Queer Posthumanism Through the Wachowskis

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*T*his article traces the development of queer posthumanism in two of Lana and Lilly Wachowski's screen collaborations: the feature film *Cloud Atlas* (co-directed with Tom Tykwer, 2012) and the Netflix series *Sense8* (co-showrunners with J. Michael Straczynski, 2015–2018). The Wachowskis' adaptation of David Mitchell's postmodern novel *Cloud Atlas* established a template for the queer posthumanism of *Sense8*, and together these two screen texts demonstrate how the destabilisation of the human is pivotal to queer ideas of the collective. These Wachowski texts suggest that such destabilisation is not only a common interest of critical posthumanism and queer theory, but also a necessary political move to achieve the liberatory project underpinned by the "transformative coalition work" set out in Cathy Cohen's influential reimagining of radical queer politics (1997, 438), as they cinematically realise the "new kinds of coitions and coalitions" envisioned by Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston (1995, 2).

The "collective" is one of several evocative conceptual figures (alongside the "cyborg" and the "monster") that illuminate the convergence of critical posthumanism and queer theory, as traced through a variety of film examples in my chapter on queer posthumanism in *Screening the Posthuman* (Henry 2023). These examples include *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999), a pioneering queer posthumanist film at the turn of the century, whose premise of colonizing John Malkovich prefigures the centrality of complex interconnectedness to the queer posthuman worlds of *Cloud Atlas* and *Sense8*. These screen texts are of course also preceded by another significant 1999 film, *The Matrix*, and its two 2003 sequels, *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*, all co-directed by the Wachowskis. Using a trans studies framework, Cáel M. Keegan's auteurist study argues that "the Wachowskis' cinema establishes a common cinematic language for sensing beyond gender's dictated forms, and therefore 'the real,' that can be periodized to the turn of the twenty-first century" (2018, 5). This periodization aligns with the pivotal year of 1999 for queer posthumanist cinema. While the trajectory outlined in this article finds a degree of precedent in the early Matrix films—and might be understood as a kind of modal for Neo's modal in the fourth instalment in the franchise, *The Matrix Resurrections* (Lana Wachowski, 2021)[1]— the focus here is on the connections between the more critically neglected *Cloud Atlas* and *Sense8*. Lana Wachowski notes that "[t]he ideas of *Cloud Atlas* continue echoing in *Sense8*" (interview in Keegan 2018, 148), and it is these connecting ideas that this article seeks to tease out through a framework of queer posthumanism and its privileging of the collective.

These late 1990s origins of the Wachowskis' expansive and interconnected exploration of queer posthuman relationality also coincides with seminal works in queer theory and queer of colour critique, such as Cathy Cohen's influential reimagining of radical queer politics in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" (1997). As Elliott H. Powell writes, "while Cohen is interested in these *individual* marginalized subjects, she's more concerned with theorizing a broad-based *collective* political vision that centers the overlapping experiences of oppression among these marginalized subjects" (Powell 2019, 188). Cohen's intersectional liberatory project is organised around "those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality" (Cohen 1997, 441), just as these exemplary Wachowski texts are organised around a cast of characters who fit this description. *Cloud Atlas* and *Sense8* perform "transformative coalition work" (Cohen 1997, 438) through their innovations in narrative structure and film form. For Powell, to pursue Cohen's new queer politics "is to redefine coalitions as a relational politics of collective resonance" (Powell 2019, 188). I argue that this concept of "collective resonance" is evocative for understanding *Sense8*'s premise of "limbic resonance," where similarly (as Powell has argued in the context of Black popular music),

> [T]o resonate is to amplify and animate; it is to simultaneously vibrate out and vibe with in unexpected, unintended, and uneven ways; and it is to then mark, draw, and produce a collective with those who share and experience such resonance, but are differently affected by it. (Powell 2019, 189)

Through the two case studies below, I unpack the medium-specific ways in which the Wachowskis generate such a "a relational politics of collective resonance." While the audience is also brought into the collective (for instance, in *Sense8*'s strong fan community), this article uses textual analysis to focus on how queer posthumanism is articulated through the narrative, thematic, and formal elements of the texts themselves.

