

## The Deconstruction of Trauma in *WandaVision*

### Introduction

The premiering episode of *WandaVision*, the first non-cinematic addition to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), opened to a confused audience. After all, the last time one of the titular characters, Vision, appeared on screen, he was killed twice. Over the course of nine episodes, *WandaVision* weaves a narrative of sitcom tropes and superhero bravado, and as the story develops, it becomes an account of trauma, loss, and recovery. Although *WandaVision* is about the *creation* of a false reality, it is *deconstructionist* at heart. The relationship between trauma and deconstruction is brought to the forefront of the show, highlighting the multitude of meanings that proliferate when deconstruction is used to expose a broader view on grief, trauma, and recovery. *WandaVision* examines the experience of trauma recovery through deconstruction, particularly the deconstruction of genre, Vision, and Wanda's own past traumatic experiences.

### Deconstruction of Genre

Although it is not revealed until late in the show that Wanda is responsible for the Hex, the hexagonal border surrounding and enchanting Westview, from the first episode, Wanda is deconstructing and evaluating the conventions of the sitcom genre. As iterated by Dalton and Linder, one of the primary concerns of the situational comedy genre is the prevailing role of social codes and the struggle of the main characters to align with it (36); the first several episodes of *WandaVision*, following this convention, center on Wanda and Vision's attempts to appear as a normal couple. By obeying many of the sitcom "rules" that remained consistent over the decades, *WandaVision* – more specifically, Wanda herself – performs a deconstructionist critique of the genre, analyzing the changes that occurred in the genre over the century and highlighting the instability that runs beneath all genres, subject as they are to cultural change.

This instability is prevalent throughout *WandaVision*. Not only is reality itself changeable, undergoing a significant shift for every sitcom decade, but the characters in Wanda's world are decentered; they are themselves rendered unstable and variable, unified only by Wanda's vision – which is itself multiplied and decentered by Agatha's interference.

In *Ariadne's Thread*, J. Miller describes the complication of analyzing literature. If a piece of literature were a labyrinth, then the analysis thereof is Ariadne's thread, the guiding force that solves the puzzle. However, in solving the maze, the original pattern must be traced and reinforced again with the thread – “the thread is the labyrinth,” as Miller writes, “and at the same time it is a repetition of the labyrinth” (Miller 19). Just as the thread examines and repeats the labyrinth, *WandaVision* examines the sitcom genre in its multiplicity, creating that repetition that “disturbs, suspends, or destroys [. . .] linearity” (Miller 19). The repetition of the labyrinth is recurrent in *WandaVision*, as each sitcom-based episode traces out the expected tropes and conventions for a new decade-specific sitcom – tropes and conventions that are, themselves, threads of labyrinths of previous decade-specific sitcoms. This deconstruction of the genre is consistently pressed throughout the season in both obedience to and disregard of the conventions. The audience laughter expected of sitcoms is constant, but transformed in several uses, such as when Mr. Hart nearly dies at the dinner table (“Filmed Before a Live Studio Audience” 10:01) and when Norm eerily jokes after pleading for Vision's help just moments before (“On a Very Special Episode” 20:38). At these moments, with the unexpected casual canned laughter, the elements of the genre are most exposed; when does it stop becoming a sitcom? At what point does the path of the thread create a new labyrinth altogether? How can the limited, lighthearted scope of the sitcom carry the emotional weight that Wanda operates under throughout the series?

When the full force of Wanda's trauma is revealed in the eighth episode, it's harshly asymmetrical to the foibles she and Vision face in the sitcom world.

Why, then, would Wanda outlet her trauma using the American sitcom form? The in-universe explanation begins with the significance of the sitcom in Wanda's past. In episode 8, it is revealed that Wanda's family would watch sitcoms together in Sokovia, and her affinity for the genre follows her for the rest of her life, particularly in moments of emotional and physical strain. Sitcoms have always been connected to trauma for Wanda – it was while watching an episode of the *Dick Van Dyke Show* that Wanda's house in Sokovia was bombed, killing her parents. More than this, the very genre conventions lend themselves towards trauma repression – for it is repression, not expression, that Wanda creates a false reality. As the Maximoff family explains in episode 8, sitcoms are full of “problem[s], but more silly than scary” (13:56), “silly mischief that always becomes fine” (14:07), and, at the end of the episode “you realize it was all a bad dream” (16:30). Sitcoms, in reality, “may be entertaining, but they are never just entertainment” (Dalton and Linder, 12 *America Viewed* 12). The conventions and stories told in sitcoms hold an important place in the development of the social consciousness, and it is no different for Wanda.

