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Tedman, Alison. "Female agency, performance and intersections of space and time in *The Wilds* (2020- 2022)." YA Studies Association Conference, 2 November 2022, Digital Conference.

This paper examines the impact of Young Adult series *The Wilds*' complex intersecting flashback structure and hallucination scenes on young female agency, within a series noted for its female-centred narrative. I will be focusing on the character of Leah Rilke, played by Sarah Pidgeon, and making reference to her visions in the final three episodes of Season 2, in addition to new flashback shots in the finale that reveal a masquerade employed for misdirection.

The Wilds ran for two seasons from 2020-2022, and built up a loyal following. It was heralded in the press for its young female cast, its proportion of female directors, producers and writers and in Season 1, feminist issues. Further series were pitched, but the show was cancelled in July 2022. Press articles discussed the way in which this popular show ended on a cliff-hanger, and quoted fan reactions. *The Wilds*' cancellation has been followed by an organised, ongoing campaign and petitions by fans.

In the opening of Season 1, a group of young women are plane wrecked on an island on the way to a retreat, Dawn of Eve. As the episode ends, we find that the crash was staged by feminist academic, Gretchen Klein. Gretchen, who has lost her University post, has set up a controlled, privately funded experiment into what young women achieve when isolated from patriarchy. The series is enunciated through flashbacks to the plane and island, and to the girls' previous lives. Scenes in the present take place in what is ostensibly a quarantine facility, where survivors are interviewed by supposed FBI trauma specialist Dan Faber and FBI agent Dean Young. Each girl's monologue introduces flashback sequences that show the material pressures of their lives before the island, including a relationship with an older man, bulimia from trying to maintain ideal body shape for diving, repressed abuse by a physical therapist, loss of a boyfriend in a hazing accident and caring for a dying father.

The island, flashbacks and signs of dystopian control remediate *Lost* (2004-10), one of the reference points noted in reviews and cited by the production team. Film flashbacks are described by Maureen Turim in her 1989 book, *Flashbacks in Film Memory and History*, as offering 'subjective truths and the emotional charge of memory', and she points out that 'these charged sequences are inserted into the less

individuated, more “objective” present unfolding of events, often combating and overturning a certain view of the law’ (1989, 12). In Season 1 of *The Wilds*, the law is framed as patriarchal, through the socio-cultural pressures on a globally-specific and partially diverse group of young women.

In Season 2, the female-led storylines are intercut with those of a male ‘control group’, the Twilight of Adam, on a separate island. Parallels include the journey, the simulated crash, hidden surveillance, and two undercover moles who report to Gretchen, one of whom is revealed to us early on, the other hidden from us until later. Some issues relating to diverse masculinities are raised, including past obsessive and controlling behaviour. Season 2 was received with a sense of loss by some fans, since less time was given to the original group, including the relationship between Toni Shalfoe and Christian Pageant Queen Shelby Goodkind.

In a 2022 adaptation study of *The Wilds*, Christina Wald correctly points to the show’s narrative complexity, as theorised by Jason Mittell. Wald analyses *The Wilds* as an ‘unmarked’ adaptation of *The Tempest*, noting that some viewers ‘will be aware of links to some of the Tempest reworkings...*Brave New World, Lord of the Flies, and Lost...*’ (2022 277-8). Complex narrative utilises flashbacks, flashforwards and occasional

flash sideways, and draws on art cinema strategies (2015). Wald links *The Wilds*' flashbacks to 'the dark underside of the 'alpha girls' discourse' (2022, 269).

I would argue that in Season 1 of *The Wilds*, its complex flashback structure becomes part of a formal system that enunciates young women's lives under patriarchy. As such, changes to the formal, textual pattern may have contributed to some viewers' initially ambivalent responses to Season 2. Some of the male characters' flashbacks imply that masculinities are materially and intersectionally impacted by patriarchal ideologies, but this is not a clear structure that unites the flashbacks.

The Wilds draws on YA dystopian strategies. It was commissioned in 2018, with shows that included Lauren Oliver's *Panic*, by Jennifer Salke, Amazon Studios' incoming CEO. Salke's stated aims included giving room to female writers and to 'sophisticated YA'. For Salke, these are texts "by young female writers that feel very addictive and sophisticated that have a young adult audience that's an older audience as well" (qtd by Goldberg, 2018). *The Wilds* develops YA dystopias' young female protagonists, sophisticated female antagonist, controlled spaces and surveillance.

YA dystopian films – notably the high profile franchises defined by Rebekah Fitzsimmons and Casey Alane Wilson as the ‘hypercanon’ (2020, ix) -also include subjective dreams that connote art cinema. In *The Wilds* Season 1, a flashforward dream shows the girls interviewed as ‘the unsinkable eight’. Martha, an indigenous American, dreams a stylised utopian musical number set on the plane. Elsewhere, the displacement of trauma, yet strength through indigenous identity are signified by non-naturalistic strategies - edits show her in her Anishinaabe Jingle dress as she kills a goat. Wald points out that ‘the rituality of this killing is emphasized by cross-cuts that blend reality, memory, and imagination’ (2022, 274). In a Season 2 finale dream, Shelby is presented as a club singer performing for Toni’s gaze, the fantasy space restoring their fractured relationship.

