

The Americanisation of Nation in *Sense8*

In mid-June 2015, in the run-up to Netflix's global expansion the following year, the streaming service released an original series: *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015-2018). Created by Lana Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski, and Michael J. Straczynski, the series explores the lives of eight individuals from around the globe whose minds become telepathically linked forming a *sensate* cluster, thereby creating a sense of community between different nations and national identities. During the announcement at Netflix's keynote address of 2016, CEO Reed Hastings spoke of the decision to make the service globally available as 'an emblem of global connectivity.'¹ Furthermore, Hastings framed Netflix as a tool for 'building connections between cultures and people.'² Therefore, it is evident that *Sense8* arrived on the streaming service as a precursor to Hastings's vision of global unification, promoting the ideals of transnationalism and community across multiple nations. However, for all the good that *Sense8* does in establishing a space that blurs national borders, its reliance on Western perspectives results in an Americanisation which is of some concern. In this essay, I will discuss the proposed concept of a global, borderless space found in *Sense8* which is ultimately undercut by the Americanisation of non-Western nations and identities, which only heightens the cultural imperialistic ideologies found in Hollywood media conglomerates such as Netflix.

The opening titles sequence for *Sense8* is important in providing some insight into the show's main objectives, as James Walters states: 'A title sequence is not only a way into a program, an "aperture" into its world, but a crucial aspect against which the merits of its

¹ Evan Elkins. "Video on Demand: Geoblocking, Borders, and Geocultural Anxieties." In *Locked Out: Regional Restrictions in Digital Entertainment Culture*. (New York: New York University Press, 2019), p.73.

² Evan Elkins. *Videos on Demand: Geoblocking, Borders, and Geocultural Anxieties*, p.73.

main narrative might be appraised.³ The two minute sequence was created by Lana Wachowski's wife Karin Winslow who described the task as having 'to go out and describe each country by what you see; find the nuances, find the food, find what people are doing, get a feel for the place.'⁴ The first season of *Sense8* filmed in multiple different cities including Berlin, Chicago, London, Mexico City, Mumbai, Nairobi, Reykjavík, San Francisco, and Seoul and the titles consist of multiple shots of these locations. To begin, the credits open with a shot of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, then introduces the other cities featured within the show. Subsequently, the music increases tempo and the shots accelerate descending into a montage of nationalistic signifiers such as landscapes, landmarks, and cuisine — for example, Icelandic volcanoes, London's Tower Bridge, and German bratwurst. The speed of the montage jumping from one location to the next suggests a desire to bring these different nations together, as a focus on people and community springs out through the time-lapsed plethora of images. Furthermore, the pace created through editing techniques such as fast cutting produce a visual overload; imagine watching the spinning rotor blades of a helicopter blur into a singular object. The sequence also features many shots of bridges and roads which are found in all cities and are indexical of connection, and bringing people together, thereby *Sense8*'s opening credits can be viewed as intending to present a global community and construction of a unified global space.

Nevertheless, the opening sequence is prefixed with the title card 'A Netflix Original Series,' which actively promotes the show as an American product, despite its multicultural cast and extensive location shooting. Furthermore, the titles are framed with shots from San Francisco which implies a neatly packaged concept of a transnational global community

³ James Walters. "Skip Intro?: *Sense8*'s Title Sequence." In *Sense8 Transcending Television*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), p.69.

⁴ Lori Rackl. "Where in the world: Pinning down the 108 scenes in 'Sense8' intro." In *tv trippin*. (2015). Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160507195318/http://tvtrippin.com/travel/where-in-the-world-pinning-down-sense8-openers-108-scenes/> [Accessed 27 April 2021].

enclosed within an American viewpoint. As Walters suggests, the titles sequence provides indicators for *Sense8*'s utopic vision of a global collective community, however, the cultural imperialism of a streaming service such as Netflix and the cultural diversity found in different nations may limit the possibilities of such idealistic intentions.