For Wanda, the sitcom becomes a safe haven of order and stability, even as she destabilizes reality itself in her dissection of it. Wanda utilizes the seemingly simple plasticity of the sitcom genre, which is in itself far more nuanced and complicated than it appears with a broad interpretation of morality and culture (Dalton and Linder, *America Re-viewed* 244-246). Trauma resists comprehension (Caruth 4); this is why the deconstructed sitcom form is used. With incomprehensible trauma, Wanda turns to a seemingly stable reality with the possibility for complex undercurrents, and it is within this reality that she is able to explore her repressed

traumatic events. In the first episode, Wanda cracks a plate over Vision's head (01:51), emulating a part of her past in which both she and Thanos killed Vision by destroying his skull. However, "he's not really injured" because "[i]t's not that kind of show" ("Previously On" 23:05). The sitcom, with its American-nuclear consistency, becomes the canvas upon which Wanda begins to comprehend her repressed trauma, particularly as it relates to Vision, the most recent in a string of loss.

### **Vision and the Trauma of the Self**

*WandaVision's* Vision establishes a connection between memory, trauma, and deconstruction. First, this is steeped in Wanda's conceptualization of Vision, whose death is at the center of Wanda's creation of the Hex. Wanda's breakdown, after all, occurs only after she finds the empty lot where she and Vision may have lived out their lives, had he survived ("Previously On" 34:24). Unlike the rest of Westview (excepting Billy and Tommy), Vision cannot exist outside of the Hex; as shown in the sixth episode, he begins to dissolve as soon as he leaves the sphere of Wanda's creation. Vision, even more than the average civilian of Westview, is a construction of Wanda's. While characters such as Mr. and Mrs. Hart are a part of the Hex only as they are brainwashed by Wanda, Vision is actually made of the same material that constructs all of Wanda's illusions – her Ariadne's thread of multiplying and repeating meaning. It is through this fantastical medium that *WandaVision* examines the construction of self and the dissolution of identity, all through the lens of traumatic recovery. The Vision of *WandaVision* is not a reanimated, living incarnation of the character that lives in other products of the MCU. Vision, more than any other character, undergoes the same process of deconstruction performed upon the sitcom genre. According to Miller, the "self exists as the product of a promissory performative contract, just as a new state does after a declaration of independence" (Miller 33).

The Hex is the “promissory performative contract.” Once this contract is dissolved, Vision no longer exists. Vision is sewn of Ariadne’s thread, a copy of Wanda’s imperfect memories of him, tainted as they are by trauma. He is a production of the Lacanian gaze, a character that exists only in the interpretation of another character.

In her fundamental book on trauma studies, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth reifies trauma as a wound and a voice that cries out from it (2). Wanda’s wound: Vision’s voice. It is Wanda’s trauma, not Vision’s, that is at the center of his creation. After all, the Vision of *WandaVision* has no memory of life before Westview (“Previously On” 31:17), and, for the first several episodes, he plays his role perfectly within the sitcom dialogue – he is a supporting character in Wanda’s reality. Just as in episode 1, where Vision increases productivity at his company despite having no idea what the company produces (“Filmed Before A Live Studio Audience” 6:46), Vision is initially used as a tool for trauma recovery and completely unaware of it. Vision’s connection to Wanda’s trauma is investigated from the same deconstructionist lens that frames the entire narrative. In the final episode, Wanda tells him, “You are my sadness and my hope. But mostly you’re my love” (“The Series Finale” 35:36). He has been “a voice with no body, a body but not human and now a memory made real” (ep 9 36:13); a voice crying from a wound; a wound stitched together with a deconstructing thread.

The emphasis on trauma and memory extends beyond Wanda’s perception of Vision; the relationship between Wanda’s trauma and the Vision of the Hex is complicated when he develops an independent consciousness. From the middle of the season to the conclusion, Vision’s journey is largely shaped by one question – who, or what, is he? Once Vision realizes that he is a production of a false reality, he begins a literary deconstruction on himself, seeking

answers from Darcy ( ep 7 22:26), Wanda (ep 9 35:33), and White Vision (ep 9), eventually uncovering the multiplying variables of identity that confuses a unified meaning. *WandaVision* introduces the deconstruction of self and identity into the dialogue of grief, demonstrated largely in Vision and his temporary adversary, White Vision (also called Anti-Vision). To “live without the illusion of selfhood, to feel one’s selfhood doubled, tripled, dissolved, as though by demonic possession [. . .] would be another kind of madness” (Miller 34). Vision undergoes a literal doubling, facing a version of himself that has as much claim on his identity as he does. Using the famous thought experiment the Ship of Theseus, Vision performs a deconstruction on identity that mirrors the relationship between signifier and signified. What is at the heart of identity? Does Vision, constructed from the mind stone that constituted original Vision have a greater claim to the identity than White Vision, who has the original physical form? Is the rotting ship the Ship of Theseus, or is it the unblemished duplicate? “Perhaps,” Vision concludes, “the rot is the memories” (“The Season Finale” 19:21). It is only after White Vision’s memories, including the traumatic experience of both of his deaths (“The Season Finale” 20:26-27), are restored to him that he is declared the true Vision (20:55). Self “lies in the capacity to find or *create* individual, personal meaning from a traumatized or tortured past” (Horvitz 134). The rot, or trauma, is as much a part of the identity as the planks.

