something to work on and work out, one that sees others and the environment as malleable, civilizable. In short, at the heart of whiteness is an aspirational striving to control the self, others, and the natural world, such that they fit into an ordered image. As Dyer writes, "[t]he ideal of whiteness makes a strong appeal. It flatters white people by associating them with (what they define as) the best in human beauty and virtue. The very idea of the best and of striving towards it accords with the aspirational structure of whiteness."<sup>58</sup> Consequently, while screenplay methodology doesn't explicitly call for the creation of white characters—as a matter of fact, because of its commitment to the universal white male neutral, there is little acknowledgement of race and how it relates to character or narrative at all—all characters are at risk for becoming "white." Combined with mix and match "color blind" casting, screenwriters who don't indicate race or other identity markers for characters (or simply don't write characters with race in mind at all), contribute to the casting of actors in roles that appear to hold difference but embody whiteness. This improves the quantifiable statistics on inclusion in the industry without actually exploring or acknowledging that one's race impacts one's ability to move in and be moved by the larger culture. Cultural wallpaper of the worst order. And what better way to secure whiteness than by prescribing that all screen stories adhere to traditional screenplay structure?

At its root, the transformation imperative at the heart of three act structure traffics in notions of non-relational individualism, aspirational striving, and mastery of both mind and matter at the expense of the physical body and the natural world that lie at the heart of whiteness. The repetition of this paradigm in countless films and television series reifies and

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57. Dyer, *White*, 31.

58. *Ibid.*, 80.

naturalizes not only white bodies on screen, but holds in place the structures that perpetuate white supremacy. As Ahmed writes, “[i]t is important that we think not only about what is repeated, but also about how the repetition of actions takes us in certain directions.”<sup>59</sup> In the spirit of moving in a different direction, towards more liberatory frameworks, we must be open to unruliness, disorientation, and discomfort. For, “[t]he ‘new’ is what is possible when what is left behind us, our background, does not simply ground us or keep us in place, but allows us to move and allows us to follow something other than the lines we have already taken.”<sup>60</sup>

By way of a short example before diving into my larger textual analyses of *Killing Eve* and *Sense8*, the Freeform series *Good Trouble* offers an instructive example of how thinking about and actively thwarting the disciplining mechanisms of narrative structure can interrogate whiteness and protect the integrity of “better” representation. The series follows a diverse group of Gen Z-ers navigating communal living, dating, and career, as well as sexism, racism, and homophobia in the world at large. The central characters occupy a range of intersectional identities seldom seen together on television: there are Asian lesbians (yes, more than one), a bisexual Latino man, a straight black activist woman, a Latina software engineer with a degree from MIT, a body-positive white woman of size, and a host of other minoritarian characters, all with agency and nuanced storylines. Additionally, while the diversity of the cast and the dedication to each unique story could alone make the series a master class in how to do diversity and inclusion on television right, series creator Joanna Johnson also insisted that the series be told with an unconventional narrative structure. Instead of opting for Field’s problem-solution model predicated on conflict, the series follows an unconventional, non-linear structure. Each episode begins with an emotionally charged moment that is slowly explained through a non-chronological presentation of plot. According to Johnson, the non-linear structure allows her to create “suspense over surprise” so that audience engagement comes from curiosity instead of artificially increased conflict or “soapy turns,” traditional methods that force storytellers into

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59. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 56.

60. *Ibid.*, 62.

making mayhem at the expense of authenticity.<sup>61</sup> Like Sciamma's characters who "follow their desires," freed from artificial complications that "raise the stakes," the characters in *Good Trouble* are free to make choices characters in more traditional dramas are not.

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61. Danielle Turchiano, "'The Fosters' Spinoff 'Good Trouble' Team on 'Chosen Family' Tone and Tackling Racial Injustice." *Variety*. January 01, 2019. <https://variety.com/2019/tv/features/good-trouble-maia-mitchell-cierra-ramirez-joanna-johnson-interview-1202978848/>.

## TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

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### FROM *KILLING EVE* TO AN EVE WHO KILLS

This section focuses on issues of progressive representation, particularly at the intersections of gender and sexuality, in the BBC series *Killing Eve* and how those representations are disciplined by generic and narrative conventions.

Critic and fan responses to *Killing Eve* are overwhelmingly positive. The show has been applauded for creating complex female characters who aren't defined by their relationships with men, who have "weird and wild inner lives," and who, unlike female characters whose complexity boils down to being acerbic, alcoholic, or both, are at once vulnerable, humorous, and deeply intelligent.<sup>1</sup> In addition, by centering women in the cat-and-mouse pursuit of the traditionally masculine spy thriller, the show has been praised for subverting tropes common to the genre, while maintaining its more traditional narrative schemes.<sup>2</sup> Thus, for the purposes of my argument, it is important to emphasize that although *Killing Eve* has been described as a show that does wonders for representation, it does so without challenging traditional narrative frameworks.

Before analyzing the disciplining mechanisms of screenplay structure in *Killing Eve*, I will first address one additional structural component: the generic conventions of the spy thriller/crime drama. Generically speaking, methods of detection within crime dramas are linked with specific narrative structures that carry ideological implications. Espionage stories—like their real-world counterparts—trade on information and, thus, the link between knowledge and power. In the cat-and-mouse pursuits between villain and hero, spy thrillers thrive on who

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1. Stewart Clarke, "Phoebe Waller-Bridge Twists the Spy Genre With BBC America's Thriller 'Killing Eve'." *Variety*. April 13, 2018. <https://variety.com/2018/tv/features/phoebe-waller-bridge-sandra-oh-killing-eve-1202742904/>; Sophie Gilbert, "Killing Eve is a Sign of TV to Come." *The Atlantic*. April 11, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/04/killing-eve-review-bbc-america/557531/>; Jia Tolentino, "The Pleasurable Patterns of the 'Killing Eve' Season Finale." *The New Yorker*. May 29, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/on-television/the-pleasurable-patterns-of-the-killing-eve-season-finale>.

2. Lee, "Too Close"; Tolentino, "Pleasurable Patterns."

has the most information, how that information is acquired, and how it is used to best one's opponent to either attain power or bring the world back into a stable order.<sup>3</sup> In terms of ideology, this usually happens by asking the audience to accept that the criminal must be brought to justice without addressing any of the underlying causes for her crime. Issues like capitalism, misogyny, systemic racism, state violence, wealth inequality, etc., and their relation to crime are never questioned because of a rigid narrative structure that keeps us focused on the investigation and its ultimate goal: bringing the criminal to justice and restoring the (presumably peaceful) status quo, which, it must not go without saying, is also our larger society's goal. In ignoring the morally complicated reasons why one might become a "criminal" and in focusing on the pleasures of spectacle and heroism, crime dramas silence discourses that would enable an exploration of hegemonic power structures and ideologies.<sup>4</sup>

So, what happens when interesting and otherwise progressive representations of women/of color/queer folks are placed within such a conservative, universal, generic structural frame? Between the relentless and efficient forward thrust of narrative structure, the paradigmatic tenets of character building, and the masculinist, hegemonic aspects of the spy thriller, it is my contention that potentially robust and complex female characters become what bell hooks, in her lament about Madonna's abandonment of her early feminist principles in favor of masculinist power, refers to as "dicks in drag."<sup>5</sup> Put another way, when female characters chase masculine power (or are, in the case of media representation, squeezed into masculine molds) they become what Ariel Levy calls "loophole women." While attaining dominance seems empowering, Levy argues that "if you are the exception that proves the rule, and the rule is that women are inferior, you haven't made any progress."<sup>6</sup>

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3. Mareike Jenner, "Telling Detection: The Narrative Structures of American TV Detective Dramas." *American TV Detective Dramas: Serial Investigations*, (2016), 56; Rosie White, "Introduction." *Violent Femmes: Women as Spies in Popular Culture*. (London: Routledge, 2007), 2.

4. Jenner, "Telling Detection," 60.

5. bell hooks, "Power to the Pussy: We Don't Wannabe Dicks in Drag." In *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (Routledge, 2015), 25.

6. Levy, Ariel. "Female Chauvinist Pigs." In *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, (Collingwood, Vic.: Black, 2010), 112.

## REPRESENTING EVE

Since the breakout success of her hit series *Fleabag*, Phoebe Waller-Bridge has been applauded as a fiercely feminist voice in television, creating (and playing) complex female characters who are flawed, funny, and deeply vulnerable. In an essay on the series *Fleabag*, Waller-Bridge's brand of feminism is compared to that of Roxane Gay in her seminal essay "Bad Feminist," marking Waller-Bridge as someone who rejects essential feminism "because it turns too intensely on misperceptions of what women should and can be, rather than the vast range of what their experiences are."<sup>7</sup> Waller-Bridge's characters aren't ideal women: they are broken women, funny women, violent women, women who disarm audiences with their razor-edged wit and all-knowing gazes.

If discussions of problematic gender representation for women revolve around the objectification of the female body, the over/under-sexualization of women through stereotypes like the vamp, the jezebel, and the spinster, the sidelining of female characters next to their fully fleshed-out male counterparts, or the reduction of women to wives, girlfriends, or mothers—the women at the center of *Killing Eve* can be seen as exemplars of complex, nuanced, and refreshing female representation as depicted through a female and feminist gaze. The protagonist, Eve Polastri (Sandra Oh), is a middle-aged British state security bureaucrat bored in her marriage and her job. From the moment we meet Eve—dressed in flimsy beige pajamas, hair a matted mess, drool at the corner of her mouth, screaming bloody murder because her hands have fallen asleep—we know that we will never see her jet-setting around the globe in fuck-me heels and a leather cat suit like her predecessors in series like *Alias* or *La Femme Nikita*. Eve is different and delightful, in part because she's painfully normal. And it is Eve's boredom with the agonizing normality of her life that pushes her to take an interest in the antagonist of the series, the prolific female assassin, Villanelle.

