

# Research Articles



# Transgressive TV

## *Euphoria*, HBO, and a New Trans Aesthetic

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### Abstract

While television shows *Orange Is the New Black* (OITNB) and *Transparent* have made headlines for their inclusion of trans performers and their debatably authentic takes on trans experiences, *Euphoria* signals a new era in trans representation, one that is defined by a “cool” trans aesthetic that epitomizes multiplatform television’s investment in trans as an edgy brand marker. Where HBO differs from Amazon’s *Transparent* and Netflix’s OITNB is in its investment in a new type of trans representation that disrupts the cinematic and television tradition in which trans characters remain closely associated with tragedy or are relegated to the recent past. While HBO utilizes both cable and video-on-demand (VOD) streaming services, its recent investment in trans discourses is in part a response to Netflix and Amazon Prime’s successful trans programming and indicative of the competitive value trans content offers content producers in the multiplatform era. *Euphoria* breaks new ground by offering a new aesthetic treatment of trans identity that invokes Gen Z’s ubiquitous use of social media, creative application of makeup, and nuanced approach to gender and sexual identities. The show’s stylized aesthetic, represented through hypermobile cinematography and surreal lighting, reflects this transgressive approach while also highlighting the show’s hypersubjective framing. Finally, *Euphoria* illustrates the crucial role of showrunner auteurs for HBO and, more specifically, the function of transgressive trans characters in Sam Levinson’s auteur brand.

**Keywords:** HBO, transgender, transgressive, multiplatform television, *Euphoria*

In August 2019, an article in the *Guardian* summed up the response to a new HBO show with the headline “‘It Triggered Mass Panic!’—Is *Euphoria* the Most Shocking Teen Show Ever?”<sup>1</sup> Drawing on the wave of controversy surrounding the show’s debut, the article references the now infamous “30 penises scene” before describing the “provocative” show’s exploration of “sex, social media, anxiety and addiction.”<sup>2</sup> Recalling the controversies associated with teen dramas such as *Skins* and *Kids*, *Euphoria* depicts harsh realities long associated with teen life, including teen sexuality, mental illness, and substance abuse. But where *Euphoria* breaks new ground is in its unapologetic focus on Gen Z youth culture and its success at tapping into contemporary discussions about gender and sexuality. While the show’s central narrative arc follows the queer cisgender character Rue as she deals with drug addiction and mental illness, it also focuses on her increasingly complex romance with the new girl in town, the transgender Jules. Through the character of Jules, the show explores questions of identity, authenticity, and the complex relationships between gender and sexuality that increasingly inform youth culture—all while avoiding the focus on transition that typically characterizes transgender characters’ narrative arcs in mainstream media.<sup>3</sup>

While television shows *OITNB* (Netflix) and *Transparent* (Amazon Prime) have made headlines for their inclusion of trans performers and their debatably authentic takes on trans experiences,<sup>4</sup> *Euphoria* signals a new

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1. Martha Hayes, “It Triggered Mass Panic!—Is *Euphoria* the Most Shocking Teen Show Ever?” *Guardian*, August 3, 2019, <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/aug/03/is-euphoria-the-most-shocking-teen-show-ever>.

2. Hayes, “It Triggered Mass.”

3. Lukas Dhont’s 2018 film *Girl* exemplifies this tradition, with its focus on a young girl’s medical transition. Netflix acquired the film’s distribution rights after its success at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, further demonstrating how the streaming service profits off (at times problematic) trans narratives. Danielle Solzman outlines the film’s controversial reception among trans critics in her article “The Transgender Drama ‘Girl’ is Earning Awards Season Buzz—Here’s Why it’s Infuriating Trans Critics,” *Slate*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.slashfilm.com/562805/girl-controversy/>.

4. It is worth noting that Netflix’s investment in trans content does not preclude it from hosting transphobic content, as demonstrated by the release of Dave Chappelle’s stand-up special *The Closer*.

era in trans representation, one that is defined by a “cool” trans aesthetic. The show cast trans performer Hunter Schafer as the now iconic Jules but appears less interested in debates about the perceived authenticity of trans identities than in employing transness as a marker of transgressive youth culture. And although Schafer’s involvement indicates that trans casting remains a relevant issue for trans media, its understated emphasis in paratextual conversations demonstrates a marked distinction between trans cinema and trans television. For instance, while cinematic projects such as *Girl* and *Rub & Tug* continue to face backlash over casting decisions, shows such as *Euphoria* have effectively moved past these debates by unreservedly promoting trans-affirmative hiring practices and treating trans identity as sophisticated and fashionable, so that the show subsequently frames Jules as a symbol of youth culture and an emblem of HBO’s edgy aesthetic. In fact, *Euphoria* ultimately grounds its representation of youth culture in gender-queer practices that reframe trans identity as an authentic celebration of self that remains congruent with Gen Z culture and essential to a developing Gen Z aesthetic. In the case of *Euphoria*, trans identity has shed the tragic cinematic associations of the past and is reconstituted as an edgy celebration of transformative identity practices and woke culture. However, the show’s innovative treatment of trans identity is complicated by showrunner-auteur discourses that foreground cis creator Sam Levinson over the show’s trans creatives.

As I demonstrate below, *Euphoria* signals a shift in trans representational practices while reiterating multiplatform television’s investment in trans as an edgy brand marker. Edge refers to a media text or genre’s “ability to establish clear taste boundaries among demographic groups,”<sup>5</sup> but it is also a crucial generator of prestige for channels like HBO and streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime. Edge, in other words, reflects an investment in transgressive elements that push social boundaries and represents

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5. Timothy Havens and Amanda Lotz, *Understanding Media Industries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 255.

