

## Affect, Hope and Collective Consciousness as Acts of Radical Rebellion in Wachowskis' *Sense8*

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**Abstract:** Shared consciousness, interdependence, and hopefulness are just a few of the themes explored in the Wachowskis' Netflix series *Sense8*. The show tells the story of eight strangers from around the globe who discover they are psychically and emotionally connected. Through their shared thoughts, sensations, and skills, the Sensates navigate personal and collective challenges, highlighting the transformative power of human connection. This article examines how ideas from affect theory can be found in *Sense8* and explores connectivity as both a narrative device and a metaphor for global interdependence. The Sensates' bond illustrates how shared emotions and experiences can foster empathy and solidarity across cultural divides, presenting human connection as both a survival mechanism and a source of beauty in their lives.

At the same time, the series complicates its utopian aspirations by acknowledging the tensions inherent in deep interconnection, including the fear of losing personal histories, identities, and struggles within a collective mind. This paper, then, considers how *Sense8* navigates the boundary between solidarity and the erasure of difference. In doing so, the analysis positions the show as both a speculative, hopeful imagining of collective consciousness and a commentary on the emotional, social, and political struggles of contemporary global life. The series' hopeful tone celebrates diversity and collective action, imagining a world where unity and collaboration overcome division and oppression. By combining affective experiences with the possibilities of global networks, *Sense8* offers a fresh perspective on how empathy and shared experience can transform individuals and communities alike. This paper argues that the series is not just a story of interconnected lives but also a hopeful vision for navigating an increasingly (dis)connected and complex world.

**Keywords:** affect, interconnectedness, community, collective consciousness, empathy, *Sense8*, hopefulness, transformation

The last episode of the Netflix series *Sense8* ends with one of the protagonists stating:

We live in a world that distrusts feelings. Over and over, we are reminded that feelings are not as important as reason, that feelings are childish, irresponsible, dangerous. We are taught to ignore them, control or deny them. We barely understand what they are, where they come from, or how they seem to understand us better than we understand ourselves. But I know that feelings matter. (Lana and Lilly Wachowski and J. Michael Starczynski 2015, season2, episode 12)

The statement refers primarily to Western culture – particularly the legacy of Cartesian and Enlightenment thought, in which reason, rationality, and logic are privileged over emotionality, relationality, and empathy. Within such a framework, feelings tend to be dismissed as secondary or even obstructive, and yet, as the character claims, their existence cannot be erased. The continuous denial of the innate, profound, and interpersonal quality of feelings estranges people not only from themselves but also from others. The tension aligns and is partially addressed by affect theory. As Erika Doss notes “affect has been embraced by such scholars as Eve Sedgwick and Brian Massumi as a means of overcoming Western binaries (like the mind/body divide) and re-inserting ‘the body,’ and hence physical sensation and emotional conditions, into contemporary cultural theory” (2009, 9). Doss further highlights Brian Massumi’s argument that affectivity is central to grasping “the absolute inseparability of thought and feeling” a statement that directly contests the tradition in which emotions are dismissed (2009, 9). Doss also acknowledges that “focusing on feelings and emotions – he senses – as sites of critical inquiry raises questions for those accustomed to the clarity and coherence of seemingly more objective and conceptual bodies of evidence” (2009, 10). As she claims, emotions are often regarded as “untrustworthy and slippery”, resistant to the “disciplined distancing of data” that structure many academic practices (2009, 10). As Doss further argues, the juxtaposition of feelings and logical reasoning clearly reveal the long-standing cultural division based on the “assumptions that privilege human intelligence as distinct from human emotion (the basic binary of the Cartesian mind/body thesis) need to acknowledge how cognition

itself is embodied, sensate, interested, and invested" (2009, 10). Such framing of the two, supposedly contrary matters, showcases that approaching feelings seriously is not merely an alternative analytic choice but a conscious challenge to dominant epistemological norms. Therefore, it is in this sense that certain elements of *Sense8* can be illuminated with the use of affect theory.

In a culture that emphasizes the importance of individuality and detachment, affect theory offers a somewhat reparative turn by centring on care, connection, and relationality. In the introduction to *The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible*, Rosi Braidotti points out that the current political climate, one that diminishes the importance of feelings, renders activist movements and ideologies, such as eco-criticism or feminism, harmful and obsolete, which actively discourages collective political imagination that could potentially bring change. Moreover, Braidotti argues that by insisting that change is futile, dominant systems maintain passivity in people, preventing them from perceiving genuine alternatives (2006, 133).