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7. Hilarie Ashton, "In Defense of Fleabag Feminism." *Ms. Magazine* Blog. March 01, 2019. <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2019/01/02/defense-fleabag-feminism/>



Villanelle (Jodie Comer) is a sociopathic, bisexual assassin whose kills are marked by equal measures of style, creativity, and relish, all of which fuel Eve's obsession. While Villanelle is attractive and feminine, she's much more likely to use her femininity as an invisibility cloak than a tool of seduction. We see this during her first assassination, where she sneaks into a party at an Italian country estate, slips on one of the hostess' dresses, and wanders the party, undetected, to identify her mark. When she finds him, she doesn't lure him away with her feminine wiles, but instead coaxes his grandson to call him upstairs to play so she can stab him in the eye with a poisoned hairpin. In many ways, Villanelle demonstrates what Jill Soloway—in her lecture on the Female Gaze—refers to as the “gazed gaze,” which is a rebuke to the male gaze by way of an awareness that says “we see you seeing us,” and now we're going to use the way you see us against you.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the series, Villanelle uses her understanding of the ways women are either objectified or glanced over to her advantage. So far, so good.

In terms of queer representation, Villanelle appears to be bisexual, and the bisexual representation is decidedly “good” in that Villanelle is seen being intimate with both men and women (sometimes simultaneously). While Villanelle leans lesbian—as evidenced by her multiple (and obsessive) past relationships with women—the show does not force her to choose, which allows her to defy the normalizing structures of both monogamy and monosexuality that usually result in bisexual erasure.<sup>9</sup> At the same time that her portrayal brings bisexual visibility, she also occupies a long-standing problematic trope for queer female characters: the lesbian psycho-killer. So much so, in fact, that after the season finale, New Yorker television critic Emily Nussbaum tweeted, “I enjoyed KILLING EVE. But I'm fascinated that it isn't getting any flack for suggesting—Basic Instinctishly—that lesbianism and murder are two great tastes that go great together.”<sup>10</sup> In answer to Nussbaum's query, it's important to note that Villanelle is more

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8. Jill Soloway, “Jill Soloway on The Female Gaze.” Lecture, Toronto International Film Festival, Canada, Toronto. September 11, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I>.

9. San Filippo, Maria. *The B Word Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 18.

10. Emily Nussbaum (@EmilyNussbaum), “I enjoyed KILLING EVE. But I'm fascinated that it isn't getting any flack for suggesting—Basic Instinctishly—that lesbianism and murder are two great tastes that go great together.” 28 May 2018, 10:05 a.m. Tweet.

refreshing than she is problematic, in part because there is more and (slightly) “better” representation of lesbian characters than there has been in the past, and in part because lesbian audiences enjoy their gay villains. Villanelle, like many “lesbian baddies” before her, gives lesbian-identified viewers the license to look, to desire. As Whatling argues, “[a]s an audience or individual viewer, we can ‘look around’ the unprepossessing figure of the evil lesbian (we can also love her for her sheer power and dynamism)..., channelling her transgressive ability to look (predicated upon her perverse and violent desire), into one’s own voyeuristic pleasure in looking.”<sup>11</sup> If anything, the mercurial Villanelle, who has a penchant for castration, threesomes, and masculine drag, is a destabilizing force in a genre known for enforcing the status quo. Thus, Villanelle’s lesbian deviance, while foregrounding the “fatal link of sex and violence” that has so often plagued queer female characters, provides viewers an opportunity to “delight in deviance.”<sup>12</sup> Based on Eve’s obsession with Villanelle and the relish with which Villanelle’s strangeness is foregrounded, queer deviance in *Killing Eve* is refigured as empowering rather than bringing erasure, punishment, and death.

With its distinctly female point of view and central female characters who are specific, highly capable, vulnerable, and funny, *Killing Eve* challenges heterosexist, patriarchal trends in the spy thriller. Seen in this way, the representation in *Killing Eve* is not only “better,” it’s refreshing and provocative. At the same time, however, the workings of genre and paradigmatic narrative structure discipline the representation in troubling ways.

#### THRILLING EVE: WHEN THE SPY THRILLER TOPS THE ROM-COM

In addition to centering complex female protagonists in a cat-and-mouse scenario usually reserved for men, Waller-Bridge plays with other aspects of the genre in unexpected ways. The first time Eve and Villanelle meet, in a hospital bathroom as Eve is trying to protect a witness

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11. Clare Whatling, “In the Good Old Days When Times Were Bad’ The Nostalgia for Abjection in Lesbian Cinema Spectatorship”. In *Screen Dreams: Fantasizing Lesbians in Film* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997) 109-110.

12. Whatling, “Nostalgia for Abjection,” 92.

and Villanelle has come to kill that witness, the scene is played as a deranged “meet-cute” from a romantic comedy. As Eve futzes with her hair in front of the mirror, Villanelle stares, entranced. (We later learn she has a fetish for Eve’s hair-type, making Eve ‘her type’). Then, as she exits the bathroom she tells her to “wear it down.” A few episodes later, after stealing Eve’s suitcase in Berlin, Villanelle returns it full of new, form-fitting clothing and expensive perfume, a nod to every rom-com makeover scene in the history of film, where men like Richard Gere take their “pretty woman” on a shopping spree, making her, finally, just as beautiful on the outside as she is on the inside.

In *Killing Eve*, the tension created from the rom-com/spy thriller mash-up gives way to queer desire at the center of the series. When—in any given scene—the pursuit of justice/crime is subordinated to romance, Eve and Villanelle’s mutual obsession becomes slippery. For example, in episode Three, as Eve describes Villanelle to a forensic artist, instead of providing the concrete details useful for a composite drawing, Eve grows wistful, lingering on the intangibles underpinning her desire such as, “she had a lost look in her eye.” As Lee points out, “Eve’s description is that of a crush seen in a fleeting moment, at the same time that it is a criminal profile. Eve’s ability to identify Villanelle becomes Eve’s desire to identify *with* Villanelle.”<sup>13</sup> As the series continues, Eve’s pursuit of Villanelle becomes increasingly questionable: does she want to be Villanelle, have sex with Villanelle, or bring Villanelle to justice? There is no doubt that Waller-Bridge’s fluid genre-play is rife with potential; at the same time, however, there are other genre requirements that bring our characters back into line with normative discourses.

Unlike many spy thriller characters before her— Bond, Bourne, and Bristow—who offer a fantasy of internal agency (as secret agents no less) in an increasingly confusing world,<sup>14</sup> Eve occupies a much older thriller trope. If Sydney Bristow is a highly skilled killing-machine hiding behind an innocent, girl-next-door facade, Eve Polastri is a dowdy, middle-aged woman who

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13. Lee, “Too Close.”

14. White, *Violent Femmes*, 6.

wears her feelings on her fraying cardigan sleeves: she can't fight; she can't handle a gun; she can barely dodge a bullet. And while this seems to make Eve a welcome reprieve from the ways that female characters in male genres are paradoxically masculinized and sexualized without care for the ways that men and women move in and are moved by the world differently, Eve occupies one of the most enduring tropes of the thriller genre: the Every Man (or in our case, the Every (Wo)man). The Every Man typifies McKee's "conservative" central character: an ordinary person brought into extraordinary circumstances and forced to fight a highly skilled villain—often a sociopath—who has shadowy, yet powerful institutional backing. From Hitchcock's *North By NorthWest*, where New York ad man, Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant), is mistaken for a CIA agent and forced to evade and outwit an international crime syndicate, to Michael Mann's *Collateral*, where Max (Jamie Foxx), a cab driver, is coerced into being an accomplice for a sociopathic hitman, the Every Man character is as pervasive as he is ordinary. Additionally, because of the deficit of power between the protagonist and the villain in the Every Man thriller, the optimal narrative for such a character is the hero's journey, which drives the transformation of the central character from someone who lacks the drive or skills to be effective in their lives to one who acquires the necessary skills to survive in a harsh world.

For Eve to be a true Every (Wo)man character, she must begin the series with a lack (inner need), which, Villanelle, as her antagonist, must address. This routinely plays out in scenarios where the protagonist takes on some aspects of the antagonist's persona. In *North By Northwest*, Roger Thornhill takes on the name and clothing of George Kaplan, the decoy secret agent he's mistaken for in the inciting incident of the film. In *Collateral*, Max enters a night club as mercenary Vincent (Tom Cruise) in order to acquire a flash-drive with a copy of Vincent's hit-list. In becoming Vincent, Max toughens his otherwise nervous persona: he deepens his voice, he repeats Vincent's words as if they are his own, all as a way to acquire the power the audience knows Max lacks. Likewise, Eve begins the series as an ineffectual mid-level bureaucrat. She's bored. She lacks agency. But as Eve pursues Villanelle, she changes—as she must: she starts dressing better, she gets more confident at wielding weapons, she slaps her husband when he

accuses are of being turned on by a psychopath. Eve's identification with and desire for Villanelle bring her closer to being like Villanelle, to becoming someone who can kill with abandon and without remorse. In short, Eve is becoming the skilled "professional" at the core of most spy thrillers, who must be adept and aggressive "if the world is to be saved from the subversion of skilled conspirators."<sup>15</sup> At this point, it should be apparent that in terms of hegemonic story structures, the hero's journey—as it has become entrenched in the Hollywood media-making machine—has become the ultimate narrative schema to represent and perpetuate an ethic rooted in the staunch individualism and self-transformation that defines white, heterosexual masculinity.