HBO's appeal to young audiences. It is worth noting that these "transgressive" elements are not necessarily transgressive in a political sense but represent transgression as brand identity. *Euphoria's* engagement with morally troubled characters and complex seriality further contributes to HBO's distinctive brand, known for its investment in what Amanda Lotz refers to as "phenomenal television"<sup>6</sup> (a programming category trading on contemporary cultural issues in an effort to achieve the "watercooler status" of earlier broadcast television) while demonstrating the importance of buzz for HBO and its success at tapping into relevant cultural discourse. Where *Euphoria* differs from Amazon's *Transparent* and Netflix's *OITNB* is in its investment in a new type of trans representation, one that disrupts cinematic and television traditions whereby gender dysphoria (and trans identity more broadly) remain a ubiquitous source of tragedy and suffering for trans characters. While HBO utilizes both cable and VOD streaming services, its recent investment in trans discourses is in part a response to Netflix and Amazon Prime's successful trans programming and indicative of the value trans content offers content producers in the multiplatform era. In a crowded television market where exhibiting prestige dramas commercial free is no longer a major asset, HBO (and its streaming partner HBO Go) must invest in phenomenal TV<sup>7</sup> that pushes social boundaries to compete with the many complex serial dramas now screening on streaming services worldwide. *Euphoria* breaks new ground by offering a new aesthetic treatment of trans identity that invokes Gen Z's ubiquitous use of social media, creative application of makeup, and nuanced approach to gender and sexual identities. The show's stylized aesthetic, represented through hypermobile cinematography and surreal lighting, reflects this transgressive approach while also highlighting

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6. In *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Amanda Lotz describes "phenomenal" TV as a "particular category of programming that retains the social importance attributed to television's earlier operation as a cultural forum despite the changes of the post-network era." See Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

7. Lotz, *The Television Will*, 42.

the show's hypersubjective framing. Finally, *Euphoria* illustrates the crucial role of showrunner auteurs for HBO and, more specifically, the function of transgressive trans characters in Sam Levinson's auteur brand.

Television scholarship has theorized that in the narrowcast era, "edge" has become a productive marker for cable channels and service providers aiming to distinguish themselves as an in-demand source of original programming. The term *edgy* is often used in association with words such as *original*, *complex*, and *sophisticated*<sup>8</sup> and therefore privileges a certain kind of serialized storytelling now often associated with streaming services. While it is important to note that "not all media industries seek edgy media texts under all conditions," most media corporations carry a "combination of both edgy and broad-appeal programming, or they own media outlets that reach a variety of narrowly defined groups."<sup>9</sup> In the case of HBO, edgy content has historically been a useful avenue for developing their reputation as an in-demand cable channel. HBO specifically draws on the correlations between edge and darker, more transgressive content to promote themselves to younger audiences as a cooler, more relevant brand. While the term *edge* broadly refers to works that establish clear taste boundaries among demographic groups, its early association with television shows like HBO's *Sex and the City*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos*, or *The Wire* (and other controversial and provocative content) suggests a specific appeal to the most coveted demographic: young adults. Dubbed "early adapters," these consumers "tend to be heavily influenced by marketing campaigns and strive to be on the leading edge of trends"<sup>10</sup> and are therefore highly valued by advertisers and television networks alike.

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8. Michael Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 81.

9. Timothy Havens and Amanda Lotz, *Understanding Media Industries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 196.

10. Meg James, "Edgy TV Shows Harder to Sell," *Chicago Tribune*, August 9, 2004, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2004-08-09-0408090107-story.html>.

Content traditionally associated with edgy programming (i.e., explicit depictions of sex and violence, morally ambiguous characters, etc.) have long been a hallmark of HBO's distinctive style and have since become a prestigious indicator for the network. Their development of original television drama was originally "augmented by an active marketing campaign whose purpose was to produce 'an Aristocracy of Culture' for the network and its dramas."<sup>11</sup> HBO therefore cultivated a reputation as a distinguished source of culturally relevant dramas that rejected the low-brow aesthetics associated with network television. Their brand of cultural distinction is effectively summed up in their 1996 slogan: "It's Not TV. It's HBO." According to Trisha Dunleavy, this tagline "exhumed historic perception of television as the cultural inferior of theatrical cinema as well as invoking longstanding aesthetic differences between TV dramas and feature films."<sup>12</sup>

But this reputation for quality television was always tied to HBO's interest in transgressive and provocative content, as evident in shows like *Sex and the City*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Wire*. HBO, according to Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, "makes a virtue of its autonomy from the constraints and restrictions limiting network television. Institutional power comes from asserting pleasure in scandalising and flouting, from pushing the boundaries by broadcasting profanity, brutal violence and explicit sex scenes not seen (until recently) elsewhere."<sup>13</sup> Breaking cultural taboos then off-limits for traditional broadcast networks productively elevated HBO above its conservative competitors, but in an era where streaming services dominate the television market (services that are also not beholden to advertisers), HBO must push social boundaries even further to distinguish

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11. Trisha Dunleavy, *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 79.

12. Dunleavy, *Complex Serial Drama*, 82.

13. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, "Sex, Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming and Producing Quality TV," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 66.



itself. Although HBO “stakes its reputation on consciously violating codes policing the illicit,”<sup>14</sup> it also envelopes this transgressive content within institutional discourses of quality. Courting controversy has therefore “been institutionalised by HBO, embedded in and through its original programming, as a distinctive feature of its cultural cachet, its quality brand label and (until recently) its leading market position.”<sup>15</sup>

This investment in provocative content and edgy themes productively draws on transgressive capital to distinguish HBO as a prestigious and culturally relevant brand. Summer Pennell’s definition of transgressive capital sheds light on the correlation between edge and prestige. Transgressive capital describes how cultural transgression (particularly in the context of queer culture),

seeks to interrogate the limits placed on people by mainstream society. To transgress is to point out that social constructions are a way to control those who do not fit neatly into normalized ideas of individuals and cultures. By pointing out limits, transgression can then go beyond them to create more nuanced, robust understandings of identity.<sup>16</sup>

While Pennell’s work discusses queerness as a form of transgressive capital, a broader interest in pushing social boundaries as a means of accruing cultural capital signals the attraction of provocative content for television producers. Just as some media providers consider queer themes taboo, televisual depictions of underage sex or drug addiction often invite controversy and, when screened with other markers of quality television,<sup>17</sup> can effectively challenge

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14. McCabe and Akass, “Sex, Swearing and Respectability, 70.

