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Report of the Workshop of the 2nd of April 2022

WRITING DIVERSITY



Participants

The **42 international scriptwriters**, présent within the scope of the CANNESERIES Writers Club.

With the participation of **Aline Marrache**, and **Priscilla Siney** of PFDM, of young talents of the association **1000 Visages** and of **Catherine Jean-Joseph Sentuc**.

Coach et facilitator

Fabienne Silvestre, Head of Institutional Relations and Diversity at CANNESERIES, Coach and Co-founder of the Lab.

Sandrine Brauer, co-president of The Collectif 5050

Observers

Lise Perottet, assistant of the Lab Femmes de Cinéma
Shirin Rashidian, Organiser of the CANNESERIES Writers Club.



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THE WORKSHOP PROCESS

This workshop took place in the framework of the **CANNESERIES Writers Club 2022**, with screenwriters from all over the world as participants. The workshop was divided into three parts. The first part provided a context for the theme: the 50/50 Collective presented its latest study [Cinégalités](#) and the Lab synthesized its [note on the place of women and diversity in series](#). Then, the screenwriters had to find inspiring characters from a series with a different gender than their own, and inspiring non-white characters. This individual exercise led to group discussions. The discussions were focused on the main gender stereotypes present in fiction and it led to the search of categories of under-represented characters in fiction.

STATE OF PLAY

As part of the 5th season of CANNESERIES, we have written a note entitled « **Parity and diversity in series: where do we stand?** » This note is based on the fact that series are now part of the daily life of a growing number of people around the world. In France, for example, 66% of the French population say they watch at least one episode of a series per week and 92% say they watch them regularly.

Series have an impact on the worldview and on the collective imaginary of the viewers. We have therefore worked on bringing together as a synthesis the existing information on the subject of the place of women and of any « under-represented » group in series. Our note is a synthesis of the data, key figures and major trends that run through the world of series on a global and French scale. **This note is an inventory of what exists and what is still missing in the serial universe:** behind the camera, via the creative teams and in front of the camera, through the characters we see on screen.

To take a few key figures showing these disparities, in the world of series, in the United States only 35% of scriptwriters are women and they represent only 31% of the series directors. In France in 2018, according to the CNC, of all French TV shows, 2% of episodes were written and directed by women only, while 48% of episodes were written and directed by men only. These disparities behind the camera have strong consequences for the characters portrayed on screen. This note was presented at the beginning of the workshop, to contextualize the issues and the crucial and powerful role of series writers.

To take a deeper dive into the world of series, starting with the societal power they wield, going behind the scenes, and ending with the characters you see on screen, we invite you to discover [our note](#), the English version will be soon available on our website.



GENDER STEREOTYPES IN THE WORLD OF FILMS AND SERIES

The scriptwriters participating in the workshop had to find the main gender stereotypes present in television fiction and relate them to fictional characters. Here we try to classify the main stereotypes mentioned by the participants. We would like to point out the following: on the one hand we have not seen all the series mentioned below, on the other hand this is an exercise where the proposals are very subjective. You who read this review may not agree with the stereotypes conveyed by this or that character mentioned. These are situated points of view of scriptwriters and a non-exhaustive list, as the exercise is very limited in time and this was intended to generate spontaneous responses.¹

1) Gender stereotypes associated with female characters identified by workshop participants

Gender stereotypes are conveyed **in the character and personality** of the female characters on screen. The stereotype that came up most often in the different groups was that the female characters were « **hysterical** », crazy, couldn't control themselves, and couldn't keep their cool. The characters cited as examples are Claire Danes in HOMELAND, Cassie in EUPHORIA, Lynette Scavo in DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES. The second stereotype that came up in several groups was that women would behave in a submissive way, that they would have little agency². These characters, more objects of desire than subjects of their lives, are for example embodied in the characters of Laura Burney (SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY) or in most of the female characters of MAD MEN.