#### STRUCTURING EVE: NARRATIVE MACHINES AS KILLING MACHINES

Along with the genre conventions driving Eve's character arc, the structural constraints at the heart of classic screenplay paradigms corral Eve's trajectory even more precisely. Below I will analyze two key moments in the series: the first is a scene in episode five, which operates as the midpoint of the series, where key expectations about Eve and her inability to use a knife are planted; and, the second, from episode eight, the climax/resolution of the series, where the midpoint moment is predictably reversed and the plant is paid off, as per every manual on screenwriting I've ever read.

At the series midpoint, Eve returns home alone to find that her stolen suitcase has been returned after a forensic inspection. Inside she finds the gifts of clothing and perfume Villanelle bought her. Annoyance soon turns to curiosity—her Amy Schumer-sized wine glass full of Pinot Grigio might be partly to blame—and Eve tries on a tight black dress and heels, while dabbing the perfume (aptly named "Villanelle") on her wrists and neck. In the background, we hear what soon becomes Villanelle and Eve's anthem of queer desire, *Sigh* by Unloveable. A throaty female voice drones on about how "there's something about...the way you are" as Eve looks at and runs

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15. Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1979), 14.

her hands over her ass in the mirror. There's an erotic quality to this moment, as this is perhaps the first time Eve sees herself through Villanelle's eyes, as someone desirable. Moments later, she hears a noise and discovers that Villanelle has broken into her home. Eve screams and runs towards the bathroom where she holds Villanelle off temporarily with a toilet brush before being tackled into the shower and doused with water by Villanelle who insists that she just wants to have dinner with Eve.

In the kitchen, soaking wet and sulking after being overpowered by Villanelle, Eve microwaves some shepherd's pie and sneaks a knife down her pants. Ever watchful, Villanelle smiles and warns her not to let it slip, and that she's welcome to hold on to it if it make her feel safe. The scene is at once awkward and tender, like a first date, and, eventually, hostile, as two women too smart to be outmaneuvered try to outmaneuver one another. As the scene wears on, it becomes clear how the two women operate as opposites of one another, with Villanelle being physically proficient while having no understanding of the nuances of human emotion (she is a psychopath after all) and Eve being emotionally astute, while having little physical prowess. This dialectic is an example of the conflict imperative central to screenwriting. Perhaps this is best captured in what Ruiz complains of as the "predatory worldview" espoused by Hollywood screenwriting techniques that makes a "flower...a battlefield where thesis and antithesis fight, looking for a common synthesis."<sup>16</sup> When Villanelle fakes an emotional break-down, Eve calls "bullshit," putting Villanelle on the defensive, at which point she becomes petulant, shifting to more aggressive tactics, telling Eve that she murdered her best friend Bill because he was "slowing [Eve] down." Eve, pushed to the edge and no longer in control of her emotional reactions, responds by trying to stab Villanelle, only to be quickly over-powered and pinned against the refrigerator with a knife at her throat.

While there is no doubt that the genre play within the scene wittily throws much into question, the scene is ultimately disciplined by the need for conflict, rising stakes, and by occupying the "midpoint" of the series, also known as "the ordeal." This is where the "fortunes of

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16. Ruiz, *Poetics*, 15.

the hero hit bottom in direct confrontation with his greatest fear.... [where] the hero must die or appear to die so that she can be reborn again.”<sup>17</sup> Further, it is the midpoint where we get a glimpse of how the hero will fare in the end, and it is often the “mirror opposite” of the final climax.<sup>18</sup> Read in this way, we can see that a part of Eve’s innocence dies in this scene. Pinned to the fridge and forced to understand that she’s not a physical threat to Villanelle, she promises that she’s going to find the thing that Villanelle cares about and “kill it.” Her failure to outmaneuver Villanelle births her desire to kill Villanelle, or at least a part of her. This, then, is a preview of the final solution, or resolution. We can now guess that the climax of the series will find the women at odds once again, stakes raised to their highest level yet, with Eve finally using her superior emotional intelligence to outperform Villanelle. And if not only the rules of the midpoint are followed, but also the mandate that the “preparatory device” of the “plant” be followed during the resolution by a proper “payoff,”<sup>19</sup> we can (spoiler alert!) safely bet that a knife will be involved.

As I’ve alluded to previously, the resolution—whether of a film, a series, or an episode—has major ideological implications. Resolutions require that the hero, no matter how grave the threat, “attain a solution that leaves the rest of the society untouched.”<sup>20</sup> This is especially true in the spy thriller, a genre designed to tame the threats of an ever more confusing and globalized society. While many critics seemed excited by the possibilities offered by the finale of the inaugural season of *Killing Eve*, they also seemed to forget that narrative and genre constraints are autocratic in nature. For example, *New Yorker* critic Jia Tolentino wrote of the finale that “it seemed equally possible that Eve and Villanelle could team up, or try to kill each other, or fall into bed.”<sup>21</sup> Because *Killing Eve* is such a fun and genre-bending show, Tolentino’s high hopes

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17. Vogler, *Writer’s Journey*, 15.

18. Paul Joseph Gulino, *Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 16.

19. Howard, *Tools*, 72.

20. Todd Gitlin, “Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment.” *Social Problems* 26, no. 3 (1979): 262.

21. Tolentino, “Pleasurable Patterns.”

are understandable. But, on account of the series' adherence to the tropes of the spy thriller, Eve's choice is almost predestined. As established in the midpoint, like all masculinist, professional secret agents before her, Eve must pursue a license to kill.

As the cat-and-mouse pursuit draws to a close at the end of season one's final episode, Villanelle has once again outplayed everyone—the organization she works for as well as the one Eve works for, which Villanelle believes “if you went high enough...are probably the same people.” At this point Eve has lost her best friend, her job (twice), and is on her way to losing her husband, which means she's got nothing to lose. Instead of going home to nurse her losses, in an inverse of the midpoint episode, Eve breaks into Villanelle's home, where she is awed by the Euro-chic apartment and opulent wardrobe Villanelle's job affords her. Many reversals follow, none of which include a second round of shepherd's pie.

As Eve searches Villanelle's apartment, she becomes increasingly agitated at the decadence of Villanelle's lifestyle: designer dresses and sheets, chic wigs, drawers full of weapons. After pocketing a switchblade, a reminder of our midpoint plant (I sense a stabbing coming on), Eve opens the refrigerator to discover that it's full of expensive champagne. The decadence is too much for dowdy Eve with her boring cardigans, more boring state security job, and most boring husband, and by way of revolt she shakes up a bottle, uncorks it, and shoots champagne all over Villanelle's bedroom before taking a hearty swig. (Does she have a phallus now?) And when that's not cathartic enough, Eve smashes the bottles one by one in an envious rage just as Villanelle returns home.

Unfazed by Eve's outburst, Villanelle asks Eve if she's “having a party.” Eve, exhausted or feigning exhaustion, sits on Villanelle's bed and confesses that she thinks about Villanelle all the time: what she eats for breakfast, what shampoo she uses, what she feels when she kills. And while this seems like an erotically charged moment, if we know how the midpoint operates in relation to the climax (which sadly we do), we know that just as Villanelle worked to emotionally manipulate Eve in the prior scene, Eve is now manipulating Villanelle, preying on Villanelle's



queer desire, which, as fetishistic as it is, is very real, so that she can use the knife in her pocket to finally out-phallus Villanelle.

Eventually, the two lay down on Villanelle's bed. Villanelle sets her gun down and strokes Eve's hair. Eve, with an innocence that'd give *Alias*' Sidney Bristow a run for her money, tells Villanelle that she's "never done anything like this before," suggesting to Villanelle and the audience that a sex scene will follow. Only, with Villanelle's defenses down, Eve doesn't get intimate with Villanelle; instead, in yet another undeniably phallic moment, she pulls out her knife, straddles Villanelle in missionary position, and jams the knife into her abdomen. In stabbing Villanelle, in claiming phallic power, in practicing the art of the kill, the title *Killing Eve* finally takes on a new meaning. This is no longer a show about the death of Eve: this is a show about how Eve becomes a killer, like Bond and Bourne and Bristow before her. To put it another way, the old Eve had to die to make room for a new Eve, an experienced Eve, a "dick in drag" Eve: an Eve-who-kills. And here we are once again with the predatory, hostile worldview endlessly reiterated on our television screens by "central conflict theory,"<sup>22</sup> brought to fruition through relentlessly repeated narrative beats and techniques: midpoint and resolution, plant and payoff.

#### REHABILITATING EVE: OR HOW ALL MIGHT BE LOST

What *Killing Eve* foregrounds is a tension between progressive, feminist, queer representation, and the corralling of those representations through narrative and generic constraints. This is what Gitlin refers to when he writes about how "[c]ommercial culture does not manufacture ideology; it relays and reproduces and processes and packages and focuses ideology that is constantly arising both from social elites [in this case classic generic and narrative constraints] and from active social groups and movements throughout the society [in this case feminism]."<sup>23</sup> If, as Phoebe Waller-Bridge claims, *Killing Eve* is emblematic of social movements like #metoo,

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22. Ruiz, *Poetics*, 11.

23. Gitlin, "Hegemonic Process," 253.

just as we're finally seeing more robust and exciting female representation, we're also seeing how long-standing generic and narrative codes discipline that same female empowerment.