15. McCabe and Akass, 63

16. Summer M. Pennell, “Queer Transgressive Cultural Capital,” in *Critical Concepts in Queer Studies and Education*, ed. Nelson M. Rodriguez, Wayne J. Martino, Jennifer C. Ingrey, and Edward Brockenbrough (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 321.

17. McCabe and Akass’s book *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* productively outlines some of the early debates about quality television.

the status quo while also attracting attention and prestige for the associated networks.

Göran Bolin's work on media industries further attests to the value of controversial content in drawing interest and establishing brands, as he argues that controversial media often sparks cultural discussion that boosts the reputation and reach of that same media. According to Bolin, for a media text to have

a strong distinctive power, the symbolic value of the commodities struggled over must be distinct, and worth the while and engagement to argue over. This means that the more controversial this value is, the harsher the discussion and arguments will be over its worth (or worthlessness), and the higher the stakes for arguing this value.<sup>18</sup>

HBO has a long history of courting controversy, and its interest in content that sparks fierce debate speaks to the network's investment in "buzz." According to Amanda Lotz, "Buzz was—and remains—central to HBO's strategy" and how the network evaluates the success of a series.<sup>19</sup> It uses a metric that accounts for the "dollar value of the visibility HBO receives from press coverage."<sup>20</sup> Controversial media is therefore valuable to content producers like HBO, as it offers a kind of transgressive capital that the network can use to promote their distinctive brand of edgy, original programming. Although this strategy was increasingly underutilized in the years following *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* (both shows completed their run by 2008), the rise of streaming services and ad-supported cable channels like Amazon, Netflix, and FX—who mastered HBO's strategic use of controversial content—in the multiplatform era sparked a return to "prestigious" and transgressive

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18. Göran Bolin, *Value and the Media: Cultural Production and Consumption in Digital Markets* (London: Ashgate, 2011), 78.

19. Amanda Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 41.

20. Lotz, *We Now Disrupt*, 41.

programming for HBO (for example, *Game of Thrones* and *Westworld* were widely regarded as a return to form for the network).

*Euphoria* is a culmination of both HBO's investment in transgressive quality TV and the rise of complex serial dramas more broadly, as the proliferation of morally ambiguous characters and taboo subjects like underage sex contribute to networks' accrual of transgressive capital in the competitive contemporary streaming landscape. As Pilot Viruet notes in their review for the *Observer*: "Euphoria is a dark, hard-to-watch and often overwhelming drama with a lot of moving parts that only occasionally seem to work together. So in short: It's definitely HBO."<sup>21</sup> The show's frequent depiction of teenage nudity—including "dick pic etiquette" and locker room scenes that feature multiple close-ups of penises—invites controversy while simultaneously critiquing porn's impact on teenager's sexual experiences. And while the show resists portraying Rue naked, her drug addiction often compels her to lie, steal, or verbally attack her loved ones. Her transgressive actions are explicitly tied to her struggles with addiction, yet her behavior also fits with the "morally ambiguous" protagonist that characterizes HBO (and complex serial drama more broadly), which Tony Soprano initially epitomized but that AMC's prestige programming cemented with *Breaking Bad's* Walter White and *Mad Men's* Don Draper. Although early iterations of this character type were almost exclusively men, it has since been embodied by women in complex serial dramas such as *Killing Eve* and *Sharp Objects*. For Michael Newman and Elana Levine, the "predictability with which HBO programs include taboo words and nude scenes attests to their eagerness to distinguish the 'freedom' of the ad-free format from the kinds of constraint faced by their less culturally legitimate competitors."<sup>22</sup> So thus, while HBO's transgressive content has historically illustrated the network's cultural legitimacy, more recently its use

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21. Pilot Viruet, "Do HBO's Controversial 'Euphoria' Shock Tactics Have a Point?" *Observer*, June 13, 2019, <http://www.observer.com/2019/06/euphoria-hbo-controversy-teen-drug-use-review/>.

22. Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, 135.

of explicit content attempts to distinguish the network from online ad-free distributors like Netflix and Amazon Prime. In *Euphoria*, the crossover investment in sexual content and drug use in a teen setting productively plays on the transgressive capital central to HBO's reputation as edgy content provider.

While controversial sexual and violent content—including queer themes—has always been a hallmark of HBO, *Euphoria* is unique for its investment in trans-as-transgressive content and its nuanced exploration of queer youth experiences. Pennell's concept of transgressive capital originally focused on queer content, and HBO's latest queer series taps into the steady expansion of cultural interest in queer and trans issues. The show challenges traditional identity categories by refusing to explicitly label either Jules's gender identity or her relationship with Rue. There are references in the dialogue to Jules being "trans," but the show avoids any "coming out" sequences or discussions about her identity with or between any of the cis characters. And while it is clear that Jules and Rue's relationship is more than platonic, neither character's sexuality is explicitly commented on and discussions about their budding relationship are intentionally vague, eliding labels in a favor of a more fluid representation of their developing intimacy.

A scene wherein Anna (played by nonbinary performer Quintessa Swindell) applies Jules's makeup during a trip to the city illustrates the series' overall commitment to identity and relationships as implicitly queer. The sequence includes tight close-ups of Jules and Anna, and the only wide shot of them together is reflected in a mirror, which instills both a sense of intimacy between the characters and the viewer's distance from them. Vibrant red lighting dominates the scene, lending the conversation a surreal dimension that contrasts with the deep blue that often illuminates the suburban scenes. In this moment, Jules talks intimately with Anna about her gender experiences while wholly avoiding the "born-in-the-wrong-body" trope familiar to trans characters.<sup>23</sup> Epitomized by Caitlyn Jenner in the reality TV show *I Am Cait*, the "wrong body" trope is "a

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23. Other examples include Maura Pfefferman in *Transparent* and Rayon in *Dallas Buyers Club*.

highly recognisable script of transgender subjectivity within contemporary popular culture: the notion that transgender people possess an authentic gendered core, which is located within an initially mismatched corporeality.”<sup>24</sup> In contrast to the historical tendency to treat transgender identity as a set process with an explicit end goal, Jules describes transition as “levelling up,” telling Anna that she hasn’t yet reached her “full powers.” The implication here is that Jules can continue to level up indefinitely, rejecting the traditional transition narrative for an infinite yet empowering journey. She also explains her past relationships with men: “In my head, it’s like if I can conquer men, then I can conquer femininity.” This is the most explicit discussion of gender and sexuality in the show’s first season and is clearly anchored in the safe, explicitly trans space of the city. Even here, when trans identity is the focus of the conversation, gender and sexuality are never discussed as binary but rather as fluid processes of transformation.