Cloud Atlas is a precursor to the queer posthumanism of *Sense8*, with its narrative and formal experimentation foreshadowing the Wachowskis' more elaborate queer posthuman features in the Netflix series. Three central narrative and formal features of *Cloud Atlas*—foregrounding interconnectedness with others, challenging humanist and heteronormative ideas of a "natural order," and celebrating the transcending of boundaries—are refined and underscored in *Sense8*, and the amplification of disorientation, celebration, and embodied pleasure further enhance the radical queer political notion of "collective resonance." Beyond their adaptation of *Cloud Atlas*, the Wachowskis had further scope to develop their model of queer posthuman relationality in the expanded serial narrative of *Sense8*. Here the collective of protagonists, the eight "sensates," evolve toward ideals of queer posthumanism, including Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston's "posthuman bodies," José Esteban Muñoz's "queer utopia," and the collective orientation of Rosi Braidotti's posthuman ethics (each elaborated further below).

In line with Braidotti's posthuman ethics, the "self" in these two texts is conceived as a "moveable assemblage within a common life space which the

subject never masters but merely inhabits, always in a community, a pack or an assemblage" (2016, 26). The emphasis on interconnectedness, community, and the collective in these Wachowski productions challenge humanist ideas of the individual subject or autonomous self, and forge queer relationality. The Wachowskis develop the collective orientation of posthumanism by foregrounding queer community and queer pride.[2] Just as the "explosion in queer perspectives of the nonhuman" in recent scholarship has seen "queer as a pivot for pushing explorations into new materialism and posthumanism further than it currently sits" (Harris and Jones 2019, 19), the Wachowskis use cinema and television storytelling in ways that disorientate humanism and evoke posthumanism's non-unitary subject—with its "enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others" (Braidotti 2013, 49)—through queer models of the deeply interconnected and intersectional collective.

Within and between these two popular screen texts, the Wachowskis weave a political vision of *collective resonance* in an accessible way to broad audiences. These texts play an important role in popular screen culture in the narrative and affective translation of queer and queer of colour perspectives on posthuman relationality. The conceptual ideas underpinning these Wachowskis texts—such as feeling and healing collectively—are not new, particularly in queer of colour theory; however, the Wachowskis repackage these ideas up in rainbow pride, collective sensory pleasures, and formal televisual innovation. Like the films themselves, this article connects to parallels of thought across posthumanism, queer theory, and queer of colour critique, and joins in the celebration of queer posthuman collectivity.

Cloud Atlas (Lana Wachowski, Tom Tykwer, and Lilly Wachowski, 2012)

Some of *Cloud Atlas*'s features are inherited as an adaptation of David Mitchell's novel, which as Hélène Machinal notes, is characteristic of postmodern writing in its "generic hybridity, a fragmented structure, interrupted narratives, and an emphasis on illusion and simulacrum" (Machinal 2011, 127). Postmodernist novels connect to posthumanism in that they "undermine the ideological assumptions behind what has been accepted as universal and trans-historical in our culture: the humanist notion of Man as a coherent and continuous subject" (Hutcheon 1988, 177 cited in Machinal 2011, 135). *Cloud Atlas* (novel and film) uses various formal techniques—techniques that I characterise below as constituting a queering of film form—to challenge these humanist assumptions. Posthumanism is also central at the novel's thematic level as it invites readers "into a posthuman world that details what the human could become in a future society characterized by the annihilation of human identity, a subjection of the human through technology, and a reduction of human beings to mere commodities" (Machinal 2011, 127-128). Luke Hortle cites Machinal's chapter as a notable exception to the general scholarly neglect of the novel's posthuman aspects (2016, 256), and in general the film has received significantly less scholarly attention than David Mitchell's novel. Hortle's examination of the novel's posthumanism frames it as queer—arguing that it "depicts the posthuman as a fundamentally queer presence" (Hortle 2016,

256)—and reappraises its intervention in posthumanism's theoretical project by examining its "depiction of human consumption practices, non-reproductive sexuality, and Anthropocene futurity" (Hortle 2016, 253). Hortle and Machinal's readings point to various posthumanist aspects of the novel, but here I focus on three broad queer posthumanist elements of the film that anticipate those of *Sense8*.