It may seem inevitable that a series such as *Sense8* will run into issues when dealing with the depiction of multiple cultures and nations, especially when the show's main objective is to create a singular global space. Andrew Higson highlights the fact that Hollywood cinema, and in this case, Netflix, can flow with ease across national boundaries, however, 'they may displace the sort of 'indigenous' films [and television] that might promote and maintain specific national identities,' as a consequence.⁵ This displacement of national specificity can be demonstrated in *Sense8*'s use of language. The decision to have every character speak English can be viewed as a mode of creating a singular space, however, the space becomes coded as specifically Western and American. At times characters do speak in different languages, for example, in the episode "What's Going On?" (S01:E04), Chicago cop Will Gorski inadvertently speaks in Korean to a fellow cop when he is "visiting" his Korean sensate counterpart Sun Bak. His colleague's response, "I didn't know you spoke Korean" acts as comic relief which transforms the use of non-English languages into something of a novelty on the show. Moments like these serve as a reminder for viewers that these characters are in fact speaking in many different languages but the decision to maintain a primarily English-speaking television series highlights the Americanising factors of a streaming service such as Netflix who are appealing to their largest audience base, therefore resulting in the flattening of cultural difference and national specificity.

⁵ Andrew Higson. "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema." In *Cinema and Nation*. (London: Routledge, 2000), p.60.

On top of this, *Sense8* employs a number of stereotypes when depicting the lives of non-American characters which results in the further dissolution of cultural specificity. In a popular blog post, Claire Light skilfully encapsulates the stereotypical plotlines of the show:

The protagonist in Nairobi is a poor man whose mother has AIDS and whose life is ruled by gangs; in Mumbai we have a woman in a STEM career marrying a man she doesn't love and engaging in Bollywood dance numbers; in Korea we have a patriarchally oppressed wealthy corporate woman who also happens to be a kickass martial artist; in Mexico City we follow a telenovela actor. London and Reykjavik are filmed using tourist locations and anonymous interiors.⁶

These stereotypes perpetuate the ideas held by Western audiences and while *Sense8* is actively engaging with diverse and multicultural characters, they are brought together under an American lens of tired assumptions that provide a sense of familiarity for viewers, which avoids alienating them from watching the show. Eli Avraham suggests that, 'a national stereotype is not an objective entity, but rather is a subjective one formed through the eyes of the target audiences.'⁷ Consequently, a Netflix production such as *Sense8*, reaffirms its American viewers that they are watching an American series through the occurrence of predictable tropes of non-Western nations. For example, in the episode "I Am Also A We" (S01:E02), taking place in Mumbai, Kala is surprised with a Bollywood dance performance from her fiancé Rajan. Furthermore, Avraham's studies on nation branding and tourism reveal that stereotypes and negative representations of African countries are upheld through Western media.⁸ Nairobi sensate Capheus suffers the most from these stereotypes that treat African nations as lesser developed by placing him in the slum city Kibera, which is

⁶ Claire Light. "Sense8 and the Failure of Global Imagination." In *The Nerds of Color* (blog). (June 2015). Available at: <https://thenerdsofcolor.org/2015/06/10/sense8-and-the-failure-of-global-imagination/> [Accessed 28 April 2021].

⁷ Eli Avraham. "Nation Branding and Marketing Strategies for Combatting Tourism Crises and Stereotypes Toward Destinations." In *Journal of Business Research*. Vol: 116. (2020), p.717.

⁸ Eli Avraham. *Nation Branding and Marketing Strategies for Combatting Tourism Crises and Stereotypes Toward Destinations*, pp.714-715.

not officially mentioned by name until the episode “Who Am I?” (S02:E02). The erasure of cultural specificity in favour of Western stereotypes may, on one hand, create a singular space for a global community, but on the other, the Americanisation of non-Western nations only seeks to other and exotify them.