The surreal space of the city is in many ways the antithesis of Rue’s suburban home, where Jules must navigate cis-normative assumptions and face the possibility of trans violence. While she is clearly accepted and treated as “one-of-the-girls” by the other high schoolers, the presence of Nate and his father reminds viewers of the constant threat suburbia poses to nonnormative identities. As the only trans person in town, Jules is largely ostracized from her community until she returns to the city. Only in the city does Jules interact with other trans people, and only in this protected space does she open up in front of the camera. The club scene that follows Anna’s introduction cements this formula of suburbia as cis/city as trans. The show’s trans consultant (Scott Turner Schofield) filled this scene with eighty trans and nonbinary extras, a fact Schofield referred to as a “true moment of real trans infiltration.”<sup>25</sup> In this space the queer and exuberant *mise-en-scène* matches

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24. Michael Lovelock, “Call Me Caitlyn: Making and Making over the ‘Authentic’ Transgender Body in Anglo-American Popular Culture,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 6 (November 2017): 676.

25. Palmer Haasch, “Euphoria’s Trans Consultant on Why the Series Tells Authentic Trans Stories,” Polygon, August 10, 2019, <http://www.polygon.com/interviews/2019/8/10/20792118/euphoria-hbo-trans-actors-jules-scott-turner-schofield-hunter-schafer>.

Jules's queer excess, represented through her alternative, high-fashion aesthetic.

*Euphoria's* explicit evocation of queer capital (treated in this case as transgressive) is particularly pertinent for younger generations and speaks to the increasing value of queer content. According to Lisa Henderson, only recently has queerness become central to culture (in contrast to, for instance, the significant but relatively marginal successes of the new queer cinema). She argues that "queerness has delivered cultural expansion, a new commercial horizon broadened beyond old typifications of queer marginality but well shy of heterosexual disarmament."<sup>26</sup> In the case of television, Henderson connects this to the multiplatform era in which

smaller, more defined "niche" audiences acquire industrial value, cable outlets compete as targeted brands with each other and with traditional broadcast networks, and distinction relies on a combination of old formats (situation comedy, nighttime soap opera, family melodrama) and new themes and characters, queers among them.<sup>27</sup>

While Henderson addresses queer culture, her work does not discuss the proliferation of trans discourses in modern mass media. In fact, as queer characters became more prominent in mainstream television, trans identity inherited their previous function, becoming in turn the go-to marker of distinctive television trying to push boundaries and tap into contemporary cultural discourses about gender and sexuality. By adopting trans characters that radically challenge representational norms, networks like HBO capitalize on the transgressive capital associated with trans, creating buzz that enhances the network's brand and marking themselves as culturally relevant.

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26. Lisa Henderson, *Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 34.

27. Henderson, *Love and Money*, 34.

*Euphoria's* fluid depiction of gender and sexuality differs from shows like *OITNB* and *Transparent* in part because it explicitly ties these radical or transgressive ideas about queer and trans issues to Gen Z youth culture. According to Mary L. Gray in her research on queer youth in rural United States, young people have “a unique relationship to modern constructions of sexual and gendered subjects”<sup>28</sup> partly because of the Internet and its capacity to connect young rural queers. Bruce E. Drushel also explicitly connects changing queer youth culture to the Internet. He argues that “as the post-Stonewall period evolved into the post-web era, queers themselves changed: they self-identify as sexual minorities at a younger age and are more likely to reject labeling that is permanent and classifies them according to a single facet of their identity.”<sup>29</sup> *Euphoria's* fluid approach to gender and sexuality reflects this attitude toward identity politics, as both Jules and Rue avoid labelling their developing relationship or their own gender or sexual experiences. Schofield notes that there was some pressure from HBO to “really name the labels, whether it was [*sic*] Jules' labels or to label [*sic*] Jules' and Rue's relationship in a way that isn't really how we do things anymore. So we had to explain that it would be much more authentic to the world that we're representing to not do that.”<sup>30</sup> There is therefore a sense that this vague treatment of queer identity, rather than signaling unwillingness to explicitly acknowledge queerness, speaks to contemporary approaches to identity labels congruent with Gen Z values.

*Euphoria* also reflects (and contributes to) mythologies about the increasing acceptance of queer identities and experiences by younger generations, most obviously by eliding the traditional cornerstones of queer youth drama: homophobic and transphobic bullying. Jules's presence in

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28. Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 91.

29. Bruce E. Drushel, “The Evolution Will Not Be Broadcast (or Published): Social Capital, Assimilation, and the Changing Queer Community,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 66, no. 12 (October 2019): 1764.

30. Haasch, “*Euphoria's* Trans Consultant.”

town—and the queer implications of her relationship with Rue—disturb only Nate and his father, and their anxiety is explicitly tied to personal struggles with queer sexuality and toxic masculinity. Within the show’s suburban setting, Nate’s father represents the traumatic repression of queer desire associated, in *Euphoria* at least, with older generations, a trauma Nate inherits and manifests through physical and emotional violence. Jules’s problems with Nate do not extend to the rest of the suburban community, wherein characters openly talk about “sexuality [as] a spectrum” and never question Jules’s identity or her presence in women’s spaces. And while Nate presents a physical and emotional threat, Jules is never subject to transphobic slurs or misgendering. Her casual acceptance reflects the increasing visibility of queer identities among younger generations and the “wider variety of resources available to [queer youth], from specialised social media sites to support organisations in their schools and communities, as well as the suffusion of mainstream popular culture with varied queer images and role models.”<sup>31</sup> The ubiquity of social media in the show signals this development of a new “safe space” for queer and trans teens, a digital space Jules frequently uses to find sexual partners accepting of her trans identity.