Firstly, *interconnectedness* is foregrounded through a range of devices, including the alignment of moments of action and tension across stories set in different times and places (devices used frequently again in *Sense8*). Match cuts are used to connect story worlds and characters, for example, the barefoot running of Hae-Joo Chang and Somni-451 across the bridge between buildings in Neo Seoul in 2144 is matched with that of Autua across the ship's mast in the 1849 story, and in turn each are shot at from below by their oppressors. The novel "asserts the necessity of connectivity and continuity" (Machinal 2011, 138), a feature magnified by the film's cinematic structure and techniques. Lana Wachowski noted that one reason they were drawn to adapt the book was its vision of "a humanity that unites all of us and transcends our tribal differences" (Lana Wachowski quoted in Rosen 2012). Unlike the novel, which tells the six stories sequentially, the film interweaves the stories and highlights connections through formal devices including parallel editing and the repetition of dialogue and score in the soundtrack (particularly the main theme of *The Cloud Atlas Sextet*). In doing so, it departs from structural aspects of the novel but also from the linearity of continuity editing that has long been standard in Hollywood cinema. Like the spatial and temporal leap at the end of the Mount Rushmore scene in *North by Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959), discussed by Lee Edelman, *Cloud Atlas* similarly "flaunts the discontinuity of what its continuity editing joins" (Edelman 2004, 96). Interconnectedness is foregrounded in the Abbess' dialogue, "Our lives are not our own. From womb to tomb, we are bound to others, past and present…," which becomes a voice-over in a montage of the other stories, and is repeated later in the film by Somni-451. This also prefigures Nomi's declaration, "I'm not just a 'me', I'm also a 'we,'" in the first episode of *Sense8* (discussed further below). The common birthmark on characters in different times and places also points to a fundamental connectedness, and foreshadows the geographically-dispersed genetic pool of intensely connected protagonists in *Sense8*.

The decision to cast actors in multiple and diverse roles across storylines builds connections between characters and foregrounds the theme of human interconnectedness. *Cloud Atlas*' casting and performance is comparable to vaudeville, "particularly in its racial, ethnic and gendered cross-play and its unusual blend of farcical, pantomimic characterizations and realist performances" (Peberdy 2014, 172). As Donna Peberdy argues, the film "offers a radical example of the ensemble as a metaphor for global interconnectedness" (2014, 167). Gabriel Estrada notes that the effect of parallel editing between these actors in their diverse reincarnations is to "intimate that all people are ultimately transgender and transracial actors in a universal soul struggle for freedom" (Estrada 2014, 3). In this way, the film is a prototype for *Sense8*, which does not use the same

multi-role casting of *Cloud Atlas* but uses parallel editing extensively to forge interconnectedness and a sense of global collective struggle.

In emphasizing interconnectedness, the film erases differences, the consequences of which have been insightfully analyzed through a queer Polynesian lens in Estrada's article (2014) and the lens of transculturality in Stephen Trinder's reading of the film (Trinder 2019, 232–44). Estrada critiques the film's "queer settler colonial logics," noting that the film interconnects political struggles and persons "within sharply demarcated understandings of Western freedom and humanism" (Estrada 2014, 3). Similarly, Trinder argues that the film is tainted by colonial discourse and an assumption of Western values as superior and is therefore "unsuccessful in disseminating the fluid and hybrid nature of transculturalism" (2019, 241). Thus, while the film works to blur the boundaries of difference to emphasize shared humanity, critical race theorists highlight how the text's ideal of transcultural interconnectedness belies monocultural assumptions and ethnic hierarchies. Such readings of the film echo earlier critiques of posthumanism's whiteness and Eurocentrism and point to the legacies of humanism's hierarchies and assumptions within these screen representations.

The second key element of queer posthumanism is the way that the film challenges the idea of a "natural order." The need to uphold a hierarchical "natural order" is voiced most explicitly by actor Hugo Weaving's villains. As Boardman Mephi in the story set in 2144, he says to Somni-451 (who is a clone, or "fabricant," and therefore below "pureblood" humans in the hierarchy): "There is a natural order to this world, Fabricant, and the truth is this order must be protected." As Haskell Moore in the story set in 1849, he tells his daughter and son-in-law (who intend to join the abolition movement): "There is a natural order to this world and those who try to upend it do not fare well." He warns that their efforts toward the abolitionist cause will be futile: "No matter what you do, it will never amount to anything more than a single drop in a limitless ocean." The son-in-law replies, "What is an ocean but a multitude of drops?" which again highlights queer posthumanist values of interconnectedness and collectivity. Aligning villainy with the upholding of the "natural order" positions those who challenge this perspective as the heroes—or indeed, the revolutionaries—of the film. This is echoed in *Sense8*, where the villains are representatives of medicine (Dr Metzger) and science (Mr Whispers) who attempt to uphold the "natural orders" of gender and species (e.g., by planning to lobotomize the transgender sensate, Nomi, and by hunting down the sensates with the resources of the Biologic Preservation Organization). As Donna Haraway notes, "Queering has the job of undoing 'normal' categories" (2016, xxiv). *Cloud Atlas* "queers" the normal and natural; for instance, through its vaudevillian ensemble casting and performance (discussed above), it denaturalizes performance and casts actors in roles across gender and ethnic lines.