Women are often portrayed as having a « **princess** » **behavior**, very precious like Marnie Michaels (GIRLS) or Rachel Green (FRIENDS). They are also portrayed as very jealous (DOCTOR FOSTER), as constantly showing their emotions and crying very regularly like the character of Hannah Horvath (GIRLS). They are also « **weak** » **physically and/or psychologically** like Jessica Brody (HOMELAND), Gabrielle Solis and Susan Mayer (DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES), Skyler White (BREAKING BAD) or Alicia Florrick (THE GOOD WIFE). The non-white female characters are written as very stereotypical, with personalities that would be in excess, very emotional and in constant exaggeration like Gabriel Solis (DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES), Jane (JANE THE VIRGIN) or Betty Suarez (UGLY BETTY).

Female characters have recurring aspirations and tastes in the fictional world, which carry persistent stereotypes. The stereotype that came up most regularly was that of **shopping addiction**. Female characters are said to be obsessed with material things. Examples include Carrie Bradshaw (SEX AND THE CITY), Haley Dunphy (MODERN FAMILY) and Hilary Banks (THE FRESH PRINCE OF BEL-AIR).

¹ In this report we talk a lot about gender identity, sexual orientation and gender expression, if you are not clear about these terms, if you are French speaking, we recommend that you listen to the episode of the Camille podcast « [Déclinez votre identité](#) » Otherwise, we recommend you read articles on the « [genderbread person](#) ».

² Agency can be defined as « the faculty of action of a being ». It is the capacity of an individual to act. (Source : [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agency_\(philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agency_(philosophy)))



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Workshop participants pointed out that female characters **would be motivated solely by money and the prospect of getting rich**, such as the fictional characters Gabriel Solis (DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES), Claire Underwood (HOUSE OF CARDS), the teenage girls Blair, Serena, Jenny from GOSSIP GIRL, the female characters from BREAKING BAD or Cookie Lyon (EMPIRE).

When female characters have so-called « masculine » traits, these traits or aspirations are not treated in the same way as male characters and in fact crystallize a form of « machismo ». Ambition in women systematically becomes a vice or a flaw. The character of Claire Underwood (HOUSE OF CARDS) is very ambitious, she is written very negatively, as having an inordinate ambition that would make her evil. Women who have authority and give orders are seen as « bossy » and unpleasant by their male counterparts. This is certainly the case with Monica Geller (FRIENDS) or Lynette Scavo (DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES). On the contrary, some female characters are highly valued when they adopt codes generally associated with men: those who adopt codes of masculinity are painted more positively than other women. This model of « strong women » is notably present in the BILLIONS series.

The sexual and romantic orientation of the female characters is also a source of stereotypes. The vast majority of television dramas present heterosexual female characters **whose happiness can only be achieved through an intimate and sincere relationship with a male character**. The heterosexual couple is a crucial component of their happiness and personal fulfillment, as it is the case for the characters of SEX AND THE CITY, those of BRIDGERTON or even the main character in FLEABAG. This heterosexuality is often linked to motherhood as an obligatory passage. The fictional women **are particularly fulfilled and find meaning in their lives during motherhood**. The characters mentioned here are Alicia Florrick (THE GOOD WIFE), Monica Geller (FRIENDS), and Cersei Lannister (GAME OF THRONES), the mother characters in the French show DO NOT THIS, DO NOT THAT. **Lesbian characters, when present in fiction, most often have a very masculine gender expression**, yet gender expression isn't correlated from sexual and romantic orientation. In television fiction, this is rarely the case. The characters mentioned are those in WORK IN PROGRESS and THE MARVELOUS MR MAISEL.

The last gender stereotypes present in female characters in fiction according to the participants of the workshop are related to **the physical appearance of the characters**. The main female characters are systematically thin, white and able-bodied. Some of them fit perfectly into the classic beauty criteria and correspond to the image of the « bimbo », being presented as very beautiful but not very intelligent, examples were given of Penny Hofstadter (BIG BANG THEORY), Peggy Bundy (MARRIED... WITH CHILDREN), Emily (EMILY IN PARIS) and Gabriel Solis (DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES). Women who don't fit the classic beauty criteria would be eternally single and unhappy (GIRLS). **Non-white women are systematically relegated to the second rank**, as friends of the white heroine (CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM or SEX EDUCATION).



