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Subjective Excess: Aesthetics, Character, and Non-Normative Perspectives in Serial Television After 2000

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SUBJECTIVE EXCESS: AESTHETICS, CHARACTER, AND NON-NORMATIVE
PERSPECTIVES IN SERIAL TELEVISION AFTER 2000

by

Jessica Sellin-Blanc

A Dissertation Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

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May 2023

ABSTRACT

SUBJECTIVE EXCESS: AESTHETICS, CHARACTER AND NON-NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES IN SERIAL TELEVISION AFTER 2000

by

Jessica Sellin-Blanc

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2023

Under the Supervision of the Professor Gilberto Blasini

This dissertation aims to fill gaps in contemporary television scholarship with regards to aesthetics and character subjectivity. By analyzing eight series that have all aired after 2000, there is a marked trend in series that use an excessive visual and aural style to not only differentiate themselves from other programming, but also to explore non-normative perspectives. Now more willing to explore previously taboo topics such as mental health, addiction, illness, and trauma, the shows featured in this dissertation show how a seemingly excessive televisual aesthetic works with television's seriality to create narrative complexity and generate character development. Chapters are arranged by mode of production with the first chapter focusing on the series *Grey's Anatomy* and *Hannibal* as a means of exploring the production and distribution practices surrounding network TV. The second chapter examines the basic cable series *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and *Legion* and posits how the narrowcasting of cable allows for more nuanced character representations through aesthetics. In the third chapter, the impact HBO has had on the television medium is explored through *Carnivàle* and *Euphoria*. The final chapter looks at contemporary series *The Boys* and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* as a way to better understand how the medium's production and distribution has shifted during the convergence era. Ultimately, this dissertation will argue that in addition to further explorations of aesthetics, television

studies is in need of a medium specific vernacular for creating meaningful textual analyses that avoid an overreliance on cinematic terminology.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	vii
Acknowledgments.....	x
Introduction.....	1
Methodology & Text Selection.....	2
Medium Specificity.....	12
Television: A Brief History.....	15
Applied Theory.....	20
Chapter 1 Network Television.....	28
The Enduring Nature of Meredith Grey & Parasocial Bonds.....	29
Ellen Pompeo: The Woman Behind the Doctor.....	34
Technology & Production.....	39
“Song Beneath the Song”: A Case Study.....	44
Meredith Grey: Complicated Woman.....	49
Beauty in Death: Fine Art Aesthetics & Character on NBC’s <i>Hannibal</i>	57
Hannibal Lecter & Will Graham: A Character Study in Stylistic Excess.....	67
A Meal Fit for a Cannibal: Food Design & Production	71
Will Graham: Machiavellian Archetype.....	75
Final Thoughts.....	86
Chapter 2 Basic Cable.....	89
Rebecca Bunch: Antihero or Anti-Villain?.....	92
Genre-Blending & Seriality.....	97
Sound & Production Practices.....	102
Unique Narrative and Subjective Characterization.....	107
<i>Legion</i> : Peak TV & Creating a Historiographic Account of Televisual Aesthetics.....	111
The Mode of Aesthetic Complexity.....	113

Operational Aesthetics and Television of Attraction.....	116
Historical Expressionism and the Avant-Garde.....	118
Digitally De-Centered.....	121
Style in Action.....	124
Final Thoughts.....	128
 Chapter 3 Premium Cable.....	 131
<i>Carnivàle</i> & the Curse of the Period Drama.....	133
The Aesthetics of Historicity.....	136
The Politicization of Biblical and Historical Themes.....	140
The Subjective Telling of Good Vs. Evil and Active Viewing.....	144
“Too Much Weird”: Escaping the Cinematic.....	150
Title Sequence and Music.....	154
Cinematic Problems: Anti-Realism & <i>Euphoria</i>	158
Non-Normative Subjectivity & Emotional Realism.....	161
Formats, External Characterization, & The Disney Effect.....	171
Final Thoughts.....	180
 Chapter 4 Streaming.....	 182
<i>The Boys</i> : This is NOT DC or MCU.....	185
Vought Owns This City: Visual World Building.....	186
Antiheroes, Villains, & Subjective Trauma.....	192
Breaking Down Artifice: Practical vs. Digital FX.....	196
Aesthetics, Fandom & Political Commentary.....	204
Production & Distribution.....	209
<i>Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt</i> : The Aesthetics of Concealed Trauma.....	212
Radical Comedy: Trauma, Humor, and Psychological Distancing.....	214
Authorial Intent: Real World Controversy.....	221
Cinematography & Mise-en-Scène.....	225
Screwball Comedy: Puppets, Cartoons, & Original Songs.....	228

Interactive Endings.....	232
Final Thoughts.....	236
Conclusion.....	238
Chapter Recap.....	241
Critical & Theoretical Obstacles.....	248
Future Research & Final Thoughts.....	249
Works Cited.....	251

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. <i>Grey's Anatomy</i> (Meredith Dream).....	33
Figure 2. <i>Grey's Anatomy</i> (“Song Beneath the Song”).....	47
Figure 3. <i>Grey's Anatomy</i> (Meredith Drowning PoV).....	51
Figure 4. <i>Hannibal</i> (Damien Hirst & Beverly Katz).....	67
Figure 5. <i>Hannibal</i> (Will Crime Scene PoV).....	70
Figure 6. <i>Hannibal</i> (Ortolans).....	73
Figure 7. <i>Hannibal</i> (Series Finale).....	85
Figure 8. <i>Crazy Ex-Girlfriend</i> (Marilyn Monroe Parody/Lemonade Parody).....	98
Figure 9. <i>Crazy Ex-Girlfriend</i> (Rebecca Letting Paula in Her Mind).....	102
Figure 10. <i>Crazy Ex-Girlfriend</i> (Elaborate Mise-en-Scène).....	105
Figure 11. <i>Legion</i> (Exploding Kitchen/David’s Powers).....	120
Figure 12. <i>Legion</i> (David in Asylum).....	125
Figure 13. <i>Legion</i> (World’s Angriest Boy).....	127
Figure 14. <i>Carnivàle</i> (Ben’s Home/Ken Burn’s Image).....	139

Figure 15. <i>Carnivàle</i> (Ben Heals Girl & Crops).....	143
Figure 16. <i>Carnivàle</i> (Title Sequence).....	155
Figure 17. <i>Euphoria</i> (Rue Overdosing/Lighting).....	163
Figure 18. <i>Euphoria</i> (Rue’s OCD).....	166
Figure 19. <i>Euphoria</i> (Rotating Set).....	170
Figure 20. <i>The Boys</i> (Seth Rogen & Black Noir).....	188
Figure 21. <i>The Boys</i> (The Deep Gills/Practical Effects).....	195
Figure 22. <i>The Boys</i> (Black Noir Subjectivity).....	197
Figure 23. <i>The Boys</i> (Comic vs. Series).....	199
Figure 24. <i>The Boys</i> (Practical & Digital Effects Award Nom.).....	202
Figure 25. <i>Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt</i> (Promo Photo).....	213
Figure 26. <i>Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt</i> (Kimmy & Dong/Slapstick Comedy).....	218
Figure 27. <i>Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt</i> (Kimmy’s “Happy Place”).....	221
Figure 28. <i>Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt</i> (In the Bunker/Kimmy & Jan).....	226
Figure 29. <i>Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt</i> (Titus/Mr. Frumpus/Ronan Farrow).....	231

Figure 30. <i>Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt</i> (Interactive Episode).....	235
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Introduction

On March 1, 2018, *The Atlantic* took a bold stance when it published critic Jake Nevins' "Aesthetic Excellence: How Cinematography Transformed TV." It is no secret that for nearly two decades before the article's publication, creatives from the film industry had been consistently flocking to television for the medium's promise of economic stability and creative freedom. As with several academic and critical pieces that have come before, Nevins claims that contemporary television has taken on the "sensibility of cinema," but without ever quite elaborating on what that sensibility means (Nevins). While earlier work has credited this turn towards the "cinematic" to directors or writers' rooms, Nevins places his focus on the director of photography, suggesting an emphasis on visual aesthetics. What the article fails to acknowledge is any sense of medium specificity, claiming that a convergence of production practices (thanks to streaming) has rendered film and television virtually indistinguishable, with television officially usurping film for stylistic dominance.

The article works hard to ignore television's brief, but rich history, acting as though current series' "inventive camerawork and glossy lighting" are new fixtures, and not just reiterations of the televisuality of the late Eighties and early Nineties, as explained by John Caldwell (Nevins). While Nevins does not reference Caldwell directly, the theorist's work with television's self-conscious style of the Nineties can help to better understand the contemporary issues Nevins addresses. To the article's credit, television is applauded for its ability to more fully realize visual worlds given its long-form nature, a clear nod to the benefits of medium specificity. But such specificity is completely disregarded when Nevins includes interviews from producers and directors of photography, who claim that no "creatives involved in this project saw this as a TV show," or that they "all imaged it as a 10-hour movie" (Nevins). These claims

suggest the need for a much deeper look at contemporary television with focus placed on aesthetics and medium specificity, or rather, the televisuality of our contemporary television landscape (across cable and streaming). This article's discussion signals a regression in the legitimization of television and its medium specificity amongst critics, a need for scholarship to take notice and adapt existing studies to the new digital landscape.

Even with an emphasis on televisuality and medium specificity, there is a new sense of diversity across contemporary programming, suggesting the need for a consistent "through-line" that can be applied to all shows up for analysis. Director of Photography (DP), Jim Frohna suggests that we are currently in an era where subject matter has more bearing on the way a series looks than ever, allowing television to open our "eyes to a different sort of protagonist or subject matter" not previously seen on the small screen (Nevins). Fellow DP, Ava Berkofsky agrees, noting that "unexpected people are running shows and unexpected stories are being told in unexpected ways on television" (Nevins). This dissertation focuses on these "unexpected stories" by selecting series that offer non-normative, subjective interior access to their protagonists. Series I examine must also prioritize narratives that feature interior states altered by factors such as trauma, mental illness, addiction, and supernatural abilities. I connect complex characterization and aesthetics, as well as narratology, noting both visual and aural style.

Methodology & Text Selection

Guided by a background in art history, my early research involved looking at ways that fine art and television converge through artists like Tom Wesselmann, Alfred Leslie, and Nam June Paik. Through mediums like oil and canvas, as well as video art, these artists reveal the ways in which the television medium has impacted the fine arts world by exploring themes like iconography, pop culture, and the role of the television set as a sanctum within the home. While

these artists have historically noted the influence television has had on the fine art medium, I am concerned with how contemporary television is incorporating fine art works and techniques into its aesthetic. Without arguing that television needs to be considered an art object to be deemed worthy of study, my current interests lie in television's reimagination – even subversion – of fine art theory within its programming. The methodology that follows is interested in the ways in which tenets from movements such as surrealism, emotional realism, and baroque art can be used to better understand non-normative perspectives through visual and aural storytelling.

By examining eight contemporary series - that originally aired after 2000 - across four different modes of production and distribution, I argue for the importance of aesthetic considerations of television. By recontextualizing Caldwell's definitions of televisuality and stylistic excess from the late Eighties and early Nineties, I suggest that the selected shows use visual and aural excess as a means of exploring non-normative characters' perspectives, while also drawing attention to conversations previously considered taboo. I argue that what is being read as excess is necessary in our contemporary television landscape for series to distinguish themselves, while also immersing viewers in non-normative subjective perspectives. By looking at narratives that explore topics like addiction, mental illness, sexual trauma, Alzheimer's disease, and supernatural abilities, an aesthetic analysis helps us to better understand how these series are allowing viewers to experience perspectives they would otherwise not encounter in most TV shows. Furthermore, a consideration for how a series' aesthetic works alongside narratology and character development allows for a greater understanding of how this aesthetic is serving a larger purpose than just creating a distinct look, helping these shows differentiate themselves amidst an ever growing number of competitors.

With the goal of emphasizing subjective characterization through televisuality, this dissertation calls upon multiple existing theories, including aesthetic theory, production studies, sound studies, narrative studies, as well as existing methods, such as formal textual analyses and television criticism. Along with existing scholarship, this project will be guided by an interest in initiating a more medium-specific means of discussing character and aesthetics in long-form story telling. Acknowledgement of similarities between television and film and their modes of production will also be present. While a lack of sound studies within television studies will be supplemented with theory from radio and film, the goal is to create a method for analyzing television sound that is particular to contemporary programming and considers how sound functions with images to create meaning and advance character in serial narratives. This is done by analyzing both diegetic sound as well as non-diegetic soundtracks and voice-over narration.

Industry journals and critical reception provide background information on the production of series. This context helps better elucidate textual analyses and theory, taking a cue from John Caldwell's *Production Culture*, which focuses on workplace interviews/observations, marketing materials, textual analyses, and popular press. In combination with textual analyses of episodes (focusing on aesthetics and character), I use behind-the-scenes information on series production to contextualize how particular visual and aural rhetorical choices are being rendered to create distinguishable, but consistent aesthetics. By delineating these analyses between platforms (network, cable, premium cable, and streaming), this dissertation finds a correlation between production, distribution, and aesthetics in an otherwise diverse digital landscape. With this potential for divergences amidst platforms, an emphasis on aesthetics and character development provides an overarching sense of homogeneity. This uniformity also serves to further solidify a medium-specific methodology for discussing television style (visual and aural)

independent of evaluation and cultural criticism. These methods are all in the service of avoiding the pitfalls of a hierarchical canon of programs by moving away from notions of “quality” television, as critiqued by scholars such as Jonathan Gray in *Television Entertainment*, Amanda Lotz in *The Television Will be Revolutionized* and Jason Mittell in *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*.

John Caldwell’s seminal *Televisuality* serves as the foundation for the textual analyses that will appear in this dissertation. While Caldwell’s dissection of the stylistic excess found in television of the late Eighties is tied to network television’s battle to compete with cable, such excess can still be seen in the contemporary television landscape. Referred to as a “self-consciousness of style,” Caldwell suggests that by 1990, television “had retheorized its aesthetic and presentational task,” and that programming increasingly featured shows where “style itself became the subject, the signified” (Caldwell 5). Evading any notions of technological determinism, televisuality still applies to modern programming through a shared lens that examines modes of production, distribution, audience recognition, and economic imperatives. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, the excess seen in the selected series is read as intentional creative choices meant to expand the narrative, explore non-normative subjectivities, and highlight difficult conversations surrounding stigmatized topics. Shifts in how television is produced, distributed, and viewed has not forced the medium to be any less presentational than the “trash spectacles” Caldwell first noted in the late Eighties (Caldwell 3-4).

Beginning in the late Eighties and early Nineties programs sought to “flaunt and display style” in an attempt to create “identifiable style-markers and distinct looks in order to gain audience share within the competitive broadcast flow” (Caldwell 5). In our current era of convergence, the ability for a series to generate a marked style remains important, as audiences

continue to become increasingly narrow and the market more saturated with content. Caldwell delineates style-driven, televisual shows into two “general, and production-based stylistic worlds: the cinematic and the videographic” (Caldwell 12). Cinematic series refer not just to a “film look in television,” but also the way that “cinematic values brought to television spectacle, high-production values, and feature-style cinematography” (Caldwell 12). Cinematic series have historically been the most likely to garner critical attention and be regarded as prestige for their “cinematic air of distinction” (Caldwell 12).

Video graphic series, in contrast, were deemed “more pervasive and perhaps more anonymous than cinematic ones,” but were “no less extravagant in terms of stylistic permutation” (Caldwell 12). The videographic is praised for its readily available stylistic options, that give shows “more embellishment potential given their origins in electronic manipulation,” which are often marked by “acute hyperactivity and an obsession with effects” (Caldwell 12-13). Caldwell suggests that iterations (and combinations) of the cinematic and videographic are indicative of producers within the television industry becoming “more stylistically *and* more theoretically inclined,” with series’ approaches to production becoming increasingly “premeditated rather than rote” (Caldwell 75). Caldwell defends excessive visual style as a move towards the self-consciousness of television in the late Eighties. However, he does note that the industry in general sees that “excessive visuality – overproduction – seems to be a trait that producers should overcome,” and that “the industry is interested, not in excessive or empty style, but in stylistic originality and *motivated* style” (Caldwell 76). This dissertation is most concerned with this notion of motivated style and how a series can simultaneously create a distinct aesthetic while also using said aesthetic to further narrative, expand character development, and push the boundaries of generic conventions.

While televisuality as a larger concept still applies to help define the set of aesthetically distinct series that appear in this dissertation, adjustments to the definition of excess are in order. *Televisuality* suggests that series (beginning in the mid-1980s) contained a “structural inversion between narrative and discourse, form and content, subject and style,” noting that “what had always been relegated to the background now frequently became the foreground” (Caldwell 6). Likewise, Caldwell sees television’s referentiality to outside media as a penchant for commodification of the image, stating that “through intermedia and pictorialism, television becomes a boundaryless image machine, gobbling up any cultural visage that hesitates long enough to be abducted” (Caldwell 151). This “gobbling up” of images for the sake of visual spectacle does little to account for series like *Hannibal*, which use fine art tableaux to help conceal graphic violence on network television, a clear motivation for the employment of such recognizable imagery. For Caldwell, “style was no longer a bracketed flourish, but was the text of the show,” providing little to no narrative motivation, and with no mention of how style can serve character development (Caldwell 6). The series examined in this dissertation suggest a need to explore how stylistic excess is not only serving larger narrative purposes, but also working to explore character subjectivity. This motivated style suggests that what at first seems an excess of style is actually premeditated, intentionally excessive aesthetic that serves larger narrative and character-driven purposes. By focusing on shows that feature non-normative subjectivities, serial narratives are able to fully explore complex characters in a way that allows audiences to discover perspectives they may not otherwise experience (such as Alzheimer’s, addiction, mental illness, superpowers, trauma, etc.). While updated notions of stylistic excess are tantamount to my use of televisuality, Caldwell’s definitions of cinematic and videographic visual styles will also be explored and updated.

The selection process for the television texts included in this project was multi-faceted.. The goal is to create a contemporary sampling of texts that factors in the influx of filmic talent into the television industry as well as the rise of streaming platform original content. Selected series must run between 2000 and today. To emphasize varying modes of production, chapters are divided based on network programming, cable programming, premium cable programming, and streaming platform originals. Two series were selected from each mode of production and distribution based on the following additional production-based factors: the shows must be a fictionalized serial, there must be mention of uncommon visual and aural styles in at least two popular or trade journals, and abundant access to extratextual information (such as interviews and promotional materials) must be available. On a series level, factors include: a distinct mode of visual and aural storytelling, access to internal character subjectivity (visually or aurally) and a protagonist whose subjectivity is based on a non-normative experience (mental illness, addiction, or disease are required. Most notably, shows are paired with each chapter focusing on one series with a male identifying protagonist, and the other with a female identifying protagonist.

Traditionally texts like Brett Martin's *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution* have focused solely on depictions of male antiheroes in primetime, by looking at series like *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, and *Breaking Bad* .However, recently, scholarship such as Sarah Hagelin and Gillian Silvernman's *The New Female Antihero: The Disruptive Women of Twenty-First-Century US Television* suggests a growing number of female antihero representations. While this dissertation will not take on a feminist lens, each chapter will feature a female antihero to recognize this growing trend. To create a flexible methodology, this

selection process does not discriminate by genre, network (or streaming platform), runtime, or whether the series has ended or is still airing.

When considering the breadth of scholarship that focuses on male antiheroes such as Tony Soprano, Don Draper, and Walter White, there has been a newfound inclusion of what I term “hideous women” on television. In his own analysis of male antiheroes in primetime television, Jason Mittell suggests that while we have previous female characters who inch towards the level of antihero (Veronica Mars, Patty Hewes), they often fall short, with an overall lack of “female characters who invite us to embrace their troubling morality” (Mittell 134). While the term antihero is not be recycled here, a spotlight is be placed on the assortment of female characters that not only invite us to embrace their problematic morality, but to also confront such choices as a side effect to previously taboo subject matters such as trauma, mental illness, and addiction.

The first chapter focuses on network television and features textual analyses of ABC’s *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005-) and NBC’s *Hannibal* (2013-2015). As hospital drama/procedural *Grey’s Anatomy* entered its nineteenth season, its ensemble cast has seen drastic changes over the years, but still centers around a handful of characters from the pilot, most notably Meredith Grey. The series has accomplished this feat while maintaining a consistent visual and aural style, reminiscent of its stylistic predecessor, *ER* (1994-2009). This series proves an interesting contrast to NBC’s *Hannibal* (2013-2015) whose high art aesthetic was often heralded by critics and images from the series are reminiscent of Renaissance and Baroque tableaux, a feat achieved through an elaborate and costly production. Despite early critical praise for its visual and aural style, the series’ use of a fine art aesthetic to conceal violence proved a failure with audiences and led to its ultimate cancellation.

The second chapter centers on cable-based and network programming by looking at two programs from The CW and FX networks that share similar production models, but varied standards and distribution. While The CW is an example of a mini-network, it is included in the basic cable channel due to the network's parallelisms with networks like FX when considering content and production. The CW's *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019) features an elaborate production with regard to mise-en-scène, as the series explores the protagonist's inner monologue via extravagant musical numbers. Such an aesthetic lent itself well to a live tour of the series, and both iterations, especially concerning aural aesthetics, seem extremely fruitful for the project at hand. Along with production accommodations for such inherent musicality, the show's aesthetic also serves as a deeper dive into the visual and aural characterization of Rebecca Bunch and her journey as she comes to grips with her lifelong battle with depression and anxiety. Such a subjective exploration of character can also be seen in FX's *Legion* (2017-), as genre blending (horror, sci-fi, drama and superhero) is used to pull from a variety of film and television sources to create an abstractly-styled superhero tale based on the *X-Men* comic series spin-off of the same title. The series relies heavily upon CGI visuals and post-production sound effects which contrasts *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*'s elaborate stage and costume-based production while also offering an additional look at a character whose inner-subjectivity operates as part of the series' larger visual and aural style. Shifting from subjective characterization on-set versus on-location production, the third chapter concentrates on premium cable series airing after 2000.

The series in this chapter both aired on HBO, but over a decade apart. *Carnivalè* (2003-2005) has been briefly discussed academically for its "cinematic" style, as the period piece follows a 1930s dustbowl circus across the drought-stricken United States. This biblical tale of good versus evil features elaborate on-location sets, and the landscape and diegetic sound effects

are key components of the show's overarching aesthetic. These stylistic choices mark a departure from the network's success with the gritty crime drama, *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). An exploration of production for a series synonymous with on location shooting and a "cinematic" style stands in stark contrast with *Euphoria* (2019-). Showrunner/director Sam Levinson prides himself on the series' reliance upon elaborate sound stage sets, reminiscent of the classic network era. *Euphoria* is an interesting choice to juxtapose *Carnivàle*, given its discussion in popular discourse as possessing an excessively televisual style. Further, creator Sam Levinson expresses a wish to create a diegesis that plays with notions of realism (what he calls an antirealist aesthetic) by creating completely enclosed sets with special doors for obscure camera angles (Zoller Seitz).

Continuing with this theme of antirealism, the fourth and final chapter explores two series from streaming services: Amazon Prime's *The Boys* (2019-) and Netflix's *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-2019). Billed as the anti-superhero series, *The Boys* has been coined in popular and trade publications such as *Slate* as simultaneously tasteless and astutely timely in nature, with an inherently nihilistic aesthetic (Dessem). With an ensemble cast of morally lacking and vapid characters, an analysis of the series' visual and aural style can prove an intriguing task, especially in conjunction with a deeper dive into Amazon's production practices, and the series heavy reliance upon CGI and urban location shooting (with a hefty production budget). Operating with a similarly nihilistic undertone, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt's* employment of pain, grief and poverty is masked with the brightly toned, overly saturated visual style of the series. Using comedy and cheerfulness as a mask for the darker themes that *The Boys* fully embraces (such as rape, murder, radicalism, and false prophets), *Kimmy Schmidt* serves as an fascinating parallel for analysis, especially juxtaposing Netflix's more seasoned production

model with that of Amazon. Both series are also helmed by television veterans with Eric Kripke of *Supernatural* fame producing *The Boys* and Tina Fey of *30 Rock* stardom writing/producing/directing on *Kimmy Schmidt*. A framework for analyzing these series can be further adapted by adding textual analyses to the existing exploration of Amazon and Netflix's production practices.

An analysis of streaming originals seems an apt conclusion to an assessment of contemporary television aesthetics given the rate at which such production is proliferating. It remains imperative that any methodology created for discussing contemporary television aesthetics be able to discuss platform original programming, while also considering how such programming has redefined what television is. This balance is an important factor in creating a medium-specific framework, and such discussions about how to define TV remain key factors in television studies.

Medium Specificity

The question of medium specificity has become a tenuous and difficult question to answer, thanks to the convergence of film and television production with the advent of streaming. So why bother delineating the two mediums, or rather, what is at stake? Critic Ben Travers sets up a succinct argument in favor medium specificity by noting *how* we talk about a text matters. As critics continue to vaguely point out that television looks increasingly "cinematic," greater emphasis has also been placed on network, cable, and streaming television come awards season. Where arguments used to revolve around genre, now questions arise about whether the latest anthology or limited series belongs at the Emmys or the Oscars. With regard to reception, television has always been critically (and academically) usurped by film, left to defend itself in its predecessor's shadow.

The fact that film originated some fifty years before the advent of television necessitates a theoretical vocabulary largely borrowed from film, but multiple golden ages have proven television's staying power, popularity, and ability to garner critical acclaim. Therefore, continuing to ambiguously label television as "cinematic" seems like a regression towards any tangible, medium specific progress that had been made. Using *Twin Peaks* 2017 return as an example, Travers notes that David Lynch and his die-hard fans claimed the highly episodic series as a filmic entity—a ten-hour film, to be exact. So where does the disconnect lie? In a concise and divergent vernacular, according to Travers. Fans, critics, and scholars alike are apt to rely on vocabulary that they feel confident in, which often defaults to film. To remedy this, Travers seems to suggest that not only do we need a more medium-specific means of discussing television, but also a need to revisit old vernacular such as seriality and how to avoid rigidly holding onto outdated scholarship.

Historically, television's specificity revolves around its liveness, an attribute praised long before the eras of DVR and streaming. With radio lacking any visual component and film lacking the ability to broadcast live from a studio, television was both praised and questioned for these distinguishable qualities from its outset in the 1930s. Beginning with live news broadcasts as early as 1929, the medium truly cashed in on this liveness with the advent of the multi-camera sitcom in the 1950s. Series such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) offered the reactions of a live studio audience, and the actor-supported advertisements of radio, with the added benefit of visual storytelling. The multi-camera sitcom became synonymous with television's early aesthetic, later giving way to televised sporting events, special event programming, and live talk shows. During the 1980s, John Caldwell would credit much of this live programming with the visual excess overtaking the medium with series like ABC's *American Gladiators* (1989-1996) or MTV's

Remote Control (1987-1990) (Caldwell 4). Some forty years later, television now operates within a digital landscape, with live viewing only a priority prioritized for major sporting events, such as the Super Bowl and special programs. While remnants of liveness still permeate some visuals, when and how we view television is no longer a primary contributor to television's innate capabilities as a distinct medium.

Instead, I argue that our focus must turn to how contemporary television is operating under new modes of consumption by responding through aesthetics and characterization. Given the proliferation of platforms (well beyond even the reach of narrowcasting), there is a new possibility for telling stories and perspectives that were previously marginalized or deemed financial risks for homogenous network audiences. Certainly, these stories have been told for decades in Indie films, but their production, storytelling, and distribution still differ greatly from that of television. Even though contemporary directors of photography (DPs) may claim to be working on ten-hour long films instead of a season of television, there are clear differentiations between the two media that simply do not allow such analogies. For example, as Nevins posits, even a show like *Altered Carbon* (2018-2019) is still episodic in nature, with each installment following a clear three act structure, wrapping up episodic arcs, and continuing all serial storylines. Likewise, while the series is released all at once, allowing for binge viewing, each installment still stands on its own, clearly truncated from the next episode. It is also worth noting that not all streaming platforms follow a bulk release, with many, such as Amazon Prime, still following a weekly episode release schedule, mimicking that of network and cable television.

Television production practices in the age of streaming still hold true, particularly when it comes to directing. While films utilize a singular director, television production still shifts between a handful of directors (and guest directors) between episodes, relying upon a writers'

room, DPs, and sound engineers to maintain a consistent sensibility for the series. When considering set design and general mise-en-scene, more time, detail, and budget is often put into creating locales that can be used long term, helping shape a more detailed and consistent diegesis. As *Altered Carbon*'s DP Martin Ahlgren notes, the inherent structure of television allows for a visual world to be "more fully realized than it might have been as a two-hour feature, where much of the show would have been constructed via green screens and digital effects" (Nevins). This is a testament to the impact that long-form storytelling has on production and the affordances the medium allows for offering more nuanced and detailed examinations of complex characters and storyworlds. Each chapter therefore holds a brief conversation surrounding how the term "cinematic" has been applied to series through both critical reception and scholarship. John Caldwell's definitions of the cinematic and videographic are explored, as well as interviews with creators, producers, and directors who have offered insight into issues surrounding medium specificity.

Television: A Brief History

Along with aesthetics and production, the medium's technological advancements play a crucial role in understanding how the contemporary television landscape operates. Given the rapid shifts that have occurred in production, distribution, and reception over the last twenty years, attempts to define just what television is have been a focus of scholars and critics alike. Since its introduction by RCA at the World's Fair in 1939, the physical television set has long been a focal staple in the American household, with the medium being closely tied with domesticity. This placement within the domestic sphere simultaneously has helped establish the medium as separate from film, while also igniting criticism for television's ability to welcome images of violence and upheaval into the home. Today, television no longer has the same

domestic locus, as internet/cellular enabled devices like phones, tablets, and laptops allow programming to be viewed on the go with streaming and on-demand programming. This transition begs the question: With the delocalization of television outside of the home, how do we define medium specificity?

The displacement of television outside of the home is paralleled by shifts in the film industry as well. Over the last twenty years, film distribution models have been upended by video-on-demand, with most theatrical releases lasting only a few weeks in theaters before switching to various streaming providers. This process was quickly expedited over the COVID-19 pandemic, when theater chains across the country shuttered with dozens of big budget films still awaiting release. This led to an increased proliferation of streaming platforms such as HBO Go, Disney+, Paramount+, and Peacock eagerly popping up to rescue production companies' bottom lines with paid subscriptions. Such a shift in distribution helped to further conflate already converging production practices between film and television, thanks to platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime, who had already been successfully producing original series and films side-by-side for the last decade.

Prior to streaming and the shift to digital filming, television and film had more distinct production practices and formats. As noted earlier, the liveness of television's classic network era in the Fifties offered an aural and visual immediacy that both film and radio were lacking. These attributes eventually drew the attention of scholars, as television studies began to rear its head in academia in the early Seventies. However, it is worth noting that this attention was not always positive in nature. These features were expounded upon as the Eighties welcomed the multichannel era, and cable programming began to proliferate. With advancements in distribution via cable and satellite through the Eighties and Nineties, the actual television set also

improved, with high-definition televisions first being released in 1998, following the switch to mostly digital filming in 1996. It is worth noting that the actual conversion to all digital stations did not happen until a decade later in 2006. The push towards 4K began and yielded progress in lenses to help achieve the crispest image possible and is ongoing, as new digital lenses and coatings are in continual circulation as the push towards 8K continues.

The technological shifts touched upon above follow a historical breakdown of television's eras more in line with how critics like Alan Sepinwall and Matthew Zoller Seitz have dissected the medium's historical periods: black and white analog (1930s), color analog (1950s), rise of cable & satellite (1980s), rise of digital (1990s), HD TV (2000s), and streaming/over-the-top content (today). While these technological shifts were not determinant in the type of programming that was subsequently produced, aesthetically, adjustments have been made to match the additional scrutiny that high definition has placed on series. In contrast to a more technologically driven history, Amanda Lotz's *The Television will be Revolutionized* recounts a breakdown of eras more closely tied to decades and the types of programs produced: classic network/first golden age (1950s), rise of the sitcom (1960s), serial television (1970s), dramas/second golden age (1980s), prestige (1990s), and peak TV (2000s). There is also debate regarding exactly when the medium's golden ages occurred, if the second golden age is ongoing, and whether peak TV truly exists (Lotz 158). While controversy over how to break down the medium's history exists, there is a slightly more clear-cut picture of how television studies as a discipline—or rather, mode of analysis—has unfolded since its rise and recognition in the 1970s.

On May 9th, 1961, FCC chairman Newton Minow delivered what would become famously known as his “Vast Wasteland” speech. Just two weeks later, he would offer a similarly impassioned speech before a senate subcommittee concerning the state of American

broadcasting. In his remarks, Minow argues that television is not upholding its duty to public interest, noting a clear lack of educational programming featured on the medium. Amongst his list of grievances with the medium, sitcoms, gameshows, and sadism ranked highest. This was not a new perspective, as the medium had been chastised from its earliest inception for bringing images of war and violence into the home via unmediated news programming. (This would only intensify in the next decade as the U.S. would become involved in Vietnam). It comes as no surprise that as television studies began to popup at universities across the U.S. and UK, as many scholars were fighting for the legitimacy of the medium.

Citing television as “a medium for the people,” Amanda Lotz notes that its placement as a popular medium was crucial to how television “was understood and studied (or not studied)” (Lotz 13). Given its highly commercialized nature, television has long been viewed as the unsophisticated sibling of theater and film, often negating close aesthetic analysis of programming. Early scholarship was mostly concerned with social science perspectives, in the vain of George Gerbner, whose work focuses on investigating the potential dangers and effects the media could have on citizens, particularly the youth. The late Seventies saw a push for legitimization by looking at the medium through a humanistic lens, applying literary and film theories to television as a means of finding meaning that went beyond the technological medium, and focused on textual analysis, production, and reception. The introduction of cultural studies helped solidify television studies as we have come to know it today, and the initiation of the fight for television to be seen as a cultural object worthy of close analysis (Lotz 296). It was at this time that scholar Charlotte Brundson first called for some form of medium specificity when discussing television that helped (somewhat) free the medium from the confines of literary and

filmic theories. Some sixty years later, this battle faces new hurdles in the form of streaming and the continued convergence of film and television production practices.

This process of legitimization continued through the Eighties, with the rise of the television critic. Such work helped make textual analyses accessible to the general public and helped push towards an initial wave of television studies scholarship that would be published in the U.S. during the early Nineties. In 2000, Lynn Spiegel announced television studies had arrived as a legitimate academic pursuit, although Amanda Lotz notes that to this day, there exist very few college departments dedicated solely to the pursuit of television studies (Lotz 27). Instead, it exists as a continued protocol for other disciplines to use the medium within their own field. It is argued that this sustained inability to legitimize television studies as its own standalone discipline stems from the medium's rapid technological shifts in production and distribution, as well as a continued lack of medium-centric theory (Lotz 29).