However, by representing younger generations as inherently accepting of queer and trans culture, the show resists acknowledging contemporary concerns facing the trans community in favor of a more simplistic celebration of Gen Z culture. While *Euphoria* depicts Jules’s uncomplicated acceptance within the suburban community, recent reports from the Human Rights Campaign confirm increasing rates of antitrans violence<sup>32</sup> that suggest increased visibility is inevitably followed by increased vulnerability. While the show might use Nate as a stand-in for these concerns, his position as an

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31. Drushel, “The Evolution,” 1764.

32. Madeline Roberts, “Marking the Deadliest Year on Record, HRC Releases Report on Violence Against Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People,” Human Rights Campaign, November 19, 2020, <http://www.hrc.org/press-releases/marking-the-deadliest-year-on-record-hrc-releases-report-on-violence-against-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-people>.



out-of-touch teenager reliving the trauma of earlier generations dismisses this violence as an old-fashioned concern, one that is antithetical to Gen Z values, an overly simplified approach to the issue of antitrans violence.

Embedded within this transgressive appeal to youth culture—represented by references to vaping, contemporary music, and social media—is a unique approach to representing trans identities, one that explicitly connects trans and youth culture. Screen depictions of trans femininity are historically associated with tragedy and transphobic violence, with few film and television programs challenging that correlation. Andre Cavalcante notes how, for Hollywood in particular, “transgender struggle and tragedy bec[a]me the defining paradigm for narrativising gender variance.”<sup>33</sup> This filmic tradition extends to television, wherein trans characters have most often featured as victims of violence (for instance, in *CSI* and *Law and Order*). *Euphoria* breaks this pattern by eliding Jules’s transition narrative, and while the show’s dark tone means Jules’s narrative journey is often difficult, it doesn’t explicitly address gender dysphoria in its first season, which trans cinema scholars have pinpointed as one of the main features of cis-authored trans characterizations.<sup>34</sup> Schofield notes in an interview with *Polygon* that in mainstream television, “the trans person’s only narrative is transition. . . . We have life beyond this, and that’s what we’re seeing with Jules. Her narrative is complicated.”<sup>35</sup> *Euphoria* challenges norms by shifting focus to what happens *after* the initial stage of transitioning that mainstream media has traditionally dwelled upon in, for instance, *Transamerica* and *Transparent*. While the show deals explicitly with several forms of trauma (including a disturbing sex-scene between Jules and Nate’s father), it’s notable that Jules’s gender identity is, for her, never defined by dysphoria.

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33. Andre Cavalcante, “Centering Transgender Identity via the Textual Periphery: *Transamerica* and the ‘Double Work’ of Paratexts,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30, no. 2 (2013): 88.

34. C  el Keegan, “Moving Bodies: Sympathetic Migrations in Transgender Narrativity,” *Genders* 57 (2016).

35. Haasch, “Euphoria’s Trans Consultant.”

In contrast to conventional depictions of trans femininity in, for instance, mainstream films like *Dallas Buyers Club* and *The Danish Girl*, *Euphoria* innovatively uses makeup and costumes to reflect a new trans aesthetic that highlights spontaneity, ephemerality, spirituality, and the capacity to know oneself. Jules's costumes and makeup are highly stylized: she combines cottage core (a style inspired by a romanticized interpretation of agricultural or rural life<sup>36</sup>) with an e-girl aesthetic that evokes an alternative high-fashion look, and her bold use of vibrantly colored makeup contrasts and complements the color filters deployed throughout the first season. In one instance, a saturated blue filter augments her red-orange mascara to create a surreal image signaling the end of her trip to the city and foreshadowing the harrowing developments in the season's final episode. Although Jules's costumes and makeup mirror the show's stylized cinematography and lighting, they also fit with a wider Gen Z style. Most (if not all) of the teenage girls flaunt a distinctive aesthetic that demonstrates a creative application of makeup less interested in traditional beauty norms and more invested in creating a unique "look."<sup>37</sup> Like that of the rest of the women in the cast, Jules's makeup is a fashion statement that marks her as original and cool. But while many of the characters utilize distinctive makeup styles, none is as iconic as Jules, who incorporates more radical color-clashing and rave aesthetics. Makeup and fashion, in this world, are radically creative expressions of self rather than performances of binary gender associations, and in this space, trans identity is synonymous with both authenticity and edgy Gen Z cultural aesthetics.

While the show is radical in its investment of trans as cool, it still adheres to trans-normative beauty standards that celebrate thin, white androgyny.

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36. Isabel Slone, "Escape into Cottagecore, Calming Ethos for Our Febrile Moment." *New York Times*, March 10, 2020, <http://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/style/cottagecore.html>.

37. *Euphoria's* make-up artist has since inspired a Gen-Z beauty movement, according to a recent edition of *Vogue* (Lauren Valenti, "How *Euphoria's* Lead Makeup Artist Sparked a Gen-Z Beauty Movement," *Vogue*, August 1, 2019, <http://www.vogue.com/article/euphoria-hbo-gen-z-makeup>).

Trans-normative narratives reinforce “acceptable” ways of being trans, behaviors related to class and racial markers. Trans media have an established history of using race to invite points of identification between trans characters and cis audiences that contribute to “acceptable” ways of narrativizing trans difference.<sup>38</sup> Several trans writers have written about the impact of “fascist” beauty standards in trans media—particularly advertising that features trans models. According to Ray Filar, “the most acceptably sexy trans people are also the ones replicating existing beauty norms: whiteness, thinness, trans female femininity or assigned-female androgyny. Where these norms are expanded to include trans bodies, they leave beauty fascism intact.”<sup>39</sup> Jules’s unique style upholds these beauty standards while contributing to the overwhelming whiteness of trans media. Her thin, model-like stature and her long blonde hair recall characters like *Girls* Lara Verhaeghen, reinforcing notions of “acceptable” transness as tied to race and aesthetics. While HBO’s fashionable treatment of trans identity might productively challenge traditional television tropes, it lacks a truly subversive quality and therefore remains transgressive only within the context of traditional trans representation.