Further emphasis should be placed on the overarching presence of Western media in non-Western nations. Higson writes that Hollywood cinema has a ‘transnational reach capable of penetrating even the most heavily policed national spaces,’ and the many intertextual references found within *Sense8* prove this while presenting yet another layer of Americanisation.⁹ The dominance of American cinema can be found in the episode “We Will All Be Judged By The Courage Of Our Hearts” (S01:E08) where, as a child, German sensate Wolfgang and his friend Felix watch *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982) whilst drinking Coca-Cola. In various episodes Wolfgang quotes lines from the film and is encouraged by his friend to embody the mentality of Conan. This connection to such a recognisable action hero in America removes the need for any cultural specificity of Berlin as Wolfgang becomes a surrogate of familiarity to Western American audiences. Similarly, and most obviously, the Americanisation of characters is found in Capheus who is often referred to as “Van Damme.” He is given this moniker due to his obsession with Jean-Claude Van Damme films and often embraces the spirit of this Hollywood action star to overcome his battles. Furthermore, a moment in the Christmas special, “Happy F*cking New Year” (S02:E01), where Capheus and his mother watch the Hollywood classic *It’s a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946) creates another link of association for American audiences, although, the tradition of watching this Christmas classic every year appears incongruous in a Kenyan slum. This method of displacing non-Western characters with the personalities of recognisable Western film stars and the use of intertextual references of American classics results in the removal of cultural

⁹ Andrew Higson. *The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema*, p.60.

specificity and creates a flattened version of these different nations. The use of Hollywood films further addresses the cultural imperialism found across nations by demonstrating the one-way flow of cultural content, as Ramon Lobato puts it, 'from the West to the rest.'¹⁰

Historically, the medium of television has been preoccupied with the national due to geographical restrictions, often articulating and promoting a specific national identity for its viewers.¹¹ However, as technologies advance and the consumption of television becomes more geographically fluid through streaming services such as Netflix, Graeme Turner suggests that, 'nation must become a more marginal player in the future of the medium.'¹² As a global television series, both in terms of production, cast, and distribution, *Sense8* is a prime example of the medium's development in recent times and can be seen as a deliberate attempt to rearticulate the concept of nation through its national border blurring premise. Zoë Shacklock's writing on Netflix and *Sense8* highlights similarities between the series and the service it streams on. Much like the instant connections the sensate cluster can make with one another around the globe, Netflix is equally accessible, encouraging users to expand their minds to a more extensive selection of cultural content.¹³

Nevertheless, as previously discussed, *Sense8*'s reliance on stereotypes and assumptions about non-Western nations has resulted in a series that is perhaps not as diverse as it appears on the surface. While one could argue that *Sense8* does marginalise the concept of nationhood through its proposed unified global community, the Americanising of nation(s) highlights the cultural imperialistic ideologies of Netflix which codes the idea of

¹⁰ Ramon Lobato. "Content, Catalogs, and Cultural Imperialism." In *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*. (New York: New York University Press, 2019), p.138.

¹¹ Jean K. Chalaby. "Towards an Understanding of Media Transnationalism." In *Transnational Television Worldwide: Towards a New Media Order*. (London: I. B. Tauris & Company Ltd., 2004), p.1.

¹² Graeme Turner. "Television and the Nation: Does This Matter Any More?" In *Television Studies After TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*. (New York: Routledge, 2009), p.54.

¹³ Zoë Shacklock. "You Are No Longer Just You: Netflix, Sense8 and the Evolution of Television." In *Sense8: Transcending Television*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), p.46; p.52.

universality as American. Aida A. Hozic points out that non-Hollywood films such as Bollywood and Nollywood struggle or even fail to travel across national borders due to the domination of Western content in the market.¹⁴ Therefore, it can be argued that a series such as *Sense8* uses the visual aesthetics of multiculturalism as a façade to maintain the ideologies of cultural imperialism which promotes Western values as the default for Netflix's home audience demographic, and the rest of the world. Furthermore, Joseph Straubhaar (as quoted by Chalaby) claims that viewers 'prefer their own culture or similar ones on television,' thereby a series like *Sense8*, despite its depiction of many different nations, still appeals to Western audiences because of its lack of cultural diversity and displacement of national specificity.¹⁵ The global distribution of *Sense8* through Netflix grants the possibilities for a universal and diverse audience, however, it has struggled to transcend the historic function of the television medium and continues to promote a specifically American perspective as the default.