After watching the first season, I'd originally hoped that the following seasons might shift in a different direction. I reasoned that because the arc of a series can extend over multiple seasons, if the series followed a heroine's journey instead of the classic hero's journey, the season one climax could end up representing the phallic phase of the heroine's journey, where the female hero tries, and ultimately fails, to use masculine tactics to navigate a patriarchal world. In this scenario, Eve, like many heroines before her, would learn that phallic power doesn't work for women the same way it does for men. With the advent of subsequent seasons, however, my hopes that Eve would give up on knives, guns, and other penetrative devices to embrace the power of her emotional intelligence have been dashed. The second and third season doubled-down on violence and bloodshed, forcing Eve and Villanelle to partake in increasingly deranged and sociopathic behavior, including Eve hiring Villanelle to torture another assassin, multiple scenes of castration, and the gutting of a man in front of a group of spectators.

By sending Eve down the well-trodden path of so many white, male protagonists, *Killing Eve* reminds us that assimilation is antithetical to transformation. We cannot simply plug female/of color/queer characters into otherwise patriarchal, white supremacist, heteronormative, ableist narratives, and expect them not to be tamed into the shapes of their predecessors. This isn't to say that minoritarian representation can't push back against or stretch the structures that seek to contain them, only that it has to be done thoughtfully and purposefully. It is with this in mind that I turn to another contemporary television series noted for innovative storytelling: *Sense8*.

## THE SENSORIUM OF *SENSE8*

In contrast to the traditionally structured and normatively disciplined *Killing Eve*, this section focuses on issues of queer and trans\* world-building in the Netflix series *Sense8* and how representation is radically reimagined through challenges to the paradigmatic conventions of genre, character, and narrative structure.

The Wachowskis began their careers as comic book writers who shifted into cinema when their script for *Carnivore* (a dystopian sci-fi horror about eating the rich) landed them an agent. They then made their first feature—the masterful neo-noir lesbian thriller *Bound* (1996)—on a shoe-string budget to prove they could helm a studio film. Following *Bound*, they made cinema history via the stylish, technologically innovative, and philosophically complex *The Matrix*, which ushered the blockbuster into the 21st century. From the rehabilitation of the femme-fatale in *Bound*, to the invention of bullet-time in *The Matrix* (1999), to the inventive ‘slide’ edits that elide time and space in *Speed Racer* (2008), the Wachowskis push the boundaries of what is cinematically possible with each project. It is thus no surprise that their first foray into television would mark one of the most ambitious televisual projects to date. Shot entirely on location, spanning 16 cities in 11 different countries, *Sense8* challenges traditional televisual storytelling practice from script to screen.

As the first major studio project helmed by trans creators to feature a trans actor in a trans role, *Sense8* is the most explicitly queer project in the Wachowski oeuvre since *Bound*, that is if you measure queer content by the inclusion of identifiably queer characters. Including queer characters, however, is only part of the queer and trans\* world-building that the Wachowskis have engaged in throughout their careers. As filmmakers deeply conversant with philosophy, literature, and film aesthetics, their work—even when focused on presumably straight characters like Neo and Trinity from *The Matrix*—operates queerly through rejecting binaries, blurring boundaries, blending genre, denaturalizing the natural, and, ultimately, linking the transgressive and the transcendent. In the Wachowskis’ hands, gender, genre, sexuality, race, ethnicity, time, and space—far from being distinct categories—intermix and overlap so that

“queer” and “trans” no longer function merely as identity markers, but modes of sentience. Though some accuse the Wachowskis of a naive utopianism, there are few filmmakers who more clearly embody Muñoz’s utopian queer ethos as “the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality for another world.”<sup>1</sup> In this vein, as Keegan argues, *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.”<sup>2</sup>

If commonplace notions of utopia query the possibilities for the praxis of positive paradises, perhaps it’s important to remember that within the work of queer theory, the negative, as embodied by all manner of failure, is considered generative ground for queer world-building. As trans cultural producers who’ve built their career inside the Hollywood studio system, the Wachowskis are no strangers to failure, for “failure...goes hand in hand with capitalism.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, I’d argue that their career is best characterized by spectacular failure. For many fans, *The Matrix*—with its bullet dodging, leather-clad, cyber punk heroes and complex philosophy about the nature of reality—marked the height of their filmmaking talents. This is no surprise. By all measures, from following traditional three-act structure to delivering an action-packed techno-thriller to setting international box office records, *The Matrix* was everything a Hollywood studio executive dreams of. The sequels, however, did not live up to the promise of the original film and suffered major box office losses and fan attrition. Although *The Matrix* sequels featured the same leather-clad characters and continued to deliver technically-innovative fight sequences like the “Burly Brawl,” which featured hundreds of Smith replications battling the singular Neo, they didn’t *feel* the same. The narratives sprawled with a relentless, yet uneven momentum that threw off the balance between action sequences and expository scenes, leaving audiences as overwhelmed and confused as the characters themselves. (Which is precisely the point.) Further, and this is what drove most fans of *The Matrix* away in droves:

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1. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

2. Cael M. Keegan, “Tongues without Bodies,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 3-4 (2016): pp. 605-610, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3545275>, 606.

3. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 88.

Neo wasn't "the one." He was one of many. Like every white(ish) male hero who had gone before him, he was a replication of a replication of a replication.<sup>4</sup> Put simply, the Wachowskis eschewed the traditional screenwriting paradigms that made the difficult philosophical premises central to their work easier to swallow. Moreover, not only did they use Neo's character to reject the hero's journey, they turned the paradigm inside out to expose the flawed patriarchal, individualist logic it relies on. Breaking the rules, however, meant they couldn't break the box office; and, therefore, they've had a somewhat rocky career ever since. And while they may have been nearly run out of town after the colossal box office failure of *Speed Racer*,<sup>5</sup> their career has not ended, but endured, and there are many lessons to be gleaned from their aesthetic and narrative experiments, as well as from the failure of those experiments to gain cultural traction. Failure to adhere to the status quo is often a sign of the radical work required for queer-feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-colonialist struggle. This is a brand of failure I would call productive or instructive failure, and it is what Halberstam refers to as "the queer art of failure." He writes, "I tell it also as a narrative about anti-colonial struggle, the refusal of legibility, and an art of unbecoming. This is a story of art without markets, drama without a script, narrative without progress. The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being."<sup>6</sup> It is in this spirit that in the following sections I discuss some of the radical failures of *Sense8* and the radical possibilities those failures generate.

#### REPRESENTING AN EIGHT-IN-ONE: CHARACTERIZATION AS ESSENTIAL TO ESSENCE

As with much of the Wachowskis' work outside of *The Matrix*, critic and fan responses to *Sense8* have been ambivalent. Like *Killing Eve*, praise for the series as a "whacked-out masterpiece"

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4. The pain of this realization to the white male ego is most palpable with a cursory survey of the dozens of YouTube video essays, with legions of supportive comments, about "Why *The Matrix Sequels* Suck."

5. "Lilly Wachowski and Lana Wachowski." YouTube, uploaded by DePaul Visiting Artist Series, 2 May, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARoKJoocEZ8>

6. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 88.

tends to coalesce around the diversity of its central protagonists, which includes four men and four women: a transgender white lesbian, a gay Mexican man, and six other ethnically diverse characters from cities around the world, including Nairobi, Mubai, and Seoul. In this vein, *Sense8* has been called “casually diverse”<sup>7</sup> while promoting intersectional feminist forms of solidarity that media scholars characterize as “the utopian notion that humans are connected across lines of nationality, race, gender, sexuality, and class.”<sup>8</sup>

*Sense8* follows the interconnected lives of eight co-protagonists who form an eight-fold psyche. In addition to living in different cities and countries, the characters occupy unique intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. Nomi (Jamie Clayton) is a white transgender “hacktivist” living in San Francisco with her biracial girlfriend Amanita (Freema Agyeman); Will (Brian J. Smith) is a white cop living in Chicago; Lito (Miguel Ángel Silvestre) is a famous (and closeted) action hero who lives with his boyfriend in Mexico; Sun (Doona Bae) is a business woman by day and underground martial arts fighter by night in Seoul, Korea; Capheus (Aml Ameen) drives a tourist bus called the “Van Damn” and cares for his sick mother in Nairobi, Kenya; Kala (Tina Desai) is a Hindu pharmacist in Mubai, India struggling with whether she loves her fiancé; Wolfgang (Max Riemelt) is a safe cracker in Berlin, Germany; and Riley (Tuppence Middleton) is a depressed and drug-addled DJ from Iceland with a tragic secret. These simple character descriptions don’t change over the course of the series, which consequently, is one of the show’s most common mainstream criticisms. But we’ll come back to that.

Over the course of the first season, the co-protagonists discover that they are part of a “cluster” of “sensates” born of the same mother on the same day and are telepathically and sensorially connected through their limbic system, the complex neural and nerve network responsible for instincts, moods, and basic emotions and drives. Through their connection they

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7. Emily VanDerWerff, “I Watched Netflix’s *Sense8* and Don’t Know If It’s a Travesty or a Whacked-out Masterpiece.” *Vox*, 10 June 2015, [www.vox.com/2015/6/10/8756283/sense8-review-netflix](http://www.vox.com/2015/6/10/8756283/sense8-review-netflix).