*Sense8* portrays a reality where transformation is not optional, but essential to flourishing, not just survival. In the series, the characters undergo continuous processes of becoming, whether internal or societal, through acts of solidarity across cultural and social boundaries. Hence, the narrative embodies Braidotti's call "to put the 'active' back into activism" showing how affective and collective transformation can be an act of rebellion against oppressive systems and create opportunities for picturing a more hopeful future (2006, 134). Therefore, this paper argues that *Sense8* can be understood simultaneously as a utopian dream and a critique of contemporary conditions marked by extreme individualism, loneliness and prioritization of reason. While it envisions an alternative reality structured around entanglement and affective interdependence, the series can also be seen as a manifesto that calls for a reorientation of social values – from isolation and rationalism towards practices grounded in hopefulness, community, and affective connection.

While many attempts at defining affect have been made, one of its most prominent qualities remains its indefinability. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg begin *An Inventory of Shimmers* by asking, "how to begin when, after all, there is no pure or somehow originary state for affect?" (2010, 1). This question highlights a central trait of affect theory: its refusal to be captured fully in language or fixed categories. In a similar statement, Brian Massumi describes affect as "a dimension of life" (2015, 9), a formulation that draws on Baruch Spinoza's

idea of affect as the capacity “to affect and be affected”. Massumi further characterizes affect as “deceptively simple”, which does seem to be an accurate definition, since it emphasizes the interpersonal intensity as well as the pre-linguistic, bodily aspects of affect (2015, 9). Seigworth and Gregg also utilize the concepts of “actualization” and “potentiality”, referring to the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who employed Spinoza’s ideas to connect affect to processes of becoming (2010, 2). Therefore, it becomes clear that change and transformation are central to affect theory, with affect conceived as a pre-linguistic, pre-conscious, and interpersonally circulating force.

Patricia T. Clough’s reading of Massumi elaborates on these points while foregrounding the temporal, relational, and bodily indeterminacy of affect. Clough notes that affect is not pre-social but, following Massumi, “open-endedly social,” that is, “social in a manner ‘prior to’ the separating out of individuals” (2010, 209). Thus, Massumi and Clough reject the perception of affect as purely pre-social, instead understanding it as fundamentally relational and emergent, before being codified and ascribed to individuals. Such a framing positions affect as a dynamic force capable of shaping both individual and collective experience, rather than a static, passive energy enclosed in an isolated body. Sara Ahmed provides a complementary perspective by emphasizing the historical and socially mediated aspect of affect. She claims that “emotions tell us a lot about time; emotions are the very ‘flesh’ of time. They show us the time it takes to move, or to move on, is a time that exceeds the time of an individual life. Through emotions, the past persists on the surface of bodies” (Ahmed 2014, 202). Whereas Massumi foregrounds the pre-conscious circulation of affect, Ahmed situates emotions in the social and historical context. However, similarly to Massumi, Ahmed emphasizes affect’s forward-looking potential. While past experiences continue to shape lives in the present, they do more than carry the past – they also open up new futures, influencing how we orient ourselves relationally to others. Hence, these perspectives demonstrate that affect cannot be reduced to intensity, sensation, or pre-linguistic experience alone. Massumi and Clough demonstrate that affect is bodily, temporally complex, and pre-individual, while Ahmed foregrounds its social, historical, and ethical dimensions. The integration of these insights allows for an understanding of affect as both emergent and relational, circulating through bodies and contexts while shaping possibilities for action, experience, and relationality.

Such statements resonate both with Rosi Braidotti's and Donna Haraway's work. In her essay "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene", Haraway uses a metaphor of tentacles and legs, like those of an octopus or a spider, to illustrate how life is entangled in complex, overlapping relationships. Haraway's work argues for interdependent relationships between humans, non-humans, organic and technological beings, and their ability to influence each other in unpredictable ways. In the essay, the theorist refers to environmental studies to juxtapose two types of biological relationships and behaviours of complex biological systems in nature – sympoietic and autopoietic. The biology of sympoiesis, as defined in Haraway's work drawing on M. Beth Dempster, are "collectively-producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries. Information and control are distributed among components. The systems are evolutionary and have the potential for surprising change" (2016, 33). On the other hand, autopoietic systems are characterized as "self-producing", "autonomous", with "with self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries that tend to be centrally controlled, homeostatic, and predictable" (2016, 33).