With its lineage in literary and film theories, much of television studies' scholarship revolves around narrative, serial storytelling, operational aesthetics, and genre analysis. Despite multiple golden ages of programming and the influx of filmic talent into the industry, television continues to struggle for legitimacy as an art object, worthy of aesthetic analysis. Herbert Zettl, a pioneering scholar for television aesthetics, asserts that existing scholarship on television aesthetics can "fit quite comfortably into a normal-sized briefcase" (Zettl). When exploring why this has occurred, Zettl seems to harken to the work of fellow scholar Marshall McLuhan, by suggesting that television continues to be viewed as a receptacle for distributing pre-designed messaging, not a true art object worthy of such elevation. Early television (before recording devices and streaming) was also labeled as an ephemeral piece of culture, unable to be easily and repetitively scrutinized.

Contemporary scholars such as Jason Mittell and Sarah Cardwell have attempted to fill gaps in this scholarship while avoiding the pitfalls that come with creating a hierarchical canon of texts. It is worth noting that much of the discussion surrounding aesthetics in television is related purely to visual style, often negating an inclusion of sound or relation to character. Other scholars, such as Matt Hills in *Fan Cultures*, denounce aesthetic inquiries into television as inherently dangerous, and even regressive for television studies (Hills 18). His reductionist perspective on such a methodology suggests an inherent assumption that all aesthetic inquiries must revolve around a canonical repository of texts deemed worthy of examination. Such derisions have often been shared by critics, such as Adam Wilson, whose article “Good Bad Bad Good: What was the Golden Age of TV?,” reduces an entire era of scripted television to little more than a hierarchical game of subjective taste. It is therefore apparent that there exists a continued need for aesthetic examinations within television studies that avoid creation of a canon, and meaningfully seek to generate a vernacular that can conduct textual analysis with medium specificity in mind.

Applied Theory

Despite popular criticism and scholarship noting a turn towards more style-driven television after the late 1990s, limited attention has been paid to aesthetics within television studies. While scholars such as Jason Mittell note the importance of creating a medium specific framework for discussing visual style, such analysis is often secondary to narrative or authorship. Mittell’s *Complex TV: Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* serves as a foundational text for how to begin looking at storytelling through alternate lenses, such as character and visual style. Likewise, scholars such as Amanda Lotz and Jonathan Gray dedicate much of *Television Studies* to noting distinctive features of television’s visual style, differentiating it from that of

film, and referencing a need to discuss aesthetics while avoiding evaluative criticism (and the creation of a canon). Both important contemporary texts share John Caldwell's *Televisuality* as an important starting point for their own discussions.

A shift toward medium specificity when discussing television aesthetics asks us to move beyond the application of filmic techniques and can be found throughout various existing discussions within television studies. There is also a consensus on the role that serialization plays in distinguishing television from film, and the impact this serialization has on character (though a connection to style is not made apparent). However, while all these scholarly accounts attempt to formulate goals for discussing television aesthetics, there is a lack of contemporary studies (since 2000) that pay attention to the role those differing modes of production (network, cable, premium, streaming) play in creating a series' visual style. When aesthetics is mentioned, it almost always references purely visual style, completely negating sound studies from television scholarship.

Without many options aside from *Televisuality* as a foundation, contemporary aestheticists such as Robin Nelson also utilize filmic means of describing highly visual (usually premium) television programming, often further conflating already converging production and distribution. Focusing on heavy use of CGI and industrial practices, Nelson emphasizes the medium's shared use of production practices with the film industry as a way of reaching audiences that want to see something different from television, something more akin to film. Mittell counters this use of the cinematic by suggesting that the term itself is inherently vague, while also noting that the film industry's shift towards digital filming (i.e., away from celluloid) does bring it in closer production practice with television. As a means of working around a reliance upon terms such as the inherently vague "cinematic," there exists an opportunity to

focus on aesthetics through the lens of characterization within serial narratives to achieve some semblance of medium specificity.

Such a framework pays heed to the convergence of technologies in the production of film and television set forth by previous scholarship, while also acknowledging the privileges of television's mode of serial storytelling. Due to the serialized nature of television, there exists the potential for repetition of aesthetic elements, such as setting and costuming to aid in cohesion from one week to the next. There is also a need to create displays of aesthetics on an episodic basis to help individual series differentiate from a vast landscape of programming. To further expand prior scholarship, it is important to consider aesthetics from a more well-rounded definition that also includes a close examination of diegetic and non-diegetic sound, particularly when looking at series that focus on voice-over narration and musical accompaniment.

Loosely following the methodology of Jeremy Butler in *Critical Methods and Applications* and *Visual Storytelling and Screen Culture*, which emphasizes diegetic sound as a means of narrative propulsion, any attempts at discussing sound on television must consider sound studies within radio and film and adapt such frameworks for television. While Butler's formal analysis of sound focuses on its close association with cinematography, there is a need to discuss sound as an extension of character within serialized programs. Michel Chion's methods put forth in *Audio-Vision* can prove useful in determining how series are using sound to better understand the complex interiorities of their main characters. Contemporary series offer a subjective exploration through visual and aural style that warrants closer scrutiny, especially given today's complex production and distribution landscape. James Bennett and Niki Strange's *Television as Digital Media* proves a fruitful contemporary guidepost for navigating the ever-changing definition of what television is and how we watch it. All featured essays continue the

call for meaningful discussions about television's features as a medium separate from film, despite contemporary convergences.

Additional texts that discuss production-based and technological shifts within the history of television studies, and how those changes help inform historical trends also provide important context for contemporary practices. While scholarship focused on television history does briefly mention noteworthy technical shifts (e.g., the transition from black and white to color), such shifts are positioned more as the result of historical demands rather than discussed in-depth as changes in production practices. Therefore, these texts revolve around particularly noteworthy points within television history, such as the shift to color and high-definition programming, while also paying attention to the various facets of television production, including filming, writing, and editing. While suggesting a need to pinpoint medium specific modes of production, a lot of scholarship simultaneously discusses the production of both film and television.

To better understand how aesthetic choices are made and implemented, Jane Barnwell's *Production Design for Screen* diverges from the prioritization of the director as auteur and instead celebrates the production designer's role as a fellow maker of visual meaning. This becomes important when attempting to understand how someone like the food production designer on *Hannibal* is such an important creator of meaning in the series' overall aesthetic. A shift in focus away from the director can also be seen in Tara Bennett's *Showrunner*, which privileges the role of executive producers within a show's production and style. This import helps to understand how a creator/showrunner like Eric Kripke has managed to create such a unique visual style in Amazon Prime's *The Boys*, helping differentiate the series from its graphic novel origins. Cited by many contemporary scholars, Raymond Williams's *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* was first published at the advent of television studies in 1974.

Williams maintains that technology will be responsible for shaping the cultural form of the television medium. Williams claims that technology will allow audiences the ability to disrupt historical conceptions of how the medium should be utilized, as well as what messages can/will be distributed by said medium. This argument serves as an excellent forecast for our contemporary over-the-top landscape. Such predictions into the future can help to better understand the role that special episodes, such as *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*'s interactive episode, play in the series' larger production and established aesthetic.

Along with a sense of liveness, Jeremy Butler argues in *Television Critical Methods and Applications* that television's ebb and flow, polysemy, and its penchant for self-interruption mark it as distinct from other media (Butler 4). Before our current era of convergence that emphasizes streaming and cord cutting, television texts were defined not just by their individual episode, but the programming block they were featured in on their respective network, as well as any potential interruptions. Television frequently interrupted itself with commercial breaks, meanwhile viewers interrupted their own programming by switching channels during commercial breaks, or leaving the room during the show. The medium was also praised for its polysemy, which "contributes to television's broad appeal...with so many different meanings being signified, we are bound to find some that agree with our world view" (Butler 6). While television remains polysemic in nature, particularly with an emphasis on narrowcasting, the larger metatexts created by watching entire blocks of programming on a particular channel, switching channels, or viewing commercials has changed with the advent of streaming. While viewers previously had limited autonomy for curation of the viewing experience by switching between channels, streaming allows for greater agency with regards to binge viewing entire series.

It is worth noting, however, that the advent of streaming has not completely negated previous modes of distribution, with platforms such as Amazon Prime Video and Apple TV maintaining traditional models that feature a singular episode of a serialized program being released once a week.

By maintaining a traditional release model, series such as Amazon Prime Video's *The Boys* highlight the importance of seriality with regards to television's specific mode of storytelling. Jeremy Butler notes that "the serial is another form of storytelling that successfully made the transition from radio" (Butler 25). Butler goes on to note that the "television serial begins each episode in medias res. The story has already begun, the action joined in progress" (Butler 26). In *Class Divisions in Serial Television*, Wibke Schniedermann and Sieglinde Lemke note that the "allure of contemporary serial and subscription TV – with its multiple, interlocking and twisted plotlines as well as an open-ended structure with suspense generating cliffhangers – provides bait for viewers to enter landscapes" (Schniedermann and Sieglinde 7). When discussing medium specificity in *Complex TV*, Jason Mittell notes that unlike film, television revolves around its "ongoing long-form narrative structure...where ongoing and seriality are core features," and calls for a need to "develop a vocabulary for television narrative on its own medium terms" (Mittell 18). This dissertation will also argue that television's long-form structure also offers a distinct opportunity for exploring non-normative perspectives in-depth, while also generating complex series aesthetics that help shows differentiate from a vast landscape of programming choices.

Expanding upon ideas expressed in *Television Studies*, Amanda Lotz's *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* focuses on how the internet has opened up new possibilities for the medium, further supporting the need for a medium specific means of discussing TV. Lotz's book

focuses on time-shifting technological developments such as TiVo and on-demand programming, as well as downloadable content on the web. This work is expanded further by more recent publications, such as Derek Johnson's *From Networks to Netflix*, which focuses on platform-based programming and original content from entities such as Netflix and Hulu. While Johnson calls for a shift in how we define television, maintaining that the medium is not the message). Johnson continues Lotz's argument that such changes in technology and production are signs of an enduring, rather than dying medium with its own individualized style.

While choosing contemporary series that are still airing runs the risk of analyzing a text in flux, such is the crux of studying media, which are never static in nature. However, in emphasizing textual analysis and creating a methodology independent of social and cultural criticism, this project seeks to create a methodology that is easily applicable to contemporaneous programming, free from a need to only focus on encapsulated time periods in the past. Should it be argued that a neglect for cultural criticism in such analysis is short-sighted in nature, the use of popular and trade magazines as a means of selecting texts pays homage to discussions taking place in popular culture. Likewise, an emphasis on production helps direct these conversations toward a more medium specific discussion that considers the shifts that television distribution has encountered in the last decade, and how these changes relate to visual and aural style. Such a discussion can lead to deeper acknowledgement of how sound and image work together to elaborate serialized characters, sparking a return towards the verbal and aural aspects of television, which has been a part of the medium since its inception, further delineating it from film's early history.

Instead, our focus must turn to how contemporary television is operating under new modes of consumption by responding through aesthetics and characterization. Given the

proliferation of platforms (well beyond even the reach of narrowcasting), there is a new possibility for telling stories and perspectives that were previously marginalized or deemed financial risks for homogenous network audiences. Certainly, these stories have been told for decades in Indie films, but their production, storytelling, and distribution still differ greatly from that of television. Even though contemporary directors of photography may claim to be working on ten-hour long films instead of a season of television, there are conspicuous differences at the sites of visual style, sound, and character. Instead of being used as a signal for baseless excess, televisuality is used as a term for stylistic (visual and aural) excess that is determined by subjective characterization that also serves the larger series narrative.

Chapter One: Network Television

This chapter examines the role of network television in the current digital landscape through a focused lens on ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-) and NBC's *Hannibal* (2013-2016). Together, these shows present two distinct representations of highly flawed protagonists who allow viewers subjective access to their interior states. Despite some shared similarities with subjectivity, Meredith Grey and Will Graham are radically different characters both operating within the drama genre. *Grey's Anatomy* demands critical attention for its ability to persevere for nineteen seasons, despite Nielsen reporting that in the last year, there are over 817,000 television options across cable and streaming (Nielsen 2022). In contrast, Hannibal Lecter did not fare as well with longevity in his first television iteration, with *Hannibal* lasting only three seasons. Both shows have consistently received critical praise, and their differences in the portrayal of their protagonists' subjectivity, aesthetics, and production practices are worth further consideration.

Both series will be grounded in John Caldwell's notion of televisuality, though at varying ends of the spectrum created by the theorist. Looking at four series airing from 1973 to 1991, Caldwell argues that television's presentational mode began gravitating towards exhibitionism by the mid-Eighties. This exhibitionism includes a highly stylized mise-en-scène, a cinematic style, special effects, stylistic cycling from one week to the next, and flourishes of spectacle that can be considered normative to the program in question. This chapter will argue that while NBC's *Hannibal* falls into the category of exhibitionism, its fine art aesthetic, as well as its visual and aural excess, serve larger narrative and subjective characterization purposes that evade mere exhibitionism. Similar to Caldwell's own dissection of CBS' *Dallas* (1978-1991), this chapter will also argue that through the use of dramatic realism, soap opera tropes, and a female

antihero, ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* allows for stylistically coded explorations of morality and non-normative subjectivities.

Each series televisuality will be explored through several theoretical concepts that highlight how both shows utilize aesthetic excess as a means of exploring non-normative or deviant perspectives, while simultaneously helping to provide forward momentum for complex narratives. Theoretical explanations of narratology help to better understand how the non-normative subjectivities of Meredith Grey (*Grey's Anatomy*) and Will Graham (*Hannibal*) force their audiences to embody perspectives they may not otherwise encounter. Concepts of fine art theory and realism guide a deeper understanding of how each series is operating stylistically within their given generic confines and on their respective networks on broadcast television. Along with an analysis of character subjectivity, both series present distinct formulations of the antihero that require a closer look. Lastly, critical reception and interviews with series' creators offer insight into the role that authorship and reception play in the understanding of two series with disparate levels of success.

The Enduring Nature of Meredith Grey & Parasocial Bonds

When referencing the inability to recreate the success of *Grey's Anatomy* on linear television, critic Adam Epstein calls the long-running series "the last of a dying breed of broadcast TV dramas" in his article "The Enduring Success of 'Grey's Anatomy' Will Never Be Repeated." Currently, the only shows still airing that have run longer than *Grey's* are *The Simpsons*, *Law & Order: SVU*, and *NCIS*. So how does a series like this maintain over 15 million viewers per episode, across multiple TV and streaming platforms? Most notably, "critics cite Pompeo's well-rounded lead character, a diverse cast, and a smart blend of soapy elements with romantic comedy" (Epstein). What is often not discussed when considering a primetime medical

drama are its aesthetic qualities. While the show has maintained a consistent visual and aural style over the last twenty years, it has had to do so amidst significant changes both technologically and industrially. Given its nineteen-season run, *Grey's Anatomy* has sparked recent critical and fan-based speculation as to whether the show has yet reached a natural conclusion, with star Ellen Pompeo vocalizing her own support for a series end. Such discussions yield important questions about the show's longevity and how it has managed to be such a ratings success for ABC for nearly two decades, amidst such an increasingly saturated market.

When *Grey's Anatomy* began in 2005, Ellen Pompeo was only thirty-three years old and in her first starring role. Commenting on the static nature of serial programming, a recent interview found Pompeo lamenting the fact that she aged in front of million of people, noting that going from "33 to 50 on screen is not so fun. You really see the difference because I'm in the same clothes playing the same character" (Ausiello). While Pompeo may have personal misgivings as a woman in Hollywood, aging before the public every week, Meredith presents a distinct opportunity for viewers who rarely get to grow up with a character for nearly two decades. A fact of serial television revolves around the accumulation of experiences that a character endures over the course of a series, and both we and Meredith are certainly left with a vast repository of events to remember.

There is a comfort and familiarity that comes from being with a character for such an extended amount of time, while also a desire for them to remain a slightly unknown, surprising entity. Film theorist Murray Smith suggests that engagement with a protagonist is one of the most important reception practices of filmic allegiance. His system from *Engaging Characters* is threefold and begins with recognizing the protagonist (or protagonists), aligning with their character through narrative cues, and if the first two steps are successful, forming an allegiance

with said character (Smith 186). For serial television, this alignment is usually forged over an extended period (a length of time not granted by the contained nature of film) and by access to characters' interior states. To expand Murray Smith's theory for serial television, Jason Mittell notes in *Copmplex TV* that television (and even film) rarely offers subjective literary conventions where characters outrightly provide access to their interior voices for the audience (Mittell). For Mittell, "In a long-form serial, attachment is a crucial variable, as our relative connection to individuals can shift from episode to episode" (Mittell 129). Privileged access to characters can also create intrinsic norms for the series at large, which can be seen through Meredith's voice-over narration at the start of each episode. (This will continue into season 20, even after Ellen Pompeo's departure from the series). When looking at a series such as *Grey's*, which is going on twenty seasons, it is important to draw attention to the role that seriality plays in Smith's original framework, especially in the face of serial television's tendency to feature drawn out and frequent character overhauls and transformations (Mittell).

Throughout the entire series every episode of *Grey's* features voice-over narration on behalf of Meredith (or in special episodes, other ensemble characters). It is worth noting that there are "special" episodes that offer unique insight into other ensemble characters, such as Dr. Izzie Stevens. After losing her patient/boyfriend Denny Duquette in the second season, Denny returns in the fifth season of the series as hallucinations in Izzie's mind. Only Izzie and the audience can hear and see Denny, in what is assumed to be mental illness associated with trauma and grief. As the season progresses, it becomes evident that Izzie's manifestation of Denny is actually tied to a growing tumor in her brain. In contrast to Izzie, Meredith is, at times, an emotionally closed-off character, and her voice-overs read like diary entries, exploring key plot points such as her troubled relationship with her late mother, her affair with her eventual

husband, and battles with her mental health. They also frame each episode, thematically, offering viewers insight and closure at the outset and conclusion of each installment.

Meredith's voice-overs quickly become a key establishing entity for the series, as they open and close each episode, alerting viewers to the themes and obstacles of that week's drama. Early in the first season, the audience is introduced to the recurrent theme of Alzheimer's disease within the series. Ellis Grey, world renown surgeon and abusive mother to Meredith, is now a shell of her former self, confined to an assisted living facility. In the pilot, it is revealed that Meredith's narration is her talking to her mother at the nursing home. However, after Ellis's passing in the third season, our access to Meredith's internal dialogue continues, leaving viewers uncertain for *whom* such narration is intended. Regardless of the reasoning behind the narration, it serves as an important avenue for audience alignment with Meredith, and like the series' opening credit sequence, becomes an important intrinsic norm for the series' structure. After the airing of season nineteen, fan forums and critics have some theories pertaining to the intended listener of the voice-over narration., A brief look at Meredith's character trajectory with her mother helps to solidify these claims.

Throughout the course of the series, following Ellis's death, Meredith frequently speaks to her late mother, whether it be seeking her expert medical advice and revisiting her diaries, or chastising her for her (lack of) parenting skills. The audience also experiences hallucinations of Ellis from Meredith's point-of-view, usually when the protagonist experiences a trauma, near death experience, or most recently, while suffering from COVID-19. Like Izzie's hallucinations of Denny, these scenes diverge visually from the series by featuring a soft-focus filter, warmer lighting, and an almost hazy effect over the entire scene. At one point, a glint on the screen simultaneously captures the sunlight of the beach, but also signals that something is not quite

right, and we are no longer in reality (figure 1). Ellis's presence in the series, posthumously, signifies her as a subjective extension of Meredith, offering the audience insight into Meredith's childhood and anxieties as an adult. Ellis's passing also presents a huge developmental hurdle for Meredith, in both the immediate and long term. Throughout her career, Meredith has had to live up to her mother's name, while also operating in her shadow, under intense scrutiny. After Meredith herself becomes a mother (let alone a single mother), Ellis' fate at the hands of Alzheimer's disease forces Meredith to confront her future by completing genetic testing in season nine.



Figure 1

With testing revealing Meredith's likely future battle with Alzheimer's, she experiences a cycle of denial and depression before the plot ultimately moves on. As the series continues and Meredith's children grow older, themes of Alzheimer's return, with seasons seventeen, eighteen and nineteen seeing her conduct research to help cure Parkinson's, and in-turn, Alzheimer's, as well. The personal stakes that Meredith holds in this research are intensified by her now eleven-year-old daughter, Zola, and her recent struggles with anxiety. At the beginning of the nineteenth

season, Zola, a newfound medical wunderkind, suffers a very public panic attack while giving a presentation on her late grandmother. Dripping with sweat and tripping on her words, Zola notes her grandmother's ultimate passing from Alzheimer's, before heart-wrenchingly noting that her mother and aunt will suffer the same fate. With Meredith now on a mission to find a school for gifted teens to help foster Zola's intelligence, a former regular character, Dr. Jackson Avery) has a unique proposition for Meredith: move with her kids to the East coast and let him fund her Alzheimer's research. This familial trauma is intensified and made personal for the audience through their strong alignment with Meredith's character, having experienced the events first hand, over countless seasons, through Meredith's eyes.

This serial arc between Meredith and Ellis vis-a-vis Alzheimer's sets the stage for several events in the current nineteenth season. Returning to fan and critical theories as to *who* exactly Meredith is speaking to when narrating, it has been speculated that Meredith is speaking to her own children, perhaps in the form of a log or diary. The motivation for these conversations being her own likely battle with the degenerative brain disease in the future. Similar theories also posit that Meredith has in fact already been suffering from the slow burn of Alzheimer's for seasons, perhaps explaining her increasingly frequent hallucinations of Ellis. Audience access to this narration offers a sense of intimacy, while also offering a sense of audience recognition through a serial "expository function," similar to a theme song as theorists Gymnich and Allrath posit in their work *Narrative Strategies in Television Series* (17). These theories, along with Meredith's potential move to Boston and Ellen Pompeo's limited appearances in season nineteen, bring up some important questions about the very elements that have helped the series succeed.

Ellen Pompeo: The Woman Behind the Doctor

To date, Ellen Pompeo represents an exceptional example of the power dynamics that can be found on network television. Beginning as a relative unknown, the entire concept of *Grey's Anatomy* was built around Pompeo's potential star power. Shifts in the series can be seen throughout its two-decade run based on Pompeo's growing creative authority within the show and television at large. Ultimately, this star power would lead Pompeo to leverage her way out of *Grey's Anatomy* and into new projects, despite the series renewal for season 20 in 2023. In 2017, Pompeo began serving as an executive producer on the series, followed by co-executive producer credits on *Grey's Anatomy* spinoff *Station 19* (2018-) in 2018. While other cast members of the series, such as Chandra Wilson and Kevin McKidd have directed episodes very much in-line with the overall tone of the series, Pompeo's two episodes behind the camera present a markedly different emotional tone from the series' normal routine. These facets of Pompeo's career help to prove her position as an actor turned authorial voice for the series and a figure whose ability to transgress the creative boundaries of acting, producing, and directing has had an impact on the industry at large.

As of 2018, Ellen Pompeo officially became the highest paid actress on prime-time television, netting over \$500,000 an episode. After the departure of her onscreen husband, Patrick Dempsey, from the series in 2018, Pompeo signed new contracts for seasonal work, syndication, and a hefty signing bonus that would go on to net her over \$22 million annually. Despite the elevation of female voices with the MeToo Movement, any lead, but particularly a female lead, netting such a hefty salary is unprecedented, but then again, so is a nineteen-season run. While Shonda Rhimes (executive producer) remains the powerhouse and voice behind the series, Ellen Pompeo is the face of the series. While always marketed as an ensemble series, by season four, most of Pompeo's fellow resident surgeons began to slowly dip out, taking on other

projects. One of last remaining cast members, aside from Pompeo, to be featured in the pilot episode, Justin Chambers, left in season sixteen.

James Pickens Jr.'s Dr. Richard Webber, and Chandra Wilson's Dr. Miranda Bailey are the only two remaining season nineteen characters that appeared in the series pilot. With Rhimes taking a backseat from the series in 2017 after signing a nine-figure production deal with Netflix, Pompeo was in a good position to negotiate with ABC and parent company Disney, should they wish to continue producing the top-rated series in all of television. Commenting on her status in Hollywood, Pompeo notes that "I'm not the most relevant actress out there. I know that's the industry perception because I've been this character for 14 years. But the truth is, anybody can be good on a show seasons one and two. Can you be good 14 years later?" (Rose). That interview was conducted in 2018, and in the interim, *Grey's* has managed to still hold the same numbers, despite a continued proliferation of original programming, a drop in ratings for most network television shows, and a global pandemic.

Unfortunately for ABC and Disney, Pompeo also negotiated benefits for her own production company, Calamity Jane, in her 2018 deal. With office space on the Disney lot, and a newly signed feature with Hulu, Pompeo's success, and desire to move outside of Meredith Grey, proves a ratings nightmare for ABC. Set to star in and executive produce her new *Orphan* project with Hulu, Pompeo's limited appearances (only eight episodes) in season nineteen recalls Shonda Rhimes insistence that the series does not exist without Pompeo and will only continue if the actress wishes. While replacing major protagonists with either new actors or completely new characters is rarely successful in television, it proves nearly impossible when considering nearly twenty years of alignment with the series' namesake. That's not to say that the latest season is

not trying, with a fresh new batch of interns and residents entering Grey Sloan Memorial Hospital, generating a season premiere reminiscent of the fresh-faced cohort in the series' pilot.

The medical drama, historically, has had a problematic history with its female leads, particularly on network television. By the late 70s, “not only did more women physicians appear in guest shots than ever before but a few doctor shows began to include them regularly as central characters. And in 1978 the first medical series aired with a woman as the title character” (Turrow 222). The series in question, *Julie Farr, M.D.* (1978), lasted only one season before being cancelled by ABC, reflecting the sentiment of network executives that “concluded that the attempts to spark new interest in doctor shows by highlighting women had gone nowhere in the ratings precisely because women were the stars” (Turrow 222). The reasoning behind a continued lack of female-led medical series continues to be tied to the misogyny of the 70s, wherein female dominated audiences desire a romanticized male lead, and the notion that the very same audience cannot handle an “emotionally complex or unstable” female physician (Turrow 224). Even thirty years later, Meredith Grey’s presence on television is rare, and credit must be given to Ellen Pompeo’s portrayal of the character over the last two decades, as other attempts, such as the CW’s failed *Emily Owens, M.D.* (2012), have been unable to emulate the same level of success.

While beginning the series anew with a fresh influx of interns and residents may not signal the series' future success, Pompeo has managed to build a name for herself not just as an actress, but also a producer and director, over the last twenty years. With her success, Pompeo also frequently offers a unique perspective on the TV industry via candid interviews and guest essays. Writing for *The Hollywood Reporter* in 2018, Pompeo notes some pitfalls of the industry, explaining that her experience and age has left her more interested in producing. Producing is

something I really enjoy. That's my creativity now. Acting, to me, is boring. An actor is the least powerful person on set, so I don't care about chasing roles" (Rose). Pompeo goes on to note that while both television and film industries share a disposable attitude towards actresses as they age, the industries differ in their ability for stars to crossover successfully. While she suggests that film actresses can often find success on television, Pompeo notes that while she could always transition to "some cool cable show," even though TV actresses do not crossover to become film stars (Rose).

Pompeo's perspective goes on to suggest that her experience is extremely tied to the state of network television, and not necessarily cable or streaming. An advocate for female voices in television, Pompeo has been an integral member of the industry's Time's Up initiative and notes that her experience in Hollywood could have been very different (and in fact, after a meeting with Harvey Weinstein, almost was). Instead, Pompeo's path was one that sought financial empowerment, and avoided "ducking predators and chasing trophies," while noting that such choices "are not for everyone. You have to be more interested in business than you are in acting" (Rose). She goes on to suggest that the long hours and mundane day-to-day of network television breeds a frustration in actors that translates to onset drama, of which *Grey's*, and Pompeo herself, were not immune.

As an actor turned producer/director, Pompeo suggests alternative practices that can help solve the more soul-crushing aspects of network television production. For example, she finds that offering actors scripts ahead of table reads offers more time to make a story their own, and encourage actors to align more fully with their characters. Likewise, actively engaging them in the process of casting encourages deeper investment, and perhaps offers less time for misbehavior both on and off set. It seems, according to Pompeo, that much of the backstage

controversy on *Grey's* stemmed from rivalry and boredom, coupled with producers and network executives offering extra attention and work to those with the worst behavior, in an ill-guided attempt to occupy their time. It is, again worth noting, that Pompeo only claims her theory applicable to the dynamics present on network television, and its unique production practices (and perhaps, lack of creative freedom). A closer examination of said practices and technological shifts in the industry is worth analyzing, especially given the prolonged period over which the series has been in production.

Technology and Production

In *Televisuality*, John Caldwell notes that the medium's shift towards televisual excess in visuals and sound was not deterministically accomplished through technological shifts in production practices, or physical medium itself. *Grey's* serves as an important representative of this point, given that since the series inception in 2005, the medium has seen several technological shifts, while the show itself has maintained a relatively stable aesthetic. Rather than being coded by shifts in production, distribution, and technology, the series' aesthetic has remained reflexive of the network ideals of ABC (as a family network), as well as its protagonist Meredith Grey, and her specific, subjective characterization. While the show's storyline frequently grapples with contingent issues, its setting, sound design, and narration offer a sense of visual and auditory familiarity, week-to-week, and even season-to-season.

As was common practice, for much of the series' run, it has been filmed on Super 35 film stock, with dailies (the day's film stocks) being transferred to HD video. Television cornered the market on filming digitally in the early 2000s, years before it would become common practice in the film industry, beginning in 2010. Despite beginning to film in 2005, *Grey's* opted for a more traditional, filmic style of filming and had nearly seven seasons under its belt before making the

switch to digital in 2010 (Ramanello). From a stylistic standpoint, it is visually impossible to tell exactly when this shift happens, as the seventh season maintains its original visual integrity through use of the Arri Alexa camera (a staple during the shift from 35mm film). Such changes have implications industrially and on the labor force, as elaborated upon by producer Lisa Taylor, who, in an interview, notes the impact that the efficiency of filming and delivering offers the series and industry as a whole: “Back in the day, the PA would go and pickup the DVCAMS and then we’d have to digitize to an Avid. It’s so much faster and more efficient now” (Ramanello). However, in the same interview, Taylor stresses the anxiety the show’s creator and producers faced when switching to digital, claiming to have waited until the last possible moment, despite pushback from the network due to the financial savings of digital filming and delivery (Romanello).

So exactly what style was the series attempting to maintain during the shift to digital? *Grey’s* certainly did not invent the long-running medical drama, as that title was already granted to NBC’s *ER*, which ran for fifteen seasons from 1994 to 2009. In fact, for three seasons, the two series aired simultaneously, even sharing the same Thursday primetime positioning for one season (*Grey’s* first two seasons aired on Sunday nights). *ER* became synonymous with a rapid filming style, centered around the prioritization of fluid character movement, as the camera followed via Steadicam. The rapid, life-and-death stakes in the hospital setting are made palpable through the camera’s ability to follow every minute movement of the characters as they navigate the ER triage, surgical suite, or onsite catastrophe. While it is noted that series like *Miami Vice* and *NYPD Blue* helped originate this sense of visual urgency, *ER* is responsible for pioneering such visual excess within the medical drama genre (Chaney).

In the sixth episode of the second season, a train derailment sends Meredith and the other doctors running to the emergency room to receive several trauma cases. A wide angle shot of doctors and emergency staff running haphazardly outside of the hospital entrance is quickly cut with a slow-motion shot of Derrick (Meredith's boyfriend, at the time), entering the bar that the doctors have just left, in his stereotypically late fashion. As Meredith and her team enter the emergency room, an EMT casually walks in, dangling a disembodied leg in his hands, as the show's stereotypically cheerful opening music plays in the background. As Meredith examines two patients that are impaled together on a pole, her voice-over for the episode comments on her ongoing feud with Derrick over his lack of attentiveness to their relationship. Noting progression to a "faster beat" in the late 90's medical drama, the pacing of this scene (which appears regularly across episodes) fits with what Steven Peacock and Jason Jacobs refer to in *Television Aesthetics and Style* as a generic "action mode" (Jacobs 45). Noting the "rapid alternation between scenes of action – emergency medical treatment – and those of reflection and introspection," Jacobs suggests that action is "typically rendered in a fluid, restless visual style complemented by medical technobabble...with moments of reflection, where characters assess the consequences of a medical procedure, for the patients, and more importantly, for themselves" (Jacobs 45). The opening few minutes of the episode in question feature what Caldwell would call a "cinematic flourish," relying on quick cuts and combining several "self-conscious" modes of cinematography (Caldwell 53). The rapid cuts, combined with slow-motion, suggest an acknowledgement of artifice and excess not acknowledged in previous invisible production styles.

With an ensemble cast that has fluctuated over the years (apart from star Ellen Pompeo), the maintenance of a particular aesthetic is important for viewership and the series' longevity.

With that in mind, *Grey's* has also had to maintain its weekly audience numbers amidst the uptick in streaming and platform original content, which has furthered the disavowal of network television first noted by Caldwell in the late Eighties. *Grey's* at times outlandish storylines and case-of-the-week structure are grounded by its visual attempts at a filtered realism. The fluorescent lights of the hospital where they film provides a high key, washing of light over nearly every frame. Cool tones dominate the series, with scenes usually bathed in blues and grays. While the show's content has been critically compared to daytime soap operas (namely, *General Hospital*), *Grey's* lacks any sense of liveness such as heavy use of filters or multi-camera filming. The warm, heavily-filtered tones of the soaps are traded in by *Grey's* for cool-toned grit, where scenes punctuated with blood and bruising are highlighted. Further, the visual wear and physical effects of difficult episodes/seasons can be seen in its characters' appearances and is not mediated or filtered.