8. Ava Laure Parsemain, “I Am Also a We’: The Pedagogy of *Sense8*.” *The Pedagogy of Queer TV*, (2019), 216.

can appear in one another's minds/bodies at any moment to "share" emotions and experiences. In essence, they are empathy personified. Visually, this is depicted in a number of ways. Sometimes characters suddenly show up in the same spaces with other characters. This can happen with two or more sensates for something as simple as a conversation in a bar or as complex as a transnational orgy. Other times one character replaces another in order to share a particular skill like fighting or hacking a computer. In either case, all of the "visiting" scenes are filmed in and edited to include each of the locations unique to each character to emphasize the global, cross-spatial connection the characters experience. When Nomi is connecting with Lito, for instance, their scenes shift seamlessly between San Francisco and Mexico City. Similarly, scenes between Wolfgang and Kala cut back and forth between Berlin and Mumbai. Certainly the technically innovative Wachowskis—who filmed much of *The Matrix Trilogy* and all of *Speed Racer* with green-screen technology—could have used special effects to bridge the distance, but their insistence on in-person, on-site shooting for all scenes emphasizes the theme of connection across distance and division. While much of the series is focused on the interconnections between characters, eventually the antagonistic forces in the narrative compel them to work together to evade the evil Biologic Preservation Organization (BPO), which wants to capture and experiment on them. Simultaneously global and intimate, action-packed and quotidian, *Sense8* "appeals to audiences that have gravitated to it for its identity politics as well as its compelling characterization and themes."<sup>9</sup> With this brief introduction to what is sometimes a mind-bogglingly complicated series, I will now shift to an analysis of how *Sense8* defies and reimagines Hollywood storytelling structures related to character, genre, and narrative towards liberatory ends.

In terms of characterization, unlike *Killing Eve*, each *Sense8* characters' unique race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality contributes to their specific problems. In *Killing Eve*, Sandra Oh plays a role originally written for a white protagonist, and, yet, at no point in season one is there

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9. James Elrod, "I Am Also a We': The Interconnected, Intersectional Superheroes of Netflix's Sense8." *Panic at the Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, [www.academia.edu/39809616/\\_I\\_am\\_also\\_a\\_we\\_The\\_Interconnected\\_Intersectional\\_Superheroes\\_of\\_Netflixs\\_Sense8](http://www.academia.edu/39809616/_I_am_also_a_we_The_Interconnected_Intersectional_Superheroes_of_Netflixs_Sense8), 47.

a reference to her Korean-Canadian heritage, nor what it means to live as an Asian woman in a white world. In contrast, Sun, the South Korean co-protagonist of *Sense8*, deals with issues particular to her gender within Korean culture. Specifically, Sun faces forms of sexism unique to Asian cultures, where long-standing patriarchal business practices keep women from inheriting family businesses, with CEO fathers often marrying off their daughters to pass the business on to the husband if there is not a son available for the job. Within the world of *Sense8*, Sun's father hands their family business over to her corrupt brother when she's proven to be far more competent, ethical, and concerned about her family's legacy. By privileging what McKee would denigrate as Sun's "observable qualities" in the creation of her character, the Wachowskis upend the binaristic antagonism inherent in screenwriting paradigms that pit character against characterization. Sun's specific identity is not something to transform or overcome in a journey towards a universal and neutral form of virtue, but instead becomes the fuel that drives her in her quest for justice. Unlike Eve, who emulates masculinist violence to gain power and reinforce the status quo, Sun uses the violence of her martial arts practice to fight patriarchy and the other forces that oppress her and her fellow sensates.

In addition to racial, ethnic, and gender specificity, *Sense8* demonstrates a commitment to specific trans and queer representation. While the queer characters deal with trans-misogyny and homophobia, they are also given storylines and intimate partnerships that are celebratory and non-normative, which challenge dominant hetero- and homonormative paradigms of monogamous relationships and straight, reproductive time. Like heteronormativity, homonormativity espouses an assimilationist agenda, promising "the possibility of a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption."<sup>10</sup> Put simply, the queer characters are not written to cater to a straight audiences by mimicking straight (universal and neutral) behavior. For instance, Lito and Hernando live with a straight woman named Daniela. While the three don't have sex together, Daniela often participates by filming the men during

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10. Lisa Duggan, *Materializing Democracy Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*. Edited by Dana D. Nelson and Russ Castronovo. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 179.



sex and masturbating. Daniela's spectatorship and arousal challenge negative and moralistic attitudes around gay male sex by making Daniela a fan of their love and love-making. Rather than relying on overused portrayals of queer love that employ straight-safe markers like coming out (to warn the cis-het people around them), queer marriage (to normalize non-normative relationships), or the time-tested 'Burn Your Gays' device (which makes queer characters nominal, expendable, and easy to kill off), *Sense8* depicts queer and trans characters doing things actual queer and trans people might do in real life: attend pride parades, participate in queer art performances, discuss queer politics, create chosen families, engage in v-logging and queer connection online, all of which are important cultural practices central to queer community.<sup>11</sup> Despite some critiques of "paper-thin" characterizations,<sup>12</sup> the *Sense8* cluster contains no bland, universal neutrals on which to project the straight audience's hopes and fears about queerness—instead the queer and trans characters start, live, and end immutably queer.

It is precisely this character specificity, established via a trust in the power of characterization, that allows the sensates to demonstrate a deeply relational ethic that foregrounds the "the interdependency among multiple systems of domination"<sup>13</sup> and the solidarity required to upend those systems. Rather than acting as lone individual heroes pursuing their own wants and needs while encountering a series of conflicts designed to transform them into autonomous, "self-balanced" selves,<sup>14</sup> all eight characters act together as a slowly integrating and intersectional whole. As Elrod notes, "[a]s they advance into new, shared explorations of sexuality and interconnectedness they begin to transcend—or even negate—the limitations of separateness in a way that allows for shifting possibilities for new subjectivities.<sup>15</sup> Their empathic connection is predicated on a "vision of the self [that] acquires identity in

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11. Parsemain, "Pedagogy of Sense8," 221.

12. Kevin Yeoman, "'Sense8' Series Premiere Review: Beautiful Nonsense." *ScreenRant*, 5 June 2015, [screenrant.com/sense8-series-premiere-review/](http://screenrant.com/sense8-series-premiere-review/).

13. Cohen, "Punks," 442.

14. Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, (Stanford University Press, 2016), 31.

15. Elrod, "Intersectional Superheroes," 52.

relation to others”<sup>16</sup> and establishes a pluralism rooted in permeability, fluidity, and boundary-crossing. Unlike the bounded systems (border walls, prisons, etc.) manufactured by the state to corral human behavior and keep people apart, the sensates remain open to one another through free-flowing forms of exposure that “enable the characters to escape the ‘trauma of enforced confines’” while becoming “part of a stronger collective.”<sup>17</sup> This communal thrust is perhaps best captured by the character of Nomi, whose specific trans identity and way of experiencing the world informs her essential role in the cluster. Her name ‘Nomi Marks’

can be translated as ‘one who is marked by knowledge’ by possessing an organ of special insight. For Nomi, this organ is her sensate awareness, which is represented as a speculative extension of her trans\* sensorium—of *feeling something is there* that others cannot perceive. Nomi’s central presence in the series is an initiatory lesson for how *Sense8* will require both its characters and audience to sense differently. The sensates are ‘marked’ by a trans\* awareness that will move them into a pluralization of self, forcing them to abandon the feeling of autonomous personhood. In becoming sensate, Nomi and her cluster will become a ‘we’—in other words, a ‘no me.’ A sensate is therefore ‘one who knows they are not one.’<sup>18</sup>

In this way, the highly specific nature of each character builds into a multidimensionality absent from the highly individualistic characters at the center of most screen narratives that follow a singular protagonist. Each character in *Sense8* is unique, but not alone. Moreover, each character contributes to their cluster in ways that only they can (no colorblind or gender-blind casting here). The identities so interchangeable to McKee or Vogler are immutable and essential to the characters, and, thus, to the story, forming what philosophers like Cavarero call a relational ethic founded on vulnerability and radical equality.

For Cavarero, the individualistic framework at the heart of the Western tradition—and exemplified by characters like Eve who moves from a position of lack to a position of individuation, triumphant but alone—is best illustrated through the geometrical schematic of the singular vertical line. In her pursuit of a relational ethic founded on vulnerability, Cavarero

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16. Sijia Li, “Netflix by Netflix: On ‘Sense8,’” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 16, 2017. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/netflix-by-netflix-on-sense8>.

17. Elrod, “Intersectional Superheroes,” 52.

18. Keegan, *Lana and Lilly*, 113.

critiques this vertical axis for being rooted in a convenient fiction most exemplified by Kant, whom Cavarero describes as someone who “seems obsessed by an autistic model of a self that legislates from itself upon itself—a straight and self-balanced self that takes its place in a straight line alongside every other self, over the earth’s surface, all of which are likewise autarchic and at the same time replicas of one another.”<sup>19</sup> The sensates are specific and pluralistic, not singular replications like the Wachowskis’ most famous villain, Agent Smith (*The Matrix*) who, in trying to destroy the intersectional community of Zion, turns everyone he encounters into a “me” instead of a “we.” Agent Smith’s refrain of “me, me, me” is rebutted by *Sense8*’s Nomi, ie., “no me.” Thus, an ideology of individualism elides the vulnerability, asymmetry, and dependence that are essential components of a relational ethic. *Sense8*, in opposition to individualistic narratives, asks us to “reorient our gaze” by centering unique and vulnerable members of society who, together, pursue a form of relational wholeness that relies on connection, mutual vulnerability, and difference.