Therefore, by providing the example of sympoietic systems, as collective, spatially undefined and fluid, Haraway refers to affect studies by highlighting the network-like connections and the relational nature of being, where emotions and experiences circulate rather than remain confined within individuals. By foregrounding these porous boundaries, Haraway's notions may suggest that affect not only emerges as a shared intensity within assemblages of beings but also becomes a bonding and a connective factor. Just as sympoiesis implies constant exchange and mutual shaping, affect operates as a contingent process that forms and reforms relationships. Such a notion resonates in Massumi's work, who claims that "one always affects and is affected in encounters; which is to say, through events. To begin affectively in change is to begin in relation, and to begin in relation is to begin in the event" (2015, 9). Thus, affect, once more, appears as a contextual force.

Sister Wachowskis' Netflix original TV series tells a story of eight strangers from all over the world (the United States, Germany, Iceland, Kenya, India, Mexico, and South Korea) who, unbeknownst to them at the beginning, are a variant of a new species – homo sensorium or Sensates. As a result of a simultaneous "birth", they are in a "Sensate cluster", which means that they function as part of a network, sharing an emotional, physical, and intellectual

connection that enables them to communicate, share skills, and simultaneously experience emotions, transcending physical distance. In some instances, the Sensates can intuitively feel each other's emotions or physical sensations without fully understanding the circumstances that triggered them. At other times, they can visit one another, appearing co-present despite being physically spread across different continents. In one of the episodes, Nomi, a Sensate from San Francisco, while escaping the Federal Agents, can access the abilities of Will, a Sensate from Chicago, who is a policeman. The main storyline follows the characters as they become increasingly aware of their connection to one another and work together to overthrow a nefarious multigovernmental organization called BPO (Biologic Preservation Organization) which perceives Sensates as threats and works to eradicate their race.

Moreover, the Sensates are joined through a specific part of their brain, which differentiates them from "normal" humans – the psycelium. The psycelium refers to the fungal mycelium, which connects individual fungi miles apart through an underground network. The fungal-mycelial connections function as an allegory in which each Sensate's individual self/consciousness is a small but vital part of a larger and invisible sub-surface consciousness. This correlation is mentioned in the series itself several times since the Sensates have a solitary existence "above" and are connected "below" via the psycelium. Therefore, the psycelium does not merely facilitate communication or skill-sharing; it enables a deeper, almost visceral limbic resonance, where feelings, memories, and bodily sensations are co-experienced. This model reinforces both Haraway's tentacular logic – thinking through webs and knots rather than lines and hierarchies and affect theory's assertion that affect circulates between bodies.

After realizing the depth of the relationship, some of the protagonists attempt to block it, perceiving the connection as bothersome and intrusive. For example, Kala Dandekar, a betrothed woman, worried about her growing feelings for her cluster companion, Wolfgang, isolates herself from other Sensates. Similarly, Sun, an independent businesswoman from South Korea, accustomed to her solitary lifestyle, often finds the entanglement uncomfortable and invasive. However, over time, the characters come to realize that embracing their belonging to the group allows them to feel stronger, more supported and less estranged. What once felt like a loss of autonomy for Sun transforms into a sense of companionship and collective resilience. In "The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible", Braidotti introduces the notions of *potentia* and endurance, understood

in the spatial sense with “the body as an enfleshed field of actualisation of passions or forces” (2006,134). Therefore, the body, just like affect, is not a closed or static, autopoietic entity, but rather a dynamic site where energies and intensities circulate. Braidotti connects the idea of *potentia* to “the desire to become”, referring to the body’s capacity to channel affects that exceed what is individual and express the faithfulness to the potentiality (2006, 134). Thus, endurance emphasizes the body’s ability to sustain and hold these intensities, extending them through time and space, not in the sense of mere survival but as a form of persistence and transformation through hardships. It becomes clear that potential and endurance are inherently tied to relation; the capacity to endure depends on the openness to others and the ebb and flow of affects across bodies.

Revital Zilonka and Jennifer Job, whose article criticizes the neoliberal perspective, argue that the cluster moves along two axes: from despair to hope, and from social isolation to love. As the critics claim, “neoliberal paradigms, by definition, commit violence on community; by letting markets rule, and wiping out any structures in place that block the work of the marketplace, people and cultures are continually decimated by business forces” (2017, 392). This observation suggests that the challenges faced by individuals, and by extension the *Sensates*, are not merely personal or psychological, but rooted in wider political and economic structures. This perspective positions the *Sensates*’ ethical and relational practices as a form of resistance: the cultivation of hope, love, and community becomes both an affective and political response to the isolating and destructive logics of neoliberalism. In this sense, their collective endurance and care enact a counter-model to the commodification and instrumentalization of social relations. Zilonka and Job, relying on Erich Fromm and bell hooks, emphasize that love, care, commitment, and responsibility to each other are essential, reactive practices to the conditions of greedy, abusive, and divisive social and political structures (Zilonka & Job 2017, 393). In *Sense8*, the protagonists embody this idea when they realize that their strength lies in shared experience – not simply as a plot device but as affective interdependence. Their ability to access one another’s sensations, emotions, and abilities illustrates how connection, as an embodied process, becomes a condition through which knowledge, agency, and endurance are generated. Hence, Braidotti’s notion of endurance should be understood as a fundamentally collective practice, which can perhaps be best illustrated by the title of the second episode of the series “I am also a We”.