The third key element of queer posthumanism is the film's celebration of *transcending boundaries*, as Lana Wachowski foregrounds in the making-of documentary, *A Multitude of Drops* (Josh Oreck, 2013): "So much of the movie thematically—and in the book—is about this transcending of boundaries, and we

thought that it'd be neat to try and transcend time and space, and storytelling and genre." Again, this aspect is most explicitly conveyed in dialogue, here delivered by actor Ben Whishaw as Robert Frobisher in the 1936 story in a voice-over that carries over a montage of sex and intimacy between different couples:

> All boundaries are conventions, waiting to be transcended. One may transcend any convention, if only one can first conceive of doing so. Moments like this, I can feel your heart beating as clearly as I feel my own, and I know that separation is an illusion. My life extends far beyond the limitations of me.

At the end of the montage, Robert Frobisher's lover, Rufus Sixsmith, wakes on a train as if the sequence was a dream. In other parts of the film, these queer characters are shown as transcending the separation of distance in other ways, for instance, their separate spaces being merged into one mise-en-scène (Figure 1). These cinematic techniques reinforce the way that the novel transcends postmodernity "by introducing a philosophical dimension that goes beyond the individual level to a more collective one," taking on a "phylogenic perspective, one that widens the prospect to the human species" and its potential future (Machinal 2011, 127). In the novel's central two narratives, there is "an evolution from an individual perspective to a more collective one" (Machinal 2011, 130). *Cloud Atlas* emphasizes these ideas through transcending various boundaries across genre, time and space, using techniques that become further elaborated in *Sense8*.

Figure 1.
Compositing the separate spaces of Rufus Sixsmith and Robert Frobisher into one mise-en-scène in *Cloud Atlas* (2012).

Sense8 (Lana and Lilly Wachowski and J. Michael Straczynski, 2015–2018)

The narrative action and spectacle of *Sense8*'s premise resonate with a theoretical move to reactivate Sara Ahmed's notion of disorientation in the context of posthumanism (2019, 13). Ahmed (2006) and Haraway (2008) assert the value of disorientation in queer phenomenology; for Ahmed, "queer describes

a sexual as well as political orientation" and "a queer phenomenology would function as a disorientation device" (2006, 172). *Sense8*'s title sequence both echoes *Cloud Atlas*'s forging of a collective perspective through globe-hopping interconnectedness and encapsulates how the series operates as a "disorientation device." As Keegan's analysis indicates, the title sequence "teaches us how to engage the text" and "aesthetically prepares us for the feeling of *Sense8*'s narrative 'cluster' geometry. Space and time will contract rapidly as the sensates' enhanced sensories gather into a collective point of immediacy" (Keegan 2018, 111–12). This fast-paced montage first features bridges and rivers with flows of traffic and water; interactions between nonhuman animals intercut with human sport and cultural pursuits; touristic and local activity in configurations of individuals, pairs, and crowds. The effect of this montage is to highlight both diversity and interconnection (the idea of one world closely connected and parallel in its various human and nonhuman activities), while also featuring landmarks and cultural events particular to international locations where the series is set (such as London and San Francisco). Moving bodies—walking, dancing, embracing, marching—are foregrounded and paralleled with the flow of traffic and water through similar use of fast motion and fast cutting. As Ahmed explains, "[i] n simple terms, disorientation involves becoming an object" (2006, 162), and through these parallels, the title sequence makes the human body an object. The dizzying sequence effects a queer posthumanist "disorientation." Just as Anne M. Harris and Stacy Holman Jones (2019) reactivate disorientation in examining "the queer life of things," *Sense8* reactivates disorientation in disrupting interlinked heteronormative and humanist ideas about human bodies and their connections to others. Indeed, *Sense8* materialises disorientation through storytelling, conveying the phenomenological experience through its characters for queer posthuman ends.