#### SENSORY OVERLOAD: GENERIC EXCESS

The only consistent consensus as to where *Sense8* fits genre-wise is that it has an “insatiable appetite for genre” so much so that it “def[ies] genre categorization itself.”<sup>20</sup> Just as the sensate cluster seamlessly crosses geographical, gender, racial, and sexual boundaries to connect with one another inside their collective psyche, the series can be seen as a trans-genre project that whimsically, yet strategically, leaps between genres, from police procedural to Bollywood musical to maternal melodrama to martial arts to gangster noir. Where *Killing Eve*’s playful blending of the spy thriller and the rom-com gave in to the more conservative aspects of both genres, thus locking its characters into masculinist paradigms of individualism and domination, *Sense8* fluidly shifts between genres at such a fast clip that the boundaries themselves become blurred into more fluid forms that open new possibilities. In this way, *Sense8*’s queer and trans\*

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19. Cavarero, *Inclinations*, 31.

20. Li, “On *Sense8*.”

aesthetics harken back to the New Queer Cinema movement of the 1990s, where young queer filmmakers like Todd Haynes, Gregg Araki, and Cheryl Dunye broke new ground in queer representation by centering stories on queer characters while challenging the dominant modes of Hollywood storytelling through genre mash-ups (and send-ups) like *Poison* (1991), *Nowhere* (1997), and *The Watermelon Woman* (1996).

In accordance with my previous discussion about the ways genre works to discipline character and narrative, it's helpful to think of genre as a narrative cage or, more precisely, a cage inside of another cage, as narrative already operates via the particular limitations of three-act structure. With this in mind, *Sense8*'s wild romp across genre can be seen as a form of decarceration that sets its characters free. As Keegan notes, the series places each character inside a familiar genre representative of structural and cultural rules that might imprison them in real life, and, thus, functions as "an exploration of how static forms limit which stories can be told and which modes of life can thus become cognizable to others."<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps this is best exemplified in the way that the male characters in *Sense8* all coalesce around genre tropes founded on masculinist hero myths: Will is a cop and agent of state violence; Lito is a Mexican movie star and leading man; Wolfgang is an outlaw-hero and professional safe-cracker; and Capheus, arguably the gentlest of the main male characters, is the archetypal entrepreneurial underdog-hero who drives a bus called the "Van Damn" named after his favorite action star, Jean Claude Van Damme. Unlike other series rife with these masculinist genre staples, in the Wachowskis' hands the archetypes are troubled and dismantled, revealing the heterosexism, misogyny, and destructive patriarchal power they're predicated upon, to the detriment not only of the ancillary characters but to the 'main' characters themselves.

In the tenth episode Wolfgang, who lives inside a crime drama, runs into trouble when a rival gangster, Steiner, shakes him down for some diamonds he's stolen, demanding that Wolfgang explain how he got them. When Wolfgang tells the truth—that he cracked the safe—Steiner doesn't believe him, because he'd failed to crack it himself. In order to protect his own

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21. Keegan, *Lana and Lilly*, 116.

masculinity, Steiner pushes Wolfgang for a different answer, threatening to kill him if he doesn't fess up. The only way for Wolfgang to save himself is to lie and downplay his ability, but because Steiner reminds him of his own abusive father, he freezes and cannot get the words out. Lito, who is in the midst of a personal crisis of telenovel-ic proportions, "visits" to counsel and then act for Wolfgang, which highlights a number of issues. First, Steiner calls Wolfgang every homophobic slur he can think of, which, once Lito arrives in Wolfgang's body, takes on new resonance.

Lito, unlike the movie-heroes he plays, is not a man for whom machismo comes naturally. When not on set or in public, he's often sensitive and sometimes silly. But because the world of macho action heroes is predicated on displays of violent heterosexual masculinity, Lito accepts a life in the closet in exchange for a career in the spotlight. At the point where Lito is visiting Wolfgang, the choice to live in the closet has decimated Lito's relationship with his long-time boyfriend Hernando, whom he loves deeply. When Lito arrives to help Wolfgang, he taps into his well-practiced ability to act—or, more specifically, to lie—a skill he learned not only through his chosen trade but by trying for his whole life to fit himself into the masculinist world represented by the homophobic and hyper-violent Steiner. In the case of Lito, in his life and now Lito-as-Wolfgang faced with Steiner, failing to lie could result in death. Such is the price of not passing. Masquerading as a tough guy has allowed Lito to save his own life in the deeply hetero-masculine culture he grew up in, afforded him a successful career pretending to be that tough guy on screen, and now gives him an opportunity to save Wolfgang's life. However, the experience of absorbing Steiner's homophobic insults is a turning point for Lito, contributing to his decision in a later episode to come clean about his identity and risk his career in order to be with Hernando. The action hero gives up his action-hero-ness for a different type of honor: authenticity and love. In this way, *Sense8* uses the trappings of genre against themselves to free its characters from their narrative confines.

If unthought adherence to the trappings of the spy thriller put Eve on the masculinist path of the Every (Wo)Man, *Sense8* strategically employs the genre tropes of the police

procedural to comment on and dismantle its central hero Will, placing him on something we might call the un-hero's journey, which tracks with the "unbecoming" central to the "queer art of failure."<sup>22</sup> Will begins *Sense8* as the typical cop hero, meaning he pursues "bad guys," follows clues to solve crimes, and has access to information that other characters in other genres don't. As cop, he is an emblem of white male privilege and power who possesses "a heroic willingness to risk life and livelihood in pursuit of justice."<sup>23</sup> While many police procedurals rely on audiences to accept the "good guy" status of the show's central characters, Will's essential "goodness" is depicted as flawed and clueless. While the more marginalized characters like Nomi—locked in a techno-thriller and pestered by dead-naming and a medical industrial complex who wants to lobotomize her—are aware of the trappings of normative society as represented by genre, Will remains the most stubbornly attached to, and thus trapped by, the trope of the white-hero. From the moment we meet Will, we know he has a hero complex: he bends over backwards to take care of his abusive, alcoholic father, is obsessed with a childhood friend whom he failed to protect from a tragic fate, and, in what is widely considered the most problematic storyline in the series (for good reason), puts his job on the line to save a black kid from Chicago's south side. To expose the trappings of genre, the Wachowski's lay them on thick, sometimes cringingly so; to sever the trappings of genre, they connect Will most intimately with Riley, the drug-addled and melancholic DJ from Iceland, who we eventually learn is living in the genre of a maternal melodrama from hell.

Over the course of the first season, as Will grows closer with Riley and consequently becomes incorporated within her genre, the liberatory potential inherent in melodrama shakes Will from the narrative cage of the masculinist police procedural. While melodramas are commonly associated with emotional excess, music, femininity, and social issues, they also "encompass a broad range of films marked by 'lapses' in realism, by 'excesses' of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and

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22. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 88.

23. Jonathan Nichols-Pethick, *TV Cops: the Contemporary American Television Police Drama* (Routledge, 2012), 8.

repetitive.”<sup>24</sup> We see this most explicitly in episode ten (“What is Human?”), when Riley and the cluster attend a symphony performance of Beethoven’s “Piano Concerto No. 5.” As the music swells, Riley—a motherless daughter and a daughterless mother—remembers her birth, which inspires an earnest, heartfelt, and bloody montage of birth-memories from each sensate culminating in Riley reliving the loss of her own child. The sequence is as long as it is emotionally wrenching, bounding across time and space from one simultaneous birth to another, some painful, some joyful, all of which link the past to the present, blurring the line between here and there, then and now in an explicit rendering of queer temporality.<sup>25</sup> Unlike the hyper-logical police procedural, which follows Field’s problem-solution narrative paradigm through posing a seemingly unsolvable crime in the first act and solving that crime and serving justice by the final act, the melodrama foregoes solutions to ask “[w]hat would happen if this procedure were interrupted?”<sup>26</sup> Blending the stories of Will and Riley works to undercut Will’s attachment to his genre and the heroic role he’s required to play within it because melodramas simply don’t believe in the certainty or the individual heroism at the root of the police procedural. Instead, “the desire for change is part of the appeal of the melodrama,” and “[r]ecognizing that is a way to finding what is possible.”<sup>27</sup>

Like Eve—who also loses a great deal on account of her romantic/obsessive attachment to Villanelle—Will loses his job, his status, and his access to power because of his connection to Riley. Unlike Eve—who claims power through seducing and stabbing Villanelle—in a reversal of common hero narratives, just as Will is poised to reclaim his power and prove he is the ultimate hero by saving his love from the evil clutches of the BPO, Will must give up his heroic, violent, masculinist, and white privilege in order to continue his narrative trajectory. In the final episode of the first season, Will encounters Whispers, a deranged sensate from a previous cluster, whose

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24. Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess.” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991), 3.

25. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, 2

26. Jonathan Goldberg, *Melodrama: an Aesthetics of Impossibility*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 33.

27. Goldberg, *Melodrama*, 42.

goal is to lock eyes with Will in order to gain access to the entire sensate clusters' collective consciousness. Will resists, but, unfortunately, as many women know only too well, when a man stares at you intently enough for long enough, it's hard to avoid their gaze. In a moment of weakness, Whispers catches Will's eyes long enough to get a glimpse of the access he needs to take the cluster down. Will is faced with a choice: he can either keep actively fighting, as is expected of a hero, or he can stand down and do the literal opposite: nothing. To save his fellow sensates—or, rather, to keep them whole—Will blocks Whispers' access to the cluster by giving up his own agency, willfulness, and consciousness, a feat made possible by Will's submission to a steady stream of heroin injections that keep him continually unconscious.