In “Tentacular Thinking”, Haraway highlights the importance of learning to grieve together, since apparently “neither the capacity nor the practice of mourning is a human specialty” (Haraway 2016, 38). Haraway claims that people have never learned how to share and process the difficult emotions:

Mourning is about dwelling with a loss and so coming to appreciate what it means, how the world has changed, and how we must ourselves change and renew our relationships if we are to move forward from here. Genuine mourning should open us into an awareness of our dependence on and relationships with those countless others being driven over the edge of extinction. (Haraway 2016, 38)

Therefore mourning should be understood as productive, not in the sense of linear progress or advancement, but rather as an opportunity for transformation. The theorist further clarifies this by stating that “grief is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying; human beings must grieve with, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing” (Haraway 2016, 39). Grieving, then, should not be a solitary act but a collective practice that reveals and strengthens the bonds. In Haraway’s terms, loss can turn into a recognition of a shared experience.

Almost all characters of the series experienced some sort of loss during their life, whether through the death of a family member, estrangement from loved ones, or the sacrifice of a relationship for the sake of surviving within hostile social and cultural structures. While these losses initially deepen their sense of isolation, reinforcing the individualism imposed by the world around them, over time, the Sensates recognize the strength in dwelling and grieving-with. The grief is shared, allowing the loss to transform into empathy and solidarity. The members of the cluster share advice help solve problems or simply remain present together in the emotions. After Sun’s incarceration, the Sensates appear co-present multiple times to help her survive and deal with the lack of freedom. These moments go beyond simple acts of support; they embody the collective mourning, as the other protagonists grieve with her the injustice of the sentence. Similarly to Braidotti’s endurance, the shared dwelling is not a mere coping mechanism but an essential survival strategy, one that actively incites rebellion against the world centered on individualism.

The first episode of the series titled, "Limbic Resonance", also hints at the biological nature of these connections. As defined by Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini and Richard Lannon in *The General Theory of Love*, limbic resonance is a state of deep emotional and physiological connection between people. It is established by the limbic system in the brain through the release of neurochemicals. When people are attuned to one another, they affect each other's physiological states such as blood pressure, respiration, and heart rate (Lewis et al. 2007). Therefore, their lives, begin to resonate against/with each other on an even more sub-surface level. The Sensates, once their abilities develop, stop experiencing life as disconnected individuals, but rather begin to merge and entangle, forming a self that is no longer confined within the limits of a single body and mind, but one that is constantly becoming and reforming together. Stephanie L. Young and Art Herbig, in their queer interpretation of the series call it not only a disruption of the traditional understandings of self/other but rather "an interpretation of being/becoming" (2020, 73). The queerness of *Sense8* lies in the refusal of rigid boundaries, whether cultural, gendered or social. The protagonists' identities are never fixed; they are constantly in flux, fluid, and shaped by the context of the affects of their entanglements. Therefore, the being and becoming are not mutually exclusive, but rather simultaneous, signalling the potential for transformation. And although the series is filled with queerness, it is less about sexuality and more about the porosity of the self, since the characters' identities are inherently relational and collective.

Moreover, the cluster, having what can only be identified as a collective consciousness, not only blurs the spatial and temporal boundaries of reality but actively co-creates it through their shared experiences. Precisely for that reason, the Sensates transcend the perception of the reality of an individual, and as Young and Herbig claim this allows them to "truly experience empathy and connectivity" (2020, 77). The collective perception expands the limits of what can be seen, felt, and known. Instead of experiencing the world through one lens, the Sensates inhabit multiple perspectives, which makes their lives significantly richer in relationships and sensations.

This idea of co-creating reality aligns closely with affect theory's emphasis on the intersubjective nature of experience. Affect blooms in the immaterial spaces between people and does not belong to the self alone. Therefore, the Sensates, through their openness to the emotional realities of others, show that they not only come to know one another more deeply but also transform each other and

the world around them. More importantly, this mechanism, their closeness, is not simply a form of defence against BPO, but it is primarily a source of hope, beauty, and resistance. The cluster becomes a way of life for them, since the characters learn how to navigate their daily struggles with the help and presence of others. The protagonists, such as Sun and Wolfgang, who do not have families of their own, find a surprising sense of belonging and companionship in others. The newfound kinship compensates for the absence of the often failed traditional family structures, offering them an alternative form of intimacy and solidarity. Throughout the series the Sensates are frequently hesitant to share their realities with those closest to them in fear of being rejected, which may emphasize the fragile yet transformative power of the new modes of being.

