

Book review

Sense8: *Transcending Television*. Edited by Deborah Shaw and Rob Stone. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 978-1-5013-7960-4. \$135 hardback, \$42.95 paperback or Kindle.

Sense8 (2015–2018) was a high-concept, high-budget Netflix production consisting of two full seasons and a feature-length final episode—twenty-four episodes in all. Developed and written by Lana and Lilly Wachowski (known for the *Matrix* franchise) and J. Michael Straczynski (*Babylon 5*), it was fast-paced, globe-hopping, mind-bending, wildly queer- and trans-affirming, and cancelled all too soon (and never officially released on DVD). The core of the show is a group of eight characters, all born in the same instant but scattered around the world, who in their late 20s suddenly develop an intense psychic connection to each other: they share experiences and emotions in real time, can access each others' skills and languages, and can “visit” each other or allow each other to take over their bodies. In other words, the “sensate cluster,” as they call themselves, forms an evolutionarily advanced, globally dispersed, radically empathic *gestalt* reminiscent of what Theodore Sturgeon imagined in the classic SF novel *More Than Human* (1953). Their struggle is, as one might expect, against those who would exploit and/or destroy their unique powers and connection: corporations, governments, even other sensates or clusters turned toxic.

Sense8 shares significant themes with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and especially *Dollhouse*: the strengths that the marginalized can find in community, the malleability of identity and sexuality especially in young adulthood, the struggle against forces that would harness and weaponize uniqueness in the service of greed or destroy it out of fear, and in the end, somehow, a stubbornly “utopian outlook” in a “recognizably dystopian world” (1): joy, creativity, courage, connection, and potential all valorized and celebrated. The cluster-creating process has its interesting similarities to the transformation of Potentials into Slayers; the sensates' instant access to new skills and languages has parallels to the imprinting of Actives in *Dollhouse*. And it shares with *Firefly* an indebtedness to an organized and highly vocal fan base that demanded, and got, a feature-length continuation when the original series ended unresolved.

But one major frustration of this collection for *Slayage* readers, evident from the first pages of the introduction itself, is a lack of awareness of and engagement with the potential intertextuality of *Sense8* with the Whedonverse (and for that matter with much other preceding media). For example, *Firefly* makes no appearance in the editors' list of “fan campaigns and revivals,” which starts only with the dawn of the “streaming age” (3)—ignoring a history of this sort of fan action reaching back through *Star Trek* to Sherlock Holmes and beyond. On the other hand, the authors of the introduction elegantly apply Fredric Jameson's notion of “postmodern pastiche” to the show and

note that “pastiche loses its connection to history” (12); at a meta-level, then, perhaps what I am perceiving as an ahistorical framing is a deliberate critical choice.

James Walters applies the framework of title sequence studies – a niche but intriguing field – to *Sense8*’s kaleidoscopically global opener: as operatic overture, book cover, or ritual experience, the mere seconds spent on each location or image prime the viewer for the pace and reach of the show but raise questions of the touristic “gaze” (64), while the ending scenic shot of San Francisco fog provides a “moment of calm tranquility” to “catch our breath” and divide title from content (63). (I hear the sustained ending chord of the *Buffy* intro in my head as I type this.) Rosalind Galt acknowledges the “ideological ambivalence” (93) of the show’s “textual politics” (91) in privileging certain representations of race, power, gender, and class, but praises it for “constructing a poly imaginary” that suggests “an alternative model to humanity’s isolation and violence [and] dominant practices of capitalist life” (90). This awareness of the show’s underlying difficulty in escaping its privilege and embracing true revolutionary change, in spite of its progressiveness, is a recurring theme throughout the collection.

Will McKeown writes eloquently about “the mutuality of self-sacrifice within the cluster” (139) and how it “demonstrates the socially transformative potential of radical empathy” (165) as “a challenge to corporatism and patriarchy” (173); there are useful frameworks from Lacan and other theorists here that could be fruitfully applied to *Buffy* and *Dollhouse* in particular. The essay by So Mayer is a heady exploration of dance, movement, and fight choreography that takes as its starting point Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Dancing in the Streets* (2006), with its call to resist “Eurowestern Christian colonial capitalism’s destruction of collective joy” with a return to Dionysian “communal ritual and festivity” (175); it is one of the few essays that also considers other works helmed by the Wachowskis.