While *Sense8* can at times neglect the representation of non-Western nations, it is still undeniably linked with the formation and rearticulation of nation. Higson explores the concept of nation as an imagined community stating that, 'those who inhabit nations with a strong sense of self-identity are encouraged to imagine themselves as members of a coherent, organic community, rooted in the geographical space, with well-established indigenous traditions.'¹⁶ The importance of belonging to a geographical space is removed in *Sense8* as the sensate cluster find belonging together, despite being separated by different nations. Furthermore, Shacklock highlights *Sense8*'s main themes writing that the series, 'is very clearly about global connection, and in particular, about the universal experiences we

¹⁴ Aida A. Hozic. "Between "National" and "Transnational": Film Diffusion as World Politics." In *International Studies Review*. Vol: 16(2). (2014), p.234.

¹⁵ Jean K. Chalaby. *Towards an Understanding of Media Transnationalism*, p.9.

¹⁶ Andrew Higson, *The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema*, p.58.

share no matter where we live – emotion, desire, sex, and love.’¹⁷ With this in mind, *Sense8*’s representation of the LGBTQ community and queer identities highlight these universal experiences of human life and even work to create something of an imagined queer nation, where geographical location is no longer a signifier of nationhood.

Tom Rice’s analysis of national Independence events highlights the ‘visually striking’ displays that these parades evoke, emphasising the use of ‘symbols and rituals [that] serve to represent, construct and encapsulate a national history.’¹⁸ In *Sense8* focus is placed on the celebration of queer identities through similar parades in the form of pride marches. Both the episodes “I Am Also A We” (S01:E02) and “Isolated Above, Connected Below” (S02:E06) feature moments from San Francisco and São Paulo Pride parades, respectively. These events involve national symbols and ritual such as pageantry, the waving of the rainbow flag and speeches which promote acceptance and a sense of belonging. These images of nation construction however, link people together through identity and not geographical space, therefore, *Sense8* exposes the imagined construction of national identity by creating a space for a queer nation that is not bound by national borders. Nevertheless, the focus on LGBTQ representation in *Sense8* has arguably resulted in the exclusion or flattening of cultural difference as a consequence. This inadvertent displacement however, only underscores the cultural imperialism of American productions and streaming services like Netflix as Western values and culture have been promoted as the default.

Sense8 is undoubtedly a progressive show with visible efforts to represent different nations and cultures, as well as a range of sexuality and gender identities. The series aims to bring people together through universal human experiences, which is emphasised during a speech in “If All the World’s a Stage, Identity Is Nothing But a Costume” (S02:E10), where

¹⁷ Zoë Shacklock. *You Are No Longer Just You: Netflix, Sense8 and the Evolution of Television*, p.52.

¹⁸ Tom Rice. “Merdeka for Malaya: Imagining Independence Across the British Empire.” In *The Colonial Documentary Film in South and South-East Asia*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p.52.

Capheus proclaims: 'Love is a bridge and not a wall, if we let it be.' The main titles sequence showcases the coming together of multiple nations, culminating in a celebration of humanity over geographical borders. Despite its reliance on Anglocentrism and stereotypes in its storytelling, the series is still one of the most diverse television programmes on Netflix. It succeeds in promoting the concept of a universal global community through its sci-fi premise that connects the minds of individuals around the world, however, the medium of television and its links to landlocked national identity has proved a challenge to convey cultural diversity and national specificity to audiences. Furthermore, the show attempts to go beyond the requirement for national boundaries by constructing a queer nation that shares and expresses national identity. While this may be *Sense8's* true objective – bringing people together – the series has done so through cultural imperialism which has displaced cultural difference in favour of American values and a Western perspective.

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