Sense8 further develops narrative and formal devices of interconnectedness in following the stories of its eight globally-dispersed protagonists who comprise a cluster of "sensates," a group of individuals who can psychically[3] visit one another and share their skills and sensual experiences. These sensates, or *homo sensorium*, are a variant species of human who share strong psychic, kinaesthetic, and emotional bonds within their cluster, and can act together when one of them needs support (sometimes alongside close homo sapien allies). The concept of the cluster realises Ahmed's assertion that "[t]he queer body is not alone; queer does not reside in a body or an object, and is dependent on the mutuality of support" (2006, 170).[4] The eight sensates—Lito, Riley, Sun, Wolfgang, Will, Kala, Capheus, and Nomi—are diverse in terms of race and sexuality as well as personalities, skill sets, and occupations. Their diversity brings strength to collective action, akin to a band of superheroes, as they tackle a range of personal and collective challenges including evading the villain Mr Whispers (the leader of the Biologic Preservation Organization who is trying to hunt them down). The sensate cluster exemplifies the conceptual figure of the collective that is central to queer posthumanism.[5]

Sense8 presents a response to Rosi Braidotti's call "to work towards multiple actualizations of new transversal alliances, communities and planes of

composition of the human: many ways of becoming-world together" (2016, 24). Such actualizations forge a posthuman ethics, infused with positivity through the series' often celebratory mode:

> The ethical ideal is to actualize the cognitive, affective and sensorial means to cultivate higher degrees of empowerment and affirmation of one's interconnections to others in their multiplicity. The selection of the affective forces that propel the process of becoming posthuman is regulated by an ethics of joy and affirmation that functions through the transformation of negative into positive passions. (Braidotti 2016, 26)

This posthuman ethics of "joy and affirmation" aligns with the queer celebration of pride, foregrounded in the scenes of Nomi and her girlfriend Amanita participating in San Francisco Pride in the first episode (including their sex scene that concludes with a shot of a rainbow-colored dildo—Figure 2). In this first episode, pride is established as a basis for this affective community when Nomi vlogs about Pride, which continues as a voice-over for a montage of the other characters in their respective lives as well as shots of San Francisco Pride parade, including Nomi and Amanita on a motorbike together in the parade: "Today I march to remember I'm not just a 'me,' I'm also a 'we,' and we march with pride." The centrality of celebratory pride to the queer community and the affective bonds of the cluster are underscored again in season two through Lito's coming out speech and the "cluster" of sensates dancing with the huge crowds at the São Paulo LGBTQ Pride Parade.
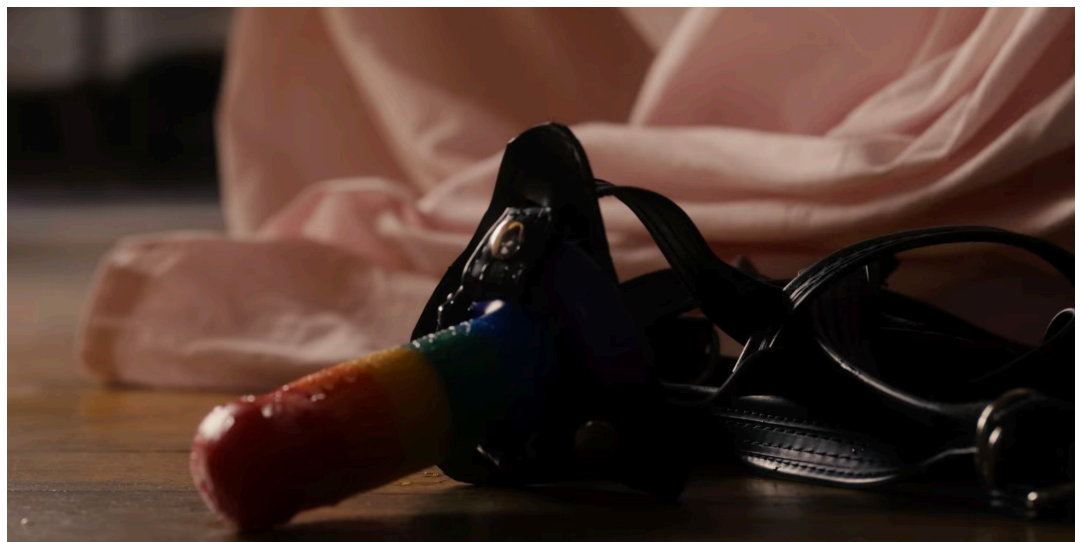
Figure 2.
Celebratory pride and queer prosthetics in *Sense8* (2015-2018).