If Season 1’s feminist system is lessened by Season 2’s male-led flashbacks, a microcosm of this system appears in a textual figure involving Leah. Her hallucinations in episodes 6, 7 and 8 are textually linked in the Season 2 finale with new flashback shots that revisit - with a surprising shift in meaning – her narrative agency in Season 1.

Leah is portrayed as strong but in emotional turmoil, and she suffers dark moods on the island, due - as she defines it beforehand to her parents - to 'emotional devastation'. We see her relationship with older writer, Jeff, to whom she lies about her age, and who on learning this, stops all contact. After recounting this in her interview in the facility in the present, she leans dramatically over the table and begs the interviewer in a cracked voice to let her know if Jeff tried for her.

Leah is recognisable as YA's dystopia's 'rebellious girl protagonist' (Day, Green-Barteet, Montz 2014, 4). Although she pines for Jeff, she is suspicious about the island, citing '*deus ex machina*' when a bag of supplies is washed ashore. She seeks, as Day, Green-Barteet and Montz define the YA dystopian protagonist, 'the means to challenge the status quo' (Ibid.). When Leah becomes too suspicious she is trapped in a pit. After escaping she tries incessantly to relocate it, wearing herself down mentally while Shelby and another character, Fatin eventually find evidence. She also becomes empathetic to the others, including ex-diver, Rachel who is traumatised after her twin, Nora is missing from the shark attack that injures Rachel.

In Season 2 episodes 6, 7 and 8, Leah hallucinates lucid, waking conversations involving her pre-teen crush, musician Ben Folds. Their

dialogue indicates Leah's acceptance that he is a projection. The first visitation as she floats in a pool constructs the Freudian (1919) uncanny or *unheimlich*, heralded by a male voice calling her, and a point of view shot of the dark trees. There is an uncanny red light on the piano as Ben sharply tells her to respond to calls from the others who are looking for Martha. The second hallucination, by the sea, suggests that Leah is emerging from her crisis: it is lighter in tone. As Ben sings and plays and Leah dances on the beach, lens flare connotes summery freedom. One result of Leah's visions is the realisation of her love for the others on the island. Another is the awareness, as voiced by Ben, that youthful, intense 'all-consuming infatuations' can be a source of great artistic creativity, not shame.

Leah's projections are comparable to the dreams in YA dystopia that over-determine adolescent development, as they leave home to a dangerous but compelling future, and growing awareness of dystopia. They are also akin to the simulated faction test and fear landscapes in *Divergent*, which lead to self-knowledge. Executive Producer Sarah Streicher refers to Leah's scenes as part of "her coming-of-age" and explains that: "We had done a lot of talking about Leah's odyssey of the mind ...and the natural extension of that felt like she is going to be

hallucinating something from her past...” (Streicher qtd by Bucksbaum, 2022).

Leah’s changed appearance renders her a part of the hallucinated landscape, as if in virtual reality. The presence associated with immersive virtual reality is also connoted, when, after she swims to a rock with Ben, Leah opens her eyes and suddenly ‘sees’, as the audience see from a birds’ eye shot, imaginary debris from the faked crash, including Jeff’s book.

In writing of the relationship between the mind, body and virtual representation of self in virtual reality, Jacqueline Ford-Morie argues fittingly that:

The body of the participant is synchronically subsumed into the virtual self that enters into the world within the screen, which is created in the mind from what the body experiences. Entering into a territory that is not quite imaginal, and yet not fully based in solid physicality, the self becomes subsumed, bodily, consciously and subconsciously – dancing with the created space-for-becoming (Ford Morie 2007, 127)

In envisioning the dress, book, and Ben singing ‘their song’, Leah acknowledges Jeff’s material impact on her. The projections combined with brief intersecting flashbacks to different past spaces culminate in understanding. She cries out ‘I am not a lovesick child’, after pulling Ben

– i.e. herself – as if in rebirth, into the sea. Ben replies, ‘I know you’re not. But if others want to believe that’, he beckons and speaks close to her ear, ‘you let them, and you use it’.

In Season 2’s finale, this internal conversation is repeated, together with retconned clips from her time in the facility, to show that Leah constructs an emotional masquerade. After reacting amusedly to Gretchen’s pride in her growth, Leah triumphantly walks down the corridor, to a heavy beat that signifies her strength. Brief flashbacks of Leah’s Season 1 scenes include new inserts, so that as Leah leans emotionally over the agents’ desk, a reverse point of view shows their notes on her as a ‘subject’ and a ‘liability’. In her hysterical rejection of a sedative in her cell, she is passed, and palms, a door key card. She is led to find a phone in her cistern, and to call Ian, who contacts the FBI.