### **Traumatic Deconstruction and Deconstruction of Trauma**

And so the rot, a force that both deconstructs and is deconstructed, becomes the driving focus of *WandaVision*. Wanda undergoes a similar process of self-deconstruction, especially in the last three episodes of the series, where the Hex begins malfunctioning. In episode 8, Wanda’s past trauma is re-examined by Agatha, broken down to analyze the many layers of trauma and identity within each traumatic event. Starting with her near-death experience with a bomb as a

child, Wanda revisits her traumas chronologically, associating each event with one of the sitcoms mimicked in *WandaVision*. Throughout the show, Wanda's thread traces a breakdown of sitcoms; in episode 8, Wanda's thread traces a breakdown of her own traumas, another duplication of the labyrinth. In "follow[ing] the motif of the line" again, Wanda does not "simplify the knotted problems of narrative form but [. . .] retrace[s] the whole tangle from the starting place of a certain point of entry" (Miller 4). Wanda's delineation of trauma, while clarifying the premise of the show, does not entirely unify it. Rather, it adds another layer of meaning to the already complex labyrinth. The thread is intricately tracing through the labyrinth in the search for order, the solving of the maze, but, in that same action, creates a web of itself – "pattern is here superimposed on pattern" (Miller 12). Wanda becomes the narrative of Ariadne and Arachne unified by Miller. They are one entity that produces both order and chaos; in *WandaVision*, the creation of a sitcom form that is both linear (in its chronology and consistency with traditional conventions) and complex (in the phantasm of its creation). Wanda is the thread attempting towards unity and sense and, at the same time, the author of the labyrinth itself, the creator of the Hex and the subject of the trauma it is replicating. The "line of Ariadne's thread is at once the means of retracing a labyrinth that is already there and is itself the labyrinth [. . .] [therein is] Ariadne anamorphosed into Arachne" (Miller 16).

Perhaps most vitally, it is through this deconstruction, multiplication, and creation that Wanda begins to address the wound and the voice defined by Caruth. Just as Miller analyzes the value of deconstructionist critique as the replication of the labyrinth, Caruth views trauma not as an escape from an event, but rather its persistence (5). Wanda describes her grief "like this wave washing over me, again and again. It knocks me down, and when I try to stand up, it just comes for me again [. . .] It's just going to drown me" ("Previously On" 24:10). In Caruth's terms (2),

Wanda's trauma is not fully experienced until it repeats itself. For some victims of trauma, "these repetitions [of trauma] are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the individual's own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control" (Caruth 1). Even though Wanda is the creator of the Hex that repeats and copes with the trauma, she is not actively aware of this, and it is Agatha, not Wanda, that initiates the final, most literal repetition of her past. Agatha not only forces Wanda to revisit traumatic events; she forces her to live through them again. Wanda is not a passive audience in episode 8. She physically becomes the past version of herself and relives at least a part of the trauma (12:59), though this is not by choice – it is by "the possession of some people by a sort of fate" (Caruth 1). However, without this "emotional and cerebral recognition of wounded and ravaged past, personal and political change is impossible" (Horvitz 57). Despite her initial powerlessness, crippled as she is by the deconstructive force of her trauma, Wanda finishes the show by re seizing absolute control of the Hex, reclaiming her trauma as her own. Finally, Wanda finds a therapy in the ultimate deconstruction, as the Hex itself dissolves over the course of the final episode. Trauma is a deconstructive force. *WandaVision* paints trauma recovery, too, as an act of deconstruction, one that proactively and retroactively retraces the labyrinth, recalls the wound, and re-examines repression.

### **Conclusion**

"The only way forward is back," Agatha Harkness taunts Wanda in the eighth episode (17:49). The world of *WandaVision* shows this to be true. Wanda goes back to the basics: the sitcom art form that, in its simplicity, dissolves into a complex maze of meaning. *WandaVision* revolves around the power of retracing, deconstructing, and, through these, recovering. The show



deconstructs trauma; trauma deconstructs the characters; and the characters deconstruct reality to cope. By the end of the show, Wanda has worked through her trauma and come to a more complete sense of self (“The Series Finale” 27:01). Deconstruction is wound, voice, labyrinth and thread, both rot and rebuilding, and *WandaVision* ultimately stands as testament to the force of trauma and the necessity of experiencing it.

## Works Cited

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