Cultivation theory can help better understand the show's ability to blend a soap opera aesthetic and outlandish storylines, while still maintaining a sense of realism, largely grounded in the show's employment of medical fact—visually, aurally, and narratively. Using Stuart Hall's notion of perceived realism, a 2011 study examined three television medical dramas, including *Grey's Anatomy*. The series was found to have a positive perception of medical professionals, due to the series' successful employment of perceived plausibility, typicality, narrative consistency, and narrative probability. This fits with early theoretical descriptions of the medical drama (occurring as early as the 1950s), which refers to series within the genre as “paternal in the sense that they sought to augment public trust in the medical profession largely through the ‘stamp of quality’” and “medical accuracy” (Jacobs 45). Despite the series' occasional implausible storylines, the show's ability to convey these events coherently and

consistently over the course of 19 (and counting) seasons creates an internal logic and sense of realism that translates directly to audience's perceptions of real-world physicians. Ultimately, the study suggests, by combining qualitative research with media theory, that "frequent exposure to television content may promote beliefs about the real world only when the television content is perceived to be real" (Cho, Wilson, Choi). This application of cultivation theory helps to better understand how the series manages to possess a sense of realism despite its heavily filtered aesthetic, while also explaining the show's consistent willingness to grapple with contingent events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to theorist Martin Sohn-Rethel, all media should possess a "a surface accuracy," and successfully "conform to notions of what we expect to happen," as well as "particular notions of psychology and character motivation" (Sohn-Rethel 25). Sohn-Rethel goes on to suggest that this realism is systematized through four areas: the text's form (mise-en-scène, cinematography, sound, editing, performance), conventions (genre and narrative), institutions (producers and distributors), and industrial conditions, audience, and representation/ideology (Sohn-Rethel 69). Central to this methodology are generic constraints on the depiction of realism, as well as continued reception of historic events. *Grey's* presents a unique perspective on realism given its tendency towards soap opera-like drama, while still maintaining a sense of medical realism with its weekly cases. Likewise, its tendency to emphasize historical events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, present interesting cases for how the series' realistic portrayal of a contemporaneously lived experience will age for future viewers.

A push towards a raw sense of realism became a priority for the series during the recent COVID pandemic. Industrially, strict safety guidelines changed the television landscape, with many series not surviving the additional costs and time it was taking to film singular episodes

(resulting in many truncated seasons of programming). Medical dramas such as *Grey's* have had the added responsibility of ensuring that they are also properly representing the real world within their diegesis. While initially resistant to the switch to LED lighting – again driven by a desire to maintain the show's visual integrity – the series' seventeenth season finally took advantage of the shift in technology to help mimic best practices in real-life hospitals.

According to DP Alicia Robbins, it was “time for the show to jump into the 21st century,” while also taking advantage of LED's ability to allow for “on the fly tweaks of color and exposure” (Mark Williams). Such a technical shift has still allowed the show to maintain its dominant wash of cool tones, but has also introduced moments of warmer lighting, when applicable. Citing hospitals moves to mimic circadian rhythms for patients hospitalized during the pandemic, many daytime scenes in seasons seventeen and eighteen of the series feature warmer lighting, with the scenes returning to the cool blues fans are accustomed to during nighttime scenes. This subtle shift can be seen in the abbreviated season seventeen, as the medical testing tents placed in Grey Sloane Hospital's parking lot are flushed with unseen LED lights, giving the new setting a wash of the show's customary lighting and color. Warmer tones can be seen introduced in Meredith's hospital room in the first three episodes, as she vacillates between the warm circadian hues of her room and the bright, angelically lit fever dreams in her mind, ravaged by COVID. While the series prioritizes a sense of realism, it does not completely negate more stylistically excessive moments, both visually and aurally. Again, according to Caldwell, realism can be used as a “dramatic artifice,” or combined with more excessive stylistic elements to create a more heterogenous, and compelling aesthetic (Caldwell).

“Song Beneath the Song”: A Case Study

While certainly rich in visual style that has become synonymous with Shonda Rhimes' entire slate of series, *Grey's* largely resists the overt stylization and exhibitionism synonymous with John Caldwell's definition of visual and narrative excess. Instead, the series has deliberately sought to create a static aesthetic throughout its run while also dabbling in moments of performative stylization. One stable theme throughout the series' nineteen season run has been the subjective access to the mind of Dr. Meredith Grey. After the initial establishing shot of Grey Sloan hospital at the outset of each episode, the audience is always briefed with narration by Meredith. This familiarity is broken with what can only be described as the spectacle that is season seven, episode eighteen, titled "Song Beneath the Song."

This one-off musical episode was simultaneously panned and lauded by critics and fans at the time it aired, with many viewing it in a more positive light some ten years later. The episode originally aired in 2011, about halfway through the run of Fox's *Glee* (2009-2015), some seven years after fellow medical comedy/drama *Scrubs* (2001-2010) tried its hand at such an event-based episode, and around the same time that series such as *Pushing Daisies* and *How I Met Your Mother* featured special musical episodes. The presence of such episodes (and series) marks a "boom in millennial television-musical integration," wherein the "apparent intrusion of musical tropes has become largely compatible with the medium's increasingly intertextual, cross generic, and narratively complex form" (Kessler 3). It is important to highlight the role of the "special" episode as a unique feature of television, wherein a series can momentarily deviate from its established norms before returning to an equilibrium. Historically, such episodes have been used to momentarily boost ratings for a failing series, in hopes that viewers will return for a special episode and be drawn back in long term (Cohn et al 222). So, what exactly makes *Grey's* use of such a spectacle distinct, given its solid standing as a ratings success? Aside from the

episode's stark divergence from the series' usual tone, it does emphasize the show's reliance upon music as an integral part of its aesthetic identity. All the songs covered by the cast in the episode have until that point been featured in the series' soundtrack, making their compilation and the episode read almost as a "best of..." special. The songs featured punctuate the state of Dr. Callie Torrez's damaged mind after a car accident, while simultaneously expressing the fear and anxiety in those around her, as her colleagues scramble to save her and the life of her unborn child. Each cover also begs for fervent viewers to recall back to previous episodes when the original songs were utilized.

The episode itself feels at once familiar, yet foreign, as a common scene of the group rushing a patient (Callie) down the hall to the surgical suite in slow-motion is altered to feature a second, singing version of Callie sitting atop her lifeless body below, a feature that pops up multiple times during the episode (figure 2). Perhaps the fact that the episode still holds the same familiarity of those past is a credit to the well curated soundtrack that Shonda Rhimes has prioritized from the series' outset. The varied success of individual actors taking a stab at singing is sidelined by the rate at which the series has managed to catapult songs and artists to the top of musical charts during its run. For example, avoiding one-hit-wonder syndrome, The Fray's "How to Save a Life" has become synonymous with *Grey's Anatomy*. The song ran during promos for the series second season and was then featured in a prominent scene from said season. Spending months at the top of charts, the song went on to be featured in over six popular primetime shows after its stint on *Grey's*, including an ensemble-based rendition during "Song Beneath the Song."

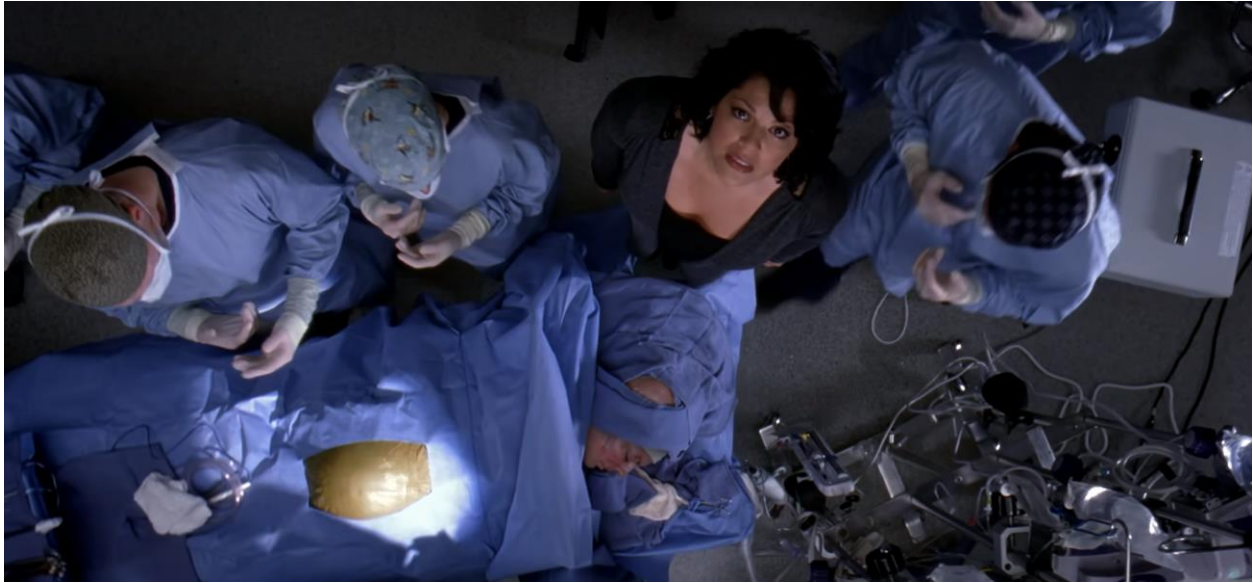


Figure 2

Working with musical supervisor Alexandra Patsavas on multiple shows, Shonda Rhimes has become somewhat of a queen of the needle drop on primetime television. Patsavas notes the importance of the show's music being another character in the ensemble: "This character would have a place in both the operating room and the break room. It would be there in the elevators, bars, and homes. And, of course, it would be there for all THE BIG STUFF – for weddings and funerals, for births and deaths, for the grittiest moments and the most light-hearted" (Patsavas). The soundtrack (released as an album at the end of each season) works hard to help the pacing of the show: speeding things up during moments of urgency and punctuating slow-motion montages at critical moments. By focusing on a lyrically based score, Rhimes and Patsavas have created a fluid way of transitioning between scenes and making meaningful thematic connections—a necessary task when quickly shifting between the stories of an ensemble of characters.

Ambitiously, Rhimes has used her positioning within television also to leverage progress in the music industry. In another Shondaland production, *Scandal*, music is also an integral part of the show's diegesis, prominently featuring Black female artists and Motown's greatest hits,

rarely heard on primetime television. While the genres included in *Grey's* differ, there is also a prioritization of older songs from the Sixties and Seventies, often reinvented by more contemporary artists. For some context, in nineteen seasons, the show has featured over 1400 songs, with over 80 of those songs being covers. The songs also serve a larger, more anchoring purpose to the series, namely in the form of episode titles.

With 406 episodes (and counting) having aired, all but one feature the titles of famous songs that usually fit that week's thematic conflict. For example, the pilot episode is titled "A Hard Day's Night," and finds the interns facing a nearly 24 hour long shift on their first day. The special musical episode, named after Maria Taylor's "Song Beneath the Song," is also very telling, asking viewers to search for layered meaning beneath all the songs featured in the tightly packed 42 minutes. An anomaly to this structure does not pop up until the ninth episode of the fourteenth season, with an episode focusing on Dr. Jo Wilson and the return of her abusive ex-husband. The episode was originally titled "Four Seasons in One Day," a song by the band Crowded House. The song title references the band's hometown of Melbourne, Australia, and the rapid rate at which the weather can quickly change and become inclement.

The original episode title speaks to the narrative's focus and highlights the rapid shift in Jo's mental wellbeing with the arrival of her ex, the very reason she fled to Seattle and changed her name. With a new fiancée in tow, Matthew Morrison's Paul Stadler shifted that week's episode to an important conversation about domestic abuse. Before the episode aired, series regular Giacomo Gianniotti (Dr. Andrew DeLuca) suggested that the episode title be changed to the domestic abuse hotline phone number, "1-800-799-7233." This title shift, along with Camilla Luddington's (Jo Wilson) PSA at the end of the episode highlights another consistency within the series, which is its ability to grapple with difficult, and exigent content in a meaningful way,

and provide resources to audience members experiencing such difficulties. These types of stories prove especially impactful when a series holds as much rhetorical weight as *Grey's* and when an audience has managed to become increasingly attached to its diegesis and characters. While the time spent within the diegesis (again, nearly twenty years) helps with alignment, complex characters such as Meredith also force viewers to regularly question their allegiance.

Meredith Grey: Complicated Woman

Character alignment in *Grey's* is an extremely important act, as Meredith is not always an easily defensible character. In his seminal text, *Difficult Men*, Brett Martin focuses on cable television's prioritization of the "Man Beset" in the early 2000s, analyzing characters like Tony Soprano, Don Draper, and Walter White. These men have been lauded as the new antihero: morally flawed, emotionally complex, at times offensive, but human and relatable. Female characters are mentioned, but only as benefiting second-hand from their male counterparts, allowing them to be "venal, ruthless, misguided, and sometimes even heroic human beings in their own right" (Martin 5). The types of female characters mentioned by Martin are almost exclusively relegated to prostitutes, housewives, and secretaries, certainly not self-possessed medical doctors. While Meredith Grey certainly does not possess the same moral corruption of a Tony Soprano, she does mark a departure from traditional, simplistic female protagonists, and successfully evades serving as a mere character foil for male leads.

If Meredith were to helm the cover of a work of scholarship centered on characterizations of her and her female contemporaries, a more apt title may be something along the lines of "Complicated Women." While Meredith is not an antihero in the same vein as Walter White, her drive to follow her own personal morality often flies in the face of societal norms and at times,

even the law. She is at once both completely vulnerable to the audience via access to subjectivity, but also cold and closed off, even to other characters with whom she has formed strong and intimate bonds. From a story perspective, much of her behavior is masterfully excused by her past and ongoing traumas. For example, her absentee father explains her struggles with her own romantic relationships, and the abuse she suffered at the hands of her mother created long-lasting issues with love, trust, and self-worth.

Meredith was not always a self-possessed, strong female character, after all, she started the series infatuated with a married man who would go on to break her in different ways throughout the series run. Her character did, however, take a progressive turn towards growth in the third season, after a visit from Ellis Grey, deep in the grips of her Alzheimer's disease. In the fourteenth episode of the third season, Meredith's mother is admitted to the hospital for eventual heart surgery. While there, her daughter is subjected to the embarrassment of her mother still thinking she is head surgeon, ordering around anyone and everyone at the hospital. Suddenly falling into a lucid phase, Ellis has some cutting words for her daughter: "I raised you to be an extraordinary human being, so imagine my disappointment when I wake up after five years and discover you're no more than ordinary" ("Wishin' and Hopin'"). Meredith defends her life to her mother by noting that she is happy with her friends and Derek, to which Ellis laments that happiness is not the priority, and the Meredith she used to know "was a force of nature," and a fighter, not concerned with the trivialities of happiness. Ultimately, Meredith returns to her mother's room to let her know that she is in fact the cause of her daughter's "ordinary" nature.

Although initially an innocuous scene, the next episode, entitled "Walk on Water," begins with Meredith taking a bath. While we hear her narrating the scene, discussing misdiagnoses and vanishing diseases, the camera takes on a first-person perspective, as Meredith

submerges herself under the water, and a distorted Derek hovers above (figure 3). The viewers and Meredith are rescued from the depths of the bathtub by Derek's arms, followed by a heated conversation between Meredith and her boyfriend turned rescuer, whom she claims is not her "knight in shining...whatever." Assuring her roommate, friend and fellow resident, Izzie, that she did not try to drown herself, Meredith asks: "Why can't I just be that happily ever after person? Why can't I just believe in that?" ("Walk on Water"). As with her response to Ellis in the previous episode, the most likely answer is, her mother.



Figure 3

The bathtub incident foreshadows the end of the episode, where after working on the scene of a ferry accident at the nearby bay, Meredith is accidentally thrown into the ocean by the dying patient she is aiding. With no one there to witness the scene except a mute child, Meredith is left helplessly treading water into the next episode, "Drowning on Dry Land." In a voice-over reminiscent from the previous episode, Meredith talks about disappearing and fading away, as we watch her gasp for air, as a recap of Derek saving her from the tub flashes before her and the audience's eyes, and Meredith notes there is more she has left to do. Suddenly, Meredith stops

treading and falls below the water, with just a single bubble breaking the surface, as the narration whispers that she “is disappeared.” The episode is half over before a pale and lifeless Meredith is pulled from the icy waters by her “shining knight in whatever,” Derek.

The end of the episode offers us one of our instances of extended access to Meredith’s interiority, as we enter “limbo” with her. As her colleagues frantically work to save her life, Meredith awakens in an empty Grey Sloan to see Dylan, a deceased bomb tech from season two, who passed after Meredith heroically held onto an unexploded IED inside of a patient’s abdominal cavity for hours. As she eagerly asks Dylan if she is dead, Denny, the late fiancée of friend and colleague, Izzie, offers a firm “damn right you are” (“Drowning on Dry Land”). Our soft-focus dreamscape is quickly interrupted as the screen cuts to black, and we venture into a three-part episode with the song “Some Kind of Miracle,” whose recap highlights some of Meredith’s most traumatic storylines from the first three seasons, including Dylan and Denny. As Meredith narrates about miracles in the medical field, and Drs. Bailey and Webber work tirelessly, we return to Meredith’s dream, with the same non-diegetic music now fading into the background.

As Meredith is joined by her childhood dog, Doc, Dylan, and Denny try to convince her that she is, in fact, dead, and not on drugs, but she is unwilling to listen. The episode continues to split between efforts to save Meredith, her hysterical and confused mother in pre-op, and Meredith’s limbo-like dream. In her mind, our protagonist continues to be joined by important, but deceased figures from her life, including a lost patient, Bonnie, from the sixth episode of the second season. While Meredith tries fruitlessly to save an already deceased Bonnie, Denny urges her to talk about her drowning, and notifies her that she is running out of time. For seasoned fans, Bonnie’s presence is critical, as Meredith was the only doctor who fought to save Bonnie’s

life in “Into You Like a Train,” when all the other staff rushed to save a secondary victim of the same train crash. If there is one thing we have confidently come to learn about Meredith Grey thus far, she does not like talking about her emotions. Bonnie and Denny work diligently to get Meredith to admit that she let go while in the water, they even reference what happened earlier that morning in the bathtub. Back in reality, even Derek notes that Meredith knows how to swim, and that something about the situation does not seem right.

Appealing to her loyalty to her friends, Denny tells Meredith that if she does not fight, she will forever change her friends and Derek; she will break them. Tearfully, Meredith admits “I was swimming. I was fighting. And then I thought, just for a second, I thought, what’s the point? And then I let go. I stopped fighting. Don’t tell anybody” (“Some Kind of Miracle”). As Meredith determines she wants to fight and go back, she notes that she just had intimacy issues, and that it is a silly reason to give up. Ultimately, Meredith is visited by Ellis, who is in v-tach in another room of the hospital, and both women tell the other that they should not be where they are. Uncharacteristically, Ellis hugs her daughter before telling her that she is anything but ordinary and commanding her daughter to run. After disappearing into a flash of light, Meredith begins breathing on her own again in the company of Drs. Webber, Bailey and her best friend, Dr. Christina Yang.

Meredith’s near-death experience, shared with the audience, is made familiar by keeping the setting within Grey Sloan Memorial (then called Seattle Grace), which also helps viewers follow along the multi-story arc. Long-term fans are rewarded by revisiting characters from the first and second seasons, and even the very rooms and hallways in which they perished. The audience also gets teased with privileged access to Meredith’s psyche by witnessing firsthand the solace she finds with her mother, knowing when she woke up, that Ellis had passed. Viewers

experience similar episodes of subjective dream access in the fourth, fifth and sixth episodes of the seventeenth season when Meredith is admitted, and eventually intubated at Grey Sloane with COVID-19. Between seasons three and seventeen, Meredith has gone through a lot of growth including: therapy, four children, the discovery of a half-sister, deaths of close friends, and the sudden loss of her husband, Dr. Derek Shepherd in season eleven.

To keep the medical aspects of the series accurate, the show's production and writers' room) features medical consultants. Dr. Zoanne Clack happens to be a writer and executive producer on the series, as well as a formal medical practitioner. When interviewed about the seventeenth season, which was filmed at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Clack was asked whether the lucid dreams shown on behalf of Meredith were accurate to the actual disease. Clack notes that "Mer's COVID dreams are more like her experience in season three, where she's kind of in limbo between life and death, holding onto one and reaching for the other" (Borge). Using similar techniques to season three, with soft-focus lighting, Meredith is greeted by late friend Dr. George O'Malley, and late husband Derek Shepherd on a beach. The story even manages to cover all its bases by noting how and why George and Derek have managed to age in Meredith's dream (needing to mirror the real-life aging of the actors by some ten years). For the creators, it was important not only to portray COVID accurately, but also to acknowledge audience fatigue with the pandemic, and a need to navigate new production hurdles.

These life-or-death moments offer the audience a more in-depth look at a complex, and often closed-off character, and further highlight some of the more ethically complex choices Meredith has made. Her role as a doctor has been central to Meredith's identity on the show, and how the audience has come to align with her. In season eight, for example, Meredith jeopardized her job and relationship with Derek when they were helming an Alzheimer's clinical trial. Dr.

Webber's wife, Adele, happened to be a member of that trial and was set to receive the placebo before Meredith intervened, switching her doses out with the actual drug ("This is How We Do It"). Meredith's choice to stand behind her decision further exacerbated Derek's loss of trust in her and jeopardized her future as a doctor. Meredith would go on to push this moral policing again at the end of the fifteenth season, when the series grappled with issues surrounding immigration and the state of the contemporary healthcare system under the 45th president.

In the twenty-third episode of the fifteenth season, a father comes in with a daughter in severe pain, he shares with the medical staff that he is undocumented and seeking asylum ("What I Did for Love"). With his wife and another daughter still detained at the southern border of the United States, he confides in Meredith that the daughter seeking care was detained in a cage for three months without proper medical care. When a mass is found in the girl's abdomen, the father panics and decides he cannot move forward without an insurance policy in place, especially after he is denied grant money, being told he makes too much money as a custodian. As the girl's condition worsens, and it is determined she needs emergency surgery, Meredith takes matters into her own hands and operates on the girl under her daughter Zola's name, submitting to her own insurance.

Immediately reprimanded by Dr. Webber, Meredith doubles down on her choice, noting that the system is broken, refusing to let this family fall victim to it. After Richard helps her work out an insurance loophole to help the girl with her ultimate cancer diagnosis, Meredith vents her frustrations on paper, writing a list of thoughts and pitches for a damning op-ed on the insurance industry. After Meredith's ultimate arrest and firing from Grey Sloan (along with Drs. Webber and Bailey), the news site Meredith e-mailed ends up publishing her pitches. Continuing her defiance, Meredith disobeys her court ordered community service and ban from the hospital

when Zola is admitted for emergency surgery, which sees her ending up in jail. During her trial, dozens of former patients from the last sixteen seasons show up to testify on the doctor's behalf, helping re-secure her old job and reputation. The scene in the courtroom is a treasure trove of past experiences for Meredith and the audience, as some of the toughest cases walk through the door, speaking to the credibility and care of Dr. Grey. We even get to witness Meredith finally find closure regarding Derek's untimely death, as the doctor who Meredith holds responsible for her husband's death is a member of her tribunal.

Aesthetically, the morally ambiguous decisions made by Meredith feature more intimate cinematography and *mise-en-scène* work. Often making decisions on her own to avoid implicating those around her, scenes where Meredith switched out Adele's medicine or used Zola's insurance information feature the protagonist acting alone. Close-up shots are utilized to home in on Meredith's facial expressions and decisiveness. When facing the tribunal for the insurance fraud case, close-up shots feature a passionate Meredith speaking earnestly about the current state of the healthcare system, and the country's treatment of immigrant families. Considering the series' penchant for dream states and revisiting the past through memory exploration, this particular scene also grants the audience privileged access into Meredith's mind, where she is replaying Derek's death. This memory is triggered when both Meredith and the audience notice that the doctor who is responsible for Derek's untimely demise is in the courtroom.

Over the course of nineteen seasons, Meredith's complicated characterization has helped to inform the series' aesthetic, offer stability to a series that has yielded multiple spin-offs, and showcase a strong female protagonist amidst a sea of "difficult men." Meredith refuses to be a foil to the male members of the series ensemble, while also negating categorizations as a

simplistic character or simple antihero. Her character represents the potential success that can come from using a series' aesthetics to better explore character subjectivity. While *Grey's* remains the most long-lasting and successful example of this aesthetic subjectivity, there have been other notable, more shortly lived examples.

Beauty in Death: Fine Art Aesthetics & Character on NBC's *Hannibal*

In 2013, NBC brought filmic cannibal, Hannibal Lecter, to the small screen with their original series, *Hannibal* (2013-2015). While the show only lasted three seasons before being added to the ill-fated Saturday night slot, its third season would prove to be its last, at least on network TV. With the show's penchant for graphic violence and its protagonist, Will Graham, being defined as an empathetic sociopath, many critics were shocked that the show was picked up by a broadcast network such as NBC. Often deemed visually stunning, the series' first two seasons manage to offer contemporary notions of the Gothic macabre and Baroque sensibilities with a certain level of refinement and restraint. Aesthetically rich in its treatment of mise-en-scène, the show features stark contrasts of light and dark, overly saturated colors, exotic locales, and elaborate meals that read as works of art. Such a distinct and clearly defined aesthetic serves as an extension of its two main characters (Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter) and fully embraces the visual excess associated with scholarly definitions of televisuality from John Caldwell.

The series most readily fits within John Caldwell's definition of "boutique television" which "constructs for itself an air of selectivity, refinement, uniqueness, and privilege" (Caldwell 106). That is not to suggest that refinement negates the presence of stylistic excess, but rather that this type of programming possesses a level of "intentionality and sensitivity" that grounds any use of "cinematic spectacle" with more restrained forms of "drama, writing, and

cinematography” (Caldwell 105-106). Boutique programs hold a particular sense of allusion and nostalgia, while also maintaining a particular air of separation from other programming, both past and present. In the case of *Hannibal*, the series’ literally alludes to refinement through its narrative form (crime procedural/drama), as well as its characters, such as Dr. Hannibal Lecter. Likewise, by alluding to historical works of art each week, the series creates an elevated sense of distinction from other shows in its genre. Although always grounded in narrative/character-driven intention, the series’ frequent use of visual spectacle can be better understood by examining its use of horror, as well as a fine art aesthetic.

Published in 1990, Noël Carroll’s *The Philosophy of Horror* is credited as one of the first academic considerations for the aesthetics of the horror genre across multiple media. Examining horror’s presence in fine art, literature, film, and television, Carroll claims that “horror has flourished as a major source of mass aesthetic stimulation,” and “may even be the most long-lived, widely disseminated, and persistent genre of the post-Vietnam era” (Carroll 1). While this dissertation in general is not concerned with conceptions of high or low art, Carroll’s use of philosophical aesthetics is important for understanding discussions of *Hannibal* due to his creation of the term “art-horror,” as well as his willingness to treat mass media objects as worthy of such philosophical inquiry. Art-horror and its associated philosophical aesthetic is concerned with how an audience responds to the unnatural nature of the monster being presented, free from any potential bias. Carroll suggests that our reaction to a monster is tied to the way in which the narrative and more empathetic characters identify with them.

This notion of art-horror can be applied to the characterization of both Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham, as the presentation of Hannibal as an aesthete, and his mentorship with Will, our protagonist, complicates the viewer’s own identification of Hannibal as a monster. Notions

of philosophical aesthetics and fine art can also help to better elucidate how the series' aesthetic helps to obfuscate overt, and often graphic, depictions of violence. It can also be argued that the series' dual employment of stylistic excess and horror fits with baroque notions of the horror vacui that proliferated during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Horror vacui literally translates to a fear of empty spaces, and became synonymous with art across a plethora of media that leave little to no space empty. Baroque's curiosity with the concept of the horror vacui specifically centers around "a curiosity for monstrosity, the fantastic, and the macabre...entertainment for a mixed audience with a taste for the odd, the shocking, and the rare...theaters of anatomy and the macabre" (Carroll 259). With an emphasis on visual aesthetics, the show treats violence with intellectual purpose and death as an artistic feat, positioning the narrative's killers as artists themselves.

When describing the presence of violence in the horror genre during the Eighties, Noël Carroll suggests that violence most readily occurs at the site of the body: "Horror fictions perennially gravitate toward violence...one particular dimension of this violence is the extreme gross fury visited upon the human body" (Carroll 211). Carroll goes on to suggest that contemporary utterances of the genre see the human body "literally reduced to mere meat; indeed, the "person-as-meat" could serve as the label for this tendency" (Carroll 212). By positioning horror as a cross-art and cross-media genre, Carroll's philosophical framework helps to better understand the ways in which *Hannibal* uses conceptions of horror from previous books and films (the series' source material), as well as various fine art movements. Likewise, by definition, art-horror is the act of viewers' paralleling their reactions to a monster with those of other characters, or the series' larger narrative. I would argue that this parallelism can also be translated to the series' aesthetic, wherein Hannibal's sophisticated appearance and demeanor,

along with the series' overall visual penchant for excess, creates a complicated perception of Hannibal as a traditional monster, with his refinement often concealing his brutality.

Using the sensibilities seen in the Baroque fine art movement, it can be argued that *Hannibal's* treatment of the body as an artistic object helps to mediate the shock and brutality of death, concealing what some critics would superficially deem gratuitous violence. Returning to notions of the baroque vacui, it is noted in *Emotion and the Seduction of the Senses*, that “The vacui functions as an absence or aporia that must be navigated through its aesthetic manifestations, which typically consists of labyrinthine abundance” (Ndalianis 260). This abundance can be further connected to John Caldwell’s definition of excess to help explain the way the series’ aesthetic excess is helping to conceal its graphic violence. While such a fine art treatment of death and violence is responsible for allowing the show to exist on a channel such as NBC, such an elegant, formal treatment of content also has the potential to alienate larger audiences, while simultaneously creating a cult fan-base. Though it ended in dissolution after three seasons, the show's tactic of concealment through art deserves further exploration through aesthetic and character analyses to offer greater insight into *Hannibal's* cult following and gradual fall into cult obscurity after its third season.

Following the early days of Hannibal’s development as a killer, the series features an episodic-serial format that features a “case of the week,” structure that is complicated by larger serial narratives. Hunted by Will Graham and a group of fellow FBI agents, the relationship between Hannibal and Will is main focus of the series as the two men share a heightened intelligence and proclivity for violence that binds them intellectually. The audience is asked to view the series, at times, from the point of view of protagonist Will Graham. Early in the first season, Will is self-identified as “on the spectrum,” with the potential for great violence, which

he uses to empathize with the murderers he hunts to solve crimes. Already possessing a non-normative perspective, Will also suffers from undiagnosed infectious encephalitis during the first two seasons, which further impacts his mental state and the viewer's perception of narrative events.

While the first two seasons show Will and his team hunting infamous murderer, the Chesapeake Ripper (who happens to be Hannibal), the third season leaves behind its established episodic stories to follow Hannibal on the lam, after being found out by the FBI at the end of the second season. This departure in format also signals larger shifts in characterizations of Hannibal and Will, as well as experimentation with the series' visual style. The series is faced with the challenge of rendering a non-normative situation in a realistic manner – the majority of the population does not exist on the autism spectrum (like Will), will never suffer from encephalitis (also like Will), and will not be groomed by a cannibalistic serial killer. Still, the series strives for a particular level of affect in its audience that must be achieved through its aesthetic, world-building, and characterizations. Through an excessively stylized aesthetic, the series creates what Jonathan Gray refers to as an experiential reality, making television a “powerful vehicle for relaying history and other social realities” (Gray and Lotz 119). Highlighting the depth of character that is associated with serial programming, *Hannibal* creates tangible affect through its immersive aesthetic that is centered around its main characters. Visual insight into Will's psyche helps to highlight not only autism spectrum disorders, but also the potential that even seemingly “good” people have for moral ambiguity. Likewise, through his visual rendering as a gentle intellectual who is never actually seen killing people, Hannibal is, for the first time, portrayed in a liminal space between enviable and sadistic.

It is worth noting that the first two seasons follow the trajectory of Thomas Harris' novel, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), while the third season loosely follows his first novel, *Red Dragon* (1981). Likewise, spanning 1991 to 2007, four films were released following Dr. Hannibal Lecter and Harris' novels. As a medium, television is not averse to the risk adversity that comes with formats and repetition. Noting the importance of innovation and novelty, Jonathan Gray notes that theorists "Horkheimer and Adorno argue that running art as a business squashes it under the weight of such formulas and standardization...whereby producers and distributors try to condition the audience to accept a highly limited set of products that exhibit no real innovation or artistry" (Gray 23). Aesthetically, Bryan Fuller's television series is both a narrative and stylistic departure from previous incarnations by focusing on notions of narrative and aesthetic excess, emphasizing the homoerotic relationship between Hannibal and Will, and offering a subjective lens through Will's non-normative perspective.

When asked about his aesthetic motivation for the third season of the series, executive producer and head writer, Bryan Fuller, conveys a deep desire to use the camera to reveal to viewers the veil of surreality through which he sees the show's final form. Maintaining the series' long devotion to conveying the subjective point-of-view of its characters, Fuller aspires to blend subjective notions of reality and dream states so that viewers cannot tell the difference between reality and the imaginary. As he explains: "We Freddy Kruger them (the audience), where they don't know they're dreaming until they're well within the dream" (Fuller). Compounding on notions of Freudian dream states, the series also intensifies already existing notions of finding beauty in the taboo and grotesque, with particular focus on the creation of art via brutality and death. Through an increasingly abstract and surrealist lens, Fuller desires to

push the boundaries of what is allowed visually and narratively on network television, particularly with regard to graphic, mature content.

When comparing Fuller's declarations of surrealism with the actual teachings and intentions of the movement's founders, there seems to exist an incongruity between each instance's motivations and ultimate outcomes. *Hannibal*'s focus on aesthetic abstraction, the visual representation of dream states, and the rendering of the grotesque on network television all ultimately suggest a surrealist style and not necessarily surrealist intentions. With a largely coherent, plot-driven narrative, the show's conflation of the real and the imaginary certainly challenges normative story conventions. Through a close reading of *Hannibal*'s third season, that includes a textual analysis of narrative and character, as well as aesthetics and style, questions of intentionality as they relate to concepts of surrealism begin to arise. To better understand this difference, a consideration of the surrealist movement and some of its more transgressive work has the potential to offer a scholarly lens through which contemporary media's use of a surrealist style is indelibly different than the surrealist intentionality expressed through the movement's core group of artists. With this comparison in mind, the series' first two seasons lend themselves more readily to theory surrounding the baroque and neo-baroque than that of surrealism.

When examining the first two seasons of the series, showrunner Bryan Fuller's attempts to render violence as beautiful is apparent through the show's employment of an inherently baroque aesthetic. Dramatic in style, Seventeenth Century Baroque art oftentimes features a vivid use of color, harsh chiascuro, and both biblical and secular themes that demand an emotional reaction from its audience. In choosing to portray climactic moments, baroque scenes often feature opulent settings while also conveying a sense of dynamic movement amongst its characters. When compared to modern day melodrama, notions of power, constraint, and

sensationalism take over. The series' use of overtly baroque themes can be seen through its references to "the Wunderkammer, the Dutch still-life and vanitas painting tradition, the concept of the baroque theater of the world, a baroque horror vacui...and performativity that confuses reality and illusion" (Ndalianis 258). The historic development of Neo-Baroque art in the last century suggests that recent technological advancements have allowed contemporary media to reflect aesthetic themes from the Baroque movement of the Seventeenth Century. The theatricality seen in the neo-baroque is equally concerned with the baroque's "...concept of "theater of the world," which, in turn, is intent on actively engaging the participation through multiple senses" (Ndalianis 258). These notions of theatricality and synesthesia can be seen throughout the aesthetics of all three seasons of *Hannibal*.