However, whenever different narratives introduce the notion of collective consciousness, concerns about the potential erasure of individuality or personal agency seem to emerge. Critics of the trope often argue that, when taken to its extreme, collective consciousness risks turning into collective mindlessness, where differences are flattened and individuals succumb to homogeneity. This anxiety might reflect the underlying tension in Western cultural and philosophical thought of unity and deep interconnectedness coming at the cost of personal freedom and autonomy. Alexis Lothian's reading of *Sense8* further complicates the solely positive outlook on the series' collective consciousness plot by foregrounding the tension between utopian connectivity and structural inequalities. Lothian claims that the show evokes the "1990s digital utopias", which imagined the internet as a space of pure textual connection and post-identity transcendence, a fantasy of "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" (2016, 93). Lothian further asserts that the Sensates' extreme closeness leaves them "no choice but to recognise every other member as an equal with whom they can empathise fully" (2016, 94). Hence, although, their connection begins with a state of reluctant co-operation or dependence, with time it transforms into a more complex interdependence. The author warns against "the dangers of the idea that one could transcend inequality by transcending one's body", reminding us that digital and global media have historically produced new modalities of exploitation even as they promise liberation (2016, 94). Lothian notes that *Sense8* treads dangerously, as it fails to address the possible racial, social, and political tensions that could arise when one's life and experiences are suddenly merged with a stranger. However,

Lothain contends that “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 recognised” (2016, 94). The cluster’s developing interdependence, then, may serve as a speculative reimagining of global relationality itself. Rather than aspiring towards a post-racial, post-gender, or post-class sameness, the Sensates’ world portrays a form of global connection that insists on foregrounding mutual recognition and responsibility.

However, as Anna McFarlane suggests in her review of the show, the at times “broad brushstrokes in characterization” can be attributed to the series’ “ambitious effort at diversity”, an attempt to stage a global production within the constraints of mainstream television (2017, 150). Despite some shortcomings of the series, the cluster’s progressive merging into a shared consciousness does not erase their backgrounds, individual histories and personalities, but rather successfully employs them in the plot. The characters are capable of responding to one another’s experiences with deeper empathy. Biological families, whether functioning or not, are acknowledged, but the cluster is portrayed as a found, alternative family, built on empathy and understanding. Young and Herbig call it “a family that is defined by empathy” (2020, 81).

In *Sense8*, the cluster’s mode of relationality exemplifies a form of affective sympoiesis, an ongoing process of making-with, which resists fixed boundaries and static understandings of the self. Their connections unfold across shifting spatial and temporal dimensions, illustrating how subjectivity is continuously shaped through encounters with others rather than rigid in isolation. In the series, affect is both a pre-bodily, pre-linguistic force, as well as an interpersonal, societal property. The Sensates’ shared sensations and emotional resonances demonstrate that affect is “open-endedly social”, and dependent on context. Moreover, the circulation of affect within the cluster reveals how emotions, memories, and reactions are shaped by broader cultural, political, and historical conditions. Their sympoietic condition does not diminish the distinctiveness of each characters’ personal agency and history but rather enriches their capacity by situating them within a network of exchanges. Such a model resonates with Haraway’s and Braidotti’s work on relationality, where becoming-with others generated endless potentialities. The cluster’s interdependence reveals how individuality and collectivity are

not contrary notions but mutual and complementary states. The affective and sympoietic entanglement echoes in Zilonka and Job's framing of the series' movement from despair to hope, and from social isolation to love, care, and responsibility, which, as the critics suggest, might be a counter-response to the pressures of contemporary neoliberal modernity.

*Sense8*, then, can be understood simultaneously as a utopian dream and a critique of modern conditions marked by extreme individualism, loneliness, and rationalism. While it envisions a reality structured around entanglement, shared vulnerability, and affective attunement to one another, the series could also potentially be seen as a manifesto that calls for a reorientation of social values – from isolation and market-driven competitiveness to practices grounded in community and responsibility. Therefore, *Sense8* uses the device of collective consciousness not to erase difference but to foreground the importance of recognizing it and engaging with it. What emerges is a vision of social life in which reality, present or future, is not a fixed entity but rather a process shaped through mutual responsiveness and making-together.

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