Of particular interest to this reviewer is “The *Sense8* Bible: The Creation of a New Creed for Our Times.” Though she does not use the term in her essay, Deborah Shaw analyzes the series as what I would call a mythopoeic text: a text that creates a significant in-world mythology that informs how characters in the story conceive of their world and live and create within it, and that can reach out and change its readers as well. She begins by considering Angelica, who activated the cluster, as a creator-goddess, Riley as her evangelist, and Nomi as the codifier and communicator of her moral framework. Pride is the high holy day, the celebration of life and family and creativity, and above all love, and Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” one of its complex and meaningful major hymns. Shaw derives from the show what she calls its Eight Commendments (not Commandments), the moral laws under which the sensates operate, to conclude her article. Those of us whose scholarly work is in mythopoeic literature will not see any of the familiar sources of our field in her bibliography, which makes this essay an intriguing example of convergent evolution.

Roz Samer and Laura Horak document the effectiveness of fan activities and fan activism in advocating for the completion of *Sense8*'s story and its parallels with "empathy and connectivity at a distance" arising from the global COVID-19 response (213). Two essays (respectively by Amanda D. Lotz and Zoë Shacklock) focus on Netflix's development as a company and business model for developing original content like *Sense8* (and cancelling it) – certainly of interest to students of the media business, and not without its intriguing parallels to the themes of the show itself. Other essays deal with the "interweaving" of "the political and the erotic" in "both procreative and orgiastic imagery" (John Lessard, 109); considering the diegetic use of music in the series as both metaphor and mechanism for "compassion, solidarity, and protest" (Rob Stone, 123); and the clash of "frontier theory" and "cosmopolitanism" inherent in the urban setting(s) of the series, the "global cities [narrated] through their protagonists," with violence arising from their respective criminal underworlds and capitalist overworlds (Luis Freijo 149-150).

Cáel M. Keegan provides a summing-up essay which notes that "*Sense8* is groundbreakingly transnational, shot in at least sixteen cities in eleven different countries," and that the sensate cluster "became a powerful metaphor for the desiring, geographically diffuse body of its viewership": an "exploration of global simultaneity" at multiple levels (220). Keegan points out another aspect of *Sense8* that has its parallels with the Whedonverse (and with another of my favorite *Buffy*-fuzzy-set shows, *Orphan Black*): a playful way of performing, questioning, combining, and I might even say queering genre. "Nomi inhabits a hacker thriller, Lito a telenovela, Capheus an action movie, Wolfgang a heist film, Will a cop show, Sun a martial arts film, Kala a Bollywood romance, and Riley a maternal melodrama" (223) – and they savvily slip into and out of each other's genres, and help each other question the expectations of those genres, with ever more grace and ease as they grow in experience and mutual radical empathy.

For the *Slayage* reader and Whedonverse scholar, there is much here to spark fruitful comparisons with our other key visual texts – and much missed opportunity to do so on the part of the contributors to the collection. An excellent collection to dip into before your next binge rewatch of *Sense8*.

About the reviewer:

Janet Brennan Croft (ORCID 0000-0003-2692-3586) retired from the University of Northern Iowa in 2025 as Librarian Emerita. She is the author of *War in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (reissued by Bloomsbury in 2025; 2005 Mythopoeic Society Award for Inklings Studies). She has also written on the Peter Jackson Middle-earth films, the Whedonverse, *Orphan Black*, Terry Pratchett, Lois McMaster Bujold, and other authors, TV shows, and movies, and is editor or co-editor of many collections of literary essays, the most recent being *Loremasters and Libraries in Fantasy and Science*

Fiction, co-edited with Jason Fisher (Mythopoeic Press, 2021). She edits the refereed scholarly journal *Mythlore*, is archivist and associate editor of *Slayage*, and chairs the Tolkien in Popular Culture Area at SWPACA.