Leah has promoted her own agency through masquerade, consciously using expectations of female emotion with misdirection and sleight of hand. Sarah Pidgeon performs with a naturalistic emotional range, from ironic low-key seriousness at school, through joy to volatile grieving for Jeff. This makes it surprising to discover that her naturalistic performance was an act, underlining her cleverness.

Focusing on YA dystopian hero Katniss Everdeen's narrative agency in *The Hunger Games* trilogy. Driscoll and Heatwole (2018, 58-9) assess her use of feminine excess through feminine masquerade, particularly when playing Peeta's love. They cite Joan Rivière's seminal 1929 psychoanalytic concept, which illuminates intellectual women's feminised response to male authority figures, Angela McRobbie's 'postfeminist masquerade' (2009), and Judith Butler's work on gender performativity. Applying these among other sources, they suggest that Katniss's feminine masquerade offers a 'gender "legibility"' (59), understood by the games' audience in relation to Panem norms, while Katniss must also offer sincerity.

Leah's consciously performed post-feminist masquerade has been accepted by Gretchen. This extends to a lack of understanding of all young women's capabilities. As Wald (2022) states:

Gretchen pursues a rather stereotypical form of white, middle-class second-wave feminism co-opted by neo-liberalism that lacks the nuances of current intersectional feminist critique, has not absorbed constructivist gender theories, and risks simply inverting gendered power asymmetries (Wald 2022, 270).

We reinterpret Leah as capable of devising and performing masquerade through expression, voice and body. Maureen Turim usefully states that flashbacks may 'abruptly offer new meanings connected to any person'

and as such, 'imply a psychoanalytic dimension of personality' (1989, 12). The audience are forced to re-evaluate not only Leah's performance, but the discursive gender construct of the emotional young female as irrational, childlike and in excess, a construct that her masquerade reveals. Like Gretchen, the audience reassess their acceptance of Leah's 'messy' emotions and affirm young women's agency. In Leah's past scenes, her voice-over narration has been reliable, but the text's enunciation has not: it has left gaps between its intersections, where we would find evidence of Leah's skill.

Referring to material feminism, Roberta Seelinger Trites considers 'the process-of-becoming inherent in the gendered experience of adolescence' (2018, 5) through YA texts that include Libba Bray's 2018 satirical novel *Beauty Queens*. As Seelinger Trites argues, a passage in *Beauty Queens* ironically 'hails the reader, in Althusserian terms, by situating the represented reader's "knowing in being" as belonging to a consumerist American teenager who likely identifies as "feminine,"...' (18). Similarly, *The Wilds* acknowledges its viewers through the opening montage of shots from each 17-year old's life before the island, as Leah's voice-over invites us to ask what was good about the girls' previous lives. This montage, and the girls' longer flashbacks, are usefully paralleled by Driscoll and Heatwole's point in relation to Katniss

Everdeen, that 'the postfeminist girl hero must negotiate a treacherous landscape of suspicion over whether changing ideas about girlhood reflect feminist achievement and walk a tightrope between arguments about how images of girls impact on girls' desires and expectations' (58).

Seelinger Trites argues that *Beauty Queens* encourages readers' awareness through its strategies, that it 'emphasizes the importance of both *becoming* and performance' (2018, 10). She shows that in *Beauty Queens*, characters do not perform, since there is no male gaze.

Characters' 'desires lead to a blending of *becomings* as their identities merge with the environment, with each other, with their idealized former selves, and with the lived reality of their wilder new embodiments' (22).

This could equally be stated of *The Wilds*, whose characters rarely mourn culture or commodities, and share possessions, experiences and desires in communal discussion. Fatin, whose large suitcase of fashion clothes is ostensibly 'found', shares them willingly from the first night, and the girls wear them for warmth rather than spectacle. When Martha is injured on arrival, Shelby tears up her top to create a bandage. She unwillingly reveals to Leah that she has to mask gaps in her teeth, and is accused of being a princess by Toni, retorting by describing hunting and gutting a deer.

Gretchen might assume that through her experiment, Leah has moved into becoming, and being. However, because temporal order is unclear, we cannot ascertain the timing of Leah's development or know that she has changed. The intersecting Season 2 visions of Ben Folds occur, in chronological time, before Season 1 's opening narrated flashback. In this flashback, as noted, Leah defines her state after Jeff as one of 'emotional devastation', but this is a retort to her mother's use of the term 'funk'. She hears a phone in a buried girl's grave in the sand on the first night, and wastes a call by phoning Jeff, indicating her ongoing loss. However, our understanding of her psyche is partly constructed by her masquerading outburst at the facility, as this is intercut with island scenes in the episode.

Season 1 of *The Wilds* redirects televisual narrative complexity to contextualise girls' lives under patriarchy. It is true that Season 2 reduces the feminist charge of the complex flashback structure by associating it less coherently with young male lives. The young women's narrative and screen time is also reduced. However, the reveal of misdirection and withheld information in Leah's plotline reveal feminist enunciation in microcosm. In both seasons, *The Wilds*' intersections of space and time enable female agency, becoming, and intentional performativity.

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