If passive characters are boring characters, a passive, perpetually passed out cop at the center of a police procedural is downright sacrilegious. The Wachowskis saddle Will with what is, for the white male hero archetype, perhaps the most radical punishment of all of his sensate-siblings, in that he has to do what no hero has ever chosen to do before: stop. Or, more precisely, he must, in the language of queer failure, “unbecome.”<sup>28</sup> For Will, who has never experienced the brutal disciplining mechanisms of the status quo, this is the closest he's ever gotten to the ways many of his fellow sensates experience “the bodily and social experience of restriction.”<sup>29</sup> Throughout Will's life, he played the part of Althusser's policeman, hailing the other, asking them questions, searching their bodies, each demand “a stopping device.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, a reversal of the hero archetype and arc, the forced passivity over activity, contains liberatory potential in that “[a] phenomenology of being stopped might take us in a different direction than the one that begins with motility, with a body that ‘can do’ by flowing into space.”<sup>31</sup> If Eve's narrative arc allows her to take up space through the mantle of masculinist violence, all to fill the void at the

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28. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 88.

29. Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (January 2007): pp. 149-168, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700107078139>, 161.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*



center of her life, Will's arc is to fail to play the hero, a radical and emblematic deconstruction of the Western male archetype through a return to the void.

#### SENSING INCOHERENCE: NARRATIVE TURBULENCE

The “queer failure” of the Wachowskis’ work is most evident in reactions to how they remake structure. In the realm of popular media criticism, reviewers were perhaps most confounded by *Sense8*'s narrative turbulence. When mild, critics muse that the series is “as meandering as it is masterful;”<sup>32</sup> when extreme, critics boil *Sense8*'s failures down to “an utter lack of story structure and pacing” that “jump from moments of somber reflection, to high octane action, to plotting dribble, to mindless exposition and back again without any real pattern or logic.”<sup>33</sup> When viewed through the lens of traditional screen story structure, such irritation is understandable. As viewers, we've been trained by media—and Field and his peers—to expect certain patterns, character types, and outcomes. When writers reject traditional models and embrace different organizational logics that are more in tune with other ways of being, it feels like something is wrong.

*Sense8* “fails” narratively because it operates through digressive, excessive, and associative logics that fall outside traditional three-act structure with its causal, temporal narratives rooted in transformation arcs that redeem the central protagonist through a series of conflicts and rewards. Unlike traditional television series, *Sense8* digresses: it wanders from place to place and from storyline to storyline in a manner that often feels like a conversation, in part, because it is a conversation. As the senators get to know one another, they “visit” with each other, taking time to relate to one another. In a visual medium primed for tension, however, this can feel like the show has taken an unnecessary detour. Additionally, because there are so many characters and so many narrative threads, it's difficult to know who or what is coming next at

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32. David Levesley, “Netflix's *Sense8* Isn't Perfect, but It's the Best Queer Show on TV.” *Slate Magazine*, Slate, 22 June 2015, [slate.com/human-interest/2015/06/in-sense8-netflix-has-created-a-queer-masterpiece.html](http://slate.com/human-interest/2015/06/in-sense8-netflix-has-created-a-queer-masterpiece.html).

33. Barr, Merrill. “Sense8' Failure In Structure Highlights The Biggest Problem With Netflix Programming.” *Forbes*, 10 June 2015, [www.forbes.com/sites/merrillbarr/2015/06/10/sense8-failure-netflix/](http://www.forbes.com/sites/merrillbarr/2015/06/10/sense8-failure-netflix/).

any given moment. In this way the audience is put into the same position as the characters, who can be visited randomly by anyone in their cluster. In contrast, *Killing Eve* has a taut, causal narrative trajectory—including a connected mid-point and final climax reversal—that functions as logical and redemptive. Once Eve plunges the knife into Villanelle’s abdomen, central questions around Eve’s agency and transformation are addressed while ending the season on a cliffhanger for future investment in the next season. *Sense8* paves no such trail.

Though co-creator J. Michael Straczynski claims that the series was designed to be watched in one sitting as a “twelve hour movie” broken up by “three-act structure,”<sup>34</sup> if we contrast *Sense8*’s first season mid-point and final episodes, we’re left with more questions than answers. Episode six (“Demons”) balances its focus evenly across all characters except Riley and Will, who occupy little of the episode’s narrative focus. Instead, Sun takes the fall for her corrupt brother and is sent to prison where she’s brutally interrogated during her intake interview, which connects her to Lito, who faces an invasive “Access Hollywood”-style interview that forces him to lie about his love interest, thus putting pressure on the ways he’s trapped in the closet. Kala encounters Wolfgang at her wedding and faints only to wake up and find him naked in her bed. Capheus agrees to use his tourist bus to help a wealthy man take his daughter to safety in exchange for money to buy medicine for this mother. Nomi and Amanita arrive at a safe house and have sex after Nomi escapes the BPO operatives that tried to have her lobotomized. During their love-making, they are connected to Wolfgang, Lito, and Will who all converge in Wolfgang’s sauna for the first of the series’ transnational, queer orgy sequences. While some of the scenes operate to advance individual plot lines, the bulk of the episode is thematically centered around the ways we become incarcerated by the status quo: Sun inside the cage of patriarchal misogyny; Lito and toxic masculinity and homophobia; Nomi and trans-misogyny; Capheus and cyclical poverty in the aftermath of colonialism. The orgy that marks the climax of the episode momentarily dissolves these cages, as gender, race, and sexual norms are traversed

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34. Christina Radish, “J. Michael Straczynski Talks Collaborating with The Wachowskis on SENSE8.” *Collider*, 25 Sept. 2019, [collider.com/sense8-j-michael-straczynski-talks-collaborating-with-the-wachowskis/](http://collider.com/sense8-j-michael-straczynski-talks-collaborating-with-the-wachowskis/).

through erotic excess and pleasure. Here we can see the way that *Sense8* enlists narrative to not only “operate outside or on the fringes of heteronormative spheres of contemporary capitalist society and conventional family life,”<sup>35</sup> but to rethink the narrative potential of the climax, ironically through a (pan)sexual climax. Leave it to the Wachowskis to pun their way to queer utopia.

In traditional narrative paradigms, the climax operates as the final solution to the narrative problem, which allows for a return to the status quo. The orgy sequence provides no such closure. In its digression from the plot, it “fails” to solve any of the narrative threads centered in the episode. As a matter of fact, Sun and Capheus don’t join the orgy at all. Instead, it is a moment of intimate and ecstatic excess that marks “an exodus from the normative brutality of the available physical world” and a rejection of the normative boundaries that define the character’s lives.<sup>36</sup> By staging the “final solution” as a moment of narrative excess, the orgy-climax suggests that the solutions to our narrative and life problems lie not in logical, causal solutions, but through rapturous rupture and moments of intense intimacy.

In contrast to the unraveling and digressive, yet associated plot-lines of episode six, episode twelve centers Riley and Will almost exclusively in what amounts to a pulsating hour-long action sequence, complete with car and helicopter chases, in which Will flies to Iceland to save Riley from the grips of the evil BPO, doing so with the help of each sensate and their special skills. Instead of a clever plant to payoff, mid-point to climax reversal, what we have here is an eruption of a storyline that was a blip in the mid-point episode: Riley and Will’s initial meeting. If anything, the mid-point and final episodes work through thematic juxtaposition and association: episode six’s climactic orgy announces the role of eros, connection, and love as the prime energies required to combat the divisive forces of thanatos, individualism, and hate exemplified by the over-long, *Matrix Reloaded*-esque chase sequence that consumes the bulk of episode twelve. Further, in contrast to *Killing Eve*’s final scene, which resurrects Eve through

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35. Elrod, “Intersectional Superheroes,” 52.

36. Mincheva, Kilyana. “Sense 8 and the Praxis of Utopia.” *Cinephile* 12, no. 1 (2018), 37.

her act of masculinist violence making her into “the kind of [wo]man [s]he was before [s]he lost [her] will to live,”<sup>37</sup> the final scene of *Sense8* ends ambiguously with all eight sensates sitting together in the same boat at sunset. No one, not the sensates nor the audience, knows where they're headed, which draws attention to the way *Sense8* openly holds space for utopian queer futures. As Muñoz writes, “[q]ueerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.”<sup>38</sup>

While the narrative inconsistency and ambiguity can leave audiences straining to make connections among the disparate narrative strands, the deviation from the norm is the point, and it doesn't prevent the series from progressing, as much as it challenges its viewers to reimagine possibilities for what progress means. So much of *Sense8* is comprised of what Ruiz refers to as moments of “narrative excess,” where characters simply talk about their lives, their hopes, and their dreams. It's in these moments, such as in episode seven when Kala and Wolfgang have a conversation that spans stories from their pasts, to the force of gravity, to Kala's definition of the miraculous while shifting seamlessly from a Mumbai rooftop at magic hour to a Berlin cafe patio in a downpour that one understands that the mundane can be sublime, for the sensates' “[t]elepathic empathy” emphasizes “the quotidian flow's extreme rupture.”<sup>39</sup> Kala and Wolfgang's conversation adds nothing to the narrative thrust. But like a river, a “digressive narrative meanders; at times it flows quickly and at times barely at all, often loops back on itself, yet ultimately it moves forward.”<sup>40</sup> The best way to describe the narrative structure of *Sense8* is undulating. It moves like waves that crest and ebb, like the waters on which the boat floats in the season one finale, but never culminates in a final tsunami climax that resolves the main tension or redeems the main characters. Instead, in contrast to most of

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37. McKee, *Story*, 104/

38. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

39. Mincheva, “Praxis of Utopia,” 37.

40. Jane Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative*, (Catapult, 2019), 23.

television culture's preference for "completion and conflict resolution as accomplishment," *Sense8* "thrives when it indulges in building the interpersonal connections and metaphysical relationships among its sensates" and encourages "discovery, process, and patience instead."<sup>41</sup> In short, it allows us to live (and love) in time and across space in new and exciting ways.

