

Challengers: A cultural studies commentary on the fire and ice of filmic desires

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Francesca Sobande** 

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Abstract

Challengers is filled with depictions of desire and the power of perception. It continues Luca Guadagnino's cinematic work, known for lushly lingering in the 'what ifs' of life and love. *Challengers* portrays the back and forth dynamic of intimacy and competition in the exclusive world of professional tennis. Throughout the film are references to heat and coldness, and forms of watching and being watched. Addressing that, I reflect on the fire and ice – temperature, temperamentality and tensions – of desire in *Challengers*, and in surrounding commentaries. Informed by Stuart Hall's work on fantasy and the media, this reflection includes a close reading of the representation of *Challengers* protagonist, Tashi Duncan (played by Zendaya, who is also a producer on the film). Overall, I analyse ideas about desire in film, in audience responses and in cultural studies. Building on my research on the pop culture concept of 'the Internet's boyfriend', I also consider what online discourse on *Challengers* suggests about societal imaginaries of desire.

Keywords

Cinema, desire, film, Internet's boyfriend, intimacy, Luca Guadagnino

Dynamics between desire and media have been the subject of crucial research on the force and feeling of popular culture (Hall, 1997). Recently, Johnson (2024) provided insights on 'Lusting out loud: racialised aurality, podcast intimacy, and the uses of thirst', foregrounding the desires of Black women, which are 'often erased or distorted in the media' (p. 1). Further back, Hall's (2024 [1968]) 'A Cure for Marriage: A Case Study in Method' involved an in-depth analysis of Nancy Burrage Owen's popular story from

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Woman magazine, about a woman's experience of desire and fantasy when seeing a film featuring Cary Grant at the cinema. Hall's (2024 [1968]) enlightening analysis of 'Cure for Marriage'

offers an example of method in cultural studies. It is a 'case-study', not an exhaustive piece of work. Thus it does not attempt a general cultural survey of popular fiction in women's magazines, nor a full account of the content and attitudes of the popular commercial women's press as a whole. Its findings cannot therefore be generalised for the whole field. In contrast, the study attempts the intensive analysis of a single paradigmatic case: *one* story.

Informed by such work on desire and media, I now turn my attention to *Challengers* (2024), which features Emmy-winning Zendaya in the leading role of Tashi Duncan – a fictional and flawed tennis star who has been the object of intrigue in both fannish and critical corners of the Internet.

Challengers drew me in with the promise of Luca Guadagnino's languid landscapes of all that lies between people in moments of undoing and remaking. The film follows the layered sporting, sexual, and romantic relations between tennis players Tashi, Art Donaldson (played by Mike Faist), and Patrick Zweig (played by Josh O'Connor). Audiences witness Art and Patrick vying for Tashi's attention over numerous life stages, while the two wrestle with their own unspoken intimacy. Maybe, first and foremost, this is a film about power. As such, following on from seeing *Challengers* on its UK release day, my mind was occupied with hot and cold audience responses to it. As the night sky kissed the close of day, I walked home and mulled over different perceptions of who takes centre stage/court in this film about three lovers and their individual, yet interdependent desires. I was also fascinated by audience desires to know who 'won' in the end – from questions about who wins the pulsating tennis match in the last scene, to people's desire to know if Tashi stays with her husband Art or returns to her ex-boyfriend Patrick, and whether Art and Patrick return to each other (beyond their tense and tender embrace during the film's climax). Mindful of all of that, this piece provides a cultural studies commentary on the fire and ice – temperature, temperamentality, and tensions – of desire in *Challengers* and the society it is part of. Bringing together elements of textual analysis and audience responses, I discuss what representations in *Challengers* and surrounding discourse suggest about societal norms and imaginaries related to desire.

More than hot or cold: cinematic depictions of desire and power

Challengers marks a continuation of 'Luca Guadagnino's Cinema of Desire' (Heller, 2018). Following Guadagnino's memorable meditation on yearning, heartbreak and Crema (Italy) in *Call Me By Your Name* (2017) (starring Timothée Chalamet as Elio Perlman and Armie Hammer as Oliver), he made *Bones and All* (2022) which was based on Camille DeAngelis's fictional novel. In that film which addresses the horrors of being perceived, audiences followed the love and carnal desires shared by young cannibals Maren Yearly (played by Taylor Russell) and Lee (again, played by Chalamet). Two years before *Bones and All*, Guadagnino's TV series *We Are Who We Are* (2020)

focused on the blossoming connection and sense of self-knowing experienced by two teenagers, Fraser Wilson (played by Jack Dylan Glazer) and Caitlin ‘Harper’ Poythress (played by Jordan Kristine Seamón). In short, Guadagnino’s cinema often depicts the intimacy of relationships, including the friction and freeing feelings of desire that can be part of them.