Sense8's "positive passions" are fostered through the joyous scenes of sex and dancing[6] (as discussed in more detail below), as well the generic pleasures from the range of genres that the series draws on (including martial arts and action). Often these visceral thrills involve the sensates stepping up to their mutual responsibility, helping each other out of difficult situations such as in the numerous

fight scenes (which often draw on Sun's martial arts skill), or when Lito uses his cocktail-making skills to help Sun stay undercover, or when the other sensates inspire Lito and Capheus to respond articulately to journalists in the "Who Am I?" speech. The series reflects the way that "Posthuman ethics expresses a grounded form of accountability, based on a sense of collectivity and relationality, which results in a renewed claim to community and belonging by singular subjects" (Braidotti 2016, 26). The characters forge a closely connected affective community underpinned by the queer affects of pride and joy, which is reinforced through the formal devices such as cross-cutting, flashbacks, and switching sensates in the frame to highlight that they are psychically or kinesthetically present to each other.

The sensates (and viewers) share the intensities of mutual embodied human experience, including birth, dancing, and sex. In the analysis below, I examine how co-showrunners, the Wachowskis and J. Michael Straczynski, shape these ecstatic moments into queer posthumanist ones. I argue that the sensates epitomize Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston's "posthuman bodies" and José Esteban Muñoz's "queer utopia," presenting a model of queer posthuman relationality. The globally-dispersed bodies of the main characters in *Sense8* can be understood as "nodes in fields, inflections in orientations" forging "new kinds of coitions and coalitions" that Halberstam and Livingston envisioned (1995, 2):

> The urgency for new kinds of coitions and coalitions is too compelling in an age of continuous and obligatory diasporas [....] Posthuman bodies are not slaves to master discourses but emerge at nodes where bodies, bodies of discourse, and discourses of bodies intersect to foreclose any easy distinction between actor and stage, between sender/receiver, channel, code, message, context. Post-human embodiment, like Haraway's "feminist embodiment, then, is not about fixed location in a reified body, female or otherwise, but about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations [....] Embodiment is significant prosthesis." (195)

Their sensate engagement with each other is channelled into the pleasures of queer experience. Some characters, such as Nomi and Amanita, are already embedded in queer identities and communities, but as the eight former strangers form their queer sensate pack, even the straightest of the cisgender heterosexual characters are recruited into new "coitions and coalitions," inducted into queer pleasures.

The characters' relationships, and their individual subplots, work toward Muñoz's utopian queer futures (Muñoz 2009) and Halberstam's disruption of heteronormative values of family and inheritance to imagine alternative ways of being (Halberstam 2011). *Sense8*—like the animated children's films that Halberstam analyses—can be understood as "queer fairy tales" where "romance gives way to friendship, individuation gives way to collectivity, and 'successful' heterosexual coupling is upended, displaced, and challenged by queer contact" (Halberstam 2011, 119). As Lisa King notes, the cluster members in *Sense8* "come to form a family of sorts, but one that challenges the sexist, racist, homophobic heteronormative, Western nuclear family that operates through normalizing

and bio-powers" (King 2020, 129). The sensates' need to form "alternative forms of family rooted not in biological relatedness but in care-taking, support, and the deep appreciation of difference" (King 2020, 130) is most marked in Nomi's experience of being hospitalized against her will by her transphobic mother, who conspires with a doctor to give Nomi a lobotomy, before Nomi's girlfriend helps her to escape. *Sense8* depicts more loving, accepting, supportive, and celebratory forms of relation in the sensate alliance, as well as in characters' "chosen families," such as the friendships between Nomi and Bug, Wolfgang and Felix, and Lito and Dani.