This investment in a trans aesthetic as explicitly linked to youth culture mirrors HBO’s wider investment in a distinctive visual style. According to Lotz,

Even before many of the convenience technologies disrupted previous norms, subscription services such as HBO and Showtime cultivated a production culture that prioritized aesthetic excellence and originality in a manner that distinguished their shows from those of conventional television—arguably a necessary distinction for content for which viewers must pay.<sup>40</sup>

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38. Paige Macintosh, “Queer Capital: Transgender Representation in Contemporary American Cinema” (MA diss., Victoria University of Wellington, 2018), 77

39. Ray Filar, “Trans (TM): How the Trans Movement Got Sold Out,” OpenDemocracy, November 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/how-trans-movement-sold-out/>.

40. Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 89.

In the case of *Euphoria*, the emphasis on aesthetics goes well beyond Jules's characterization. The show employs a unique visual style that takes on elements of the surreal through clever cinematography and dynamic camera movements. The show establishes this unusual style in the first episode with a rotating room; in this early scene, a drug-addled Rue attempts to walk down a hallway when the room begins spinning. The heightened foley effects as she stumbles onto the walls and ceilings (along with the muted soundtrack) intensify the sequence's surreal quality. But while "fantastic" scenes like this in, for instance, *A Fantastic Woman* serve to other and spectacularize trans characters, this sequence in *Euphoria*, on the other hand, reinforces the surreality of high school. In *Euphoria*, teenage life occupies an alternative, unreal space cloaked in a haze of drugs, just beyond the reach of the "real" world. This real world haunts the show's high school characters through references to global catastrophe and climate change, which never quite impact their lived experiences but contribute to an anxious atmosphere that permeates the entire show.

*Euphoria's* striking cinematography is essentially HBO, but the series' style also serves a distinct purpose—its vibrant color palette and dynamic camerawork signal its hypersubjective perspective and Rue's unreliability as a narrator. Intense use of color, lighting, and slow motion productively convey Rue's internal emotional struggles. A sequence in which Rue describes her panic attacks begins with a close-up of powdered drugs on a galaxy board. The camera zooms out to a bird's-eye point of view of Rue sitting with the drugs on her lap before dramatically zooming back in, pivoting to an upside-down, front-facing shot of Rue as she snorts the line and then quickly turning upright as she looks up at the camera. This shot cuts away to a montage sequence that begins with heavy strobe lighting and increasingly switches between a warm orange-red and a cool blue filter. Close-ups of Rue's face leave the rest of the scene in total darkness as her narration begins to describe "that moment when your breath starts to swell. And every time you breathe, you breathe out all the oxygen you have." This disorientating and surreal sequence captures Rue's anxiety and numbness, a moment of terrifying, breathless euphoria in an otherwise chaotic world. *Euphoria's* cinematographer Marcell R v describes

the show's aesthetic as “‘emotional realism’ that's more based in the characters' emotions, and not how the world surrounding them really looks.”<sup>41</sup> Sequences such as this one, in which *mise-en-scène* and cinematography are orchestrated to disorient the viewer and thereby represent Rue's anxiety, perfectly capture *Euphoria's* hypersubjective worldview.

The show's innovative use of cinematography—and its repeated use of nonlinear narratives and montage editing—also mark *Euphoria* as a complex serial drama. Dunleavy argues that narrative complexity is a key feature of complex serial dramas that contribute “to the moral and psychological investigation of key characters in ways that deepen audience engagement with their conflicts, decisions and/or behaviors.”<sup>42</sup> Rue's voice-over in the opening scene of the first episode (which depicts her birth in the days following 9/11) immediately establishes her as the unreliable narrator and complex moral center of the show. The constant use of flashbacks to depict other characters' backstories, always narrated by Rue, further cements her position at the center of the text while fragmenting the narrative and enhancing the series' complexity. Dunleavy argues that the fragmented and nonlinear structure “intensifies the narrative demands that complex serials make of their viewers. Viewers are invited to remember and apply details revealed, possibly at widely disparate points of the show's entirety, to gain the fullest understanding that the text makes available to them.”<sup>43</sup> *Euphoria's* complex depiction of gender and sexuality is ultimately mirrored in the show's nonlinear format: both the show's narrative and the characters' sexual and gender markers remain indistinct, fluid, and ephemeral.<sup>44</sup> The heightened use of saturated color and slow motion in these sequences expresses the intense

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41. Matt Grobar, “Cinematographer Marcel Rév on Cultivating the ‘Emotion Realism’ of ‘Euphoria,’” *Deadline*, July 7, 2020, <http://deadline.com/2020/07/euphoria-dp-marcell-rev-sam-levinson-hbo-interview-news-1202977123/>

42. Dunleavy, *Complex Serial Drama*, 114.

43. Dunleavy, 116.

44. This emphasis on ephemerality speaks to Eliza Steinbock's work in *Shimmering Images*. See Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

emotional realism associated with Rue's internal conflicts, casting both as highly subjective and surreal.

*Euphoria's* reception reaffirms the transgressive qualities of the show, its capacity to create buzz, and its investment in younger demographics. Early reviews describe the show as "haunting,"<sup>45</sup> "controversial,"<sup>46</sup> "gritty,"<sup>47</sup> and "compelling,"<sup>48</sup> with several reviewers drawing explicit comparisons to *Kids*<sup>49</sup> or *Skins*.<sup>50</sup> By focusing on the show's controversial elements (i.e., sexual content and drug use), these reviews highlight the show's interest in courting controversy. Moreover, by explicitly tying the show's transgressive qualities to its youthful appeal, these reviews demonstrate the show's significance for younger audiences. Many point out the different generational responses: a review for the *Hollywood Reporter*, for example, argues that "Levinson steers unflinchingly into what many adults and particularly parents will be triggered (and maybe outraged) by while most teens will probably agree it's one of the few accurate visual interpretations of their life."<sup>51</sup> Another review in *Variety* explicitly describes the show as a "complicated Gen-Z story of love in the time of 'likes,'"<sup>52</sup> immediately pinpointing *Euphoria's* explicit engagement with Gen Z culture.