When analysing the popular story *Cure for Marriage* in *Woman* magazine, Hall (2024 [1968]) notes that such stories created for a popular medium ‘. . . embody and express, in a “displaced” and symbolic form, significant meanings about the social formation and the historical conjuncture of which they are a product’. Such analytical sentiments can also be applied to storytelling in film which reflects and refracts societal power relations that shape desire(s). Hence, while Guadagnino’s works do not always include a young, white, male protagonist (or two), they often do. Also, in several cases, such work focuses on their relationship with a light-skinned Black/‘mixed’ girl or woman. Enter: *Challengers*, and the toiling character of Tashi Duncan. She does not assume the tired caught between two worlds trope of ‘mixed’ identity, and she departs from well-worn depictions of a woman just waiting for The Guy(s) to notice her. This does not make Tashi’s character radical, but it does set her apart from *some* of many cinematic depictions that are tethered to the same old gendered archetypes. That said, the fact that the film’s focal point is a(nother) light-skinned Black/‘mixed’ woman is consistent with colourism in Hollywood and beyond. All of this signals the need to address the racial *and* gender politics of *Challengers*, including how such cinema and audience responses might push against some oppressive societal norms, while also starkly reinforcing others.

The Internet’s boyfriend: online framings of famous [white] men

Relatedly, as part of my previous research on the pop culture concept of ‘the Internet’s boyfriend’, I have analysed some of the ways that ‘famous men who are publicly desired and/or admired are (re)presented in digital spheres – memes, videos, articles, and accumulative discourse’ (Sobande, 2021: 539). This has involved critically addressing the ways that whiteness and ‘Anglo-Western normative notions of desirable masculinity’ (Sobande, 2021) underpin common framings of who/what constitutes ‘the Internet’s boyfriend’ – typically, a famous white man (e.g. Timothée Chalamet), who is positioned as being of the moment and adored, online (Sobande, 2024).

The notion of ‘the Internet’s boyfriend’ symbolises certain present-day issues and ideals ‘to do with gender and sexuality, online experiences and fandom, the politics of how and why celebrities are admired, and the changing nature of how celebrity is constructed and functions’ (Sobande, 2024). Unsurprisingly, digital discourse surrounding *Challengers* includes much content that identifies the characters of Art and Patrick (and, by extension, actors Mike Faist and Josh O’Connor) as Internet boyfriends. Some of such commentaries infantilise Art and Patrick, while fetishistically positioning Tashi as a mean and distracting obstacle between them both. In other words, some online narratives about *Challengers* and Internet boyfriends embrace the film’s queerness, but in a

way that coldly rejects Tashi's character, reflecting the whiteness of certain audience imaginaries of desire which are preoccupied with famous white men and their framing. In other cases, online claims of Tashi's so-called lack of sexiness and sexuality seem symptomatic of misogynoir – the intersections of anti-Black racism, sexism, and misogyny (Bailey, 2021), resulting in refusals to interpret Tashi as anything other than an (un) sexy body.

Informed by the writing of Stitch (2022) on misogynoir and fandom, in a *Teen Vogue* piece titled 'Stop Erasing Zendaya's Tashi Duncan From Challengers Because You Want New Internet Boyfriends', Artan (2024) reminds readers:

Internet fandom has always been incredibly male-centric – a new internet boyfriend is crowned every month or so – and *Challengers* has gifted the internet with not one but *two* white men to lust over. Thousands of posts labelling both Mike Faist and Josh O'Connor 'babygirl', trending hashtags like TEAMART and TEAMPATRICK, fan edits of the two boys taking over our feeds: it is a hysteria that would almost convince you that the film doesn't have a female lead.

On that note, much like the star power of Cary Grant, who the woman in the 1960s *Cure for Marriage* story fantasises about, but now shaped by the Internet – (re)presentations of famous men continue to be part of societal constructions of ideas about fantasy and desire, including the gender, racial and sexual politics of celebrity culture. Nevertheless, in *Challengers*, Tashi is at the core of depictions of desire and fantasy, demanding analysis that does not frame her through blunt binary oppositions of watcher versus watched, desiring versus desired, or hot versus cold.