Through shifts in technology and economic models, the neo-baroque suggests that contemporary art and media parallel those of the original Baroque era, such as *laterna magica*, automata, painting, sculpture, and theater –all while their mediation through new technology helps to make these media texts more reflexive of their cultural production within the 20th and 21st centuries. Such parallels can be seen throughout the first two seasons of *Hannibal*, as the show recreates several fine art tableaux within the setting of modern-day crime scenes, at the hands of contemporary aesthete, Hannibal Lecter. This baroque influence extends beyond visual aesthetics into the series' narrative and musical accompaniment as well, where storylines play upon power relations and dramatic love triangles with an original, instrumental score.

For Fuller, lighting on the series not only fit the series' baroque sensibilities, but also helped to quell any issues the series had with standards and practices. When referencing the series' standards and practices executive, Joanna Jameson, Fuller praises the exec by noting that "She knows the show that we're trying to make, and what we're trying to get away with, and she

wants us to get away with as much as the broadcast standards and practices will allow her to allow us to get away with” (Sepinwall). Noting a particular scene in the show’s third season wherein a character bites the lips off the face of another character, Fuller mentions being able to get away with a more graphic, closeup depiction of the scene due to the series’ characteristically dim lighting. It is worth noting that the series does not only employ homages to fine art of the early 17th century, but also references works from the earlier periods, such as the Renaissance, as well as more contemporary artistic movements. Despite referencing fine art from across history, the series maintains a sense of baroque theatricality through Hannibal’s treatment of the world as a theater, both in the way in which he displays bodies and his treatment of food and shared meals.

Originally appearing in surgical manuscripts from the early fifteenth century, *Wound Man*, by illustrator Hans von Gersdorff, serves as a representation of the various wounds and ailments a soldier could endure during war. This style of excessive brutality (multiple wounds) became synonymous with the Chesapeake Ripper killings featured in the first season of *Hannibal*. Upon arriving to a hospital where suspected Ripper killer Abel Gideon is being housed, the FBI stumbles upon a nurse wounded in the style of the *Wound Man*. In a flashback, missing FBI agent Miriam Lass is seen finding a *Wound Man* sketch, drawn by Hannibal, in the therapist’s office, before being presumably killed or captured by the cannibal. Referencing the work of choreographer and filmmaker Busby Berkeley, the first episode of the second season features a killer creating a kaleidoscopic gradient with human bodies that mimics the human eye. In the third episode of the second season, Hannibal kills a corrupt judge and mimics G. Metsu’s *The Triumph of Justice*, a statue of which can be seen behind the judge whose body parallels the marble figure behind him.

In a nod to more contemporary artistic movements, the fifth episode of the second season witnesses the death of FBI crime scene investigator Beverly Katz in a manner that mimics Young British Artist, Damien Hurst's work with dissected, preserved, dead animals. In one of his most famous works, *Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything* (1996), two dead cows are sectioned vertically and suspended in twelve formaldehyde filled boxes. Frozen and then sectioned vertically, Beverly's body is presented in a descending series of six life-sized glass slides, mimicking her own forensic work in the lab (Figure 4). The manner in which Beverly has been cut and displayed shows a level of brutality, precision, and detachment that suggests a medical professional (such as Hannibal) is responsible. These artful tableaux are embedded in the episodic, procedural aspects of the series' first three seasons. Combined with the fact that Hannibal is not pictured (until the third season) in the act of murder, Fuller's reference to fine art of the past works to conceal the series' penchant for graphic violence by excusing it with a high art aesthetic, character development, and narrative purpose. This creative method of psychological distancing through artistic homage helps audience members take on such a deviant, non-normative perspective more willingly. With a consistent theme of artistic spectacle taking place at the site of the human body during *Hannibal's* first two

seasons, what assumptions can be made about Bryan Fuller's choice to market the third season as such a dramatic shift from this procedural mode?



Figure 4

Within the first three episodes of the third season, the show's main characters, Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter, find themselves traveling across Europe, surrounded by the same grotesque baroque tropes of the earlier seasons: corpses, cannibalism, nightmares, and feasts. In DVD commentary, Fuller maintains that one consistent method maintained throughout the show's entirety is the aesthetic choice to place the camera in a point-of-view perspective for the characters, which often creates framing and cinematography choices not seen in traditional serial narrative television. However, within the first two seasons, specific aural and visual cues alert viewers to shifts between the objective reality of the series, and the subjective internal workings of the often-diluted protagonist, Will Graham.

Hannibal Lecter & Will Graham: A Character Study in Stylistic Excess

In *Televisuality* (1995), John Caldwell traces a particular self-consciousness of style across television's history, beginning in the early 1940's. Tracing the employment of excess in primetime programming, the theorist suggests that what had previously been relegated to the

background (visual style) is now placed in the foreground. Citing the static narrative and visual nature of programming in the Sixties and Seventies, Caldwell notes that programming of the late Eighties feature an aesthetic where “the stylistic and presentational aspects are the very elements that change on a weekly basis, while characterization becomes the medium’s static and repetitious given from episode to episode” (Caldwell 92). It can be argued that this notion of a diverse televisual style can be seen in *Hannibal*’s treatment of the generic procedural. By masquerading the more episodic aspects of the series under ever-changing artistic styles and tableaux, the series conceals not just its graphic violence, but also its generic repetition of form. Where this application diverges from Caldwell’s initial definition is the fact that these contemporary series so closely tie characterization to style and presentation that characters like Will Graham and Hannibal are anything but static, and their character development and serial arcs contribute to the show’s excess and televisuality.

The blatant stylistic excess of the series lends itself well to the externalization of its namesake, Dr. Hannibal Lecter. Mads Mikkelsen portrays the psychiatrist as a modern-day dandy or aesthete. In appearance, his suits are of the finest quality, all the way down to the silken pocket squares, with nary a hair out of place on his perfectly groomed head. His home drips with opulence, as velvet curtains adorn the dramatically vaulted windows, exotic flowers accentuate every room, and it features a kitchen fit for the finest of Michelin star restaurants. His stoic, albeit emotionless demeanor is what one would desire in a psychiatrist: a worldly and knowledgeable façade, combined with an even keeled, judgment-free temperament. Aesthetically, the most interesting aspects of Hannibal Lecter are his style of dress and home.

This is in stark contrast to his foil, Will Graham. A man of simple tastes, Will lives in a modest home in the country, far from any prospects of socialization with other humans. Adorned

in a consistent uniform of flannel, boots, unkempt hair, and a five o'clock shadow, Will's appearance masks an abnormal interiority: his ability to empathize with the very psychopaths he hunts for the FBI. Preferring to collect stray dogs in the countryside as companions, Will claims that his "horse is hitched to a post that is closer to Aspergers and autistics than narcissists and sociopaths," and that his abilities have less to do "with a personality disorder than an active imagination" ("Apéritif" S1E1). Everything from Will's appearance to his daily routine is extremely regimented to blend in and keep himself from giving in to his most violent preoccupations.

What truly makes the series stand out is its ability to allow the audience into the mind of its protagonist Will Graham in a way that was never explored in earlier novels or films from the franchise. With an episodic-serial structure, the series operates like a typical procedural, often featuring a "killer-of-the-week" for Will and his FBI cohort to hunt. Larger spanning arcs center around Will's deteriorating mental state, his evolving relationship with Hannibal, and the slow unraveling of Hannibal's cannibalistic secret. The episodic structure is what allows for such a deep exploration into Will's psyche, which is first explored in the pilot. As he enters a fresh crime scene and closes his eyes, the bustling agents around him cease to exist as the screen turns black. A brightly flashing, vertical line swipes across the screen, reminiscent of a fluorescent metronome, clearing the crime scene of other agents and police (figure 5). After three passes, we witness two Will Grahams: one narrating and inspecting the scene, the other taking on the role of the murderer.



Figure 5

As an observant Will continues to narrate the unfolding scene in the first-person, a deranged doppelganger carries out the heinous murder in the exact fashion as the actual killer. Will's gift at empathizing with murderers that makes him so sought after by the FBI is on full display. As the scene comes to an end, with what will become a common phrase: "This is my design," we become acutely aware of the fact that Will's narration is not just for us, the audience, but also for Jack, and the other agents in the room (Sn 1; Ep 1). This parlor trick becomes a weekly occurrence, and an expected convention of the series' narrative and aesthetic. As the audience escapes into Will's mind for a few minutes, every week progresses. We begin to understand the inherent dangers in his gift, especially when he begins to over-empathize with the killers he is investigating. This empathy is exactly what drives the strong connection between Will and Hannibal, with the latter sensing he could make Will his protégée.

With the ability to see inside Will's mind and his frank manner of speaking, there is little to be inferred about his mental state, or how it continues to deteriorate after an eventual encephalitis diagnosis. Will's complex interiority is tempered by his simple way of living and informal appearance. In contrast, Hannibal is meant to be an enigma, whose interior state is only fleshed out through his personal aesthetic and therapy sessions with Will. For the first season, we

never see Hannibal commit an actual murder; we are instead left to infer, as we watch the doctor concoct elaborate meals, never knowing the evening's meat source. The audience knows nothing of his upbringing or past, aside from the fact that he left behind a career in surgery after losing a patient on the table, an event that is later revealed as intentional.

A Meal Fit for a Cannibal: Food Design & Production

Food and the sharing of meals is an integral part of the series, to the extent that most episodes are named after specific meals, or courses of a meal. Season one features strictly French cuisine. The pilot is aptly entitled "Apéritif," which references a dish that comes before the appetizer course, meant to entice diners for the courses to come. Food designer Janice Poon was tasked with creating elaborate tablescapes that serve as an extension of Hannibal's characterization, as well as concealment for his cannibalism. Masked by exotic florals, brightly colored seafood, and international delicacies, Hannibal regularly impresses his friends and colleagues with his culinary skills. Introducing meals such as sheep's tongue, or boar loin, the audience infers early on that these entrees are human meat, being served to unwitting guests. However, it takes much longer for other characters within the diegesis to catch on, with Will often distracted by the excess and refinement with which Hannibal creates his meals and tablescapes. Keeping with the series' baroque sensibilities, "Showrunner Bryan Fuller understands the power that vision and sound have in orchestrating a synesthetic attack on the audience by triggering sensations from the other senses of taste, touch, and smell" (Ndalianis 257). Through visual excess, the series' aesthetic incorporates synesthesia by creating elaborate tablescapes and showing meal prep in a way that simultaneously invites viewers to smell and taste the food onscreen, while also denying the fact that it is anthropophagy. In a true feat of successful operational aesthetics, it is merely inferred throughout the first season that Hannibal is

in fact consuming human flesh. It is not until the second episode of the second season that we witness Hannibal dismember a victim, pull out a recipe, and cook the flesh. This again marks a distinction between television and film, as the accomplishment is more worthy of recognition when it is pulled off over the course of twenty episodes, instead of two hours.

Due to the exotic nature of many of the dishes, Janice Poon was forced to get creative with her designs. In the eleventh episode of the second season, entitled “Ko No Mono,” Hannibal serves an uncomfortable Will an endangered ortolan bird. Drowned in cognac, engulfed in flames, and surrounded by the finest figs and foie gras, Hannibal serves his dinner guest as he recounts a brief history lesson on the birds. The two burning birds serve as a larger metaphor for the relationship between Will and Hannibal, the latter of whom sees Will as a potential kindred spirit, or protégée. As he tells Will that the bird’s ingestion is a right of passage, Hannibal notes that it is common practice to cover one’s face in a shroud while ingesting the small songbird whole, to hide such an act from the eyes of God. As Vivaldi plays in the background, the camera takes on a sexually charged voyeurism, as we are confronted with close-ups of both men’s mouths as they slowly place the birds on their lips, as crunching bones overshadow the piano in the background, and the two men swallow with euphoric grins on their faces. The whole scene speaks to narrative, visual, and aural excess, while also offering further insight into Hannibal’s characterization as a wealthy aesthete.

Fortunately for Poon, acquiring Ortolans is illegal, not only due to their endangered status, but also the barbaric way in which they are killed (confined to the darkness, force fed, then drowned). Due to the nature in which the birds are eaten, bones and all, it was important that the birds not only look authentic, but also offer a realistic bone crunching while being chewed. Furthermore, it had to be edible material that could withstand being flambéed, and not

completely repulsive to stars Mads Mikkelsen and Hugh Dancy. The solution? Hollowed out marzipan filled with raw spaghetti noodles and cognac to offer the perfect combination of crunching bones, and booze drenched insides (Figure 6). Poon's creativity is put to the ultimate test when guest star Eddie Izzard appears in the second and third seasons. Playing Abel Gideon, Izzard's character is coerced by his psychiatrist (and partner of Hannibal) Dr. Chilton that he is the infamous Chesapeake Ripper. (We know this to be untrue, as Hannibal himself holds that title). No longer wishing to have a copycat out in the world, Hannibal captures Gideon and holds him captive in his home.

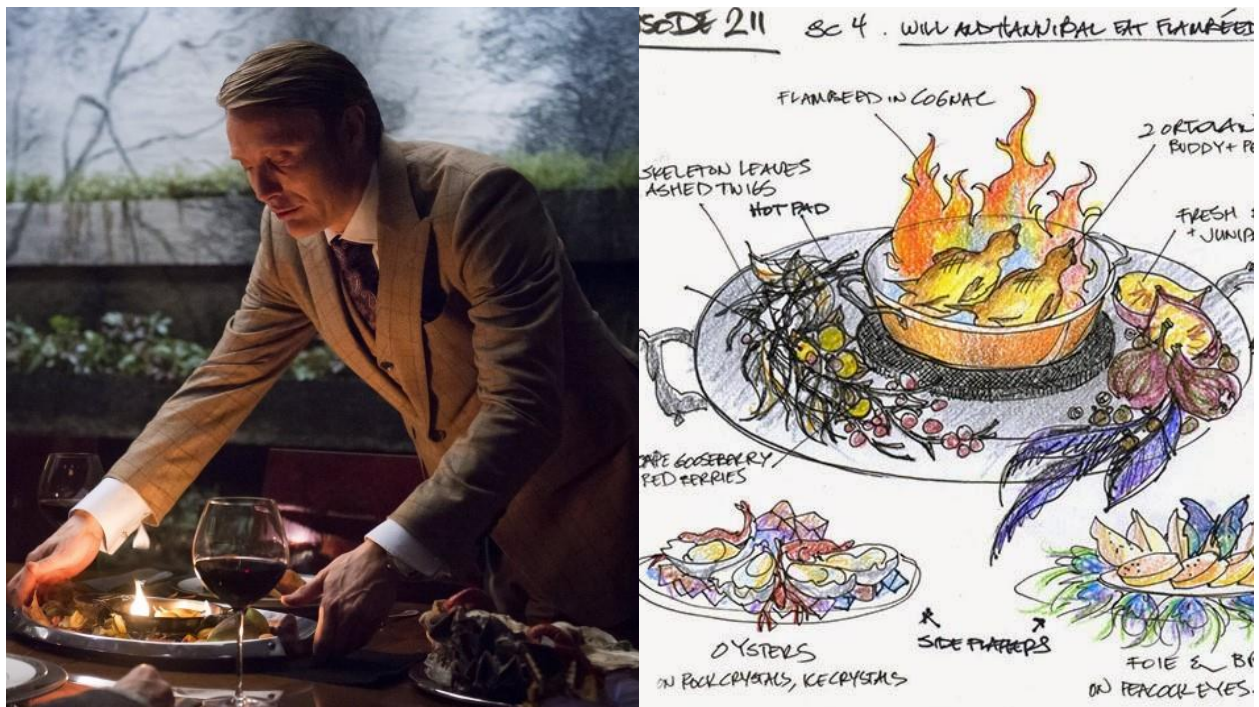


Figure 6

In a truly grotesque turn of events, Hannibal begins to remove appendages slowly and methodically from Gideon's body. As his guest is wheeled into an ornate dining room, we notice that Gideon (hooked up to an IV) is missing both of his legs from the mid-thigh down. This quickly makes sense, as the host enters the room with a silver, domed chafing dish, whose removed cloche reveals the soy and sugar cane glazed leg of Gideon. Inspired by the cenobites of

Hellraiser, and her own recipes, Poon used a combination of pork loin and lamb shank bones to create a humanistic looking leg (Poon). Gideon is unsurprisingly reluctant to indulge in his own flesh, but in keeping with the coerciveness of his character, Hannibal calmly appeals to his guest, noting that the worst thing in life is not death, but to “be wasted” (“Futamono”). A common theme for the doctor from the very first season is the idea that all life should be honored, and no part of an “animal” wasted. The thought and production work that figures such as Poon put into the series’ meals conveys the way in which *Hannibal*’s visual excess dripped over into its production practices.

In *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, Miranda Banks, John Caldwell, and Vicki Mayer suggest that onset talent occurs above and below an imaginary line: “According to David Hesmondhalgh, those who work above the line are responsible for generating symbolic meanings” (Banks et al. 89). Industrially (with regard to compensation) and socially, above-the-line workers historically include writers, directors, actors, and general creatives (Banks et al. 89). In contrast, below-the-line practitioners are often “craftspeople or technicians – people who work with their hands...cinematographers, editors, production designers, costume designers, gaffers...” (Banks et al. 89-90). In the case of *Hannibal*, production designers such as Poon are responsible for generating much of the symbolic meaning for the series. The time, thought, and creativity that goes into rendering such hyperreal situations such as Hannibal’s human meals are tantamount to the series’ overall aesthetic and to the visual characterization of Hannibal.

The meals featured throughout the series also become an episodic expectation for the viewer, with each week featuring a new and elaborate menu. There is also a clear sense that Hannibal’s characterization is closely tied to his roles as chef and host, as they are the only times

in which he offers any sort of insight into his past or personality. Shared meals are how the audience witnesses him bond with Will, and over an elaborate tablescape is where Hannibal's true identity (as the Chesapeake Ripper) is revealed, and his life is almost lost at the hands of Jack Crawford. From a production standpoint, the visual excess of the diegesis translates into the series creation, as evinced by Janice Poon's blog and cookbooks, journeying her three seasons with the series. An inability to maintain this level of visual excess with regard to production, and on network television could explain the series' ultimate cancellation, as well as a lowered budget for its third and final season. While the final season saw an increase in on-location filming (cutting funds for set design) and barely any elaborate meals, continued character development did not end in season two.

Will Graham: Machiavellian Archetype

As with many scholars and critics, Brett Martin cites HBO's *The Sopranos* as a turning point in television. In scholarship, the series is credited with beginning a revolution for the antihero, complex narratives, and elaborate production practices. Noting the over two-hundred person staffed series, Martin cites *The Sopranos* as creating a universe not previously realized on television and igniting a revolution wherein "Soon the dial would begin to fill with Tony Sopranos" (Martin 4). Other notable iterations of this version of the antihero are found on shows such as *The Wire* (HBO), *The Shield* (FX), *Six Feet Under* (HBO), *Mad Men* (AMC), and *Dexter* (Showtime). Looking at a similar set of series, Jason Mittell grapples with the antihero through audience expectations for character change: "Since antiheroes are predicated on a careful chemistry of alignment, relative morality, fascination, and charisma, character change can upset that balance, but over stagnation becomes dull and trouble for the relationships portrayed on the series" (Mittell 133). Characteristically, the dramas that house these protagonists usually end

with the character's karmic reckoning, or apt punishment for their immoral behaviors and choices.

While the limited timeframe of film allows audiences an easier separation from immoral characters, the serial nature of television and its potential for long-term immersion “complicates the solid line between fiction and reality” (Mittell 133). Between weekly installments, complex narratives and characters demand our attention, and we continue to engage with content in-between episodes, seeking to better understand the choices being made, and how we manage to identify with such immoral characters. Showtime's *Dexter* is cited as a unique example by Brett Martin, wherein the audience finds itself taking on the thought process of a serial killer, justifying the lead's choices because he possesses a moral code within which he operates. In keeping with the moral reckoning mentioned by Martin, Dexter faces his fate in the series recent sequel, where his now teenaged son, Harrison, is forced to kill his father, lest he become Dexter. Regardless, Dexter still follows a common antiheroic trope: he begins the series' narrative as a questionable and immoral figure. Instead, Mittell cites Walter White of *Breaking Bad* as possessing a unique moral transformation that has not proliferated on television.

Creator of *Breaking Bad*, Vince Gilligan set out with the goal of creating a character contrary to someone like Tony Soprano, who was born into his life debauchery, and raised in a well of immorality. Instead, Gilligan envisioned a protagonist that audiences could more readily identify with: a school teacher struggling to make ends meet, caring for a demanding wife, chronically ill child, and facing his own mortality after a cancer diagnosis. Walt is an “every man,” struggling to achieve the American dream and any semblance of respect or happiness while doing so. Over the course of the series, the audience justifies Walt's decisions by questioning what they themselves would do to provide for their family under such circumstances.

Much like Dexter, Walt has a code, but unlike Dexter, Walt foregoes that moral code by the end of the series, murdering his competition and even deliberating killing an innocent child for personal gain. The Walt we are left with has little morality left, and is not a character worth rooting for, yet the audience is already concretely aligned.

It can be argued that *Hannibal*'s Will Graham presents an equally unique perspective on the antihero, when considering the role of character change. The pilot introduces Will as a profiler and instructor for the FBI who is intentionally kept out of the field. We learn the reasons for Will being sidelined are multi-faceted and a combination of both his personal desire to avoid discharging a weapon, his placement on the autism spectrum, and a concern from his boss, Jack Crawford, over Will's "abilities." Both Jack and friend/therapist Alana Bloom share a concern for what the latter calls an empathy disorder, which allows Will the ability to get close (at times too close) to his suspects, taking on the perspective of the killer. While there are concerns about Will's potential to cross a line due to his mental abilities, he quickly shows the audience he has an extremely gentle, caring nature.

Romantically, Will and Alana have mutual feelings for one another, but when Alana sets clear boundaries, Will is respectful of them. Along with his penchant for taking in stray dogs, Will quickly takes on a paternal role for the daughter of one of his suspects, Abigail Hobbs. Not initially knowing that she is not the victim of her father's impulses, but instead an accomplice in his crimes (of killing girls who look like his daughter), Will goes to great lengths to protect Abigail, even risking his own life and fleeing with her when he senses she is in danger. Having become emotionally attached to Abigail, the thought that he could have killed her sends Will over the edge, causing a nervous breakdown. The series presents a unique case wherein the audience has access to subjectivity in a way that even the character does not. By accessing

memories from Abigail, the viewer is privy to Abigail's involvement with her father, and her relationship with Hannibal, which are both facts unbeknownst to Will. Likewise, due to his current condition, Will misremembers his time with Abigail, and while he thinks he has killed the young girl, the audience sees the scene as it actually unfolded, with Will an innocent.

Suffering deeply from his encephalitis by the end of the first season, Will is experiencing delusions, hallucinations, and lapses in memory. Visually, the show allows viewers a glimpse into Will's actual mind, letting them know that they are not losing the protagonist to murderous intentions, but rather a severe brain infection. Will himself is denied this information at the hands of Hannibal, who has been administering a clock test for dementia for weeks. As Will draws a clock face on a piece of paper, we see the drawing from Will's point-of-view, which shows a completely normal, correctly spaced and numbered clock. We then also see the actual piece of paper handed to Hannibal, with a clock more reminiscent of the dripping time pieces in a Dali painting. These drawings, combined with Will's violent dreams and daytime hallucinations, offer an equally disorienting experience for our lead character and audience.

Having lied to protect Abigail after she (supposedly) killed someone accidentally, Will is having intensely conflicting feelings while discussing the coverup with Hannibal in a therapy session (the same session where he draws his first clock) ("Buffet Froid"). In the next scene, we see Will lose his grasp on reality at a crime scene, one minute gutting a fish for dinner, the next hallucinating that he is responsible for their latest victim and contaminating the crime scene. A concerned Jack feels responsible for bringing Will into the field and questions if he broke him. His solution is to reassure Will that his job is to reconstruct crime scenes, but not imagine himself as the killer – not knowing that this very act is Will's subjective process. After getting examined at the hospital, a scan reveals Will's positive encephalitis diagnosis. But Hannibal's

charm convinces a corrupt neurologist that keeping the information from Will offers a unique opportunity to study the psychological and neurological effects of the disease on a patient. As an audience, we are given yet another reason to sympathize with Will and excuse any questionable behavior.

Continuing to manipulate Will and learning that his patient is losing time, Hannibal begins enacting an elaborate plan that will eventually have Will take the fall for Abigail Hobbs's murder. Notes from Will's sessions with Hannibal corroborate his unfolding: "I don't know how to gauge who I am anymore. I don't feel like myself. I feel like I've been gradually becoming different for a while. I just feel like somebody else. I feel crazy" ("Rôti"). A sweaty, disoriented, feverish Will begins hallucinating that he himself is Garrett Jacob Hobbs (Abigail's father), his first ever victim on the job, and runs to Hannibal for help. When discussing Will's latest psychosis with Bedelia, Hannibal's psychiatrist and confidant, Hannibal expresses an affinity for his patient, while Bedelia suggests Hannibal has a greater interest in Will's madness, than the man himself. Hannibal responds by stating that he sees himself in Will, and both men realized early on in life that they see the world differently. When asked by Bedelia (who, it is inferred, knows Hannibal is a killer) what Will presents to him, Hannibal responds by stating that Will offers an unprecedented opportunity for friendship.

At this moment, the series asks audiences to use their accumulated character knowledge to differentiate Will Graham from Hannibal Lecter. As Will is fleeing with Abigail, Hannibal is setting the groundwork that will set Will as the killer for multiple cases, suggesting that Will has a dissociative disorder where he takes on Garrett Jacob Hobbs, and loses time. As Will begins to piece together that Abigail helped her father kill his victims, she, in turn, suggests he was more than capable himself. An upset Will awakens back on the plane, alone, without Abigail, who

viewers see safely return to her old home where Hannibal is waiting for her. He ultimately tells her that he is sorry he could not protect her, after sharing that he himself is responsible for the killings, but Will is going to be taking the fall.

In the first season finale entitled “Savoureux,” Will, now overcome with hallucinations, is a shell of his former self, distraught over returning from Minnesota without Abigail. As Will is arrested and his dogs rounded up by his former colleagues, Will is convinced that he has murdered Abigail. Forensic proof, including Abigail’s blood beneath his nails, convinces him that he has killed her, but the audience is privy to evidence to the contrary. As his friends and colleagues argue over who is responsible for Will’s downfall and excuse away his murders with various mental health diagnoses and encephalitis, evidence for multiple murders begins to stack up against Will. There is a marked change in Will’s demeanor as he is ushered from FBI headquarters in shackles and an orange jumpsuit; his face is hardened and determined in a way not previously witnessed.

Shockingly, Will breaks his own thumb to free himself from his shackles and escapes the prison van. With Will on the lam, Hannibal finally lets Jack and Alana figure out Will’s encephalitis diagnosis in Hannibal’s office. Unbeknownst to the three of them, Will is hiding above them amidst the doctor’s bookshelves. In a sudden turn of confidence, Will proclaims that he knows who he is, and that he did not kill anyone, including Abigail, and that someone is ensuring that he takes the fall. As Hannibal psychoanalyzes Will, attempting to convince his patient of his crimes, Will holds firm to his innocence, and demands a road trip to Minnesota. Re-envisioning the day that Garrett Jacob-Hobbs was killed, Will suddenly pieces together that Hannibal is the one responsible for everything. This scene marks a pivotal change in Will, as he

sees blood on the floor, knowing that Abigail's throat was slit, and assumedly, knowing that Hannibal killed her.

Will's new mantra "I know who I am," echoes through the episode, as he confronts Hannibal for his crimes at gunpoint. Noting "I am who I have always been, the scales have just fallen from my eyes," Will manages to evade Hannibal's mind games, but not before Jack enters the scene, halting and ultimately shooting Will in the shoulder before he can shoot Hannibal. Now properly treated for his encephalitis, a hardened Will is being housed in a penitentiary for the criminally insane. In an exchange that mimics the film franchise (but a reversal), the protagonist and antagonist stare at each other through the cell grates in the penultimate moments of the season one finale. The Will Graham that we had come to know all season has evolved, as evinced by the camera's slow pan up to Will's face, looking up menacingly into the center of the frame.

When investigations into Hannibal come up fruitless, Will decides to play along, until Hannibal himself, presumably bored, helps absolve Will of the crimes, and places blame on another psychiatrist. Before his innocence is revealed, Will, again harkening back to the filmic franchise, is wheeled into interrogations confined to a straight jacket and face mask – after all, he is a psychopathic cannibal. When a restrained Will is still allowed to consult on the murder of his friend and colleague, Beverly Katz, he is visibly distraught over the scene, and finds himself unable to cope with the guilt he feels given the fact that his friend was close to proving Hannibal's guilt. As with previous scenes, Beverly's corpse is on display as though in a gallery, in keeping with her job as a forensic pathologist, her body has been dissected and sandwiched between life-sized slides. From an aesthetic and character perspective, the grandiosity of the staging does not align with Will's simplistic lifestyle and tastes, but with the newfound

information we have about Hannibal, the excess is fitting. Similar to previous cases within the series, the audience travels with Will into his own mind, wherein he can be seen killing Beverly as he believes the killer (Hannibal) did. Will can be seen strangling and then freezing Beverly's body, before using a table saw to prepare her corpse for placement into the display cases. Visually, the scene does not feature any distinct lighting or stylistic changes that signal we are witnessing a fictitious act. Instead, it is only Will's voiceover for his fellow FBI agents that alludes to the unfolding scene as a fabrication.

Distraught over Beverly's death, and finding himself locked up with killer, Abel Gideon, and a Chesapeake Ripper copycat as an orderly, Will attempts to put out a hit on Hannibal – the first truly immoral departure from the character we have come to know. To highlight a shift in character, Abel Gideon offers an apt soliloquy, noting that of “all the things that make us who we are, what has to happen to make those things change? So much has happened to Mr. Graham, he's a changed man. He's not looking for redemption, but revenge, that is a trinket he could value” (“Mukozuke”). Perhaps an enduring side-effect of the prolonged brain infection, or a marker of his character change, Will continues throughout the series' run to experience various waking hallucinations, many of which clue the audience in to important information through implied symbolism and metaphor.

As the second season progresses and Will is eventually proven innocent, it is too late for his previous morality, as the remainder of the series is driven by a game of cat-and-mouse between himself and Hannibal. As his former psychiatrist takes on a romantic relationship with Alana, Will's resentment only grows, as he turns on his friend and former love interest. The previously bumbling, shy agent on the spectrum from the pilot is now replaced by a confident man, capable of maintaining fierce eye contact (without the glasses) and holding a gun without

shaking hands. Will maintains his standing appointments with Hannibal, in a puzzling display of power, and when arriving for these sessions, his appearance alters to better match that of the doctor, with slicked back hair and formal button-up shirts, neatly tucked into pressed trousers. Even Will's previous wardrobe of flannels and vests at crime scenes is slowly replaced with tweed trench coats and expensive woolen scarves, again more closely resembling the attire of Hannibal.

Will's physical transformation is begging the audience to compare him to Hannibal's likeness in both appearance and personality. As the two grow more outwardly similar, so too does their bond strengthen, with frequent themes of love and attachment following their relationship. Will's undoubted hatred for Hannibal helps to absolve many of his choices, but the affection, and even admiration he shows for the killer begs the audience to view him as just another antagonist in the series. This is solidified in the second season when Will becomes involved with the psychotic Verger siblings, even agreeing to help Margot Verger bear a male heir and kill her abusive brother. While we question Will's choice to become involved with the family, and see his continued moral decline after doing so, he is once again slightly humanized when we see the pleasure he finds in the prospect of having a child, and the heartbreak he experiences when the unborn child is killed.

As the narrative shifts into the third, and final season of the series, Will's transformation becomes complete as he follows Hannibal (who is on the lam) to Europe. As a new serial killer presents itself, Hannibal, now imprisoned, and Will work together to take down Francis Dolarhyde. To elevate Hannibal, we often see the doctor free from his plexi-glass cell and jumpsuit, dressed to the nines, as Will chooses to imagine him. The power dynamic between the two shifts, with Hannibal turning himself in after being rejected by Will, spending years

imprisoned, while Will moves on and starts a family. But Will, now donning fancy suits and sport coats, still needs Hannibal, and thanks to giving himself up, Will is allowed to always know exactly where Hannibal will be waiting for him. In the series finale, Will finds comfort in his time with Hannibal before Dolarhyde arrives, enjoying a glass of wine, and discussing a potential acceptance of not being able to “save himself” from who he truly is.

After being stabbed multiple times by Dolarhyde, Hannibal, who has been shot, comes to Will's rescue. The three men violently tussle as Will, armed with a blade, and Hannibal, armed with an ax, slowly circle Dolarhyde before mercilessly ripping into him together. Hannibal even takes a bite from his neck, before their mutual foe collapses to the ground, as Siouxsie Sioux's “Love Crime” plays in the background. As the two men, covered in blood look to one another, Will notes that the blood really does look black in the moonlight. While embracing, Hannibal remarks, “See, this is all I ever wanted for you, Will. For both of us,” followed by Will's response, “it's beautiful” before laying his head on Hannibal's chest and pulling them both over the cliff's edge upon which they stood (“The Wrath of the Lamb”) (Figure 7).



Figure 7

In the tenth episode of the third season, when Will is chatting with Bedelia, the psychiatrist suggests that Will was most himself when he was with Hannibal. She goes on to suggest that murder and cannibalism is morally acceptable, and that Will himself deep down understands that. Bedelia goes on to question Will's relationship with Hannibal, and his failure to save Hannibal. Will then asks if Hannibal is in love with him, and Bedelia suggests those feelings are reciprocated, in a "can't live with him, can't live without him" situation. Due to Will's intense ability to over-empathize, she suggests that Will is capable of both intense violence and great personal pain. It becomes apparent that Will realized he at once could not fully become Hannibal, but also could not live without him, so the only solution is to take both of their lives. Series creator Bryan Fuller notes that "I think when Hannibal says his final lines, Will is forced to acknowledge that what they just experienced was a beautiful thing. He lingers on that feeling of, "it was beautiful, and I will desire it again, and I will be chasing this feeling"

(Prudom). While Fuller has shared that the two men, affectionately referred to as “husbands in murder,” survive their fall, the series was ultimately cancelled without a fourth season.