Drawing on Clare Croft's and Muñoz's definitions of queer identity as "first and foremost a question of collaborative, communal existence, rather than an atomized, singular mode of subjectivity," Zoë Shacklock understands queerness as "a collective form of embodied action, a set of shared kinaesthetics, one that offers new forms of intersubjectivity and connection" (Shacklock 2019, 516–17). These definitions resonate with Braidotti's centering of collectivity in posthuman ethics as discussed above. *Sense8* is a key example in Shacklock's analysis of how dance (and other forms of movement) creates queer connections, community, and alternative forms of relationality. The centrality of kineaesthetic empathy is highlighted not only through dance scenes (such as the birthday party montage that cross-cuts between them celebrating together in their various locations), but also through group sex scenes and the montage of the sensates' births.

The sensates come together in orgiastic sex scenes in the sixth episode of season one, and the first and last episodes of season two. These sex scenes resemble music videos, featuring a song on the soundtrack that structures the trajectory of the orgy and generically contributes to the aestheticization of the tableaux of beautiful naked queer bodies in choreographed and rhythmically-edited entanglements. The first season's orgy scene reinforces the building of connections between sensates that is central to the season's narrative. The sensates enter each other's spaces, for instance, Lito (physically based in Mexico City) "visits" Chicago police officer Will as he works out in a gym, and San Francisco-based Nomi and Berlin-based Wolfgang join in the group sex scene. As Shacklock describes, "Once the sexual encounter begins, any sense of binaries or existing ideas of sexuality and gender disappear—instead, there is just fluidity, of both desire and bodily form" (2019, 518). The series' sex scenes are in keeping with a conceptualization of posthuman sexualities that reflects queer deconstruction of binary categories:

> According to Braidotti (2013, 98–100) the key determining feature of post-human sexualities comes from the shift from isomorphic binarism, where the world and concepts are bifurcated into seeming oppositional categories which conceal the dominance of one term perpetuated over the failure of the other term to achieve equivalence, to rhizomatic connectivities. (MacCormack 2018, 36)

The second season's orgy scenes both begin with montages of the various couples having sex. The scene cuts between difference spaces, building with additional character appearances (including the non-sensate lovers of cluster

members), and reaching a climax with the climax of the song. Through parallel editing, match cuts, and an increase in the pace of editing, these scenes ramp up the connections between characters and the eroticism of the scenes, forging "rhizomatic connectivities" (MacCormack 2018, 36). These formal techniques put the globally dispersed lovers in sync, and then depict an enhanced pleasure achieved through their sensate ability to be present and share experiences and emotions. These scenes reach the "grander scale" of posthuman sexualities, "a cosmic understanding of connectivity that could be described as cosmogenic" (MacCormack 2018, 41).

Sense8's "rhizomatic connectivities" are also established through its queering of reproduction and depiction of birth. In addition to having human parents, the eight sensates are "birthed" by a member of another cluster, Angelica Turing, at which time they are awakened to each other's presence.

> Birth in *Sense8* thus exists as a multiplicity, a complex event that is connected to the past, produces a future, and operates as a form of connection between multiple subjectivities. Here again *Sense8* emphasizes the branched, braided, multiple imagination key to both seriality and queerness. (Shacklock 2019, 524)

Episode ten of the first season ends with a scene depicting the sensates' original births in flashback. In the present day, the sensates watch a classical music concert and—as in the sex scenes—the music (here Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major, Op. 73 'Emperor': I. Allegro*) features alone on the soundtrack. Each sensate in turn is shown enjoying the concert and then flashes back to their mother giving birth to them (in a variety of countries and circumstances). The graphic, non-normative depiction of labour and childbirth in this six-minute montage queers birth imagery: "We are asked to watch as women enjoy an ecstatic, orgasmic moment that is not explicitly sexual. Their militant nonconformity to the norms of conventional (hetero)sexualized femininity... alludes to the true liberatory potential of (queer)sexualized femininities" (Jolly 2018, 421-22). It also evokes Stockton's concept of a "backward birth" wherein the gay child has been "unavailable to itself in the present tense. The protogay child has only appeared through an act of retrospection and after a death" (Stockton 2009, 6). The "backward birth mechanism" connects them retrospectively; the montage of flashbacks to their original births marks the death of their humanness and underscores their common characteristic of being sensates. The queering of birth in *Sense8* also evokes Haraway's notion of a "third birth" that presents an alternative to Western patriarchal narratives:

> [P]erhaps a differential, diffracted feminist allegory might have the "inappropriate/d others" emerge from a third birth into an SF world called elsewhere—a place composed from interference patterns. Diffraction does not produce "the same" displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the *effects* of difference appear. Tropically, for the promises of monsters, the first invites the illusion of essential, fixed position, while the

second trains us to more subtle vision. (Haraway 1991, 300)

Sense8 uses both bodily movement and formal techniques to queer birth and sex on screen, producing this "more subtle vision," and moving viewers to a kinaesthetic understanding of queer posthumanist relationality and pleasure.