45. Ben Travers, "'Euphoria' Review: Zendaya's HBO Series is a Teens-in-Crisis Horror Show." *IndieWire*, June 4, 2019, <http://www.indiewire.com/2019/06/euphoria-hbo-review-zendaya-series-1202146636/>.

46. Viruet, "HBO's Controversial 'Euphoria.'"

47. Jeena Sharma, "Hunter Schafer: Leading the Charge for Femme Representation," *Paper*, June 13, 2019, <http://www.papermag.com/hunter-schafer-euphoria-2638773269.html?rebelltitem=5#rebelltitem5>.

48. Palmer Haasch, "Euphoria Respects Gen Z Teens and Gets Them Better than Anyone Else," *Polygon*, August 6, 2019, <http://www.polygon.com/tv/2019/8/6/20757309/euphoria-finale-season-1-review-gen-z-queer>.

49. Tim Goodman, "'Euphoria': TV Review," *Hollywood Reporter*, June 5, 2019, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-reviews/euphoria-review-1215681/>.

50. Rebecca Nicholson, "Euphoria Review—So Explicit It Makes *Skins* Look Victorian," *Guardian*, August 6, 2019, <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/aug/06/euphoria-review-zendaya-rue-sex-drugs-teen-drama-skins>.

51. Goodman, "'Euphoria.'"

52. Daniel D'Addario, "Trans Superstar Hunter Schafer on Her Moment in *Euphoria*," *Variety*, June 21, 2019, <http://variety.com/2019/tv/features/hunter-schafer-hbo-euphoria-1203248330/>.

The series' unique visual style connects to ongoing debates about the significance of showrunner auteurs in the multiplatform era. Critics and scholars associate television's recent investment in less traditional, nonlinear formats to the multiplatform age, described by Timothy Havens and Amanda Lotz (among others), as a new era of flexibility and creative freedom for above-the-line workers. According to these scholars, changes in the industry have led to "more flexibility, creative control, and higher pay for some creative workers, while others have experienced significant job insecurity and lack of creative decision-making power."<sup>53</sup> This is particularly true for "well-known actors, directors, musicians, producers, and other high-end workers" who, in the showrunner-auteur era, have gained unprecedented creative freedom<sup>54</sup> (e.g., Ryan Murphy). This industrial development is pertinent for *Euphoria* since the show is explicitly connected to a single creative voice: Sam Levinson. Credited as the series' creator, Levinson wrote and directed every episode of the show's first season.<sup>55</sup> In the multiplatform era, a "television auteur must be seen at once as an effective boss and an inspired genius, and in its ideal form he claims total authority, simplifying the collaborative nature of industrial media production by isolating a singular artist to whom all others in the network of cooperation stand subservient."<sup>56</sup>

*Euphoria's* paratexts follow this pattern, clearly framing Sam Levinson as the "inspired genius" at the center of the show. While articles from the *Guardian*,<sup>57</sup> *IndieWire*,<sup>58</sup> and *Variety*<sup>59</sup> reference his earlier work (*Assassination Nation*, *Wizard of Lies*) or his more established father (Barry Levinson), they also identify him as the key creative genius behind the scenes. Perhaps

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53. Havens and Lotz, *Understanding Media Industries*, 198.

54. Havens and Lotz, 198.

55. Although the show is technically a remake of a 2012 Israeli production, the radical changes Levinson made to the characters, plot, and setting have so far limited comparative analysis between the two. Levinson's introduction of Jules, however, demonstrates how recently trans characters have gained cultural value.

56. Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, 40.

57. Nicholson, "Euphoria Review."

58. Travers, "'Euphoria' Review."

59. D'Addario, "Trans Superstar."

more significantly, reviews in the *Guardian*,<sup>60</sup> *Paper*,<sup>61</sup> and *Vox*<sup>62</sup> acknowledge that Levinson largely drew on his own experiences with addiction when crafting Rue's story line. In doing so, critics spotlight one of the key trends in the show's marketing campaign: aligning major story lines with the personal lives of cast and crew. Newman and Levine argue that in contrast to the impersonal and complex structures informing creative productions, television auteurism and culturally distinctive media pose "the possibility that the individuals who create culture are crafting expressions of their own concerns within the constraints of a commercial medium," and that this trope is often manifested "through the identification of autobiographical elements in television storytelling."<sup>63</sup> Thus, *Euphoria*'s promotional campaign highlighted Levinson's personal history as both a testament to the show's authentic treatment of teen addiction and his superior creativity.

Furthermore, interviews with cast and crew consistently reference Levinson as the show's creative center, not only by explicitly citing his personal history with addiction but also by attributing the authenticity of his characters to his ability to listen to cast and crew. In an interview with *Paper*, Hunter Schafer explains that "[Levinson's] ability to understand other people's positions in life is really special. . . . He has been great about listening and being collaborative in terms of our storylines and our backstories."<sup>64</sup> This is a common thread throughout reviews and interviews with cast and crew, wherein critics credit the show with a "rich authenticity"<sup>65</sup> or "a relentless dedication to authenticity."<sup>66</sup> Surprisingly, the show's trans consultant explicitly credits Levinson with the show's authentic treatment of trans identity:

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60. Hayes, "It Triggered Mass."

61. Sharma, "Hunter Schafer."

62. Emily VanDerWerff, "HBO's *Euphoria* Is Two Shows in One. One Is Bad. The Other Could be Good." *Vox*, June 23, 2019, <http://www.vox.com/culture/2019/6/23/18701226/euphoria-premiere-pilot-episode-1-recap-zendaya-hbo>.

63. Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, 48.

64. Sharma, "Hunter Schafer."

65. Travers, "'Euphoria' Review."

66. Sharma, "Hunter Schafer."



*Euphoria* not only features other trans actors like Quintessa Swindell (Trinkets), but also explores gender and sexuality in a way that feels authentic to its audience. According to Scott Turner Schofield, *Euphoria*'s trans consultant, that's due to showrunner Sam Levinson's earnest desire to listen to trans individuals and fairly and accurately represent their experiences on screen.<sup>67</sup>

Comments such as these legitimize *Euphoria*'s edgy content with reference to Levinson's auteur status, either by explicitly citing the showrunner's personal experiences or his extraordinary receptivity.