In the same vein as *Breaking Bad*’s, Walter White, Will Graham offers a unique take on complex characterization, with intense character change throughout the series’ three season run. While Will ultimately makes a moralistic decision to end his and Hannibal’s lives in an attempt to save others, his choice also signals a final submission to a truly hideous character and fully realized transformation. Had we encountered Will as he appeared in the third, or even second season, he would not have been as empathetic of a character or as readily able to align with his audience. We are meant to find pleasure in Will’s journey, and ultimately, in the love story being told between two distinctly hideous men. In the end, it is Will’s choice to succumb to Hannibal’s way of life that ends up humanizing the series’ antagonist, showing that he is capable of actually caring for another human.

Referred to as operational allegiance by Jason Mittell, Will’s portrayal can truly only succeed in the form of serial programming. The level of subjective exploration the audience is offered cannot be achieved in a two-hour film, nor can such a drastic character transformation. Even three entire seasons did not fully realize Will’s final form, and the time spent between episodes, discussing and discerning Will’s choices and relationship with Hannibal are just as important as the forty-two minutes audiences spend with the men each week. While both Hannibal and Will should have faced an ultimate reckoning for their crimes, their fall only signals both men getting what they have always wanted: Will to finally see the beauty in death, and Hannibal to get to truly be with Will.

Final Thoughts

Although extremely divergent characters, Meredith Grey and Will Graham share many common traits as complex protagonists that greatly contribute to the success of their individual series. Audiences for both series are offered distinct, subjective access to both characters via dream states, hallucinations, and voice-over narration. This narrative access offers a direct line to subjectivity usually reserved for literary texts and helps both series to create clear diegetic and narrative expectations from episode-to-episode, while also building complicated characters. Despite differing genders, both characters serve as examples of a shift away from traditional antiheroes towards morally complex characters who openly grapple with psychological obstacles.

One of the most notable differences between *Grey's Anatomy* and *Hannibal* lies in the lengths that they aired on television, with *Grey's* going into its 20th season (at the time of writing) and *Hannibal* facing cancellation after three seasons. One large production point of contention for *Hannibal* is the sheer cost to pull off such an elaborate aesthetic. Between luxuriously crafted sets, elaborately furnished tablescapes, and pricey wardrobe, the series' budget ultimately proved unsustainable, electing for an increase in on-location shooting in the third and final season. Likewise, while the series succeeded in creating a uniquely complex protagonist in Will Graham, the series seemed to reach a natural conclusion once Will's character development had reached fruition. Should the show have continued for a fourth season, it either would have needed to change its dynamic, with Will fully embracing the killer within, or continue to wear out what little morality the character had left.

To *Hannibal's* credit, the show did manage to escape some of the pitfalls of network television that Ellen Pompeo described in her interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* (Rose). Due to its graphic violence and rich visual style, *Hannibal* was a stark departure from other

programming on NBC, or even the other major networks (ABC, FOX, CBS). Despite receiving critical acclaim, and finding a loyal cult following, the series lost out to the 18 to 49 demographic each season it aired. Airing on NBC made the show susceptible to the fickle nature of linear television, and the necessity to still reach largely homogenous audiences. Despite its cancellation in 2015, the series has fared well on streaming platforms. So well, in fact, that talks of a series revival have been circulating for the last several years. The ability for series to now succeed with smaller audiences than ever, thanks to streaming, suggests that the show may have been before its time, and seen more acceptance as a platform original series.

Chapter Two: Cable (*Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* & *Legion*)

At first glance, the lead characters, Rebecca Bunch from *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and David Holler from *Legion* have little, if anything, in common. The former is a musical theater-loving lawyer, simultaneously disenchanted and at the prime of her career. The latter just happens to be the most powerful mutant in the world, a fact hidden from him until his late twenties. The CW's *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* fixates its narrative strategies around protagonist Rebecca's borderline personality disorder, which, as the series points out in its intro multiple episodes, is a highly stigmatized diagnosis. Similarly, FX's *Legion* maintains an aesthetic heavily tied to David's dissociative identity disorder, offering viewers privileged access to his subjective perspective. Rebecca and David's shared ground lies in their positioning as antiheroes, even suggesting the need for a new term to be discussed: the anti-villain. Both The CW and FX networks possess fewer production constraints than their broadcast network counterparts; cable-based series have the privilege of grappling with more graphic imagery and controversial subject matter, with stylistic excess that helps drive character development and narrative.

The CW is an over-the-air, mini network that parallels many of the features of basic cable television with regards to content, production, and distribution. Like the USA Network (basic cable), The CW caters to a relatively narrow audience, creating original programming for those aged 18 to 39, and features topical and mature content to address that audience. With a slew of original programming, the network also depends on its character-driven series to market the network in general. The network serves as a bridge between network and basic cable given its specific demographic and willingness to continue to gamble on a series like *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, despite low ratings. Finding success with series such as *Veronica Mars* (2004-2019), *Smallville* (2001-2011), *Supernatural* (2005-2020), and *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), the network, much like

FX, undoubtedly took a risk with *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. Not only does the series skew towards the higher end of its target 18-39 demographic, it is also the network's first foray into the musical genre. A subsidiary of Fox network, FX served as the home to *Legion* during its three-season run, with the network becoming synonymous with brooding dramas that rival HBO with regards to graphic violence, nudity, and mature content. Series such as *Justified* (2010-2015), *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014), *American Horror Story* (2011-), and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005-) paved the way for *Legion*'s graphic content, though the series would be the network's first foray into the superhero realm.

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend and *Legion* both stand not only as notable risks for their respective networks, but also as generic enigmas, blending multiple genres, and using production techniques to play with time and space. On both the FX site and IMDB, *Legion* is generically marketed as "superhero," "science fiction," "action," "drama," and "horror." The series does a lot of legwork each week to hold true to each of these categories, crossing and blending the genres within the show's visual and aural aesthetic, as well as its narrative. By converging mise-en-scène pieces from across multiple decades and mixing vintage and contemporary soundtracks, the series' visual and aural style reads with a certain level of dissonance, never quite allowing the viewer to know what period our heroes live in. When considering *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, elaborate production design breathes life into the series' Broadway/musical theatre roots, while also weaving in romance and comedy. Near constant references to contemporary culture through songs help firmly ground the series in the present moment and the real-life and romantic struggles faced by its millennial demographic in the digital age.

Over the last decade, cable networks have continued to possess most of the award-winning primetime television, leading talent from the film industry to flock towards the creative

freedom allotted by networks such as FX, USA and AMC. Likewise, as television filming has transitioned from reels to the digital, the potential for post-production creativity has changed the possibilities of visual spectacle within the medium, forcing shows to adopt a unique style to stand out amongst an increasingly fractured television landscape. In recent years, this influx of filmic talent from Hollywood has both reacted to and necessitated a shift in the creative process and production of scripted television. In 1995, television theorist, John Caldwell attempted to address television's burgeoning aesthetic value in his text, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*. At the heart of the various narrative and non-narrative textual analyses within his work, Caldwell relies upon a distinct dichotomy through which all television style is realized: via the cinematic or videographic.

Under the guise of the cinematic, shows were noted for their ability to bring spectacle, high-production values, and feature-style cinematography, all of which fit in-line with network's financial expectations, as well as critical acclaim. On the other end of the spectrum, videographic series are deemed more anonymous in nature, but for technical reasons, hold the potential for embellishment via electronic manipulation. At its foundation, this dichotomy assumes that most shows are still recorded on film, like movies, and that those filmed digitally have an obsession with gratuitous visual effects. From this perspective, any instances of an overabundance of aesthetics are deemed deterministic with regard to a show's economic value, with any one text's visual style being an aesthetic metaphor for its economic role within the larger television landscape.

While both *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and *Legion* still prioritize characterizations within longform storytelling, they present new and complex narrative challenges along the way. Given the mental health struggles of Rebecca and David, their subjectivity brings a particular sense of

mistrust on the audience's behalf. While both borderline personality disorder (Rebecca) and schizophrenia (David) are already highly stigmatized diagnoses, the way that they impact our protagonists inherently forces a disconnect between their visual and aural narration, as well as the truthfulness of their own perceptions of the world around them. With *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, the audience's perception of both Rebecca, and the rest of the ensemble is clouded by Rebecca's elaborately designed musical numbers, which in and of themselves become a narrative device that imbues the entire series with a subjective lens. In the case of *Legion*, David's seeming schizophrenia sees the audience fall victim to his hallucinations alongside him, never truly knowing if the characters we meet are real, or if David's interactions with those around him are being rendered truthfully. To better understand both highly complex characters, a more detailed look is needed not only at their development as antiheroes through unique televisual aesthetics, but also at the role their unique narrativization plays amidst longform storytelling.

Rebecca Bunch: Antihero, or Anti-Villain?

Upon first introduction, Rebecca Bunch reads like a stereotypical female lead at the start of a romcom: She is a beautiful, well-dressed, successful lawyer living her best life in New York City. But that façade is quickly shattered in the pilot when she runs out of a high-profile client meeting to have a panic attack in a back alley behind her law firm. From the bottle of pills she toggles in her hand, we immediately recognize that this is an ongoing issue for Rebecca. A tense scene is quickly lifted by her running into Josh Chan on the street. A blast from her past, Rebecca has been in love with Josh for the last fifteen years since they last saw each other at summer camp. Finding that Josh is moving back home to West Covina, California, Rebecca is drawn to the glow she feels (Rebecca is seen literally emanating rays of sunshine) from running

into her old flame and promptly leaves everything behind to move to West Covina. For the audience, this is the first of many erratic and impulsive decisions that Rebecca makes.

Upon arriving in West Covina, Rebecca's deceitful web of lies begins, as we witness her stalk Josh, befriend his girlfriend (Valencia), gaslight her new work BFF (Paula), use sex with Josh's friend (Greg) to get close to him, and dump her anxiety meds down the garbage disposal. Rebecca is a walking contradiction: her bubbly personality and musical psyche make her appealing, but her choices and how she manipulates those around her lends itself more to a series antagonist than protagonist.

Margrethe Bruun Vaage describes the antihero as necessarily and "recognizably human," and possessing "mild moral flaws" (Bruun Vaage 283). It is further suggested by Bruun Vaage that the seeming charm many antiheroes possess, along with our continual alignment with them through longform storytelling, can force an audience to –perhaps mistakenly –overlook an antihero's moral transgressions (Bruun Vaage 283). This act of overlooking further implies that when watching a serial program, we first operate under an instinctual, intuitive mode of reception, followed by a more critical, and cognitive based mode of analysis. Vaage's notion that audiences merely root for such immoral characters due to temporary distraction does little to account for Rebecca Bunch's complex characterization. While Margaret Talley has credited the rise in both the male and female antihero due to industrial imperatives, namely the transition to narrowcasting via cable, Sarah Hagelin and Gillian Silverman suggest a more nuanced causality (Hagelin and Silverman). Through a socio-economic lens, Hagelin and Silverman argue that contemporary women have gained more traction in the workforce and social sphere, and this translates into not only the women we see on the screen, but also the demands from the intelligent female consumers watching them (Hagelin and Silverman 11).

Focusing on antiheroes in crime-based fiction, Fiona Peters and Rebecca Stewart categorize the antihero for what they lack: nobility, courage, idealism, morality, or a desire to operate under society's code of conduct (Peters and Stewart 2). While Vaage suggests improper reception leads to a desire to root for the antihero, Peters and Stewart instead imply that intrigue is the real reason: "...It is the flaws, the rebellious nature or immoral undertones of the antihero, that makes them more interesting, seen in the way we are attracted to Batman above Superman" (Peters and Stewart 8). Perhaps the most intriguing aspect about the antiheroes featured in Peters's and Stewart's collection is their ability to possess multiple identities, and at times, a "schizophrenic duality" (Peters and Stewart 9). Such a definition can be applied to *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* to at least partially explain the antiheroic qualities of Rebecca, whose varying identities and amoral choices are often colored by her borderline personality disorder diagnosis. But, the Rebecca Bunch at the start of the series has more villainous origins than the more self-assured protagonist we are left with in the series finale.

Initially popping up in conversations surrounding comic book characters, the anti-villain is often driven by a righteous goal, but uses unfavorable means to achieve their objectives. *X-Men*'s Magneto just wants a world where mutants are accepted but does not care how many humans (or oppositional mutants) must be killed along the way (Peaslee and Weiner 27). *The Avenger*'s Thanos does not wish to see other planets suffer the extinction that his own did due to overpopulation, therefore he views wiping out half the universe's population as a necessary evil to save it. Rebecca, throughout the series' four seasons, oftentimes serves as what creator Rachel Bloom calls, a "bubbly antihero" (Gemmell). It is worth arguing that Rebecca also serves as her own antagonist, or as the aptly titled song from the third episode of the first season suggests, "the villain of her own story." On the surface, Rebecca is pretty, charming, intelligent, and, when

needed, charismatic. But she is also manipulative, conniving, and incredibly self-centered in the pursuit of her own happiness. For these reasons, Rebecca suggests the need to look beyond the antihero, and instead consider its opposite: the anti-villain. To understand the differences between this dichotomy, it is necessary not only to define both terms, but to look at Rebecca's goals, actions, and development over the series.

Throughout the first three seasons, Rebecca's main goal is to find love, which she feels is the key to true happiness. While her goal is admirable, and one shared by most of humanity, the means by which she goes about it are downright villainous. After uprooting her entire life to follow Josh to West Covina, she completely disregards the feelings of his long-term girlfriend as she attempts to befriend her only to sabotage her relationship with Josh. She also takes advantage of the feelings of Greg, Josh's childhood best friend, who against his better judgment, has deep-seeded feelings for Rebecca. Blinded by her lust for Josh, Rebecca toys with Greg and jeopardizes his sobriety, and one point even has sex with Greg's father during a manic period. Among other misgivings, Rebecca breaks into the home of her therapist to steal a prescription pad, becomes aggressive when she does not like the diagnosis she receives, and lies about a past run-in with the law after she burned down the home of a former college professor with whom she had an affair and subsequently stalked.

If these actions, and her own ballad about her villain status, were not convincing enough, Rebecca shares many personality traits with series antagonist Trent Maddock. Initially created as a fake boyfriend to throw Josh off her trail, Trent went to Harvard with Rebecca and has been infatuated with her ever since. Happy to play along, Trent pretends to be Rebecca's boyfriend, but our protagonist is put off by his obsession and desperation, and sends him away (though he returns in the second season). Upon Trent's return, he has dirt from Rebecca's past and uses it to

blackmail her after he leaves his job and moves to West Covina to infiltrate her friend group. In one of many lapses in judgment, Rebecca sleeps with Trent in a bout of depression, unknowingly taking his virginity. Eventually, Rebecca gets her ultimate wish (after breaking up Valencia and Josh) and she and Josh are set to wed. Trent, however, unwilling to let go, gives Josh scandalous information about Rebecca, including the real reason she moved to West Covina. Rebecca is subsequently left at the altar in a manner which leads her down the path of attempting to take her own life.

Trent's presence in the series demands that the viewer see the villainous side of Rebecca, and his presentation as a masculine figure is how the trope is most readily seen on television. While the audience may be tempted to sympathize with Rebecca as she is left at the altar, prepared to jump off a cliff at the venue, it is also impossible to deny the choices that got her to that point. Up until this point in the series, Rebecca has done little to redeem the lives she has torn apart or the selfishness she has conveyed. But the privileged access we are allowed into Rebecca's psyche as witnesses to the self-conscious Broadway numbers in her head help us to better understand the hold that her borderline personality disorder has on her, and forces us to find humanity that a character like Trent lacks. Therefore, I argue that at the outset of the series, Rebecca Bunch begins as an anti-villain. As the protagonist, she is also her own worst enemy, creating a wake of pain and destruction in her selfish quest to find love and happiness. As the series progresses, Rebecca endures hardships such as being left at the altar, attempting suicide, and receiving a BPD diagnosis. Through these trials, Rebecca begins her journey away from anti-villain, and towards antihero.

Along this path towards antiherodom, Rebecca does the work necessary to combat her illness, such as taking meds, going to group, and doing workbooks. When facing attempted

murder charges against Trent, Rebecca chooses to plead guilty, stating that she deserves to be punished for all of the lies and crimes she has committed in the past. While in jail, Rebecca begins a pro-bono program to help the incarcerated women she meets and continues the program once she is released. While Rebecca continues to make mistakes and hurt those she loves along the way, her actions to achieve happiness suddenly become more introspective and less bound in manipulation and deceit. The ultimate display of this shift can be found in the last few episodes of the series when Rebecca is meant to choose between the three loves of her life. Ultimately, she realizes that neither she nor they would ever be happy until she worked on herself, and found her identity, alone. Along the way, the audience comes to appreciate Rebecca's newfound self-awareness, as evinced in songs like "You Ruin Everything, You Stupid Bitch," and no longer roots for her romantic happy ending, but rather a healthy ending for the character (Sn 1; Ep 11).

Genre-Blending & Seriality

Marketed as a romantic comedy and musical by both Rachel Bloom and The CW network, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is also tasked with heavy thematic content such as addiction, suicide, mental illness, abuse, and grief. While the show's narrative stays consistently grounded in difficult, and, at times, stigmatized cultural conversations, character development largely takes place through the series elaborate wardrobe. With most episodes featuring three musical numbers, costume designer, Melina Root, has been tasked with not only dressing characters for their day-to-day lives, but also coming up with elaborate costumes to match Rebecca's latest internal struggle with her mental health. For example, Rachel Bloom channeled Marilyn in a "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend" spoof, the entire cast took part in an elaborate Bollywood number, and Beyonce was channeled in a budget-ruining second season Lemonade-esque opener (Figure 8).



Figure 8

Previously, musicals on the small screen have been reserved for one-off specials of Broadway hits (peaking in the Seventies and Eighties) or individualized, special episodes on series like *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-), *Scrubs* (2001-2010) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). These bottle episodes serve as standouts, usually signaling some sort of trauma to the character with whom the audience is identifying and diverge greatly from the series' normal narrative style. While shows like *Glee* (2009-2015), engrained song, dance, and covers into their series theme, other shows, such as ABC's fantasy/comedy *Galavant* (2015-2016) struggled to fit a thematically unique show into the musical genre. *Glee* also found success in its formulaic reimagining of popular music situated within a high school glee club, while *Galavant* attempted to weave song and dance into a 13th century, medieval setting. Furthermore, in the spring of 2012, after the departure of both *Smash* and *Glee*, critic Kevin Fallon declared that "The TV Musical is Dead" in *The Atlantic*. So why did *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* find success where others failed, while also reviving a dying television genre (Fallon)? According to critics, the secret lies

in the series' ability to fluidly jump genres while also unabashedly grappling with seemingly taboo contemporary issues. This awareness of contemporary social issues surrounding mental health and femininity are engrained in the series' visual and aural aesthetic.

Ruby Hamad notes the show's ability to deal with themes of mental illness "with respect but without kid gloves" (Hamad). Regarding Rebecca's problematic progression from anti-villain to antihero, Rachel Bloom's ability to play the character with some form of lived experience and empathy forces the audience's hand when it comes to rooting for our protagonist. Hamad goes on to suggest that the series found its true success by "blending comedy, tragedy, earnestness and irony," therein pulling off "its eclecticism with a sincere but never sentimental commitment to non-judgmental depiction of several mental diseases" (Hamad). When forecasting the fleeting fad nature of the television musical, Kevin Fallon seems to suggest the medium's seriality as part of the problem: previous musical iterations were predictably dull, with subpar acting, characters, and narratives. This is in stark contrast to the success musicals continue to have on the silver screen, where "movies get to stuff beginnings, middles, ends, and rousing showstoppers into tidy, self-contained 90-minute packages" (Fallon). A common thread that pops up in critical responses to *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* revolves around the surplus of emotions that Rebecca feels which overflow into her surrounding world through song and dance as a coping mechanism. It makes sense that Rebecca would rely on song to express this overabundance of feelings, given the genre's ability to exaggerate and compound emotions.

With over 157 original songs throughout the series' run, writers Rachel Bloom and the late Adam Schlesinger avoided the pitfalls that come with serially breaking into song every week, as well as the staleness that can come with the romance genre. While shows like *Glee* relied on covers of existing pop ballads, past and present, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*'s use of original

music is where the series finds much of the earnestness for which it is so highly praised. While Fox's *Glee* (2009-2015) NBC's *Smash* (2012-2013) differ greatly from *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* both in the types of music they feature, and the way in which music is engrained in their diegesis. For *Glee*, a group of talented high school glee club members practice for their latest performance with chart topping hits, while also weaving topical songs into their lives. *Smash*, in turn revolves around talented performers auditioning for a new Broadway musical, and navigating the harsh realities of stardom. In contrast, Rebecca Bloom is a mentally ill Broadway fan with little to no discernable singing talent (except in her head), who uses her love of song to cope with the world around her. Furthermore, the ensemble around her vocally loathes musical theatre, but are constrained to play their part in Rebecca's elaborate imagination.

The show's sense of irony also comes through in numbers like "Sexy Getting Ready Song," where Rebecca and an ensemble of backup dancers painstakingly (and painfully) get ready for her dream date with Josh Chan. While more traditional romanticized images of women getting ready for a date feature image of slipping into fancy dresses and putting on makeup, this idyllic representation is instead replaced with images of waxing, plucking, and double Spanx. Rapper Nipsey Hustle joins the bridge to apologize on behalf of the patriarchal system that forces the horror show unfolding in front of him, before promptly exiting to "apologize to some bitches" (*Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* Sn 1; Ep 1). There is also the ever-popular power ballad, "You Stupid Bitch," wherein a very self-aware Rebecca looks at the path of destruction she has left in her wake, with self-deprecating and cutting lyrics like "you're just a lying little bitch who ruins things...go lose some weight" (*Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* Sn 1; Ep 11). But in the next breath, the song is also revelatory, showing growth: "Won't stop the self-pity cause I'm on a roll/Yes, Josh completes me, but how can that be/When there's no me left to complete" (*Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*).

The series is painfully self-aware not only of the genres within which it operates, but the constraints of the television medium as well.

In the second episode of season two, Rebecca directly addresses her fanciful song and dance numbers as facets of her imagination. Flashbacks have already clued us into her lifelong love affair with musical theatre, but Rebecca's verbal affirmation about her use of music as a coping technique reads extremely meta-reflexive (Figure 9). This acknowledgement of the series' artifice speaks to the excess that John Caldwell attaches to such examples of self-reflexive comedy (Caldwell 60). While the musical numbers themselves are indicative of stylistic excess with their elaborate *mise-en-scène* and costuming, the way in which this excess is engrained into the series' narrative - and Rebecca's character development - in such a self-conscious way is in itself a representation of excess. Her verbal revelation about her coping technique comes just before Rebecca slips into the darkest bout of depression arguably seen within the series. Several conversations within the show also reference common themes as popping up "last season," but of course then shrug it off as meaning in the summer or fall. These small references become even more meta-reflexive when the cast directly references the show's dwindling viewership, claiming that mistakes within the diegesis are no big deal, since no one is watching. But the series' most self-effacing moment comes in the form of recasting the character of Greg Serrano.



Figure 9

Leaving for other projects partway through the second season, Santino Fontana's Greg took time away from the main plot to treat his alcoholism and finally go back to business school. When Greg returned in the fourth (and final) season of the series, he had been recast with Skylar Astin. As noted by scholars such as Jason Mittell, recasting a main character can be a tricky endeavor that rarely yields fruitful results. So how did Rachel Bloom find success from yet another potentially damaging situation? The cast acknowledged that Greg was totally transformed by his time away, "literally a new character," and that he is "only here for one season," *cough* "Christmas, of course" (*Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* Sn 4; Ep 8). Again, the magic to the show's distinctness lies not only in its ability to blend genres across difficult topics, but to do so with an earnest reflexivity that puts an audience at ease.

Sound & Production Practices

With the pilot originally set to air on Showtime as a thirty-minute sitcom, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* was ultimately toned down for its final home at The CW. Co-executive producer, Aline Brosh McKenna notes that shifting to the new network forced little change: "The 30

minutes you've seen are in the show. A little bit of profanity was taken out and some of the sexiness was toned down" (O'Connell). The series found its way to The CW at a time when the network was branding itself as a multi-platform entity, after brokering a deal with Netflix that would see series landing on the streaming service just eight days after their finales air. This is supplemented by the network's own digital viewing platform that allows free, ad-supported viewing of new episodes each week. Owned by Warner Brothers and CBS, the network also operates under a unique distribution structure wherein it strictly airs only shows coming directly from CBS TV Studios or Warner Bros. TV Studios.

The revenue that the network saw come in from its continued deal with Netflix likely had an influence over *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*'s ability to remain for four seasons, despite fairly abysmal ratings. Frequently averaging fewer than one million viewers each week, the series remained in the bottom slot for its 18 to 49 demographic for three of its four seasons (Venable). When probed about the series' 0.2 rating amongst its target audience, CW President and CEO Mark Pedowitz defended the network's critical darling: "When you have great critical work and a critically acclaimed and award-nominated show like *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, it deserves to be picked up" (Thomas). Pedowitz goes on to note *Crazy Ex*'s role in helping the network stand out in an ever-changing digital landscape: "It has nothing to do with numbers. It has everything to do with how *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, *Jane the Virgin* and the DC franchises have helped alter the perception of what The CW has become" (Thomas). Despite an average weekly audience of just 553,000, Pedowitz also felt that the series was grappling with topics and issues that needed to be on television, regardless of financial viability.

In a candid interview, series creator and star Rachel Bloom shared that she makes roughly \$50,000 to \$60,000 per episode (before taxes and paying personal reps) for acting

(Swertlow). These numbers are in stark contrast to other female leads at the time, such as Kaley Cuoco who was making \$900,000 per episode of *Big Bang Theory*, and Ellen Pompeo, who was already making nearly one million dollars per episode of *Grey's Anatomy* (Swertlow). Bloom takes on multiple roles within the series, working not only as the lead actor, but also the major vocal talent, creator, head writer, and co-executive producer. The series itself faced many similar, multi-faceted constraints.

Averaging three musical numbers per episode, spanning four thirteen to eighteen episode long seasons, the series' elaborate mise-en-scène becomes a significant factor in the series' visual excess and Rebecca's character development. Caldwell notes that aesthetically driven series not only make their "mise-en-scène more excessive," but also make their "presentational demeanor more excessive and sophisticated" (Caldwell 92). This excess appears, at times, as a masquerade that revels in "marshaling and displaying aesthetic systems, not just at making images more visual" (Caldwell 92). The elaborate music interludes in each episode are not empty vehicles for elaborate style; they serve as subjective access to Rebecca's psyche, as well as larger meta-commentary on social and cultural issues. Along with a writers' room responsible for the series' episodic and serial narrative arcs, there was also a separate writers' room responsible for creating the show's original songs. Helmed by the late Adam Schlesinger of Fountains of Wayne fame, Bloom also collaborated on the songs, bringing the lyrics to life, while Schlesinger took on the responsibility of creating the musical accompaniment. When interviewed, co-executive producer Aline Brosh McKenna notes that "from the beginning, Rachel and I always said, 'Show first, then songs'" (Valentini). While the series' narrative also takes precedence, the show's musical numbers are integral to character development and setting the narrative's overall tone, as the series' identity always emphasizes aesthetics. While only taking up around ten minutes per

weekly episode, it is easy to surmise that the musical numbers consumed a bulk of the weekly budget and editing.

In the pilot, the song “West Covina,” runs just over three minutes, but sees the protagonist go from the streets of New York to the sunny concrete of California. Along the way, Rebecca is joined by a ten-piece marching band and over sixty highly choreographed background singers and dancers. Running a bit longer at four minutes, “Where’s Rebecca Bunch?,” appears in the season three opener and features the ensemble cast and a litany of extras filming on location at a renaissance fair-type village. Featuring elaborately researched period costumes and horse-drawn covered wagons, the song painstakingly recaps the events that led to Rebecca fleeing at the end of the previous season (figure 10). This sampling of songs conveys not only the amount of time that goes into choreography, but the amount of budget that goes into the elaborate costume work, on-location filming, set design, and extras, all of which are used in a one-off fashion, to ensure each original song provides a unique experience.



Figure 10

Tasked with creating costumes for the cast's day-to-day roles, as well as generating original wears for the show's musical numbers, Melina Root notes the important role that wardrobe plays in the series and the unique challenges she faced on the show's production. Since West Covina is, in fact, a real place in California, Root did her research when it came to the stores there and ensured that the characters would be wearing items readily accessible from the town. In the case of Rebecca, her wardrobe remained consistently a bit higher end than the rest of the ensemble, due mostly to her New York upbringing, and the fact that she inherently had more money than the other characters. Characterization truly shines through wardrobe, as seen in Root's choices for Paula early in the series: "You also learn that Paula is obsessed with the lives of celebrities, so she wore a lot of Katy Perry jewelry and Jessica Simpson shoes for a while. That was her way of getting a bit of the magic that was missing from her own humdrum life" (Fishman). This attention to detail was extended to the entire ensemble cast and also each episode's multiple musical numbers.

Originally coming from theater design, Root notes that film is often more realistic than stage and found the translation of a theater driven theme to television to be challenging. Given how closely tied the musical numbers are with Rebecca's psyche and self-created fantasy realm, Root found herself tasked with trying to figure out the boundaries between reality and fantasy. For the R&B ballad "Love Kernels," Root had little to go on aside from being told that she needed to transform Bloom into a "sexy cactus" for the episode. With a six-day turnaround, Root managed to create an elaborate evening gown-esque cactus costume whose embellishments and spikes turned Rebecca into a gorgeously "sexy fashion cactus," standing in the California desert, desperate for those "love droplets" (Figure 8). In a Thanksgiving episode song parodying Nikki Minaj, titled "I Give Good Parent," Root was striking out when it came to finding a turkey-

themed bra off the rack and was once again tasked with bringing Rachel Bloom's vision to life. The result was a bra that highlighted Bloom's full-figured body, each breast covered by an elaborately feathered turkey head, a costume that ended up being Rachel Bloom's favorite of the entire series (FIDM Museum).

Unique Narrative and Subjective Characterization

One of the most notable differences between *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and the Broadway hits the series parodies lies in the show's serial nature. As noted in much of the critical reception surrounding musicals on television, the lack of critical appreciation for series like *Glee* and *Smash*, is due to their inability to maintain these serial expectations while also offering a distinct narrative experience through operational aesthetics (Fallon). Returning to Jason Mittell's *Complex TV*, this act of operational reflexivity goes beyond the traditional narrative structure and demands that viewers find pleasure not just in the unfolding story, but the spectacle with which said story is being told (Mittell 43). While *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*'s internal logic teaches its audience to expect three original songs each week, the show's reliance on genre-blending, an ensemble cast, and unique subjective narration leaves room to play with audience expectations that other contemporaries lack.

The series' internal logic is founded upon Rebecca's fantastical ability to imbue her world with musical theatricality to both cope with and make sense of the events unfolding around her. Through flashbacks, the audience is made aware that this coping mechanism first began during Rebecca's adolescence to deal with the trauma of her father abandoning her and her mother emotionally abusing her. Traditional narrative theory, as it pertains to film and television, relies heavily on concepts of mimetic narration, prioritizing the ability to "show" with the visual aspects of these media, over the reliance on "telling" with text-based literature. Both

literary and visual mimesis do “not aim at truth,” but instead aim at “conveying an impression, creating an effect,” creating a “set of instructions for constructing a fictional world” (Ron 18). For the audience, their perception of Rebecca and her life in West Covina is completely colored not only by her imagination, but also her borderline personality disorder. Glimpses into Rebecca’s psyche, through the series’ musical numbers, are countered by more traditional narrative progression, where we are able to see Rebecca’s actions from a more objective viewpoint. But the subjective perspective we are offered is important for helping Rebecca maintain sympathy with the viewer. Without an understanding of Rebecca’s childhood trauma and how her adult mind operates, she would be not only a wholly unlikeable character, but an irredeemable one as well.

To successfully reach its coveted 18 to 49 demographic, the series must also create a sense of universality, reaching beyond the affluent, white, cisgendered representation of Rebecca Bunch. Although we can consider Rebecca’s musical numbers as a first-person narrative style, that definition is lacking in nuance. We learn in the second season, from Rebecca’s own lips, that she has imagined her life in a series of musical numbers since childhood, a fact that only explains the presence of these imaginings when Rebecca is present in a given scene. As the series’ protagonist, Rebecca is the focal point of over ninety percent of the show’s original songs, but there are particular musical scenes where she is not present. The first instance of this feature appears in the sixth episode of the first season, wherein Santino Fontana’s Greg, parodying Billy Joel’s “Piano Man,” laments about his doomed destiny to “pour his high school friends beer for the rest of eternity” (*Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*). While Greg sings his blues away at his bar, Home Base, Rebecca is miles away, enjoying Thanksgiving with Josh and his family. While this is the first instance of the series transferring the subjective perspective via music, it is not the last.

In the following episode, we also see Paula feature in a musical number of her own, as she momentarily contemplates cheating on her husband with a high-profile client from the law firm where she works with Rebecca. This jazzy number comes just minutes after we see Rebecca hallucinate TV's Dr. Phil in her apartment, signaling the continuation of her deteriorating mental health. Concerned she is schizophrenic, Dr. Phil assures her it is just her "depression that invited him in," and she merely suffers from an active imagination. This moment is important, as it is the first time we hear Rebecca openly acknowledge her declining mental health, while also verbalizing her penchant for imagining her world in a series of musical numbers. While there may have been some clues prior, the audience, until this point, has been unsure as to whether or not the show's musicality is imagined or real. The unfolding scene between Rebecca and Dr. Phil, as well as these anomalous musical numbers on behalf of other characters, raise interesting questions about narrative and characterization.

While the ability for other characters in the ensemble to break into song at particularly tense or traumatic moments in their lives can be explained away by a sense of narrative cohesion, it also suggests the possibility that other characters are suffering from mental illness, as well. Returning momentarily to concepts of identification, John Hartley, in *Uses of Television*, expounds on seven types of social subjectivity: self, gender, age-group, family, class, nation, and ethnicity (Hartley 11). The combination of these subjectivities, further explained by scholar John Fiske in *Television Cultures*, suggests an ideal, or dominant mode of identification. Expanding this notion, the serial, weekly nature of television asks the audience to regularly and repeatedly inhabit the subjectivities we are being presented. In the case of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, access to *only* Rebecca's subjectivity can prove both limiting (affluent, white, cisgendered woman), and confusing, given her perpetual mental health struggles.

By offering occasional subjective access to other characters, the series is able to explore different socio-economic statuses, alternative sexual orientations, and a multitude of ethnic perspectives. In the current and vast television landscape, the pleasure that can come with successful recognition relies upon a certain demand for diversity. As noted by John Fiske, “If our subjectivity conforms easily to the dominant ideology, we will find little strain in adopting the subject position that television constructs for us,” but if a particular subject position is continually at odds with our own ideologies, this adoption can prove difficult, and a series unwatchable (Fiske 115). This style of narration, wherein subjectivity is passed from one character to another, also suggests a return to literary conventions of a first-person narration style, negating any potential for unreliable narration that can come from having Rebecca as an exclusive, third-person narrator.

