

Sense8 and utopian connectivity*Alexis Lothian*

People can communicate mind to mind. There
 is no race. There are no genders. There is no age.
 There are no infirmities. There are only minds.
 Utopia? No ... The internet. Where minds, doors,
 and lives open up.

MCI commercial 'Anthem', 1997³

Utopian discourse was a marketing strategy for digital media in the 1990s, as the online world began its shift from niche fascination and speculative plot device to popular necessity. The realities of online harassment, government surveillance and pervasive advertising turned the fulfilment of early promises into realities that are dystopian for most. Yet a dream of mind-to-mind communication lives on in the Wachowskis' and J. Michael Straczynski's innovative 2015 Netflix Original series, *Sense8*. Where 1990s digital utopias posited an internet of textual connections in which inequality would be overcome by the capacity for individuals to recognise one another as the same under the skin, the Wachowskis update the fantasy for the twenty-first century internet of visual cultures and haptic interfaces, linking bodies without the benefit of visible technology and asserting that one mind can operate another's body just as well as his or her own.

The premise of *Sense8* is an evolutionary emergence of 'sensates', people who have the inherent ability to commune with others of their 'cluster' – a group of eight people born at the exact same moment, anywhere in the world – once they have been activated. Mind to mind communication is random at first, but as the group's connection deepens, they learn to share not just thoughts and feelings but skills and experiences, stepping into one another's bodies and worlds. Members of the cluster on which the show centres are based in Chicago, San Francisco, Mumbai, London, Reykjavik, Nairobi, Berlin and Seoul. Race, gender and class are visible in the diversity of a show that features multiple non-US, non-Western characters and settings and what may be the first mainstream representation of a transgender woman played by a trans actor in a storyline that does not revolve around her gender identity. The intensity of sensate communication means that each member of the cluster has

3. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioVMoeCbrig>.

no choice but to recognise every other member as an equal with whom they can empathise fully. Rather than a world with ‘no race ... no genders ... no age’, the utopia of sensate connection seems to offer an alternative vision for globalisation, one in which the dehumanisation and exploitation by the rich world of the poor could be replaced by an empathetic diversity in which the full subjectivity of every person would incontrovertibly be recognised.

Yet the failures of digital-utopian discourse are also the failures of *Sense8*. Lisa Nakamura, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and others have shown the dangers of the idea that one could transcend inequality by transcending one’s body. While digital media has made new forms of communication and self-representation possible, it has also perpetuated practices of exploitation both old and new, and these have been obscured by the narratives of futurity and freedom that have gone along with each new media development. So it is with *Sense8*, whose seemingly liberatory globalised vision fails to confront the contradictions of racism, sexism and class exploitation that shape the sensates’ lives. As Claire Light points out, it is telling that the sensates’ capacity to communicate across linguistic barriers is rendered by having them speak in English: the cluster represents global diversity only from an American perspective. Only one character in the cluster, the Kenyan Capheus (Aml Ameen), lacks economic privilege, and his role seems primarily to be as a reminder to the other characters of the ease of their lives (see Ading). Sitting next to a preoccupied clustermate as she flies from London to Reykjavik, he does not compare the problems of his own complex life with hers, but instead points out the wonder of the clouds in the sky.

Capheus’s perspective highlights both the limitations and the possibilities of *Sense8*’s utopian connectivity. José Muñoz writes that the ‘here and now is a prison house’: in his queer analysis, utopia is whatever enables us to ‘think and feel a then and there’, to know in our bodies that ‘this world is not enough’ (1). To suggest that utopia exists in a here and now, as the fantasy of mind-to-mind connection does, keeps the prison house walls intact by trying to make us believe they are transparent. Capheus knows they are not. At one point, Kala (Tina Desai), the Indian sensate, enters Capheus’s shack and joins him in watching an action movie featuring Jean-Claude Van Damme, the actor whom Capheus has taken as his personal and business icon. Kala looks from the large television to the rest of the home and wonders why someone with so little would devote so much of their limited budget to media technology rather than purchasing, say, a better bed. Capheus’s answer points to Muñoz’s version of utopia: ‘A bed keeps you in the slum, but the TV takes you out’. His travels into the worlds of his clustermates are, like his television viewing, a necessary

pleasure, but he knows they are not enough to alter a physical reality. His mind may be opened but his doors cannot be.

Yet the possibility of an elsewhere is in itself transformative. The most celebrated scene is one in which two straight men, a transgender lesbian and a gay man have sex together, their bodies sweating and gasping in bathtubs, beds and gyms. Taken up as a triumph of LGBT representation (see Lambe), the scene calls attention to a queer promiscuity underlying *Sense8*'s premise and connecting its vision of connectivity with Muñoz's call for a queer utopian impulse that would dream and enact 'new and better pleasures' (1). The scene leaves out the black and Asian characters (we catch a glimpse of Capheus's arousal, but his body does not take part), highlighting the racial limitations of dominant queer representation as well as of the white liberal fantasy that we are all the same under the skin. Nevertheless, the affective, visceral power of this sexual connectivity insists that *Sense8*'s fantasy of mind-to-mind connection never means leaving the body behind. And this speculative sex scene makes its way to our screens via the possibilities opened up by online distribution: Netflix's shrugging off of network constraints, the user-generated chaos of YouTube. The sterile fantasy of mind-to-mind communication with which I opened proves to have been a cover for the messy, queer possibilities that erupt when bodies meet bodies.

Architecture and utopia, 2015

Roger Luckhurst

Thomas More's *Utopia* is very precise about the layout of the 54 identical towns of the island, all of which 'share the same language, customs, institutions and laws' (58). The housing takes the form of flat-roofed, three-storey terraces running the whole street (an avenue 20 feet wide), with double doors that open and close at a touch and with sealed, glazed windows. Occupancy is allocated by lot and changed every ten years. More prompts an obsession with the peculiarly precise detailing of the architectural dispensation of these Nolandias. This, I suppose, is because your ideal cornice or pelmet is easier to imagine than the dynamics of social interaction: they don't do unpredictable things.

Modernity's secular utopias are blueprints for realising communalism through building. Charles Fourier's microscopic detailing of his *phalansterie*, organised around a continuous peristyle, a covered street-gallery allowing for perfect circulation for the denizens of Harmony, might seem like oddly