2) Gender stereotypes associated with male characters identified by workshop participants

The vast majority of male characters in television dramas **are heterosexual and they are often unfaithful**. This is the case of Tony Soprano (THE SOPRANOS), Noah Solloway (THE AFFAIR) or Don Draper (MAD MEN). **When a male character is non-heterosexual, he systematically addresses either a so-called "flamboyant" gender expression or a so-called very feminine gender expression**. The characters mentioned are Eric in SEX EDUCATION, Herve in CALL MY AGENT, and Will Truman in WILL & GRACE. As mentioned above in the section on the representation of lesbian women, it is a homophobic stereotype to represent all non-heterosexual men with the same gender expression.

The interests and personalities of the male characters are also markers of gender stereotypes. **Men are portrayed as addicts, especially to alcohol or drugs**, like Jimmy McNulty in THE WIRE. They would be obsessed with sports like Nate Jacobs (EUPHORIA). They would often be stupid like Hal (MALCOM IN THE MIDDLE) or Al Bundy (MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN). They would regularly have vulgar characteristics, big aficionado of meat skewers and barbecue afternoons like the male characters of THE SLAP for example.

According to the writers participating in the workshop, the male characters **often adopt codes of hegemonic masculinity**, a form of virility that is highly valued in patriarchal societies. **These are men who climb the social ladder and thrive in positions of power are presented as true « alpha males »**, such as the SUITS male characters. Men are regularly portrayed as violent. This stereotype was repeated in many groups. The characters of Tony Soprano (THE SOPRANOS), Dexter Morgan (DEXTER), Walter White (BREAKING BAD) or Jack Bauer (24) have been cited. **This violence as a constitutive characteristic of male characters is not necessarily questioned or portrayed as a flaw**. It is a violence that allows for the protection of others and conveys the image of **the savior man** as in THE MANDALORIAN. To this notion of the savior man we can add a perspective of race: one group mentioned the stereotype of the **« white savior »** presented as superior to others, especially to non-white characters and who delivers non-white people. Beyond the issue of gender here, let's give as an example the character of Daenerys Targaryen in GAME OF THRONES.

The writing of non-white male characters can also convey racist stereotypes. **At the intersection of gender stereotypes and skin color**, Latin American men are often portrayed as drug dealers. Male and non-white characters are very often involved in the writing of drug trafficking stories. **The same is true for drug dealers: they are almost systematically represented as racialized** (THE WIRE and NARCOS).

No group mentioned the representation of non-binary characters. This absence is particularly striking: in order to question gender stereotypes present on screen, the characters would have to be present on screen. For characters whose gender does not correspond to a male/female binarity, the fictional characters are so few and so little emphasized that it is difficult to mention them and, in fact, to find stereotypes in the way they are represented.



UNDERREPRESENTED CHARACTER CATEGORIES

The writers then listed by group examples of underrepresented characters in TV shows. The example given was that of older non-white characters: according to the Collectif 5050's [Cinégalités](#) study of 115 French films in 2019, among characters who are between 15 and 20 years old, 39% of characters are perceived as non-white. This figure drops to 10% of non-white characters among those between 65 and 79 years old. For characters over 80, 100% are white. In most of the examples given, this is an intersection of several categories of discriminated people. Here are the examples that were cited by the different groups of writers.

Underrepresented and gender-related characteristics of the character:

Work and Home Sector:

- Characters of women who do not want children, who are fully happy and fulfilled without children. This category, which was mentioned by many groups, could offset the stereotype presented above that women would be consistently either mothers or mothers-to-be.
- Women who are fulfilled in their professional careers, who lead teams and are respected by other employees.
- Women in more varied professional environments, who do not necessarily work in the care sector. For example, women researchers, scientists, who work in the technology field.
- Men who stay at home and take care of the household, « stay at home dads ». It is usually the female characters who are portrayed as stay-at-home moms while their male counterparts thrive in the working world and are largely absent from the family home.
- Men who work in computers, strong and healthy. Characters who work in computers often appear as « geeks » who pay no attention to their health or appearance.