Conclusion

These readings of two Wachowskis' productions have demonstrated the development of queer posthumanism in their storytelling and aesthetics, including the narrative and formal innovations that centre the collective (as opposed to the individual) and activate "transformative coalition work" on screen. The way that Mitchell's postmodern novel both "denounces the dangers of a uniformed and universal view of history and man" and "asserts the necessity of connectivity and continuity" (Machinal 2011, 138) is underscored in the *Cloud Atlas* adaptation and the Wachowskis' later work in *Sense8*, where the potential for queer posthumanism significantly develops. *Sense8* began to realize Francesca Ferrando's prediction (published in the same year that *Sense8* launched on Netflix) that:

> Over time, the hybrid may evolve more radically into a multidimensional understanding of being. Posthuman media productions will eventually follow no central plot or hero, but develop a diffuse representation of subjectivity through a rhizomatic interconnection of seemingly unrelated stories, addressing the never-ending question of identity "who am I?" as "who are we?" We are [...] the Posthumans. (Ferrando 2015, 278)

In line with other auteurist visions of queer posthumanism on screen, the diverse and deeply interconnected characters of the Wachowski epics similarly "exemplify queer packs that threaten humanist and heteronormative understandings of self and other" (Henry 2023, 153), often by employing popular film genres. The Wachowskis' brand of queer posthumanism is infused with positivity and pride, posing posthuman questions alongside a celebration of collective modes of survival and pleasure.

Notes

1. Notably, following their collaboration on *Cloud Atlas* in the interim, Lana Wachowski worked with David Mitchell and Tom Tykwer again for *The Matrix Resurrections*. This latest Matrix sequel offers self-reflexive commentary on queer and trans readings of the prior Matrix films (along with other queer pleasures, such as its casting) but the franchise's overall relationship to posthumanism is perhaps best understood through *cyberpunk*'s intervention in posthuman discourse as opposed to queer posthumanism. See Foster on cyberpunk "as an attempt to intervene in and diversify what posthumanism can mean" (Foster 2005, xiii), which is akin to the impact of queer theory on posthumanism, as discussed in Henry (2023), Harris and Jones (2019), and the present article.

2. The centrality of queer community and pride again comes to the fore in the first season of the Showtime series, *Work in Progress* (2019-2021) which Lilly Wachowski wrote and executive produced alongside creators Abby

McEnany and Tim Mason. The series puts a range of queer and lesbian social spaces on display, depicting main character Abby (Abby McEnany) navigating and enjoying both familiar and new spaces such as a games night with lesbian friends, a queer family brunch, and performances at a queer bar. The central romantic relationship between Abby (a 45-year-old lesbian) and Chris (a 22-year-old queer transman) also narrativizes several themes from the Wachowski collaborations including transcending boundaries and overcoming tribal differences.

3. Or more aptly for posthuman embodiment, it is perhaps best described "less a 'psychic' connection than one of what we might call kinaesthetic empathy, in which they understand each other through sharing their body's movement and occupation of space" (Shacklock 2019, 517).

4. This concept of the cluster is expanded extra-textually, serving as "a symbolic structure for the emergence of its own fandoms and social media affinity cultures" (Keegan 2018, 108).

5. The sensate cluster also echoes Morpheus' multi-skilled crew (Trinity, Switch, Cypher, Mouse, Tank, and Dozer) in *The Matrix*. Both collectives are underpinned by awakenings (to the existence of the Matrix and sensates respectively), a view of reality that other (mere humans) cannot access, and a mission of resistance against those who exploit them (epitomized by the villains Agent Smith and Whispers).

6. *The Matrix Reloaded*'s rave dance scene—intercut with a sex scene—is prototypical for the formal techniques and sensuous expression in *Sense8*'s dancing and sex montages.

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