Levinson also puts his personal stamp on each of the show's characters. In a promo for the show, Zendaya says, "I have this idea that basically all the characters are just, like, different facets of [Levinson's] personality" before Levinson himself explains that he wanted to create "a story that's realistic and authentic"<sup>68</sup>—this oddity, in which the characters are described as aspects of Levinson *and* as means to portraying "authentic" contemporary teen experience, suggests the extent to which Levinson's vision steered the cast and crew's perspective on the series. In other words, the promotional emphasis on collaboration situates Sam Levinson as the creative center through which cast members filter their own personal experiences. While Schafer's influence over her character is recognized, her contributions are treated as a credit to Levinson's talent as a showrunner auteur who listens to cast members and adapts their characters to the performers' experiences. It is therefore clear that Levinson's personal history is used to legitimize the show's depiction of addiction while Schafer legitimizes the show's trans discourses, both narratives celebrating Levinson as an up-and-coming television auteur.

The auteur-showrunner framework is valuable, inviting productive comparisons with Levinson's other work. While his filmography is relatively

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67. Haasch, "Euphoria's Trans Consultant."

68. TV Promos, "Euphoria 1x02 Promo 'Stuntin' Like My Daddy' (HD) HBO Zendaya Series." YouTube, June 17, 2019, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-8GuN\\_BHNI&ab\\_channel=TVPromos](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-8GuN_BHNI&ab_channel=TVPromos).

limited (he has only written and directed three films since his directorial debut in 2011), his work consistently foregrounds identity politics, “woke” youth culture, and, in the case of *Assassination Nation*, prominent trans characters. *Assassination Nation*, which opened in theaters a year before *Euphoria*’s television debut, follows the fictional town of Salem after a hacker publicly leaks private documents from half the town’s residents. Chaos ensues, and the community turns into a violent mob intent on murdering the young women they deem responsible for the data leak. Described as a “complex mix of feminist politics and low-brow genre fun,”<sup>69</sup> the film merges feminist rhetoric and woke political discourse with a gory revenge fantasy about young women navigating the “anxieties and pressures and fears of growing up in the digital age.”<sup>70</sup> The film’s investment in feminist discourse is immediately foregrounded with an opening montage of trigger warnings that playfully warn the viewer about the film’s violent and sexual content along with warnings for “fragile male egos.” As in the case of Jules, a trans performer (Hari Nef) plays the film’s high-school-aged trans character Bex and is not subject to the transphobic bullying common in teen movies. The film, like *Euphoria*, emphasizes a trans-inclusive sisterhood, and while acknowledging the potential dangers of living as a trans woman in the United States, these threats are linked to an outdated, toxic worldview that (according to the film) preceded Gen Z culture.

Ultimately, *Euphoria* gestures toward a new era in trans representation, one grounded in youth culture and divorced from the tragic associations historically afforded trans characters. Trans identity in Levinson’s canon is an accepted feature of a youth culture invested in authenticity. His aesthetic treatment of trans subjects as fashionable, self-assured, and ultimately cool

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69. Elena Lasic, “*Assassination Nation* Interview: ‘Right Now, in America, We’re in This Sort of Stand-Off. And Stand-Offs Don’t End Well, You Know?’” *Seventh Row*, September 24, 2018, <http://seventh-row.com/2018/09/24/assassination-nation-sam-levinson/>.

70. Beth Webb, “*Assassination Nation*: How Sam Levinson Made a Millennial Satire,” *Empire*, November 23, 2018, <http://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/assassination-nation-how-sam-levinson-made-a-millennial-satire/>.

suggests that trans identity is now something to be coveted or at least respected, a demonstration of one's capacity to be true to oneself. It spotlights the potential transgressive power of trans content for younger audiences. And while the show's controversial elements have sparked debate among established critics, the show also normalizes trans and queer identities in its appeal to younger audiences.

Much like trans-authored shows, such as Netflix's *Sense8*, *Euphoria* is not aimed at educating cisgender liberals about trans issues; rather, it portrays an edgy transgressive youth culture where trans identity is already largely accepted. According to Keegan,

*Sense8* marks a number of unprecedented moments in televisual media that have been largely overshadowed by the success of more culturally mainstream and palatable transgender identity narratives, such as those in *Orange [Is the New Black]* and *Transparent*. Unlike these programs, which aim to "teach" transgender to liberal cisgender audiences through universalist metaphors or through pedagogical forms of affect, *Sense8* offers different routes into trans as an aesthetic practice or as a set of narrative strategies for simultaneously representing and replicating hypermodern globality.<sup>71</sup>

Although *Euphoria* hasn't reached the mainstream success of *OITNB*, its insight into queer and youth culture marks a significant turning point in screen depictions of trans identity. The show arguably demonstrates the wider influence of streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime, which have compelled more traditional networks like HBO to not only establish VOD services but also to introduce increasingly edgy content to distinguish itself in the multiplatform era. And while *Euphoria's* auteur discourse is reductive, its treatment of trans identity signals a new trans aesthetic that rejects transition and dysphoria in favor of phenomenological experience.

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71. Cael Keegan, "Tongues without Bodies: The Wachowskis' Sense 8," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, nos. 3–4 (2016): 606.

While contemporary television's complex relationship with trans characters and performers (as a means of accruing cultural capital) contributes to a potentially exploitative environment, one where trans representation benefits industry elites more than the community it claims to represent, *Euphoria's* unique approach to representation remains an intriguing and possibly productive development in trans media. But the show also demonstrates the potentially limiting power of a "trans-as-cool" approach that relies on trans-normative beauty standards. Ultimately, *Euphoria* demonstrates the significance of trans characters, aesthetics, and culture in HBO's appeal to young audiences and adaptation of its edgy brand to compete in a crowded multiplatform television market.

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