Personality and physical appearance:

- Male characters who express their emotions and feelings. Men who cry, for example.
- Immoral women, whose immorality does not stem from trauma or from sexual and gender-based violence of which they have been victims.
- Less sexualized female characters. For example, super-heroines with less sexualizing outfits.
- Main character female that do not fit a conventional beauty. Characters who do not perfectly fit the so-called conventional beauty criteria are too often relegated to the background, friends or relatives of the main character, but they are rarely the protagonists.

Underrepresented characteristics related to the character's perceived racial identity:

- Characters perceived as Asian in French fictions. Characters perceived as Asian in French fictions are few, they are generally stereotyped and occupy secondary roles.
- Characters perceived as Arab with complex, interesting roles. Characters perceived as North African are very few in television fictions and when they are present, it is often through very stereotyped characters, generally in a very negative way.
- Latin American characters and immigrant characters that would not present stereotypes.
- Characters perceived as Arab in the scientific professions, such as doctors or physicians for example.
- Characters perceived as Arab who are non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender
- Interesting and strong Arab women. Arab women are often portrayed negatively or with very low agency, a stereotypical representation at the intersection of sexism and racism.
- Non-white people in positions of power : a black woman president.



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Underrepresented and sexual orientation-related characteristics:

- The category that came up most consistently across the groups was the lack of on-screen presence of older LGBTQIA+ characters. Non-heterosexual characters on screen are consistently young.
- In fact, non-heterosexual couples who have been together for a long time and are happy are very rarely portrayed in fiction.
- Asexual characters as main characters. If certain categories of characters begin to appear on the screen, they are often relegated to the second rank and occupy only little the principal role.
- Asexual characters presented as beautiful and physically attractive. Asexual characters are often stereotyped as characters who do not care about themselves and the image they give off.
- Bisexual people.
- Lesbian women.
- Transgender men.
- Polyamorous characters.
- Lesbian "butch" women, that is, with what is said have a rather masculine gender expression.

Underrepresented and age-related characteristics of characters:

- Older characters who would not be secondary characters.
- Elderly characters who are full of life, who have aspirations, activities, who are people in their own right and whose only characteristic would not be their advanced age.
- Women over 60.
- Happy menopausal women who could talk about it openly without it being a problem or something to worry about.
- Older bisexual characters.

Underrepresented characteristics related to the physicality of the characters:

- Characters who are fat and who are the main characters. As for the elderly, let them be complex and complete characters, and let their weight not be the only characteristic of these characters.

Underrepresented and disability-related characteristics:

- Main characters with disabilities should not be the only characteristic and subject of the story.
- People with disabilities who are not portrayed as good guys but as antagonists.
- Characters who represent certain mental illnesses in a fair way. These portrayals would have to truly take into account the experiences of the people involved.

Underrepresented and religion-related characteristics:

- Religious and believing characters
- Characters of the Jewish faith in French fiction

Underrepresented characteristics related to socio-professional and geographical conditions:

- Characters who do not live in the city but in the countryside
- Characters from different social classes such as workers or « poor people »
- People who are politically active and sincere in their objectives and their words
- People who militate for ecology



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RE-DRAW THE LINES

Participants finally had time to share in groups and come up with **solutions for moving the lines in fiction**. Presenting characters that would be less stereotypical is largely a matter of writing. In 2021 at the CANNESERIES Writers Club, this theme was the subject of an entire workshop [whose report can be found on our site](#). To conclude, each of the screenwriters present had to think about the underrepresented characters they would dream of writing. This intimate moment of reflection did not lead to a restitution during the workshop: **everyone was able to leave with their own ideas and, who knows, with sketches of characters that will populate our collective imaginary of tomorrow.**