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An Open Letter to Netflix

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Abstract
If there is one thing that I will be absolutely ashamed in admitting to you, it's that I love television. Love it. Not in a turn-it-on-watch-whatever-all-TV-rocks kind of way, but in an I'm-overly-obsessed-with-15-shows-at-a-time kind of way, to the point where I could say that being able to watch the latest episode of Suits or Community could easily be the highlight of my day (week, year…). [excerpt]

Keywords
Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, television, female lead roles, acting, strong female

Disciplines
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AN OPEN LETTER TO NETFLIX

April 8, 2013

If there is one thing that I will be absolutely ashamed in admitting to you, it’s that I love television. Love it. Not in a turn-it-on-watch-whatever-all-TV-rocks kind of way, but in an I’m-overly-obsessed-with-15-shows-at-a-time kind of way, to the point where I could say that being able to watch the latest episode of *Suits* or *Community* could easily be the highlight of my day (week, year...).

In my ever-progressing relationship with the medium of television, I have come to recognize the recent tendency for “shows with a strong female lead” to be its own genre – *what do you want to watch? A drama? A comedy? A strong female lead?* You see it on Netflix, you see articles about it all over the internet. It’s trendy to watch television shows with “strong female leads.” Or perhaps, if you identify as male, it is emasculating to admit to someone else that your favorite show is classified by Netflix to be in this category...*dude, you like a show where a girl gets to do something awesome every episode? Give me your man card.* I, too, get excited about this category, joking to my man-friend the other day that “when I get a Netflix account, it’ll probably only suggest shows to me in one genre.”

So what does this category mean? What is the difference between a “female lead” and a “strong female lead”? It seems to me that according to Netflix, the difference is precisely – nothing. Any show that has 1) a person identifying as a woman in it, and 2) that woman talking or doing something, is a show with a “strong female”. Now, I don’t want to speak for Netflix or assume that I understand their motivations behind this...but maybe this is a hugely progressive and pro-woman decision on behalf of Netflix executives to make the statement “ALL WOMEN ARE STRONG, SO ALL TV SHOWS WITH FEMALE LEADS ARE TV SHOWS WITH STRONG FEMALE LEADS.”

*Or maybe not.*

Let’s take a quick moment to point out the obvious – Netflix does not have a category for “strong male leads,” let alone a category for “male leads.” The assumption is that TV shows probably have male leads, and that if they do, obviously they are “strong” male leads because that is *natural, expected, unchangeable*. So if the underlying assumption is that all television shows revolve around awesome, cool, powerful, respectable men, of course it’s...
important to point out how remarkable it is when a show doesn’t follow this mold. Hence, the introduction of  
“strong female lead.” Hmm.. strong, female…almost an oxymoron, isn’t it?

Imagine if we had the category “TV Shows With A Weak Male Lead”? What would that mean? I guess we have to  
think about what a “weak male” is in our society. Perhaps a show in this category would have a male who cared  
more about romance than about his career. This male character could spend a significant amount of time  
worrying about his appearance, with a heavy emphasis on whether or not he was “thin enough” or “pretty enough”  
for someone else. Or perhaps we could get more dramatic, and he could consistently be rescued from dangerous  
situations by a female counterpart, instead of the other way around. He could be emotional or care more about  
photography or fashion than football. Emotions, caring about appearance, romance — none of this is what we  
consider “manly,” but all of this is what we consider feminine, and therefore weak. And you know what? I’m a  
woman, and I’m emotional, and I care about my appearance, and I’m in love with love, but I don’t think that makes  
me weak. I think that makes me, you know, a person.

But even as I want to recognize that there is nothing wrong with wearing your emotions on your sleeve or getting  
TOTALLY PUMPED when your shoes perfectly match your outfit (best day ever), I also want to remind everyone  
that there is more to women than just that. Women also have jobs, and you know, a lot of times we’re pretty good  
at them. Many of us go to school and care about school and do well in school. We have friends of all genders who  
we talk to about stuff that is not romance, but also sometimes stuff that is romance. It just depends. Sometimes  
we’re awesome at listening and other times we’re good at getting things done. And also there are probably lots of  
individuals who identify as women who totally-one-hundred-percent disagree with me. And that’s totally cool and  
also expected because we’re allowed to have opinions and get angry and talk about it and yell about it and learn  
from each other. And we can do all of that while also maybe being in love or maybe not being even a little bit in  
love.

So, Netflix, how about designing a rubric that determines when a woman is “strong” and when she’s not? It might  
sound like I’m being facetious (and okay, maybe I am), but let’s take this seriously. Netflix executives  
(Netflixecutives, if you will), it’s time we make a Bechdel Test for television, so that we can determine whether or  
not these shows are doing a good enough job of representing the women you see in the real world, out here  
where we are.

Admittedly, the Bechdel Test began as a joke, and the fact that so many films fail the test despite the  
embarrassingly low criteria proves that there is a problem. But the solution will require a rubric that has much  
higher standards for female characters. Here’s how it could look:

“TV Shows With Strong Female Leads”

Shows with women at the forefront who do more than just fall in love – they have jobs, opinions, and a purpose.  
They are heterosexual, homosexual, black, Asian, indigenous. They are interesting. They matter.  
These women would represent the women I see every day – my friends, my peers, my professors, my bosses, my  
mother. I believe that women are strong, but I do not believe that women have been represented this way in  
television. Maybe Netflixecutives aren’t the right group of people to task with the job to challenge the norms of  
television, but if not them, who?
Q. WHY DO YOU WRITE STRONG FEMALE CHARACTERS?
A. BECAUSE YOU’RE STILL ASKING ME THAT QUESTION

— JOSS WHEDON