For example, USA’s *Mr. Robot* features a protagonist suffering from paranoid delusions, whose exclusive voice-over narration is further conflated by the audience not only seeing, but also believing hallucinations of his (deceased) father to be real. While the series is yet another example of a unique subjectivity, which forces the viewer to adopt Elliot’s way of seeing the world, it also creates a deep-seeded sense of confusion surrounding what parts of the series are factual and which are imagined. Similarly, Rebecca’s gift for the dramatic begs the viewer to sympathize with her plight, while her actions often push the limits of our emotional attachment. This attachment is compounded by access to Rebecca’s one-on-one therapy sessions, where the audience hears about Rebecca’s struggles firsthand, unmediated by the usual song and dance. The series’ distinct subjectivity, original score, and topical references demand a thoroughly engaged viewer, capable of filling in the series’ social critiques, while also actively participating in a very real conversation surrounding mental health and identity.

Legion: Peak TV & Creating a Historiographic Account of Televisual Aesthetics

Citing a lack of television scholarship akin to David Bordwell's *Poetics of Cinema* or David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristen Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, Jeremy Butler blames TV's inability to release itself from the binds of the perpetual television-as-transmission concept when regarding style, as seen in *Television Style*. This emphasis on transmission oftentimes finds cultural studies analyses spending more time examining the recipient of the transmission, instead of the transmission itself, as seen in the lengthy studies compiled on soaps and their respective fandoms. Much of the foundation of television studies can be found in the medium's ability to transmit live events simultaneous to broadcast and subsequent negative attributes towards the medium's small scale and primitive, monaural sound. Citing film scholar André Bazin and auteur director Francois Truffaut as reference points, television is an industrial, aesthetically stunted product. Further, television lacks a sole director that can be pinpointed as driving a text's visual style via romantic notions of auteurism that view style as a "manifestation of the individual's unique vision" (Butler 2). Butler begins his argument with a quote from David Bordwell: "Film style matters because what people call content comes to us in and through the patterned use of the medium's techniques...style is the tangible texture of a film, the perceptual surface we encounter as we watch and listen, and that surface is our point of departure in moving to plot, theme, feeling - everything else that matters to us" (Bordwell 32). Working with the notion of texts creating an aesthetic texture, Butler grounds his approach in four broad media stylistic categories: descriptive stylistics, analytic stylistics (interpretation), evaluative stylistics (aesthetics), and historical stylistics (Butler 371).

Considering the 2015 work of Jason Mittell in *Complex TV*, complex narrative programming seems an important aspect of this aesthetic analysis, particularly when addressing a series like *Legion*, that contains such a dynamic use of narrative and temporality. Keeping this concept in mind, and borrowing from art history and theory, pictorial and aural semiotics are needed to attempt to discern how narrative form is enunciated through image and sound. As an expressionistic text, *Legion* emphasizes editing, camera, color, mise-en-scene, and sound to convey characterization and narrative complexity.

Legion, is a stand out example of expressionistic style by maintaining a complex relationship between narrative, temporality, and unreliable narration, due to the mental health and superhuman struggles the protagonist, David Heller, faces. Borrowing from the expressionist movement, the show conveys a distorted subjective reality that renders emotional effect both visually and aurally. This aesthetic can be referred to as digital Expressionism due to the show's rejection of realism via digital filming and excessive post-production visual manipulation with an emphasis on artifice. Existing within Marvel's larger superhero metaverse, David, also referred to as Legion, is one of the most powerful mutants in existence. The series follows David as he comes to terms with his powers – which he believed to be schizophrenia his entire life – and the villain within. By nature, David's superhuman subjectivity relies heavily on the use of CGI to convey his unique perspective. Although its tone is notably divergent from the Marvel film universe, *Legion's* very existence on the FX Network requires a greater look at shifts in the film and television industries in the last decade.

Inherent to John Caldwell's argument is the notion that economic factors drive shifts within the television industry, and a given show's style ultimately serves as a metaphor for its economic constraints and payoff. As mentioned, in the last decade, the television industry has

seen an influx of directors, actors, and writers leaving the film industry for the freedom and artistic potential within the TV industry, a migration not foreshadowed by Caldwell or Butler. Likewise, prior to the recent boom in streaming, the dominance of cable channels such as FX (averaging 1 million viewers when *Legion* aired in 2017) allows for a greater potential transgression of normative boundaries for time constraints, as well as, narratively and visually, content, and subject matter. Regarding digital TV and the potentiality of streaming services, the main draw for creatives lies in the more easily accessible creative freedom without the pressure of ratings as a deterministic factor.

According to *IMPACT Magazine*, "Hollywood is currently at a place where the divide between small, independent projects and massive, big budget blockbusters is ever increasing. Studios are becoming less inclined to spend money on innovative ideas because the financial repercussions of a flop can be catastrophic" (Quraishi). In contrast, television encourages experimentation with innovative ideas, offering "the luxury of hiding a more avant-garde episode amongst the rest of their safer episodes" (Quraishi). Recent trends in film, such as the proliferation of universe-based film franchises such as Marvel and DC place pressure on directors and studios alike to produce content that can be seamlessly expanded upon for maximum profit.

The Mode of Aesthetic Complexity

In response to a shift in storytelling within the last two decades that does not fit within conventional episodic and serial forms of the recent past, Jason Mittell has coined the phrase "narrative complexity" in *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (Mittell 18). Under this framework, narrative complexity serves as its own distinct narrational mode, breaking from past scholarship which has attempted to apply models of filmic storytelling

onto television. Citing Kristin Thompson's work as a cautionary tale, her extension of David Bordwell's own work to create "art television," forces storytelling from self-contained feature films onto the narrative structure of serialized television (Thompson 110). Per Mittell, narrative complexity serves as the first stage in creating a medium specific vocabulary for discussing television narrative that "redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration" (Mittell 28). The case for narrative complexity finds its origins within the late Seventies, with its most defining characteristic being its penchant for unconventionality, and its most prototypical shows emerging within the Nineties with series such as *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) and *The X-Files* (1993-2018).

Foregrounding the characteristics of narratively complex shows proves integral in understanding what current shows are doing both aesthetically and narratively. While complex shows have been historically unconventional, they do require a nuanced balance between the episodic and the serial (but not in a limiting matter), which often means that atypical episodes that veer from the serial must be balanced with more coherent episodes. Oftentimes, in such series, forward plot momentum is used to garner an emotional response from the audience, and characters and their relationships also often seek to advance the storyline's plot. While shows can successfully work against both serial and episodic norms, and issues of closure, there still must remain an ongoing accumulation of narrative events, even if that continuity is only achieved via romantic relationships, personal character discovery, dialogue, or narrative effects on setting (Mittell 32). Similarly, each show is responsible for setting expectations for continuity so that viewers do not become frustrated when they feel as though their own memory is more reliable than that of the characters and story world.

In the case of *Legion*, these expectations are challenged, as the viewer's perspective is exclusively tied to an unreliable and schizophrenic narrator. The series' internal logic is tied to David's mental state, initially believing the show's confusing temporal leaps to be due to his childhood diagnosis of schizophrenia. We quickly learn by the second episode that David is instead a strong telepath, who has been controlled and lied to his entire life. Despite this shift in understanding, this revelation does little to control the schizophrenic nature with which the audience is allowed to follow the show's narrative. As we jump between David's past and present (and at times, future), we, along with David, are flooded with the voices he hears in his head, while other characters attempt to reach him. While David conducts his "memory work," the audience, along with the protagonist haphazardly delves into David's troubled childhood, feeling the overwhelming anxiety along with our "hero." Returning again to the concept of internal logic, the series relies on the viewer's own memory being as unreliable as David's, as enjoyment comes from slowly piecing together facts. For example, if the viewer realizes too early that certain characters are in fact not real, but a figment of David's imagination, those interactions take on a different meaning. The series creates an expressionistic style that prioritizes subjectivity and emotionalism above a sense of realism or objective truth, a departure from superhero films with which the audience is accustomed.

Use of Mittell's framing for narrative complexity offers some insight into how this mode can be applied to create an aesthetic complexity that can make sense of how a series such as *Legion*, uses seriality to differentiate from the Marvel filmic universe. With considerations toward an accumulation of serial narrative events and forward plot momentum via characterization and interpersonal relationships, how is the series working to visually complicate these structures? In what ways are normative definitions of continuity being skewed through

subjective visual style on behalf of a mentally complex character via David? Likewise, how are aesthetic techniques being utilized to play with the audience's memory and accumulation of facts so that they are never left feeling more knowledgeable than the flawed character with whom they are asked to identify? A turn, once again, towards the operational aesthetics of contemporary television can perhaps begin to answer some of these aesthetically based questions.

Operational Aesthetics and Television of Attraction

For Mittell, the emergence of operational aesthetics begins with Neil Harris's 1981 work with P.T. Barnum, a crucial figure in understanding the cinema of attraction that came before narrative-centered film. Within the scope of television, Mittell argues that complex narrative TV represents a more self-conscious rendering of the medium, or as Jeffrey Sconce puts it, a more "meta-reflexive" television. Therefore, an emphasis of operational aesthetics asks that viewers revel in exploring *how* writers create, as opposed to asking *what* will happen next within the story. By using operational aesthetics as a means of analyzing complex narratives, cinematic visual effects are transitioned into narrative special effects, through which a show "flexes its storytelling muscles to confound and amaze a viewer" (Mittell 53). Through these narrative special effects, shows can build narrative spectacles into their structure in an attempt to draw greater attention to the story as *Legion* accomplishes with temporal leaps, flashforwards, and retrofitted backstories. Citing shows and films with a game or puzzle-based structure, the end goal for employing such narrative techniques is not only to keep audiences actively engaged with the series, but to also maintain viewer surprise and awe at how such feats are being achieved, as well as their diegetic result. How then, can notions of operational aesthetics and spectacle be used to create a framework that is applicable to television in a way that is specific to the medium?

Freeing its definition from the confines of cinematic special effects, a digitally filmed series like *Legion* is operating on an expressionistic level that helps both to visually convey a complex narrative, as well as aid in the maintenance of viewer surprise. Historically, within the cinema, special effects have been used to pull the audience out of the diegesis, a method that does not apply to the current sample demographic of *Legion*. Instead, visual special effects are used to help the viewer delve into the diegesis and narrative world by helping to convey the subjective perspective of a flawed and mentally impaired protagonist. The series' digital expressionism helps to offer the viewer a glimpse into David's mind as it is overcome by his powers, leaving him uncertain of his sanity, and working to combat past and future memories as they flood his—and the viewer's—mind in a disjointed and oftentimes abstract manner. Such an aesthetic not only attracts viewers, but retains them week to week, paying attention not only to narrative clues, but for aesthetic clues, in an attempt to figure out how such a creative move was accomplished.

For example, through the creation of a puzzle-like internal logic, a second screening helps viewers find small clues that help better understand David. By paying attention to David's clothing and hair, it becomes apparent when he is being “occupied” by personalities aside from his own. While this is initially written off as schizophrenic episodes, visual clues tell us otherwise. Likewise, the viewer, at first, struggles to realize that the very real character of Lenny has died (accidentally) at the hands of David. Closer examination to the way in which other characters interact (or fail to interact) with Lenny helps to signal exactly when she leaves the land of the living to exist solely in David's mind, haunting his waking hours. The series also works diligently to create a certain level of aesthetic dissonance by failing to place the diegesis within any specific timeframe. By blending wardrobe, set design, and music from a slew of past

decades, along with futuristic elements, the narrative's jumps between past, present, and future become highly ambiguous. This unique aesthetic has close ties to the avant-garde that goes beyond the videographic, cinematic aesthetic mentioned by John Caldwell and is more congruous with expressionism seen within fine art movements.

Historical Expressionism and the Avant-Garde

Apprehensive to be labeled as a distinct movement in and of itself, Expressionism remains a heterogeneous grouping of artists and texts across a range of media that share a penchant for the emotional and spiritual. Citing its origins in Germany and Austria in the early twentieth century, expressionist art proved innately complex and contradictory in its intention to "liberate the body and evacuate the psyche" of its artists (Bassie 21). Many original pieces emphasized inward visions and contained themes such as clairvoyance, the unruly, violence, chaos, and ecstasy, which all emphasize a connection between artist and viewer. According to expressionist Oskar Kokoschka, the style sought "form-giving to the experience, thus mediator and message from self to fellow human. As in love, two humans are necessary" (Bassie 54). While such a historiography places importance on the connection between expressionist artists and their audience, it does little to explain the style's more avant-garde and dramatic sensibilities.

From a more modernist perspective, expressionist art often emphasizes an oscillation between a transparent realism –the objective real world— and representations of an abstract, subjective world – the unconscious). In tandem with the historical avant-garde, expressionism has also proven to contain some of the same counter-discursive and anti-institutional sentiments as those held by artists within the Dadaist and surrealist movements (Cascardi 2). With a motive of purposeful aesthetic discontinuity, expressionism pushed back at the early Twentieth century's de-centering of the modern individual, as more classical representations of the time sought to

promote the self as a unified entity to make up for this de-centering (Cascardi 5). Instead, expressionism denies such needs for stability by focusing on the unavoidable alienation that comes with such a de-centering of the self through abstraction and discontinuity. This dramatized subjectivity asks that a text "stages subjectivity as fragmented and discontinuous...the world with which the central figure encounters is frequently the realm of deflected selfhood, with other figures becoming mere fractions of one's ego" (Cascardi 18). From this perspective, the very experience of subjectivity within expressionism is an ongoing process of accumulation, leaving readers of this accumulation extremely de-centered and at times unable to fully grasp the final abstract representation. In the case of serial television, retention of viewership is important for the economic viability of a series, this makes it important that a series such as *Legion* ensures that its use of expressionism is abstract to the point where meaning cannot be discerned on the viewer's behalf.

Upon first examination, *Legion* places an unreliable narrator at the center of the series, forcing a highly subjective visual style that renders the diegesis from the perspective of protagonist with an unstable mental landscape. While this mental instability is rendered within the narrative via therapy sessions, institutionalizations and diagnostic dialogue with other characters, David's subjectivity is most notably conveyed via special effects. Shot digitally, the series offers the freedom of post-production manipulation to render an emotive subjective aesthetic, thus the natural progression of labeling the series as possessing a particular digital expressionism. Such digital manipulation is at times necessary to convey the show's fantastical events such as memory travel, hallucinations, time jumping, and ultimately, David's explosive supernatural powers. One scene that stands out for its use of CGI becomes a benchmark, signaling David's "nervous breakdown." The scene occurs after a fight with his then girlfriend

leads David to scream in his kitchen, as the contents of his cupboards explode and swirl around him in slow-motion (Figure 11). David grabs his face in frustrated anguish, as food, cups, bowls, and plates shatter and swirl around, encasing him. The scene signals a rare usage of David's powers, but his own mind is locking him out of the memory, even though it flashes for the audience repeatedly, across several episodes. This unique visual style seeks to decenter the viewer within the show's diegesis, offering snippets of the objective real world, interrupted with scenes set within David's subjective mind. The audience is offered glimpses into David's childhood, but also sees more terrifying, supernatural images, including those of the demon attempting to invade David's mind.



Figure 11

This shared consciousness between David and the viewer creates an intimate bond akin to expressionism's original intentions – a bond that is not shared with the rest of the characters within the show. Likewise, while the viewer is the only person to share in David's subjective selfhood, visually, he is also refracted via external characters, outside of his main bodily

representation. This ability to extend character beyond the confines of their own body takes notions of the double, as seen in early German Expressionist film, to a modernized extreme via digital manipulation that allows characters to fluidly jump between bodies whether human or other. Similarly, digitally disjointed montages are also used to disrupt each show's narration to maintain a consistent level of discontinuity that provides insight into the narrative through visual accumulation of character backstory over the course of multiple episodes. As seen with the kitchen memory, both David and the audience are piecing together his past memories, bit-by-bit, forced to create a cohesive story from broken fragments.

Digitally De-Centered

Noting the self-expression lacking from the Impressionist movement, early expressionism (showing up as early as 1905) took influence from Frederich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. Responding to the dehumanization of the Industrial Revolution and the rapid spread of urban spaces, expressionist artists chose to respond to such modern changes via a total rejection of realism. Early influences for such emotional depictions can also be traced throughout history via the propaganda art that came to fruition during moments of social upheaval and revolution. Expressionism continued to be produced after World War One, but particular artists largely disbanded at the start of World War Two, at the hands of the Nazi campaign and their desire to extinguish art that disagreed with their politics. Prior to the Second World War, the emergence of dadaism and surrealism not only claimed a revolutionary stance not taken by past movements, but also accused Expressionists of creating apathetic work that had become generic and co-opted by the mainstream (Bassie 56). These themes can be seen in *Legion*'s aesthetics and character representations and, given the digitally filmed production of the series, its style can be referred to as digital expressionism.

Through various aesthetic techniques such as montage, framing, and digital special effects, the series manages to visually convey how David is internalizing his oppressive surroundings. His mental state and fractured persona reflect a lack of understanding towards his superhuman abilities, as well as attempts by various social institutions to control his mind and abilities for their own personal gain. These malicious intentions are masked, for David, as helping hands, particularly when it is revealed that David is not, in fact, mentally ill. Watching through David's past therapy sessions reads similarly to the private sessions of Rebecca in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. There is a level of intimacy in being privy to a protagonist in such a raw and vulnerable state. Similar to Rebecca, David, and his mental struggles also raise important questions about how we define a protagonist, most notably an antihero.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the term anti-villain initially gained traction within the comic/superhero world, where it has most comfortably remained. When the series begins, our view of David as a sympathetic protagonist is largely unchallenged: he has been confined and lied to his entire life to believe he is mentally ill, with most of his memories completely wiped away. We see David as scared of his own mind and abilities, but also as someone capable of deeply caring for those around him, such as his girlfriend, Syd, and his sister. However, as the series progresses, and David comes to terms with his superpowers, it is revealed in the second season that "future David" causes a global apocalypse. The second season completely subverts the dynamic from the first, wherein supervillain Amahl Farouk, must be used by David's former superhero team, Division 3, to kill future David, before he ends the world.

While this hunt happens in the third and final season of the series, the second season finale cements David's villainous status with a horrid act against Syd: drugging and sexually assaulting his girlfriend, after she attempts to break free from the abusive relationship. When

discussing David's fall from grace, creator Noah Hawley explains what truly makes a good anti-villain: "There's a trope that you're only as good as your villain...but I think it also means that the show or movie is only good if the villain is dynamic and compelling and interesting and *comprehensible*" (Patches). Hawley goes on to suggest that villains seen in the Marvel cinematic universe are relatively two-dimensional, all united by an unclear desire to end the world. Wanting to depart from this trope, Hawley says of David: "What I'm concerned with, in *Legion* especially, is the nature of everyday evils, the evils that we do to each other. We projected the drama on a global scale, but really, it's about what David does to Syd, and what his parents did to him" (Heath). It is noted that David is not the traditional "mustache twirling villain;" he is nuanced, and at times, walks on both sides of the moral spectrum.

While David's transgressions against Syd are unforgivable, the narrative still demands that we utilize the receptacle of memories we have accumulated, and the understanding we have of David. Despite his powers, David still technically suffers from dissociative identity disorder, at any moment, ready to be overtaken by one of thousands of personalities inhabiting his brain. Prior to his attack of Syd, David succumbs to these personalities, suggesting a form of detachment from the crimes he has committed. Hawley's own analysis of David's progression towards villain also suggests a level of inherited trauma that David wields as a weapon. While David began the series as a more virtuous antihero, his descent to anti-villain is due, in large part, to the combination of his immense power and mental instability. His trajectory from antihero to anti-villain is the opposite progression seen with Rebecca in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, who begins the series as an anti-villain, but achieves antihero status by the series' finale. When dissecting the season two finale of *Legion*, critic Beth Elderkin argues that the series' use of assault was not needed to aid in David's already sufficiently proven transition to villain. Instead, Elderkin

suggests the scene had little narrative incentive, and features an episode “relishing in its own unearned brilliance,” or as her husband more succinctly referred to the episode as pretentious. I argue that such a reading negates how such complex aesthetics have been used since the premiere episode to aid in character development, and maintain difficult and complex social discourses.

Style in Action

The setting helps to offer grounding within the real world as an objective backdrop to the subjective visual style that unfolds in the series. Within the diegesis of *Legion*, neutral settings help aid in situating the show outside of any specific placement in time, a desire that may be driven by the show's need to fit within the larger Marvel universe that spans across several mediums. Likewise, for a majority of the first season, David finds himself within the confines of the very institutions that seek to imprison him: the local police station, a sanitarium, a school overtaken by governmental agents, his childhood home under the guard of his sister, the Summerland mutant facility, and lastly, his own mind (an amalgam of all of these physical spaces). Due to the institutional nature of the majority of these spaces, they are represented as extremely sterile in appearance, brightly lit with shining surfaces, free of ornament (Figure 12). By contrast, David's home, associated with past trauma, appears darker in nature, and the viewer is offered visions of its basement and David's childhood room exclusively.



Figure 12

For David, setting and location serve as indicators of his current state of mind, as well as his attachment and disconnect from reality. David is most detached within his own mind, particularly during flashbacks or glimpses into his childhood. Given the serialized nature of the series, these flashbacks are built up via fragments that appear over the course of multiple episodes, and the true scope of David's powers is usually rendered via the destruction of his surroundings. For example, over the course of the first five episodes, David recalls fragments of the memory where he lost control in the apartment that he shared with his partner, an event that culminated in their kitchen exploding into a whirling mess of utensils, appliances, shattered wood, and food (as referenced previously in Figure 11). David's childhood home is most often associated with darker memories, such as his bedtime ritual of reading *The World's Angriest Boy in The World*, where an angry young boy terrorizes those he loves. This ultimately fictitious

book serves as a metaphor for David's own situation.. Amongst all of the disparate spaces used within *Legion*, unity can often be found through lighting and saturation.

Like predecessors such as *Pushing Daisies* (2007-2009), *Legion* features sets that lack enough detail to identify the series with any one specific era, while also maintaining an aesthetic that is vintage/timeless enough to not alienate contemporary viewers. The set design in both texts is highlighted by an extremely saturated color palette that reads as almost too vivid to be real. In the case of *Pushing Daisies*, these vivid colors help to accentuate intricate sets and create an otherworldly feel to an essentially supernatural narrative. For *Legion*, this saturated coloring aids in conflating the real and the imagined, leaving the viewer unsure as to whether they are caught in one of David's current delusions, a past memory, or a contemporary, realworld moment. Again, in the case of each text, shooting a series on digital allows for such manipulation of hues that would otherwise be impossible via traditional filming practices.

Tied directly to David's recollection of *The World's Angriest Boy in The World*, locations are frequently flooded with red lights, which comes to be a signal for David's detachment from reality, or impending danger. When David switches bodies with Sydney, a red-light flashes as the sanitarium is put in lockdown, a similar red light that appears when David then finds his friend Lenny dead, or when he is haunted by visions of the "angriest boy" (Figure 13). By the end of the first season, flashing red lights on the screen come to signal impending doom to the viewer, as well as a break from realism.



Figure 13

David often appears swallowed up by the sets and frame, particularly during moments of intense action where his powers get the better of him and sets explode around David as he grips his head. These longer form shots are often interspersed with close-ups so that the viewer can fully assess David's facial expressions, which help to discern exactly which version of David they are witnessing. Moments of introspection, which often occur during David's therapy sessions, frequently feature the mutant's face distorted and reflected on the surface of objects that he holds or mirrors nearby. More symmetrical framing usually appears reserved for moments when David is interacting with a fellow mutant (an equal), or another version of himself (Benny, Lenny, the angriest boy, or the yellow-eyed demon).

Employment of post-production editing perhaps best exemplifies each episode's digital expressionism through its ability to help visually narrate each character's subjective perspective. Rapid editing and computer-generated imaging help to create moments within each narrative that stand out visually from the remainder of each series. Considering the digital style of filming,

small portions of episodes can be closely analyzed to examine how post-production editing is being used to convey subjective experience. One standout scene from *Legion* takes place in the penultimate episode (episode seven) of the first season and involves an extended use of montage, transitions between grey scale and color scenes, CGI zombies, and elements of silent cinema.

Fluctuating between the inside of David's mind, reality, and a hyper-reality, David and his band of mutant compatriots are struggling to battle the beasts inside David's mind (David's alter egos). The scenes that follow involve point-of-view shots that utilize special glasses that Sydney wears so that she can separate out the imaginary from what is real. (As long as Sydney wears the glasses, we see what she sees). Alternating between color and black and white, the scenes unfold without dialogue, only highly intricate string music playing in the background, as characters frantically scream and gesture. In place of dialogue, the created montage utilizes title cards to convey brief interactions between Lenny and Sydney, but instead of offering insight, the cue cards buck cinematic tradition and help to further fracture the unfolding narrative.

Dressed as a crazed doctor, Lenny looks as though she stepped off the 1920 set of the German Expressionist film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* –an apt comparison due to the dual nature of David's current state of mind and separation of identity into doubles. However, to avoid a simplistic cinematic label upon this scene, the dependence of this montage relies not upon a cinematic spectacle, but on the serial accumulation of David's various personalities to make such a spectacle have narrative resonance. Likewise, these black and white scenes with Lenny are juxtaposed with colored scenes of the yellow-eyed demon venturing in and out of a labyrinth of scenes from David's past, again stressing the importance of viewers serially collecting fragments from their subjective experience of David's own memories.

Final Thoughts

At first glance, a lawyer turned pretzel shop owner may not seem to have much in common with the most powerful (and dangerous) superhero in the world. Yet Rebecca Bunch and David Heller have faced similar trajectories in their attempts to find mental clarity. While Rebecca's progression from anti-villain to antihero is an inverse of David's journey to villainhood, both protagonists have faced similar trials and tribulations along the way. Both suffer from trauma during their childhood and teen years, as well as abandonment by one or both parents. The two also face several misdiagnoses during their mental health journeys and hurt those around them as a "cost" of self-discovery. Due to the similarities both characters share, their respective series also share similar aesthetics, as well as narrative styles.

Although viewer subjectivity is more limited in the case of *Legion*, both series demand viewer engagement by creating an internal logic around each protagonist's mind. In the case of *Legion*, we fall prey to David's unreliable narration, while *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* allows moments wherein we are allowed to access the internal workings of other characters. While Rebecca is, in a sense, able to "gift" her musicality to other characters, allowing them to work through their own personal struggles, we are, at times, offered other unique perspectives when characters such as Syd, or Ptolemy are allowed inside David's mind/memories. In each case, the narration we are offered is still highly influenced by the main character's mental illness, which is also true of each show's visual and aural style.

These two series are distinctive for not just their stylistic excess, but the way in which said excess helps to drive characterization and advance plot momentum. The elaborate Broadway numbers from Rebecca's mind are meant to not only highlight the grandiose nature of her feelings, but also contrast her mania and depression. Likewise, CGI is necessary to render David's supernatural abilities, while the show's aesthetic dissonance, yet rich set design further

obfuscates the narrative's near constant temporal shifts. In tandem, these series help show a shift towards aesthetically rich –even excessive— series that can use this stylistic excess to convey deep character subjectivity, while still driving forward complex narratives, with meaningful thematic discussions.

Chapter Three: Premium Cable

HBO has had a profound and lasting impact on the television industry at large. In his book that shares the same title, Dean J. DeFino describes the “HBO Effect” by highlighting some of the network’s biggest accomplishments. Specifically, he focuses on a series of firsts: the first successful commercial “pay” television service, the first network to launch via satellite, and the first to successfully sue the FCC for looser content restrictions. Essentially, we have HBO to thank for the “increased allowance of sex, violence, and swearing on TV” (DeFino 6). When discussing conceptions of “peak TV,” as described by scholars like Jason Mittell in *Complex TV* many contemporary series are also indebted to HBO originals, namely *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), for gifting us Tony Soprano, the prototypical antihero. While the premium cable channel has a rich array of original comedies and dramas, two series stand out not only for their use of trauma-informed protagonists and aesthetic subjectivity, but also for the accolades they have received.

Both *Carnivále* (2003-2005) and *Euphoria* (2019-) have received the type of critical acclaim that fits with claims that “television has superseded film as the pre-eminent narrative medium of our time,” and feature “the sort of mature, satisfying stories once relegated to independent and art cinema” (DeFino 7). With a marketing emphasis on prestige programming, HBO has built an arsenal since its early original drama days, that has maintained a consistent production and distribution model. With the success of contemporary series such as *Euphoria*, the network has benefited from expanding into the streaming sector with HBO Go, now HBO Max. This move sees the network in the homes of those without cable or satellite subscriptions and led to a partial upheaval of the movie theatre industry with straight to video-on-demand blockbusters released during the pandemic.

Most closely associated with notions of auteur driven texts, a premium cable channel such as HBO necessitates a closer look at John Caldwell's definitions of the cinematic, videographic, and televisual, and how other scholars have pushed back on these definitions. Caren Deming and Deborah Tudor argue in "Locating the Televisual in Golden Age Television," that Caldwell's definition of televisual is limiting and a "narrowly defined aesthetic," that "prioritizes excess of style over substance" (Deming and Tudor 64). Looking specifically at early television associated with the initial Golden Age (1950s and 1960s), Deming and Tudor's new definition of televisuality clings to the (at the time new) medium's sense of liveness, a sentiment shared by Jeremy Butler's own reconceptualization of Caldwell's theory. Focusing on notions of 'zero-degree style,' in *Television Style*, Butler maintains Caldwell's notions of the cinematic and videographic but uses television's liveness as a distinguishing marker and call for a television-specific "aesthetic system" (Butler 26). According to Deborah Jaramillo's article, "Rescuing Television from the Cinematic: The Perils of Dismissing Television Style," the above-mentioned scholarship presents a problematic assessment, wherein television is either "a stylistic vacuum ('zero degree'), excessive ('televisual'), or derivative ('cinematic')" (Jaramillo 71). HBO further problematizes this multiplicity given its historical slogan as being "not TV."

To give purpose to the excess of style associated with televisual programming, the two series featured in this chapter help me to argue that serial aesthetics can be meaningfully used to explore complex narratives and further character development in a highly stylized setting. With two shows that fully acknowledge their artifice and operate between expressionism and hyperrealism, the televisual excess they exude is foundational in how they call attention to and address taboo subject matter such as mental health, addiction, and religion. Instead of being labeled as purely excess, the highly stylized visual and aural aesthetics presented by each series

help to immerse viewers into a storyworld that features subjective perspectives that are non-normative, and extraordinary.

***Carnivále* & the Curse of the Period Drama**

Despite critical acclaim, HBO cancelled *Carnivále* (2003-2005) after just two seasons, four seasons shy of its initial six season signing deal. With a 3.5 million dollar an episode budget, HBO president, Chris Albrecht ultimately decided that the series' drop from 3 million viewers to a mere 1.1 million by the second season no longer justified the monetary losses the production was facing, despite a cult following. While still new to the period drama realm, HBO had previously found success with its 2001 *Band of Brothers*, based on the best-selling non-fiction title of the same name created by Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks. Following parachute regiment members from the Easy Company through basic training and then the duration of the Second World War, the series relies heavily upon action and heroism to mimic the box-office success of Hanks' *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). In contrast to *Band of Brothers*, *Carnivále*'s focus on the desolation of America's Dust Bowl in the 1930s, proves a larger challenge with regards to portraying history in a dramatic and thematic light.

Taking inspiration from John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *Carnivále*'s pilot episode introduces us to our protagonist, Ben Hawkins, as a bank foreclosure forces him from his barren Oklahoma farm in 1934 –a storyline ripped directly from Steinbeck's pages. While Steinbeck would go on to win the Nobel Prize in 1962 for his realist writing, *Carnivále* creator Daniel Knauf turns this sense of realism on its head through historical remediation. The historic bleakness of the Dust Bowl is intermixed with supernatural elements, a traveling sideshow, and a biblical battle of good versus evil. Balancing outdoor on-location shooting with scenes in sets and tents, the series manages to create hyperrealism that truly showcases the poverty, dirt, and

grime that covered the Oklahoma to California stretch that the sideshow travels. The supernatural abilities of not only Ben, but other members of the carnival, add an air of intrigue and spectacle to an otherwise bleak storyline. The juxtaposition of historical realism and mysticism also helps parse out the series' complex narrative, which features two distinct plots that do not converge until the final two episodes of the series.

While *Carnivále* has been paid little scholarly attention, the series offers new insights into HBO's business model and a noteworthy perspective on how the network categorizes success. As a highly revisionist historical drama, the show also serves as a benchmark example for how a highly stylized aesthetic can be used to blur the lines between historical fact and thematic spectacle. As a highly nuanced, but largely silent protagonist, Ben Hawkins deserves closer examination with regards to internal subjectivity and narrational reliability. Given its complex narrative structure and ensemble cast, the series asks important questions about characterization and how subjectivity and visual and aural style are being used to further those pursuits. Considering an ongoing conversation surrounding the problematic nature of the term "cinematic," the way in which *Carnivále* has been critically discussed in filmic terms warrants deeper examination.

Prior to *Carnivále*'s airing in 2003, HBO had been offering original programming since it began broadcasting via satellite in 1979. Before 2003, only six original dramas had aired: *Phillip Marlowe* (1983-1986), *Maximum Security* (1984), *Oz* (1997-2003), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-2008), and *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005). Not counting the miniseries *The Far Pavilions* (1984) and *Band of Brothers* (2001), *Carnivále* was the network's first foray into the period drama genre. Despite *Carnivále*'s fate of lasting just two seasons, the network would go on to produce *Deadwood* in 2004 and *Rome* in 2005. A closer look at these three period dramas

reveals trends not only in production, but also in how HBO defines success, and how the network created a formula for the characteristically costly period drama.

With an average budget of 4.5 million dollars per episode, *Deadwood* began its first season strong with 4.6 million viewers, before dropping to 2.4 million during the second season's run, and just over 2 million during its third and final season (Woods). At least some of the first season's success can be attributed to the show airing in the slot directly after the network's wildly popular crime drama, *The Sopranos*, which was averaging just under 10 million viewers during its 2004 season. *Deadwood* was widely acclaimed by critics, with over forty award nominations (and fifteen wins) during its run, including multiple nominations for Best Drama Series. Regardless of the Western's critical acclaim, the series was ultimately canned by HBO after just three of its intended six seasons, due in large part to its tremendous production budget. This is a similar story for the network's next attempt at the period drama with *Rome*.