Game changer: gazing at/with Tashi

Depending on your vantage point, the character of Tashi might be described using words such as 'contained' and 'controlled' or 'messy' and 'manipulative'. Alternatively, she might be perceived as 'powerful' and 'precarious' in how she moves through the predominantly white and wealthy world of professional tennis, where she is far from being a complete outsider but where her racial identity and implied class-background differ to most. Essentially, no matter which words are used to describe Tashi, and no matter the attempts to treat her character as fixed, she, like all people and different desires, contains multitudes. This includes characteristics, emotions, and experiences that may seem to contrast and conflict. In the poignant words of Hall (1997) on popular culture:

It is an arena that is profoundly mythic. It is a theatre of popular desires, a theatre of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time (p. 470).

Therefore, when analysing audience responses to *Challengers* (and many other media texts), often there is scope to learn more about the imaginaries and identification of audiences than the actual content of the media that they discuss. This is also indicated by media and audience interest in responses to *Challengers* by real and world-renowned

professional tennis players – particularly, Black women such as Serena Williams who wrote a review of the film for *Vogue*, and Naomi Osaka whose *Challengers*-themed TikTok post went viral. Demand for such online commentaries reflects audience intrigue in tensions between realness and fantasy, in relation to the fictional tennis world of *Challengers* and the real world of tennis, especially as experienced by Black women. More than that, they also reflect the twinned role of digital and celebrity culture in expressing audience responses to cinematic depictions of desire, and more.

Now, back to Tashi's character. Namely, the Internet's focus on what she does (not) symbolise and convey. Various audience framings of Tashi reflect the duality of the 'fire and ice' moniker of her love interests, Art and Patrick – who were once a well-known tennis doubles team. Some online commentaries on *Challengers* detail the significance of Tashi's cool demeanour (her luxury tenniscore aesthetic style and her bitingly acerbic attitude), while others consider her role in (re)igniting the fire that quietly burns between Art and Patrick. But Tashi is not simply hot or cold, nor is she a barometer of the tepid to stormy feelings that brew between, in Tashi's dry words, her 'good little white boys'. Tashi is neither fire nor ice. She is both, *and more*. Despite that, Tashi has been discussed in ways that reduce her to an attractive face, floating free of a wilful mind and changing/injured body. She has also been positioned as a heartless villain whose smile (frequently referred to as a smirk) connotes cruelty and contempt. Audience impulses to fix Tashi as 'good' or 'bad' and 'desirable' or 'detestable' are not just suggestive of the deep-seated dominance of binary framings in society. Rather, they also reflect the ubiquity of short-hand explanations in digital culture, where commercial online platforms and social media sites thrive on content that is quickly categorised as one thing or another ('either/or'), leaving little space for a 'both/and' analysis of filmic and pop culture depictions.

The marketing of *Challengers* has taken various forms. Most prominently, it includes an official poster and soundtrack album art which features a close-up of Tashi's sun-glasses adorned face, with smaller visuals of Art and Patrick in each rimmed frame. As the image implies, it is Tashi's gaze that reigns supreme. She is watching them, and, somehow, watching you (*us*) watching her. As the striking visual of Tashi watching Art and Patrick alludes to, perhaps the ball, ultimately, is always in Tashi's court. In other words, Tashi is not simply the face of *Challengers*. Rather, she is also the lens(es) through which this cinematic world takes shape. In that sense, in parts of the film, the audience might feel as though they are *watching, with* Tashi, instead of just looking at/for her. Notably, this is invoked through shots from behind Tashi, such as when we peer over her looking down at Art's head as he buries his face in their bed, worried about the future of their marriage. Earlier in the film, a shot from behind Tashi focuses on her rooted stance as she peers down at Art and Patrick in another moment that centres her and the powerful place from which she views them, seconds before catalysing their kiss(es). Clearly, *Challengers* deals with both the gaze of a woman and the ways she is gazed upon.

For example, what Tashi sees and experiences is the filter through which we also come to know (parts of) Art and Patrick. This is indicated by their excitement when she casually says, 'I know who you are...', in response to them introducing themselves in a scene that is aptly and partially soundtracked by Nelly's 2002 song, 'Hot in Here'. Indeed, it is the entangled relationship between all three characters that the film teases out as we watch the unravelling and reknitting of their bonds. However, unlike Art and

Patrick, the first time the audience meets Tashi, it is *only her* (a close-up of her eyes) that the camera focuses on. This may symbolise a sense of self-ownership that is firmly beyond the grasp of the ‘fire and ice’ duo who are in orbit of Tashi. Contrastingly, when Art and Patrick first feature on screen, they are simply shadows that slowly cut across a bright blue tennis court. This first shot sets the scene for what follows in *Challengers*. Gravitating towards Tashi (and each other), Art and Patrick move within the shadows of her glow and guiding gaze. Yet, responses to *Challengers* include audience commentaries that position Tashi’s character as peripheral to dynamics between Art and Patrick. This reflects tensions between filmic representations of desire and audience engagements, including enmeshed raced, classed, and gendered ideas of desire, sexuality, and power.