*Sense8*'s most oft-discussed weaknesses and "failures" come together to create its strength: it's an ensemble piece that's not an ensemble piece; it's a journey with no clear hero; it's full of "thin" characters woven together to create a sumptuous and layered beating heart, meant, possibly, to represent an ideal world or smaller community in which each participant truly sees, cares about, and empathizes with one another, sharing viscerally each person's pleasure and pain, showing up exactly when someone needs another, and joining together for both pathos and partying. No room for individual aims and singular accumulated wealth or successes in this world; they only survive if they all survive.

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41. Samer, Rox, ed. "Sense8 Roundtable." *Spectator* 37, no. 2 (2017), 77.

## CONCLUSION

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### A WAY FORWARD

I began writing this thesis during the first week of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in the U.S. Over the course of the past three months, the glaring systemic and structural problems fed by white supremacist, heterosexist capitalism have been brought to light in numerous ways. As of today, over 100,000 people have died with millions infected. Of the sick and the dead, the majority are from marginalized communities, as it is always the most vulnerable who are the most negatively impacted in systems designed around human hierarchy. At the same time that people in our black, Latinx, and indigenous communities are dying, I watch on videos displayed across social media white people refusing to wear masks to protect others and themselves from infection, gathering in large groups at popular vacation destinations, and staging armed protests at state capitols to demand their freedom, which within capitalism means the right to an ‘easy’ and comfortable life. This is whiteness at work, fed by narratives of the exalted individual who is licensed to wreak havoc on his community for his own personal gain. This is the legacy of white settler-colonial expansion and its myth-making container: the Hollywood Western.

From mutual aid work to political activism to non-governmental organizations, there are many avenues to address the inequities that American culture is premised upon. As a screenwriter and educator who works in an industry that shapes the American cultural imaginary, my fight is over what appears on our screens and what those images teach us about who we are, where we’ve come from, where we’re headed, and whose lives have value. Throughout this thesis, I’ve argued that screenwriting was not founded on equity, but rather the false god of universal neutrality. Therefore, to imagine liberation through the lens of screenwriting requires a convivial inquiry into how screenwriters can trouble hierarchy and bias through examining and reinventing the craft itself. For those who love the craft, this should be a

welcome endeavor. As Sciamma says, “I am a screenwriter because I like asking myself questions about screenwriting.”<sup>42</sup>

Examination comes in many forms, a few of which I will outline here as the initial tracing of a path forward. The first stage, much of which this thesis has concerned itself with, is to line up the tomes recognized as the cornerstones of our craft and honestly assess the lenses through which the creators were looking. This will contribute to a quick understanding that our screenwriting paradigms were created by particular men with particular privileges and biases, and that those privileges and biases inform how they conceive of things as complex as a person’s subjectivity and as seemingly simple as how to define “conflict” or “desire.” Though I’ve examined the primary identitarian biases here, the list extends beyond whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality to include issues around disability, class, citizenship, religious affiliation, indigeness, ethnicity, etc. These particularities, the ones purposefully erased by McKee, Field, Vogler et al., are the key to transformation. An awareness of identity not only gives us the tools to chart new journeys, but begs us to interrogate our own biases and privileges so that we don’t continue to perpetuate them in the stories we tell.

In order to establish the appropriate critical framework within the field of screenwriting, film school curricula would be richer with the inclusion of more media and cultural studies classes so that students understand the myriad insidious ways that bias is encoded into texts. Where film school coursework contains little to no critical theory, classes in the field of Communications and Media Studies tend to incorporate queer, feminist, and anti-racist critique, which go a long way towards eliminating bias before it enters a text in the first place. To be clear, this isn’t to say that a writer can control the reception of their work, that texts aren’t read in ways unintended, or that all bias can be eliminated with a few courses of critical theory. But as I’ve demonstrated throughout this thesis, the fact that the ideology of white masculinity is codified in screenwriting paradigms has real-world consequences. We leave this unexamined at our peril.

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42. Sciamma, “Rising Tide.”

Within the studio system, studios should continue to hire professional screenwriters of diverse backgrounds and identities, and I'd also suggest hiring media, gender, and/or critical race scholars to work as consultants on projects or as fixtures in writer's rooms. This would have the bonus benefit of employing many of the un- to under-employed PhDs in an over-saturated academic job market. The role a scholar could play in a writer's room could bolster screenwriter's ability to address a social media culture where avid fans take writers to task on Twitter for things like queer baiting, misogyny, and racism. Writing teams employ consultants to guide them on industry specific information related to police procedurals, space exploration epics, and medical dramas—why not bring in specialists on how racial and gender bias operate instead of relying on well-meaning writers to be experts on all facets of humanity? Much in the way film and television figureheads responded rapidly to innovation in entertainment tech, making room for streaming platforms and fewer in-theater transactions, they wouldn't have to wait to listen to angry viewers from underserved and underrepresented audiences clamoring to see themselves on screen. The watchers have megaphones now, and they're not going to relinquish their voice. So, why not honor those voices instead?

Developing a critical apparatus, however, is only the beginning. While I don't foresee the traditional paradigms disappearing anytime soon, those invested in radically altering the cultural imaginary must begin experimenting with new methods of screenplay development. This does not mean starting from scratch, but rather taking the current paradigms as points of departure. The Wachowskis provide many possible paths for doing this work. In their queering of the hero's journey, wherein the hero "unbecomes;" in their expansive trans\* genre storytelling, which moves beyond *Killing Eve's* playful but faithful mash-up of the thriller and the rom-com to the irreverent meshing of the police procedural and the melodrama; and in their unabashed embrace of narrative excess: the Wachowskis demonstrate that each element of the paradigm holds the clues to its own dismantling. With the Wachowskis we learn that we must draw new patterns that depart from the old, that we simply cannot expect to trace the same paths and arrive in new destinations.



As the Wachowskis demonstrate with every new project, there are so many elements still to be questioned and re-conceptualized. We can reorient the logic upon which characters are constructed based on our own unique experiences of self and identity. Rather than encouraging students to emulate the character tropes common to Hollywood screenwriting, we can encourage them to think deeply about themselves and about how their specific identities have shaped their existence. This can include the ways that they experience subjectivity, temporality, how their bodies move and are moved by the outer world, how they experience different degrees of porousness and connection versus boundedness and alienation.

The organizational logic at the heart of narrative structure offers additional avenues for inquiry. In Frank Wilderson's *Red, White, and Black*, for example, he argues that Hollywood narratives—because of their attachment to the problem-solution arc popularized by Field—cannot account for black life. His scathing critique of the concept of resolution within narratives of transformation is yet another example of how whiteness is infused in the paradigms themselves. For Wilderson, an afropessimist, once Africans were taken from their homeland and put onto slave ships, they became “socially dead” and, thus, incapable of being seen or treated as human. Further, the failure of the United States to adequately address and redress slavery, which has continued in the form of mass incarceration and gratuitous violence against black bodies, has made it impossible to tell truthful black stories within current narrative paradigms. He writes, “[t]he slave formation is a formation for which there cannot be an imagined resolution, which means that the structure of narrative, which demands a resolution is antithetical to explain the black experience.”<sup>43</sup> Wilderson's critique, though focused solely on the black experience, is yet another argument against assimilating non-white characters into paradigms constructed to reify whiteness. With deep respect for Wilderson's uncompromising position, especially as it forces one to engage in the seriousness of the aftermath of slavery on black identity, I also believe that the antagonisms wrought by cis-heterosexist, patriarchy

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43. Maria Berrios and Jakob Jakobsen. Hospital Prison University Radio, May 2018. <https://soundcloud.com/hospitalprisonuniversityradio/conversation-with-frank-b-wilderson-on-fanon-etc>

foreclose redemption for most characters who aren't white, straight, and male. This isn't to say that forms of gratuitous violence don't vary across intersections of difference, but it does point towards a significant need for inquiry around the logic of redemption. I hear in Wilderson an echo of Cavarero's query about whether women can think themselves in a language that doesn't acknowledge sexual difference. Together we can ask: "[h]ow does a film tell a story of a being that has no story?"<sup>44</sup> Because, honestly, that's most of us.

If screenwriting is to be considered an art form and not a tool of oppression, should it not enable the largest range of expression possible, for as many different lives as possible? If liberation from the oppressive impact of cis-centric, white supremacist, heterosexist patriarchy is our goal, to do our part as screenwriters and screenwriting teachers, we must reformulate screenwriting practice towards healing and community-building. As Audre Lorde reminds us, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,"<sup>45</sup> which is why shunting minoritarian characters into unquestioned majoritarian style scripts is not going to bring about transformative change. This will not be a small endeavor. In an industry in which all who practice are scrambling for crumbs of success, to even quietly suggest that the industry needs an overhaul can be daunting. But in order to effect industry-wide awareness that change is needed and possible, and then to create change itself, we must begin to critically examine not just who has the ideas, gets the jobs, writes the screenplays, directs the stories, delivers the lines, or pays the price of admission: we must examine the logic and structure of the screenwriting paradigms themselves. In this spirit, we must master the craft to upend the craft.

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44. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 28.

45. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 123.

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