Rome's production recreated the titular city on an LA studio lot for 100 million dollars (Stanley). While some costs were offset by HBO sharing production with the BBC, the split was uneven, with HBO taking on roughly 90% of the show's production costs. Despite beginning its first season strong with a consistent 7 million viewers (through multiple airings each week), the second season numbers dwindled significantly, averaging just over 2 million viewers. Citing the potential for the series to read as a miniseries, the show was ultimately cancelled after partner, BBC, deemed the series too financially burdensome to continue for another season after amassing over 100 million in production costs. While viewership numbers for *Deadwood* and *Rome* do not vary greatly from some of the network's greatest successes, the downward trend of viewership for both series over the course of their run, as well as high production costs, deemed them financial losses for the network.

Similar to *Deadwood*, *Carnivále*, during its first season, relied on viewership trickling over from the highly rated *Sex in the City* (1998-2004). *Carnivále*'s consistent 2 million dollar per episode budget was mostly allocated to multiple locations, as well as constructed sets, including the carnival's train, with elaborately decorated train cars. As with *Deadwood* and *Rome*, *Carnivále*'s costly budget suggests a major caveat to the period drama, which requires recreating a bygone period from scratch, and doing so in a way that is convincing and engaging enough to maintain consistently loyal viewership to justify such high production budgets. To convincingly recreate the Dust Bowl of the Thirties, the series' production relied upon several locations in Southern California that feature barren landscapes. Along with these desolate backdrops, dirt was also constantly being blown about the set, thousands of extras were called upon as carnival attendees, and extra attention was paid to the series' costuming, which was perpetually covered in a thick layer of dirt. In an attempt to create a factual representation of the country during the Thirties, the series employed several historical experts as consultants, who are often featured in the series' DVD commentary (*Carnivále* S1 E11).

The Aesthetics of Historicity

At first thought, the arid, infertile landscapes of the 1930's great plains may not seem like the richest repository for visual excellence. In the pilot episode, we are introduced to a filthy Ben Hawkins as he says goodbye to his dying mother in the dilapidated shack they call home, on their brown, unfruitful expanse of land. The scenery is as bleak as the story, as Ben's home is thoughtlessly bulldozed by the bank, as he struggles to bury his mother, the tattered sheet covering her limp body billowing in the wind and dust. The man operating the bulldozer tells Ben that the house and land no longer belong to him, and the only sympathy the young man receives is from the carnival folk who witness the act and stop to help him give his mother a

proper burial. The “freaks” employed by the carnival, and the elaborately adorned train in which they travel, starkly contrast their surroundings.

From the pilot episode, the series positions the Great Plains as a historically overlooked area of the United States. The states most impacted by the Dust Bowl are often referred to as “fly-over” states and include the Western region of the Midwest, and the Eastern area of the West. *Carnivále* highlights not only this often-overlooked region, but also the forgotten rural citizens that occupy it. Met with too much disdain in more populated cities, the carnival stuck to small, rural towns, with their clientele mostly including farmers and railway workers, or rather, those considered outcasts by the remainder of society. With regards to social hierarchy, those employed by the carnival were beneath even the working-class attendees, frequently facing threats, violence, and derision from the audience. While the carnival visiting seems, at face value, a distraction for those most economically impacted by the Dust Bowl, the presence of the carnival workers also implies an opportunity of social superiority for the locals.

The series works diligently to maintain an extremely specific scope of the Dust Bowl, refusing to take on larger conversations surrounding the national impact of The Great Depression, Jim Crow legislation, or even FDR’s New Deal. Historically, the Dust Bowl became a larger symbol for the nationwide (even global) depression, even though it only impacted a handful of states. The dual storylines that the series provides stand in stark contrast with one another, with antagonist Brother Justin’s story focusing on the more affluent town that houses his congregation. The town’s citizens seem largely unaffected by the surrounding economic crisis and despise the rural farmers that travel from the country in their dirt-covered Sunday best for blessings from the preacher. As word of Brother Justin’s “powers,” spreads, the pews on Sundays begin to fill with more families from the countryside, who visually stand in great

contrast to their more urban counterparts. Lacking in flourishing headwear and patterned garb, the rural women appear in dirt-stained, neutrally colored, rough textured dresses. The children, equally covered in dirt, often lack shoes, and are frequently wearing clothing two sizes too big or small for their frame. The men, lacking in formal wear, are often seen in their working clothes, placing a tattered blazer over their overalls. Treating them as lepers, the other congregation members often pull their children away from the rural kids and refuse to share pews with their country brethren.

Although they are not abundant, there are moments that seem ripped straight from the history books, which lends a sense of historical realism to the series. In Ken Burns' 2012 PBS special on the Dust Bowl, familiar images populate the screen, featuring large families perched on porches of shack-like homes, not unlike the one belonging to Ben (figure 14). In *Carnivale*, the children are usually malnourished, with their mother's faces worn from worry and a sense of hopelessness and loss. At the time, historically, it was not uncommon for large families to struggle to feed their children, with often the youngest of the brood dying as a consequence. In the pilot episode, Ben encounters a farmer's wife (and picker herself) who has recently given birth to a lifeless baby, likely due to her own starvation. Unable to part with the child, the husband pleads with Ben to convince his wife to let him give the child a proper burial. This is one of the few moments throughout the series that shows the historical devastation of the period, instead of merely using the Dust Bowl as a contrasting visual backdrop.

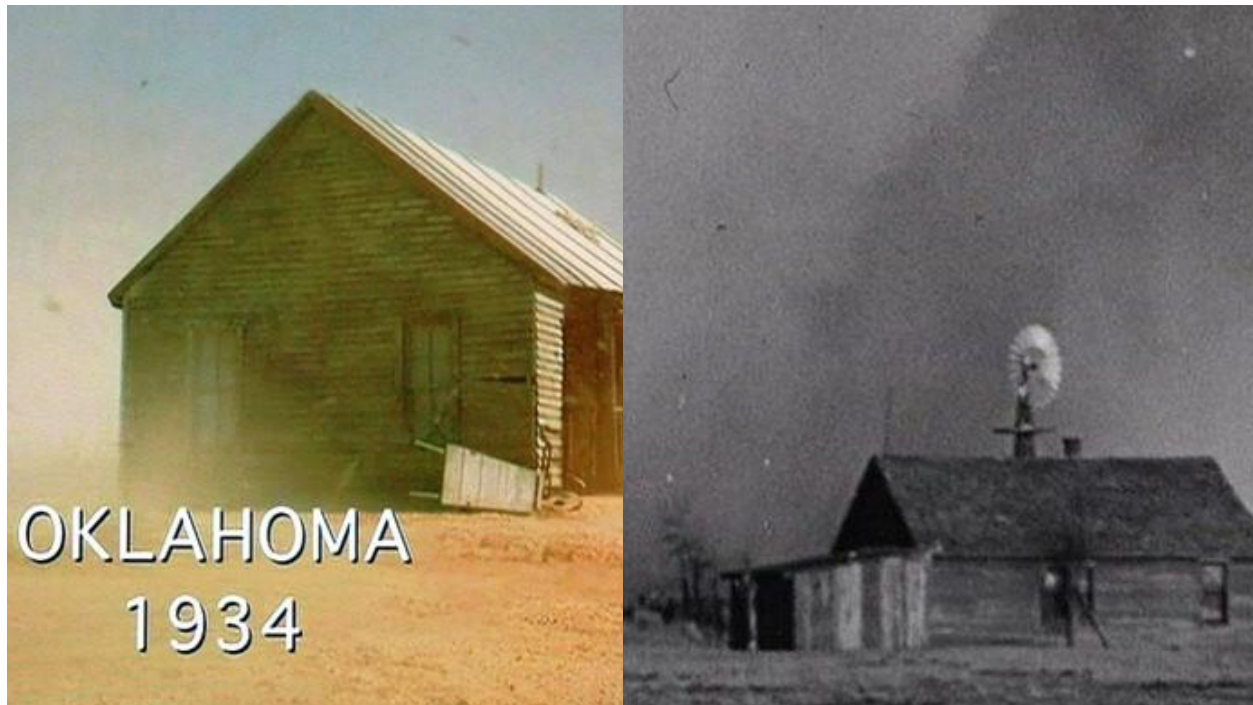


Figure 14

Within the diegesis of *Carnivále*, day-to-day, the carnival is greatly impacted by the drought, as evinced in their limited food rations, tattered clothing, and illness associated with living in and breathing in dirt constantly. However, this reality is suspended during showtime, as the inside of the wind-battered tent is a theatrical showpiece. Their performance costumes feature richly colored velvets, crisp linens, and scandalously bejeweled numbers. These showpieces appear immaculate, as they are stored securely in trunks within their respective train cars. Despite falling below their customers on the social hierarchy totem, the performers juxtapose the filth covered, often heckling, audience. Convinced that the show before them is pure spectacle, carnival goers are unaware of the actual supernatural abilities possessed by the performers.

Just as important to the series' mythos of historicity, is the implementation of biblical themes. Biblically, drought is a regularly mentioned plague in the story of the great exodus from Egypt, often leading to famine and pestilence. With dust storms managing to travel as far as Washington D.C. during the Thirties, those outside of the Dust Bowl epicenter found themselves

enjoying perfectly temperate, sunny days, suddenly engulfed by a wall of dust. These occurrences created an apocalyptic sense of Armageddon type events, forcing many Christians to imbue the drought with biblical implications. Within the series, this biblical theme is further enforced by the presence the Avatars of light and dark— through the characters of Ben Hawkins and Brother Justin.

The Politicization of Biblical and Historical Themes

Carnivále has been criticized by fans and critics as lacking in forward plot momentum, placing instead, (uncharacteristic for HBO) a focus on character (Milas). While the series does provide some historically accurate looks at the Dust Bowl of the 1930's, the event serves mainly as a foil for Ben's character development. The somewhat revisionist rendering of that region and period can be attributed to several factors, with the most important being a need to add spectacle and visual intrigue to an otherwise blight-filled time. It can certainly be argued that the series grapples with themes such as disability (carnival workers), socioeconomic disparity, regionalism, and religion, but it does so in a way that is mediated for the sake of character development and plot device.

Yearning for authenticity, series creator Daniel Knauf added to his list of executive producers American historian Mary Corey, as well as a former carnival worker Johnny Meah. Citing social media and the *Jackass* era as the “messy death” of the traditional carnival, producer Meah, notes that he “...grew up in an era of human oddities...Now you have people willing to throw themselves into a vat of manure if you'll put them on camera” (Deggans). Enamored with the “anything can happen” sentiment of the circus, Knauf wanted to visually present the carnivals of a bygone era: “If you shoot this thing the way you shoot a contemporary film, it wouldn't feel like the 1930's, even if everything onscreen was authentic” (Deggans). Knauf

would continue to explain his ethos for cinematography by stating that: "...older films, they tend to breathe a little more...you see people walking places with no quick cuts. That (MTV-fast storytelling) pulled you right out of the period" (Deggans). This historically mediated camerawork features frequent, long sweeping shots, which often focus on desolate landscapes and intimate character interactions. While the series is certainly not devoid of spectacle, the cinematography works to downplay such dramatics in favor of a more slow-paced aesthetic.

Much of the series' use of visual spectacle comes in the form of the weekly carnival performances, as well as the vivid visions of Ben Hawkins and Brother Justin. Odd historical references often present themselves, such as the ongoing supposition that the success of baseball star Babe Ruth is attributed to God himself, a bright spot in a world plagued by despair. But even Babe's presence is meant to serve as a historical foil to failed major league baseball player, turned Ferris wheel operator, Jonesy. Within the fast-paced, montage style visions of our protagonist and antagonist, images of war, a man in a tuxedo, and a man with a tree tattooed on his chest, abstractly flash. It will take until the second season to learn that these visions, on behalf of Ben and Brother Justin, represent their supernatural abilities. Ben is referred to an Avatar of light, while Justin is an Avatar of darkness, both with biblical connotations. The dream states and visions that both men experience are tied to their supernatural, ancestral lineage, with the men they see being Aavatars that came before them. This tale of light and dark is rendered in many direct and indirect ways, and also colors the series' entire conception of the Dust Bowl.

Historical references also extend to the series' use of sound, particularly musical score. Relying heavily on the music of the Thirties, Wendy Melvoin and Lisa Coleman were tasked with creating three distinct soundtracks. One soundtrack needs to be indicative of the diverse group of individuals that make up the Carnivale, many of whom are immigrants. Another

soundtrack needed to maintain this global diversity, while also offering an acknowledgement of showmanship, for the songs that play while carnival members perform. Lastly, Brother Justin's storyline required its own unique sound, more greatly influenced by gospel music from the period. Given the large ensemble cast, different characters are given their own instrumental leitmotifs to signal their presence in a given scene. For example, Ruthie the snake charmer's motif features Indian-style flute music. The series also pulls actual chart hits from the period, particularly when characters are listening to the radio.

Despite frequent historical references to place the series firmly in 1934 and 1935, the series fictionalizes the true cause of the Dust Bowl and subsequent economic collapse. Due to an increase in global temperatures, wind erosion, and poor agricultural practices after the introduction of gas-powered machinery, the Dust Bowl began brewing as early as the late 1920s. Despite never outrightly acknowledging the Dust Bowl, the physical presence of it can be felt throughout the series, especially in the episode "Black Blizzard," which references the worst dust storm of the period, referred to as "Black Sunday." On April 14th, 1935, blackness enveloped Oklahoma, followed by Boise and Texas, no different from the carnival that was in Western Oklahoma at the time.. The placement of the series in the Thirties was widely praised by critics, with the A.V. Club noting that "the '30s were a good time to set a secret-history fantasy series, one of the big points in the decade's favor *are* those dust storms, which provide for the vaguely unusual feeling of something huge and terrifying that you don't see every day" (St. James). Citing an exoticism to the dust storms of the series, the episode is critically praised because it uses historical events to further the show's apocalyptic themes (St. James).

Trapped in a home during the black blizzard, Ben is with telepath and magician, Lodz, a nefarious former leader of the carnival. Knowing the storm is looming, Lodz wants Ben to reveal

his powers and save them. What he knows that our protagonist does not, is that Ben's powers come at a cost. Returning momentarily to the pilot, before he leaves with the carnival, Ben heals a young, paralyzed girl (most likely polio) he finds sitting in a wagon. As Ben and the little girl walk away in opposite directions, a sweeping wide angle shot reveals that her family's farm is now also lush and green, against the barren landscape (Figure 15). In this instance, we see the scope of Ben's powers, and potentially his ability to cure the nation of its agricultural blight. As the series progresses, we (and later Ben) learn that his powers come at a cost of life. Once this fact comes to light, we are asked to return to Ben's previous uses of his powers, including the young girl from the pilot, which then begs us to return to the couple grieving their stillborn child, a likely ramification of Ben's healing. Through this lens, the Dust Bowl, as portrayed in the series, exists as a supernatural/biblical foil to Ben's powers. This is further signified by the series' choice to not offer any discussion of the natural reasons for the drought or acknowledge how it is impacting life outside of the carnival.



Figure 15

Within the series, Ben is responsible for ending the “Black Blizzard,” before bringing the storm surging back when he grows upset. Screaming at Lodz, Ben proclaims: “Only God can make the weather stop,” before he heals his own skin, burned at the hands of Lodz (*Carnivále* S1 E 5). It becomes apparent to both Ben and the audience that Lodz is much more knowing of Ben’s powers than even Ben himself. Once again, the Dust Bowl is being used as a character-like foil for Ben’s development, instead of a historical event with tangible, scientific reasons for its presence. According to Knauf, “We always say it’s because we over-plowed or there’s sociological, scientific, whatever reason. But the real reason, in this story, is because the devil was here” (*Carnivále* DVD). While the series does little to minimize the national disaster and its socioeconomic side effects, it also does not acknowledge the event head-on, aside from using it as a device for forward plot momentum at the hands of character development. Without the backdrop of the storm in “Black Sunday,” the spectacle of the episode is lost and the true extent of Ben’s powers would not be felt by the audience.

The Subjective Telling of Good Vs. Evil and Active Viewing

Skewing a historical realism for that of surrealism, *Carnivále* consistently conflates historical truth with supernatural mythos in a way that incorporates “documentary-style realism and attention to period detail alongside uncanny visions and a mythic battle of good vs. evil” (Jowett). According to André Breton, the leader of the surrealist fine art movement, art is meant to focus on the contradictions between dream states and reality, in an attempt to create a super reality. influenced by the Dadaists of the 1910s, and in response to communist ideals, Breton would go on to publish the Surrealist Manifesto in 1924. Within the original manifesto, great attention is paid to the concept of automatism, which requires an artist to actively suppress their conscious mind in order to fully allow their unconscious to flourish. Automatic art focuses

primarily on dream: “Pure psychic automatism...the dictation of thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason and outside all oral or aesthetic concerns” (Lomas). From a physiological standpoint, automatism references all bodily operations not controlled by the conscious mind. Psychologically, Sigmund Freud used practices with free association and drawing, which he referred to as automatism, to explore his patients’ subconscious.

Deemed historically short-lived during the Twenties, the surrealist film movement focuses largely on dream sequences, using montage to reflect the fine art movement’s origins in collage. Much of *Carnivále*’s surrealism can be found not just in its juxtaposition of historical fact and the supernatural, but also in the montage-driven dream states of its protagonist and antagonist. Beginning with the series’ pilot, Ben and Brother Justin are united by shared visions of rapidly cut scenes from across history, and even the future. Appearing in a combination of black and white and color, and rapid succession, shared images rapidly appear in shared visions between the two men. Although not revealed as avatars until the second season, both Ben and Justin have been gifted with the supernatural abilities to view the past, present and future at will, and also share their visions with others through dreams. Tied to biblical images of the hawk (Ben Hawkins) and the Crow (Justin Crowe), Ben is associated with lightness not only through his name, but also through his healing abilities.

While subjectivity does not dominate the series’ narrative style, its use of subjectivity through Ben and Justin’s visions is the driving force behind the show’s two season-long serial arc. These visions, and a shared desire for answers, surround the only forward plot momentum within the series, forcing any other tertiary characters’ plots to also unfold in service of the larger story. Before we are even introduced to Ben, a voice-over narration from carnival leader Samson is interrupted by rapidly cut images, some in black and white, others in color. Amongst the

flashing images, we see: a man in a tuxedo being chased through a corn field by another man who is heavily tattooed with a twisted tree on his chest and back, two men in military wear holding a Knights of Templar ring, tarot cards, a funeral service, Ruthie, the snake charmer, a dead sheep, miners, a man with claws for hands, Ben lying on the ground gruesomely missing his legs and arm, a top hat, a gun, and two men battling during a war. Initially, the images appear abstract and confusing, but as the series progresses, they begin to make more sense. For example, scenes in black and white are from the past, while those in color represent the present and future. The funeral and dead sheep indicates the death (his mother, Dora Mae), pestilence, and sacrifices to come. The soldiers and men featured in the visions become extremely important, as they are Ben and Justin's fathers and grandfathers, men who possessed the similar generational powers to their respective offspring.

Voice-over narration is used selectively throughout the series, beginning with the pilot episode, when Samson regales a biblical tale of lightness and darkness: "Before the beginning, after the great war between heaven and hell...to each generation was born a creature of light and a creature of darkness" (*Carnivále* S 1 E 1). The excerpt comes from the series' Gospel of Matthias, whose mentions of avatars and apocalyptic events serves as an ode to the Book of Revelation. On the cover of the fictional, yet sacred text, is a twisted tree, the same tree that appears tattooed on the chest of a man appearing in Ben and Justin's visions. Other key moments that feature narration also come from the Gospel of Matthias and can be found in the fifth episode of the series when a burlesque dancer from the carnival, Dora Mae, is found hanged, with the word "harlot," etched into her forehead. As her mother and father mourn over Dora Mae's lifeless body, Brother Justin can be heard citing a passage from the Gospel: "On her forehead, a name was written, a mystery. Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the

abominations of the earth. They threw dust on their heads, crying out...” (S1 E 5). The narration, as with that of the pilot episode, is meant to serve as a plot device for Ben and Justin’s eventual meeting in Babylon. While never meeting in person, or ever having their two separate plots converge, the presence of Brother Justin’s narration over Ben’s story is the first real intersection we witness, aside from the men’s shared visions.

Subjectivity continues to shift as the series trudges forward, exploring its ensemble of characters. In the sixth episode, we witness a third-person account from Jonesy’s past, wherein his major league baseball career is deliberately cut short as a man takes a bat to his knee—the cause of his characteristic limp. Visually, the memory appears hazy, as though waves of heat are passing in front of the camera, until we are quickly jolted out of the shared memory as Jonesy pulls his head from a chilled bucket of water. These subjective explorations are often straight forward, visiting memories from a character’s recent past. When the interior workings of Ben and Justin are explored, keeping with a surrealist lens, things are more complex, as reality and dream states are conflated. When episodes begin with visions, memories, and premonitions from the two men, the scenes appear as though they are melting, almost as though a Dali painting came to life. With regards to these visions, Justin lacks the control over his powers that Ben already seems to possess within the first season. Justin finds himself going in and out of blackouts, and frequently entering the minds of his parishioners to force them to relive their most egregious sins (such as accompanying a man to a brothel filled with young boys). As the first season progresses, the antagonist begins to lose his grip on the line between reality and dreams. We see this as he envisions being killed by a younger version of himself (recounting a murder he committed with his powers as a child) and is found by locals ready to jump off a bridge (re-enacting a jump made by his father one generation earlier).

Trustworthiness and subjectivity come into play with regard to the infamous Management. Possessing his own car and sitting behind a curtain in a booth, the only person allowed to speak with the infamous leader of the carnival is de facto leader, Samson. For years, the entire carnival has been trusting the judgment of Management: where they travel, what new acts to take on, and how to navigate their powers. All of the performers rely on an unseen and unproven trust, almost god-like in nature. In the “Black Blizzard” episode, Jonesy, wanting to ensure Management is okay, enters his car to find no one behind the curtain. Feeling as though his entire life has been a lie, Jonesy takes to drinking, and after confronting Samson, he is told: “Management...if he don’t wanna be seen, then he ain’t...gonna be seen, I suppose” (*Carnivále* S 1 E 6). At this point, the audience, along with Jonesy, is left questioning whether or not Management exists, or if it was a ploy by Samson to manipulate the workers. It is revealed later in the season, that Management is actually the Russian soldier from Ben and Justin’s visions, Lucius Belyakov, who also happens to be Justin’s father, and the previous generation’s Avatar of light. In an elaborate plan, Belyakov lures Ben into a scheme that forces him to kill Belyakov, leaving Ben with his powers, and then able to defeat Justin.

These narrative techniques, in tandem with the show’s biblical themes feed into a larger sense of operational aesthetics with regards to the overall serial narrative. But the series does so with plenty of issues along the way. As mentioned in earlier chapters, operational aesthetics are meant to leave the audience in awe of how the writers manage to pull off complex narratives, with critics suggesting that “*Carnivále* is stuffed with the sort of dense internal mythology and layered, self-referential storytelling that later shows like *Lost* and *Westworld* purposefully embraced, to critical and public acclaim” (Milas). This concept seems easily applicable to a series balancing multiple, but separate plots, and a diegesis that has created its own mythos. With

that in mind, the series has also been heavily criticized for being, at times, overly complex, with little narrative pay-off, as critic Dennis Cass notes, “If *Carnivàle* had a more straightforward storyline it might be a pleasure, but the show groans under the weight of too much weird” (Cass). While the first season situates Ben and Justin as opposites in the battle of good vs. evil, the revelation comes early, and does not reach a climax until the final two episodes of the second season. This leaves the series’ serial narrative progression wholly depending on pushing off an inevitable event as long as possible, while still maintaining the interest of fans.

Knauf attempts to accomplish this not only through visual intrigue, but also through heavy character exploration. Both plots feature a handful of ensemble characters to flesh out, many possessing supernatural abilities. Temporally, the series also fills these serial holes with inquiries into the past and future as it explores a range of subjectivities across the ensemble. At times, characters from the ensemble seem like mere distractions on the journey to Ben and Justin exploring their powers ahead of their ultimate meeting. Although each character has their own unique history, their usefulness is largely gauged by their ability to either help or hinder Ben and Justin in their pursuit of answers, and journeys into their pasts and familial lineages. When tales of biblical origin, WWI, Knights of Templar, avatars, and historic considerations for the Great Depression and Dust Bowl are layered, it becomes difficult to decipher whether the series is creating a vast diegesis or a false sense of narrative complexity.

Positioning *Carnivàle* as “...the largest and most complicated show on television,” executive-producer Ronald D. Moore does little in the series’ DVD commentary to elaborate on what exactly qualifies as “complicated” (*Carnivàle* DVD). Returning to the show’s biblical themes and surrealist aesthetic, a majority of the negative press surrounding the series involved its conflation between history and fiction, as well as a blending of reality and fantasy with its

treatment of the past, present, and future. Returning to Dennis Cass, he asks: “If *Carnivàle* asks a central question, it’s this: What is the link between Hawkins and Crowe, and what do their dreams have to do with reality? Are these visions of the future, residue of the past, or an allegory for the present?,” Perhaps more generous in their analysis, critic Alessandra Stanley compliments the show’s visual style before noting that “The story is actually very basic...the first three episodes are beguiling enough to suggest that beneath the show's mystique there is a mystery worth puzzling. But there is also the mystery of how long viewers' curiosity can stay piqued” (Stanley). The critic goes on to argue that the series needs to take a lesson from its predecessor, *Twin Peaks*, noting that if a storyworld wherein things are “not as they appear,” is created, writers are eventually under an “obligation to begin answering” just what they are (Stanley).

“Too Much Weird”: Escaping the Cinematic

Comparisons between *Carnivàle* and David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks* (1990-91; 2017) are impossible to avoid. Lynch’s short lived (and recently revived) series comes up in every piece of critical reception involving *Carnivàle* and the few works of scholarship that exist nearly wholly focus on a comparison between the two series. The presence of Michael J. Anderson as Samson in *Carnivàle* immediately forces fans to remember the actor as The Man from Another Place from the first two seasons of *Twin Peaks*, and the film, *Fire Walk with Me* (1992). Suffering from the genetic disorder, osteogenesis imperfecta, Anderson was the only actor on both series to have a real-life physical condition. In *Carnivàle*, the remaining cast, including conjoined twins, a bearded lady, and a blind mentalist, are all played by non-disabled actors.

Clea DuVall, who plays Sofie on *Carnivàle* has described the series as “*Grapes of Wrath* and *Twin Peaks* coming together” (Doty). This sentiment is shared by critic Joseph Adalian, who notes that the series is “...a really edgy, risky television show that to me brings back memories

of *Twin Peaks*. It's complicated, confusing, and beautifully shot" (Doty). *Variety*'s Phil Gallo noted *Carnivále*'s need for patience to unfold, like *Twin Peaks*, a sentiment shared by *Time*'s James Poniewozik when comparing the new "surreal drama" to its predecessor (Gallo; Poniewozik). BBC's Amanda Murray offers insight into how to view the complex series, noting that "Veterans of *Twin Peaks* or *Babylon 5* will soon realize this isn't just classily-made television – every surreal moment could be a clue to what's really going on" (Murray). In fact, at the end of Murray's review, the critic even manages to make light of just how frequently the two series are being compared: "We've managed to get to the end of this review, and only compared the show to *Twin Peaks* once" (Murray). Aside from a comparison to *Twin Peaks*, all of the mentioned critics also share an uncertainty of whether *Carnivále* is a beautiful, but "good" series, or a truly great work of television.

HBO helped fuel comparisons by marketing the *Carnivále* as a contemporary offspring to *Twin Peaks*, with critics like *Vulture*'s Matthew Zoeller-Seitz crediting the latter with creating our contemporary prestige television landscape. Zoller-Seitz refers to *Twin Peaks* as creating a stylistic wake, noting that "Everyone knows what it was and is and meant, even if they haven't watched a frame. Everything from *The Sopranos* to *American Horror Story* owes it a debt" (Zoller-Seitz). By citing the series as a namesake, all imitators instinctually cash in on all the cultural cache and prestige that comes with the original series. Michael J. Anderson himself is quoted as stating that he calls *Carnivále* "*Twin Peaks* with logic" (Owen). This concept is critically refuted by calling the series "too arcane" to have the same success as *Twin Peaks*, and possessing an overly complicated, "Escher-like labyrinth of symbology" (McHenry).

When unpacking the cultural baggage that comes with *Twin Peaks* and its use of a marketing tactic for *Carnivále*, it is necessary to address the impact of David Lynch's

auteurism and the series' firm ties to the term "cinematic." While most scholars cannot agree on a firm definition of "prestige television," they do agree on many of its characteristics: complex characters, multi-layered storylines, serial continuity, and a demand for viewer engagement. Colored by Lynch's filmic successes such as *Blue Velvet*, *Twin Peaks*'s critical reception became synonymous with the term "cinematic," as a compliment for the manner in which the show disrupted the confines of traditional broadcast television of the early Nineties. These filmic comparisons were only strengthened when Lynch released *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, a two hour feature-film, in 1992. Some twenty years later, in 2017, the series was revisited, with Lynch once again at the helm, as a limited series.

While *Twin Peaks* serves as a seminal aesthetic text for series like *Carnivàle*, its categorization as an auteur-driven series also further problematized a critical and scholarly tendency to reduce serial programming to terms like cinematic. Referencing John Caldwell's own use of the term in *Televisuality*, Deborah Jaramillo acknowledges that the term cinematic is an "inherently positive, even boastful word that many people rally around and ascribe to the best of the best on TV" in her work "Rescuing Television from the Cinematic." (Jaramillo 67). However, Jaramillo goes on to suggest that the antiquated term is limiting and suggests that "cinema can somehow liberate TV from itself," and that auteur theory "plays a role in keeping TV aesthetics off the table," ignoring the collaborative production of the television medium (Jaramillo 68-74). While many critics see the presence of series like *Twin Peaks* at film festivals and award shows as proof that cinematic masterpieces can masquerade as television, these discussions contribute little to the convergence of production and distribution between the two mediums, while also noting the affordances that television's longform structure allows.

While Lynch avoids a deterministic attitude towards the battle between film and television, any notions towards the superiority of film seem to be with regards to its ideal (and changing) reception practices: “The quality of the sound and picture is not as good as in the theater, but it’s getting better all the time. And if people see it on a big screen in their house with the lights down and good sound, or if they see it with headphones, it’s possible to really get into that world” (Feinberg). When discussing his relationship with Showtime, Lynch spoke fondly of the complete creative freedom he felt cable and premium cable offered, and even mentioned favoring the seriality that television offers: “I love a continuing story, number one. And I think the feature film is going through a troubled time right now. So television, cable television, is the new art house. And it’s so beautiful because you can tell a continuing story” (Feinberg). These are sentiments shared by Daniel Knauf, the creator of *Carnivále*, when describing why the series and its vast mythos worked so well in a serial storytelling format, despite originally writing the series as a film screenplay (St. James). In keeping with Lynch’s notions surrounding cinema and television, applications of the term “cinematic” to series such as *Carnivále* continues to read as limiting and problematic, especially as reception of both mediums continues to coalesce on smaller screens.

By leaving behind conceptions of the “cinematic” as tied to spectacle or even the “haunting” of previous films, textual analyses of series can instead focus on how characters are being developed over extended periods of time through aural and visual storytelling. Likewise, operational aesthetics can also take a front seat, as serialized formats allow multiple, complex storylines to be interwoven over entire seasons and series runs. This emphasis on medium specificity, while also acknowledging a coalescence of production, distribution, and screening

practices can further stave off notions surrounding the “death of cinema,” and instead suggest that contemporary technological and social practices have changed the role of the theatre.

Title Sequence and Music

One aspect of television that marks it as unique from film is the presence of the opening credit sequence. This sequence can help contribute to the series’ internal logic, sets the thematic tone for the show, and remains a fairly static object throughout the series’ run (Figure 16). Series with lengthier runs –think three or more seasons— occasionally opt to add Easter egg components to their introductions. For example, USA’s *Psych* (2006-2014) changes the theme song featured in their opening sequence to match the theme of the episode. For example: during an episode focusing on a Bollywood dancer, the theme song was sung in Hindi, at Christmastime, bells added flare, and in an episode taking place on a telenovela, the familiar theme song got a new Spanish rendition. *Psych* is a relatively unique case, often reserved for more comedic-leaning series or sitcoms. In the case of *Carnivále*, the opening credits offer clues to the series’ larger mythos, and thus the sequence remains unchanged for both seasons.



Figure 16

The opening sequence begins with tarot cards blowing on the dirt covered ground, the camera quickly zooming into a card labeled “The World,” filled with various tableaux of Romanesque figures. The static drawings of the card are then replaced with black and white footage of people lined up to receive rations, a blimp, the building of the San Francisco bridge, and the Dust Bowl. The camera then quickly zooms away from these clips to another colored tarot card, this time reading “Ace of Swords,” featuring a woman slaying a sea creature with a large sword. We then quickly zoom into the card of “Death,” to reveal video of a wall being built, orphans, Nazis, and Klu Klux Klan members. The next card up is “Temperance,” filled with images of drums, dancing feet, Jesse Owens on the track, Babe Ruth taking the pitch, and young men in an aircraft club. Thematically, the camera now pans to “The Tower,” which gives way to footage of marches on Washington and a speech being given to thousands by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. As we return to the tarot cards strewn about the dry ground, cards representing “The Moon,” and “The Sun,” hold our focus, until the wind overturns them to

reveal the series' title. It is worth noting that the title art features the small drawings of the sun and moon, as they appear on the two oppositional cards.

This visually dense sequence, which lasts ninety seconds, serves as a metaphor for the series' overwhelmingly dense mythos and historical allusions. By associating various historical events of the Thirties with different tarot cards, the opener sets the groundwork for the way the show will combine concepts of divination with historical realism to create, a sometimes convoluted surrealist narrative. The musical score that accompanies the images is a melding of popular Thirties sounds, coupled with Asian and European influences, representative of the ethnicities that makeup the carnival performers and workers. The opening sequence was created by Angus Wall, of visual effects company A52, most widely known for their commercial deals with companies like Nike, Adidas, Honda, and WWE. Balancing between 2D and 3D rendered images, Wall's goal is to ground the series in the unrest of the Thirties, both in the U.S. and Europe, amidst the backdrop of the Dust Bowl and the rise of fascism. These historical moments are explored through the combination of Christian fine art and stock historical footage.

Art historians will take notice of Raphael's painting, "St. Michael Vanquishing Satan," Michelangelo's "Last Judgment," and an etching from Gustave Doré's *Orlando Furioso*, featuring an angel fighting a demon. Having digitally scanned these famous works for digital manipulation, Wall uses photoshop to create 3D renderings that can be journeyed through by the camera. A52 shared their process: "Scans of famous artworks were separated into foreground and background elements, then assembled into "2.5D" sequences inside SideEffects Software's Houdini. Motion sequences were carefully edited to highlight historical events, and the entire 90 seconds was assembled in *Discreet Inferno*" (www.a52.com). Wall, who also independently worked on the opening sequence for HBO's *Rome* and would go on to work on digital effects for

Game of Thrones, offers great transparency for *Carnivále*'s opening sequence in the series' DVD commentary.