As cultural studies approaches have highlighted, the way that cinematic experiences involve the conjuring of certain desires, fantasies, and *feelings*, go far beyond those that are part of the contemporary concept of ‘the Internet’s boyfriend’ or the perceived desirability of specific actors. In Hall’s (2017) words, ‘[t]he nature of power in the modern world is that it is also constructed in relation to political, moral, intellectual, cultural, ideological, sexual questions’. Accordingly, when analysing *Challengers* and surrounding discourse, what stands out most are the power dynamics that contour the ways that different desires (e.g. to be/feel seen, validated, admired, and loved) are (un)articulated and struggled over, whether in the form of unspoken words on screen, erudite reviews of the film, or user-generated content on social media.

Somewhere beautiful: no winners

Challengers is embedded in experiences, expectations, and echoes of desire, as well as the power relations that animate them. We see the rise and fall of career related desires, the pain and preciousness of desires for love, and consuming desires to return to yesteryears. The intimacy of this film and its embrace and exhumation of desires is not just about the sensuality shared *between* characters. Rather, it also relates to their sense of self-knowing and various life events that scatter and remake that. Part of the fun and fervour of *Challengers* is that it plays with societal ideas about power, pleasure, perception, and the thirst to ‘win’, while toying with boundaries between individual(istic) desires and the intimately connected ones of multiple people.

In a key scene, Tashi poetically describes tennis as being ‘a relationship’, challenging the idea that it is simply a form of self-expression or solely a sport based on a desire to win. That is one of numerous parts of the film that points towards the relational nature of intimacy and interiority, including amid the heat and strength of a fast-paced tennis match, and the harshness of life. While sitting by the cool air of the sea at night, after leaving the heat of a party, Tashi reflects on a match that she won earlier that day. Breezily, she says that when playing tennis, two people can, for a moment, ‘go somewhere beautiful together’, almost as though they are ‘in love’. The fleeting yet powerful feeling of going somewhere beautiful together is at the core of *Challengers* and its portrayal of the full-hearted ways that people can make each other feel, even if just for a memorable moment. In turn, Tashi’s reflection reminds the audience that intimacy and

competition may not always be at odds with each other. In fact, they may sometimes be the two synchronous sides (or, in the case of *Challengers*, three parts) of a whole.

Memes, GIFs, and digitally remixed montages of *Challengers* continue to circulate in ways that highlight certain audiences' discomfort with the self-possession of Tashi's character. In this instance, self-possession does not mean an absence of vulnerability (as continual shots of the scar on Tashi's knee allude to), nor does it mean an unwavering absence of self-doubt. Instead, Tashi's self-possession relates to a relative sense of autonomy and a grasp of who/how she is. She is far from being in control of every aspect of her life, but this is not at odds with the directness and deliberateness in how Tashi moves, both on and off the court. Noting Tashi's steadfast position should not be mistaken for equating such traits with amounting to an inherently '(un)likable' character. After all, Tashi is more than the temperature of audience receptions. Perceptions of her supposed 'goodness', 'badness', and '(un)realness' reveal more about societal norms and imaginaries than the tenor of Tashi. Mindful of the minutia of *Challengers* and the insights from Hall's (2024 [1968]) writing on *A Cure for Marriage*, there is a continued need for more cultural studies of the authoring, remixing, and reframing of cinematic desires, and the racial, gender, class, and sexual politics that prompt responses to *Challengers* that cannot comprehend the existence of a Tashi, even in a fictional filmic world.

The ending of *Challengers* has been debated at length, with people speculating about who wins and what happens next. But maybe part of the point is that by the film's final moments, *there are no winners*. Instead, we've seen Tashi, Art, and Patrick go somewhere beautiful (even if bizarrely) and get back to that place together, at least, once more. The world that the characters of Tashi, Art, and Patrick inhabit may be a fantasy. However, the film deals with the realities and shifting tides of desire and, dare I say, *love* – whether for a self, another, or the exhilarating moment of feeling more than the mundane. It is fair to say that, like the cinematic experience analysed in Hall's (2024 [1968]) account of *A Cure for Marriage*, *Challengers* can be interpreted as also dealing with dimensions of power that are implicated in women's experience of sexuality, work, marriage, motherhood, politics, and the cinematic gaze. Overall, *Challengers*, including paratextual and intertextual aspects of it, provides a prime opportunity to build on the insightful provocations of cultural studies, such as through a single case study approach to untangling how ideas about desire are expressed and explored through film and audience engagement with it.

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Biographical note

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