The flashing images and clips featured in the opening titles help to prepare the audience for the surrealist visions that begin during the pilot episode. The title sequence itself requires multiple weekly viewings to fully grasp the full context of every image and clip featured. However, the titles place a perhaps unexplored importance on the rise of fascist figures like Hitler and Mussolini in Europe, as the series sees the Dust Bowl and Great Depression as distractions from WWII brewing in the East. Commenting on both the opening sequence, and the series at large, critics have declared the drama "too artsy and esoteric" to make sense of, or "*Twin Peaks* minus the black comedy" (Richmond).

Criticisms of the series relying too heavily on literary conventions make sense, given that creator Daniel Knauf considers himself a largely graphic storyteller, and transitioned after the show's cancellation to the world of comics. Contrasting the perspective of authors such as David Lynch, Knauf (post-cancellation) deemed "creative oppression endemic to television," and noted that "An idiosyncratic show like *Carnivále* would never be greenlit today. Comics, on the other hand, are much more willing to gamble on fresh concepts" (Furey). Knauf would then go on to state that the majority of creators within the television industry are, in fact, not visual storytellers, making the medium "80% to 90% talking heads" (Furey). My hope is that the sampling of series included in this volume contrasts this point by showing the growing emphasis on visual and aural aesthetics as a means of not only narrative storytelling, but also rich character development. Through this visual storytelling, the last twenty years of television have been able to feature unique subjectivities previously unexplored within the medium, taking full advantage of the affordances offered by longform programming.

Cinematic Problems: Anti-Realism & *Euphoria*

In Spring 2018, *The Guardian* published an article that claims we are currently undergoing a television revolution, and visual aesthetics are at the helm. Titled, “Aesthetic Excellence: How Cinematography Transformed TV,” Jake Nevins argues that the recent decade-long influx of filmic cinematographers to the television industry has helped blur distinctions between the two mediums by allowing television to look more like film. Paramount to Nevins’s argument is a question of aesthetic quality, as he claims that television has never looked as good as it does in this current moment, largely due to inventive camerawork and lighting. While the article claims that there is no exact moment when this paradigm shift towards aesthetic excellence began, he cites only shows from the last eight years as holding significance. Interviewing cinematographers from *Atlanta* (2016-2022), *Transparent* (2014-2019), and *House of Cards* (2013-2018), he suggests that each series is treated as season long films, with naturalistic styles indicative of indie films from the late 1990s.

However, by looking at contemporary series such as HBO’s *Euphoria* (2019-), we have also witnessed a trend towards series that break away from this naturalism by embracing overly saturated visual styles that further aid in character development synonymous with seriality. Through textual analysis of *Euphoria*, as well as primary sources such as creator interviews, the show will serve as a call for more medium-specific ways of discussing contemporary televisuality without using terms such as “filmic,” cinematic,” or “naturalism” as crutches. Such a definition will also embrace new iterations of the televisual excess noted by John Caldwell in *Televisuality*, as this visual spectacle is noted as inherently medium specific and integral to a discussion of aesthetics. An emphasis will be placed on how the *Euphoria*’s use of sound stages and handheld cameras creates an anti-realist or formalist aesthetic, and how the series’ visual and

aural aesthetics are used to further flesh out complex characters through style and not just narrative alone. This notion of using aesthetics to develop complex characters can also be seen in *Carnivàle*, although the series trades in *Euphoria*'s anti-realism for location shoots and historical realism.

In and of itself, the term “cinematic,” as described in television studies, is extremely vague and nebulous in nature, with no two scholars or critics agreeing on a clear definition. Its constrained usage to describe “quality” programming (another vague heuristic), becomes increasingly problematic as the lines between production of series and film features continue to blur, along with their side-by-side distribution. Historically, television theorists like John Caldwell and Amanda Lotz have worked diligently to free television from the literary and filmic confines that branded the medium at its inception. Seen as a mere vehicle for bringing impropriety in the home by FCC chairman Newton Minow in 1961, the medium has seen great progress from the deterministic days of the early Sixties, wherein Minow deemed the medium a “vast wasteland” in a speech to congress (Minow). Beginning as early as the Eighties with the advent of cable, the idea that television is “cinematic” has been inextricably linked to notions of “quality television,” or “prestige TV.” A sampling of just a few scholarly and critical interpretations of the word “cinematic,” shows just how problematic the term has become.

Tying the terms creation to the 2010 boon of Netflix original programming, C.E. Harris found the term to initially pop up in journalistic musings at the time. Scholars such as Jason Mittell, Brett Mills, and Deborah Jaramillo, have been quick to note the term's inherent ability to “situate television as conceptually subordinate to cinema” (Harris 57). To his credit, Mills also signaled the pitfalls of defining a medium through technological and production binaries, as production and distributions shifts in the last decade alone have further conflated those

differences between mediums. Harris brings up an equally important point, previously glossed over in earlier scholarship: “What is it about cinema that we can call cinematic?” (Harris 57). As theorist Noël Carroll points out in *Beyond Aesthetics*, every medium suffers the burden, early in its inception, of being theoretically bound to those that have preceded it (Carroll 173). Film theory’s early history relies heavily on theory borrowed from the literary and theatrical realms. Harris argues that film itself suffers from the ambiguity of the term “cinematic” (Harris 57).

Acknowledging the questionable history of the term’s employment within television studies, Rashna Wadia Richards suggests that television’s success as a medium is not dependent on its ability to approximate cinema (Richards 5). Instead, the theorist suggests that serial television borrows from cinema through homage and archival revision of cinema, steering away from any notions of medium superiority. This notion of film “haunting” television can be seen in *Sopranos* creator, David Chase’s own conception of the series as “being in a direct lineage with the films that were most foundational for him,” or as he puts it “a form of...film-intertextual quotation” (Harris 61). In other words, series are meant not only as possible homages to the films that influence them, but also to exist in a media landscape that now places film and television inextricably side-by-side.

Inversely, in a video essay for *Vulture*, Matthew Zoller Seitz and Chris Wade speak to the popular use of the term to reference visual and narrative superiority. By their definition, “cinematic” television must be well directed and is largely a matter of “judgment and discernment, of having a vision as well as a plan, making particular choices for particular reasons, and letting those choices guide how a scene is shot” (Zoller Seitz and Wade). The issue with such a definition is that it is subjective, while also failing to consider the serialized nature of television programming. Both film and television are visual and aural media, and the “cinematic”

examples provided in this video essay do little more than suggest a deterministic model wherein television production is usurped by filmic terminology due to the latter's earlier existence.

Nominated multiple times for its cinematography by the American Society of Cinematographers, HBO's *Westworld* (2016-2022) has a bit more reasoning for its "cinematic" descriptions. Shot on celluloid, on location, with a single camera, the series very much emulates the classical Westerns from the 1950s. Citing the need to have film stock to preserve the series' "organic imagery," the show features the arid dessert landscapes as a character in the ensemble series (Mendelovich). Its cinematography fluctuates between the now standard 16:0 aspect ratio for television, and the 2:39:1 ratio synonymous with film projection. Director Paul Cameron's intentionality inherently determines the series' "cinematic" designation. Such vague and subjective verbiage does little to account for televisually distinct series, such as *Euphoria*, that rely heavily on not only the serialized nature of the medium, but also multi-camera work, and elaborate set design.

Non-Normative Subjectivity & Emotional Realism

When discussing the visual style of programming in the Nineties, Caldwell argues in *Televisuality* that "style, long seen as a mere signifier and vessel for content, issues, and ideas, has now itself become one of television's most privileged and showcased signifieds" (Caldwell 5). This definition of the televisual can be expanded by focusing on the interrelationship among aesthetics, seriality and character subjectivity. With the advent of narrowcasting via cable and streaming, it is more imperative than ever for a series to create "identifiable style-markers and distinct looks in order to gain an audience share within the competitive broadcast flow" (Caldwell 5). Due to the long-term temporality associated with serial programming, these series can create identifiable visual and aural styles, while also still privileging character in a way that

allows for in-depth viewer recognition, alignment, and allegiance by exploring aesthetics through subjective perspectives. As noted in popular press and trade journals, *Euphoria* maintains a certain prioritization of visual and aural style as a means of conveying highly subjective character interiority. The series accomplishes this style by exploring themes like addiction and mental health through long form storytelling by following Rue fresh out of rehab after a near fatal overdose.

While seriality is deemed important in studies of narrative and television, little attention is paid to the relationship between seriality and televisual style. *Televisuality* mentions seriality only a handful of times in the context of production timeframes and discussions of genre. This is an important consideration, given the vast amount of viewing choices that exist with the proliferation of premium cable and streaming, beginning in the early 2000s. *Euphoria* shows how visual and aural aesthetics work together to offer added value to this long-form storytelling, as well as the difficulty the medium faces in creating intrinsic and extrinsic norms that both surprise the viewer and offer a sense of consistency week to week. *Euphoria*'s pilot, as an example, sets the tone for the series' televisual storytelling, creating weekly expectations. However, its unique mode of production and elaborate set design also allow for surprises that are read as unique to the television experience.

The opening scene of the series features a present-day Rue providing voice-over narration as we watch an infant Rue leave the safety of her mother's womb, to the juxtaposition of the Twin Towers falling just days before her birth, replaying on the television screen in the hospital room. The scene and overlying monologue are meant to signal not only the aesthetic we can come to expect from the series week-to-week, but also foreshadows the trauma Rue will endure throughout her life, as we watch her battle her own mind. The voice-over narration adds an

additional layer of subjective perspective, while also cuing Rue's potential to be an unreliable narrator. Five minutes into the pilot, the audience is asked to take on a potentially unusual perspective, as we are walked through a near fatal fentanyl overdose with our protagonist. An abnormally slow heartbeat is highlighted by the gentle flashing of primary colored lights, as a close-up of Rue's face is the focus of our attention, as she describes in detail the rush that comes from the near death experience (Figure 17).



Figure 17

The audience is meant to identify with her experiences, while also acknowledging the unreliability from a narrator who is suffering from multiple mental health diagnoses, as well as active addiction. By opening the series with a look at Rue's childhood, early diagnoses, and her family life, we are immediately put in a position to empathize with her plight, a feeling we must hold onto, as Rue immediately relapses after her release from rehab. In the socially conscious 2010s, fans rightfully have been demanding media created with a sense of situated ethos or lived experience. This was most notably evinced when Lena Dunham, the white, cisgendered creator

of HBO's series *Girls* (2012-2017) was heavily criticized for her portrayal of stereotypical Black and queer characters. Critically, part of what makes *Euphoria* so well received is creator Sam Levinson's willingness to discuss his own struggles with addiction throughout his lifetime. At the series' premiere, the creator shared: "I spent the majority of my teenage years in hospitals, rehabs, and halfway houses...I resigned myself to the idea that eventually drugs would kill me and there was no reason to fight it" (Nissen). In the same interview, when asked about critiques of the how the series so graphically depicts teenage life, the show's young stars went on to praise Levinson for showing not only high school, but addiction with a heavy dose of "rawness" and reality. As an audience, our access point to this reality is through the subjective perspective of teen addict, Rue Bennett.

Jason Mittell notes in *Complex TV*, that "film and television rarely employ the literary conventions of hearing interior character voices," suggesting that interiority must render itself through exterior markers instead (Mittell 130). This concept is complicated by contemporary shows like *Euphoria*, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, *Mr. Robot*, and *Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist*. These shows all feature direct narration –verbally or musically—from their lead protagonists, who are also suffering from some sort of mental health crisis and/or addiction that severely limits the trustworthiness of the subjectivity being rendered. While *Euphoria* works hard to convince us that our intradiegetic narrator is offering up an objective perspective of events, we must constantly remind ourselves of the subjective lens mediating our experience, and the inherent ability for an addict to lie. For example, Rue lies to her mother about being clean after a stint in rehab, but the audience is offered a privileged look at Rue sneaking out the bathroom window to purchase clean urine, before giving her mom a false sense of reassurance. Moments pop-up that

remind us of Rue's unreliability, especially with regards to her romantic relationship with Jules, the new girl at school, who happens to have just transitioned from male to female.

From their very first encounter, Rue places Jules in an impossibly perfect light, with the character literally glowing, at times, through Rue's eyes. The pair's relationship grows quickly, and in the fifth episode of the first season, the pair get matching lip tattoos, in a scene plucked from Rue's memory. However, by the ninth episode of the first season, when the pair's relationship is in jeopardy, and Rue is questioned about the tattoos by her sponsor, she mentions that they talked about, but never got matching tattoos. This episode is significant as it is the first in a series of "special episodes" meant to be small featurettes for a particular character, in this case, Rue. In a behind-the-scenes interview that accompanies the episode, Levinson notes that "we're starting to see a little bit of Rue's unreliability as a narrator. This episode is starting to sort of sow the seeds that Rue's perspective is very much Rue's perspective, and she's not always accurate in her retelling of things" (*Euphoria* S1 E9). The episode goes on to feature an extremely candid and lengthy late-night discussion between Rue and her sponsor Ali, about her mental health and jeopardized sobriety. The camerawork throughout the series creates a sense of intimacy, as though we are nestled in the booth with the two characters.

This influx of self-conscious, subjective style creates added value to garner a loyal viewership, by offering viewers gratification through complex characterization and giving the audience a first-hand perspective of Rue's trauma (past and present) and her addiction. As we explore Rue's childhood memories in the pilot, we navigate her OCD and anxiety by her side, from her point-of-view, as numbers appear on the lighted tiles above where a young Rue tries to eat dinner. As she learns to live with the diagnoses thrown at her at a young age, we are also offered a combination of surreal vignettes from Rue's perspective as her mother works to

comfort her. Rue's morbid imagination, shuffling through famous historical icons with mental health issues such as Vincent Van Gogh and Sylvia Plath) is combined with real news footage of a freshly shaven Britney Spears, simultaneously offering insight into Rue's dark mind, while also grounding the series in our contemporary reality. These vignettes, along with scenes, such as Rue counting ceiling tiles above or finding herself leading a class on the three types of "dick pics" for her peers are obviously imagined, usually truncated by a frozen, fourth wall-breaking look at the camera from our protagonist (Figure 18).



Figure 18

This intradiegetic narration transfers over to other characters, as well, leaving the audience privy to their memories through Rue's mediation. It is inferred that we are seeing childhood memories and current events based on Rue's experiences with these characters and gossip from high school. We have to assume that Rue's hatred and jealousy towards popular bully Nate colors her telling of his troubled childhood, issues with his father, and problematic anger issues. When we see a young Jules, pre-transition, with her now absentee mother, Rue's

voiceover narration implies that we are not seeing a factual rendering of Jules' childhood, but Rue's imagining of the stories her friend has shared. Even Rue's recounting of Jules' memory of first meeting Rue sees our narrator/protagonist speaking of her own involvement in Jules' life in the third person. As we witness virgin Kat's online sexual awakening, we are left thinking what we are seeing is happening in real time, until Kat's awkward exchange in a BDSM (bondage, domination, submission, and masochism) chatroom is interrupted by Rue's narration of the unfolding events. Suddenly, the seemingly objective scene we were lost in is now brought into question, as we realize we are seeing it through the mediated lens of an unreliable narrator.

To truly capture the contemporary struggles of Gen Z teens, creator Sam Levinson chooses to film almost exclusively on a sound stage to create the emotional realism for which the series has been praised. Going beyond literary definitions of emotional realism that merely highlight subjective narration, the realism being described by Levinson can be largely chalked up to the series' blurring of the boundary between spectator, character, and camera. Such a choice, however, leaves the creator, along with his set designer and cinematographer, with the task of using sound and image to convey not reality, but the subjective interior reality of the series' characters. To achieve this goal, extreme attention is paid to consistent character development through wardrobe, makeup, set design, and diegetic and non-diegetic sound.

Rue Bennett's bedroom is a chaotic, escapist retreat, that seems to exist outside of temporality. A feat they achieved through building trap doors and hinged walls in a closed set that allows for subjective camera angles. Jules Vaughn's wardrobe and makeup reflects her emotional struggles, with neon and glittery hues transitioning to darker colors that signal her sexual trauma and subsequent spiral with depression. In the sixth episode of the first season, an otherwise makeup-less Rue is seen donning a glittery eye, like that of Jules, who she is

accompanying to a Halloween party. After a drunken Jules pulls Rue into the pool, her once crisp makeup is now dripping and smudged. The glitter from that night continues to adorn Rue's face into the next episode, over one week after the party. The glittery remnants below Rue's eyes are meant to signal how deep-seated Rue's depression has become. In the next episode, the protagonist is hospitalized for a kidney infection sparked by being too despondent to even go to the bathroom. The glitter remains for the duration of the sixth episode, until a depressed Rue is bathed and dressed by her mother. This is in stark contrast to Jules, who uses makeup to conquer and then transcend her own femininity, highlighted by an awakening visit home to an old friend and his girlfriend.

After her visit home, Jules' look is different: she has new money-piece highlights, her makeup is glittery, vibrant, and highlighted by a more provocative and bolder wardrobe. Rue is taken aback by the "new Jules," and inherently uncomfortable with the way her friend is treating her like a human doll, changing the way she dresses, and loading her face up with brightly hued makeup. While these looks sparked an influx of global copycats across Instagram and TikTok, the excessively bold looks featured in the series hold deeper narrative meaning. Featuring "intricately executed eyeliner, cosmic swirls of neon and glitter eyeshadow, iridescent sticker decals, and eye crystals...the leading ladies of *Euphoria* display their emotions, growth and transitions by expressing themselves through their makeup – or lack-there-of" (Militano).

Transitioning into the second season, former BFFs Cassie and Maddie are at odds after a betrayal by the former. Their makeup signals this contrast, with Cassie fraudulently maintaining an aesthetic of virtue and purity with her light, classic looks. This juxtaposes Maddie's dark looks, often featuring bold, harsh lines, signaling a darker persona. Their third, and often forgotten friend, Kat, saw her first transformation in season one, as she stopped hiding her plus-

size frame by dressing it in curve-hugging leather, lace, and fishnets. Her makeup followed suit, with heavy, goth-inspired looks. As Kat begins to see the downside to her once empowering online work, her looks in the second season begin to soften a bit more, as she fluctuates between makeup styles, trying to find her true persona. Maximalism abounds in critical reception of the series, from its visual excess to its wardrobe, lighting, and makeup, the word has become synonymous with the series. The term can also be applied to the show's sonic aspects, from voice-over narration to original score and sampled soundtracks.

A contemporary soundtrack, mixed with Rue's voiceover narration, often has its beats accentuated with unnatural, pulsing lighting to convey particular subjective emotions. For example, Labrinth's "When I R.I.P." plays as Rue succumbs to a large dose of fentanyl. Flashing lights transition between blues, greens, and reds. As the music fades, Rue narrates the mental and physiological changes she is feeling. As Rue describes her overdose, character is the apex at which layered sound (diegetic and non-diegetic) and image meet to create meaning. This aesthetic is also maintained through seemingly impossible cinematography, as the camera itself passes through the walls of Rue's labyrinthian house to follow her as she evades yet another confrontation with her mother. Or, in the fifth episode of the first season, when the camera defies logic by spinning through beds, walls, and trailers, as an image of Rue and Jules embracing in bed is spliced rapidly with other instances of the pair (from Rue's memory) hold each other lovingly, before once again passing back through Rue's upright bed, as the two burgeoning lovers embrace.

The series' use of practical sets is distinctive and often featured in Levinson's frequent behind-the-scenes featurettes, highlighting the show's unorthodox production. The series' visual style greatly influences its production practices, and both are largely determined by Levinson's

dedication to character exploration through subjective style. Again, returning to the theme of addiction, the series' sets often serve as an extension of Rue's experience, which relies on novel ways to build practical sets to achieve new cinematographic perceptions. For the opening episode of the second season, design company Pixomondo built a fully encapsulated hallway that spins on a motorized gimbal and techno crane. Similar to the centrifuges created in Kubric's *2001: A Space Odyssey* or Christopher Nolan's *Inception*, the hallway through which Rue stumbles rotates on a 360 degree axis. *Euphoria*'s scene differs due to the intrinsic norms established series' first season, and the audience's recognition that we are witnessing a subjective perspective of an overdosing Rue (Figure 19).



Figure 19

Guided by Levinson's desire to "convey Rue's experience to the viewer," VFX supervisor David Van Dyke was tasked with creating two sets: one stationary, and one mobile for motion capture. Van Dyke estimates that over one hundred people were involved in the nearly two weeks it took to complete the scene. The initial goal for the scene was to convey Rue

“walking down a hallway where other partygoers are, but the hallway, including the people, would spin around her, causing her to actually walk up the walls to the ceiling and back down” (Sarto). VFX company, Pixmondo, offers a real-time digital rendering of the rotating set build, including conveying how the cameras are placed within the hallway. This logistical breakdown is juxtaposed with the actual scene, where the camera spins with the hallway, as we see Rue confusedly stumble from the floor to the wall, to the ceiling. As Rue desperately clings to her surroundings to keep herself upright, the other partygoers around her remain in place, leaning against a wall, or firmly planted on the floor, which has now become Rue’s ceiling. Along with the protagonist, the viewer is left questioning if what they are experiencing is real, and from Rue’s subjective experience, the scene offers a firsthand account of the disorienting nature of active addiction.

Stating a desire to have the first season feel like a present moment in the teens’ lives, Levinson wanted the second season to come off more as a memory of high school. During the second season of the series, Levinson relies on the film stock’s fine grain appearance to create the desired vintage look, as though the entire season is a memory, while also maintaining the series’ extremely saturated colors. Originally released in 1946, Ektachrome was Kodak’s more rapid film response to the popular Kodachrome, and a favorite of early publications like *National Geographic* and *Playboy*. Famously used to capture the first images of the moon on the Apollo 8 mission, Ektachrome is praised for its “wider range of film formats, ease of processing, but mostly for fine-grained saturated images” (Morrison). Production on the professional stock of the film was discontinued in 2012, only to be reintroduced again in 2017.

Formats, External Characterization, & The Disney Effect

Returning to television's specificity, the time we are allowed to spend with characters on television allows for richer, more nuanced characterizations and for viewers to form stronger attachments and affiliations than those we may interact with in film, (simply given the timeframe we spend with them. While a great deal of Levinson's writing for the character of Rue comes from his own lived experience with addiction and mental health issues, there are other competing factors surrounding the establishment of Rue's characterization. First, HBO's version of the series is based on an Israeli series by the same title from 2012. While the Israeli series had limited online global circulation, it nonetheless creates expectations for the portrayal of Rue and her world. For the US version, Levinson had Zendaya in mind for Rue from the moment he signed onto the project, which came as a shock to the former Disney actress. Applying the role of celebrity, it is worth considering Zendaya's previous public persona and the potential meaning it can imbue on the character of Rue.

Martin Shuster suggests that *who* characters are onscreen become fundamentally inseparable from the human bodies or actors that inhabit them (Shuster 50). This phenomenon is part of the reason that attempts to recast a character often fail, as it breaks with the world that has been established. Zendaya's clean cut, Disney image is most likely what the star is referencing when questioning Levinson's faith that she could pull off a deeply traumatized and flawed character such as Rue. While a failure to break from this image could hinder the drug addled diegesis series seeks to create, it actually helps feed into the series' aesthetic by softening Rue's character, adding to her relatability. This concept falls in line with Jason Mittell's suggestion that actors themselves can become sites of intertextuality, "merging viewer memories of previous characters and knowledge about offscreen lives to color our understanding of a role" (Mittell

122). Zendaya's previous, lengthy tenure on the Disney Channel has a large impact on her perception.

Addressed on discussion boards and tabloids affectionately as “the Disney curse,” former child stars like Demi Levato, Shia LaBeouf, Britney Spears, and Miley Cyrus are frequently discussed. Noting themes of public mental health meltdowns, stints in rehab, eating disorders, drug addiction, and a slew of failed romantic relationships, the ongoing narrative is that Disney child stars are destined for a lifetime of struggle and public scandal. In the case of Zendaya, the star had managed to steer clear of any such controversy, making her transition to portraying Rue Bennett all the more shocking. This is compounded by the fact that she maintained her starring role on Disney's *K.C. Undercover* until 2018, moving on to star in *Euphoria* in 2019. When asked about the transition, the star shared: “It's like going from nothing to everything – there were no steps in-between. That's why people think it's such a stretch for me to play this character. There's a lot of people who probably think I can't do it because they truly don't understand my personality. And I get it: I'm a Disney kid. There's a lot to prove” (Brunker). Over the series' current two season run, the actress has certainly proven her worthiness come award season.

Zendaya, as of 2023, has won two Emmys, one Golden Globe, and one Critic's Choice Award in the “best actress in a drama” category for *Euphoria*. From the comfort of her own home, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Zendaya became the youngest woman to win in the category, at just twenty-four years of age, beating out Jodie Comer who won the previous year, at twenty-six, for her role in *Killing Eve*. Along with Zendaya, the series also contends with previous perceptions of its executive producer, Canadian rapper Drake. Initially getting his start as an actor on the series *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001-2015), a show

that can be argued is a predecessor to the contemporary *Euphoria*. A reboot to the original *Degrassi Junior High* (1987-1991), the series explores controversial themes such as: sexuality, suicide, grief, addiction, domestic abuse, and mental health.

While Drake's involvement behind the scenes has been brought into question, with stars of the show noting he has only appeared on set or at table reads one or two times, his name and economic viability bring an added layer of cache to the series. Likewise, the correlation between Drake's Jimmy Brooks on *Degrassi* and *Euphoria* is a key benchmark for the latter's millennial audience. When discussing *Degrassi*'s longstanding willingness to grapple with contingent issues, executive producer, Linda Shuyler cited the show's ethos as: "If you're reading about it in the news, it's on *Degrassi*" (Spangler). Although *Euphoria* (unlike *Degrassi*) will not be winning any awards for children's programming, the series also tackles contemporary issues surrounding trans visibility, abusive relationships, and most notably, fentanyl overdose. With a steady increase over the last five years, overdose deaths tied to fentanyl reached an all-time high in the United States in 2020, nearing 100,000 deaths (nida.nih.gov).

Currently, *Euphoria* holds the title of HBO's most watched series since 2004, trailing only behind the eighth and final season of *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), which averaged 46 million viewers. As of February 2022, *Euphoria* averages 16.3 million viewers, some weeks pushing as many as 19 million, a 100% increase from the first season (Maas). It is hard to deny that much of the series' success lies not just with the young cast (led by Zendaya), but also with the series' creator, Sam Levinson, whose own life experience serves as fodder for the show's depictions of addiction and mental instability. What sets this situation apart is the decidedly problematic nature of Levinson and the disdain that even the series' biggest fans feel towards the creator. Several critics have noted the strange fan discourse of viewers maligning Levinson for

failing the series that they love, with the creator/writer/director being called out over 300,000 times on Twitter between January 9th and February 28th, 2022 (Tracy). In these tweets, “highly critical fans are mulling over his eternal damnation. They’re bemoaning the sexual interests and escapades of his characters and accusing him of having non-narrative reasons for including them” (Ducharme). In the world of television fandom, this type of criticism is usually reserved for a showrunner, but *Euphoria* presents a unique situation.

Television—even regarding prestige series—is often referred to as a “writers’ medium,” with the term “writers” being plural. The medium is highly cooperative, with a slew of writers making up a writers’ room, offering a communal voice, which is overseen by an executive producer. Directors often fluctuate from one episode to the next, with many only directing a handful of episodes each season. In contrast, Levinson takes on a unique authorial role in the case of *Euphoria*. Having written all eighteen episodes of the series, Levinson has also directed all but three of the episodes and is also largely in charge of the show’s musical score—not to mention offering up his own experiences with addiction for narrative use. The series has over fifteen executive producers, including the aforementioned Drake, as well as series stars, Zendaya and Hunter Schafer. While no series is immune from intermittent scorn from its fanbase, Levinson operates a murkier territory by showcasing his teen soap opera on HBO, a network known for its prevalent exploitative use of graphic nudity, sex, and drug use. Despite noting the shows penchant for stylistic visual and aural excess, much of the criticism seems to be aimed at the series’ excessive use of sex and nudity surrounding the young characters – a critique certainly not lobbed at other HBO originals, such as *The Sopranos*.

Aside from fans, the series has also received online hate from D.A.R.E., the world’s leading anti-drug organization.

“Rather than further each parent’s desire to keep their children safe from the potentially horrific consequences of drug abuse and other high-risk behavior, HBO’s television drama, 'Euphoria,' chooses to misguidedly glorify and erroneously depict high school student drug use, addiction, anonymous sex, violence, and other destructive behaviors as common and widespread in today’s world” (Rosenblatt).

This critique came after star and executive producer, Zendaya, posted a warning on Instagram, ahead of the second season premiere, reminding viewers that the series is for mature audiences and may be triggering for some. It is also worth noting that along with HBO’s usual warning for mature content, the series also features its own disclaimers, with resources, ahead of episodes that deal with mental health issues or substance abuse issues. Established in the early Eighties, it is unsurprising that D.A.R.E.’s perception of media is tied to an extremely deterministic, and social science-based rhetoric. Such an interpretation does little to see the series’ aesthetic excess as a means of personifying mental illness and addiction, and the often-sensationalized way that those suffering can see the world around them. While such critiques may be indicative of potential downfalls to excessive style, it can also be argued that it is more representative of a resistance towards the media literacy needed to navigate this new televisual terrain. Likewise, such criticisms convey an inability for viewers to apprehend the way in which the series is using visual and aural style to simultaneously draw attention to and critique the decisions made by Rue.

Through this explicit style, the series fulfills Levinson’s wish to represent the troubling anxieties and insecurities of being young in a way that had not been done before, avoiding the tired docudrama tropes associated with previous tales of mental health, addiction, and recovery. This aesthetic is accomplished not only through *mise-en-scène* and cinematography, but also

editing. In the pilot, Rue recounts her birth from a first-person perspective, and we bear witness to her expulsion from her mother's womb, overlayed with the tragic sounds of the planes hitting the world trade center on 9/11. The sound and images flashing on the television in her mother's delivery room solidify the lifelong journey of trauma Rue will endure.

Without Rue's constant, at times affectless narration, the audience would lose touch with the desperation the protagonist feels as she seeks out a detachment from reality every time she uses drugs. The smirk across her face, glitter running down her cheeks, and flashing club lights tell a visual tale that celebrates excess and indulgence, unadvisable for someone fresh out of rehab. Often, the show's sound and image are in conflict when generating a shared meaning. Michel Chion's conception of added value applies here, as diegetic, and non-diegetic sounds offer narrative and character-based clues that would be missing without image alone (Chion). When analyzing the musical score in particular, this juxtaposition is most readily evident and fits with the conception of anempathetic music. Lighthearted music, such as Jim Reeves' "Snowflake," suggests a frivolity that heightens Rue and Jules' choice to do drugs days after exiting rehab, knowing Rue's mom will test her. This emphasis on musicality brings the series full circle to its contemporaries mentioned earlier, and once again highlights the importance of redefining televisuality to include a newfound emphasis on aural aesthetics. Thanks to the privileged access to the interiority of protagonists in *Euphoria*, layered sound and image work to create profound meaning.

While giving insight into the role of a music producer, Jen Malone notes the frequently short timetable she is forced to work with, and that her job is not just "making cool playlists and listening to music all day and putting them in cool TV shows" (Diop). In the second season premiere of *Euphoria*, Malone was tasked with quickly getting approval from various estates to

use thirty-seven songs, having to convince artists, their families, and managers why their music should be used as the backdrop for, at times, intensely graphic scenes. While the first season of the series was largely dependent on original compositions from artist Labrinth, in a continued attempt to maintain the same feel, but not repeat themselves, the series' second season features less originals, and more catalogue pulls from the Sixties to more contemporary music.

Highlighting artists like Tupac and Juvenile, this shift once again fits with the series' desire to create a more archivistic aesthetic for the second season.

Malone is tasked with the difficult job of aiding character progression of a protagonist who is "more concerned with emotional impact than literal reality" (Ahlgrim). Like the visual style of the series, the 100+ songs that feature in the second season are meant to skew reality. As Malone puts it: "We really work with a lot of, almost hyperreality. Like, it's real, but not necessarily *real*. So we blurred those lines a little bit on a lot of different levels" (Ahlgrim). Song choice is so important to the series' narrative that creator/writer Levinson often writes songs directly into the script, making it Malone's job to get the proper clearances. As mentioned earlier, this can be a problematic task when an artist or their estate is being asked to use their music "with graphic depictions of sex, drugs, and violence" (Ahlgrim). While HBO is unwilling to disclose how much of the show's budget is allocated to its musical production, editor Julio Perez IV notes a strong desire to create their own "sonic galaxy" (Ahlgrim).

Citing his work with Sam Levinson on the series' soundtrack, Perez states: "We were interested in plenty of music – too much music for some. The show, in a sense, would be a musical," to create a "wild fantasia that blends a raw naturalism with hyperreality" (Coscarelli). In a series dripping with visual excess, it is unsurprising that they would also rely heavily on a maximalist musical score that fluctuates between genres haphazardly, working to match the

mood created in a scene, instead of prioritizing songs that the young teens being featured would even know.

This aural and visual excess is something lacking from the original Israeli series upon which the HBO version is based. Influenced by scandalous UK teen soap opera, *Skins* (2007-2013), creator and head writer Ron Leshem made some notably different choices in the original format of the series. Focusing purely on teens, part of the series' aesthetic is tied to obfuscating adults from the series, often outrightly blurring their faces or featuring them just out of frame. This starkly contrasts the U.S. version, which features adult characters as main foils to their teen counterparts. The Israeli version also faced many obstacles before its ultimate cancellation after just one season. Most notably, the series was derided by parents of young teens, who much like those reacting to HBO's remake, felt that the series glorified sex, drugs, and violence. Due to its graphic nature, the show aired on a late nighttime slot on cable and lacked the necessary viewership to warrant a second season.

Airing in a politically conservative country, the series was chastised not just for its graphic depictions of teenage sex and addiction, but also a lack of national gratitude (Schiff). In the pilot episode, the series received criticism for its depiction of Yom HaZikaron, a national memorial day. In one scene, the protagonist and her friends can be seen willfully ignoring the blaring sirens, meant to signal stillness: "During these moments, all activity stops. Drivers pull over and get out of their cars, meetings are halted, and all commerce is stopped" (Schiff). During this ignorance, the voice-over narration notes: "When you were seven, people jumped from the Twin Towers on live television. And it was repulsive, exciting, and logical. Parents have drowned their kids. Kids have stabbed their parents. So, at the age of seven, you got hooked on

the news” (*Oforia S 1E 1*). This scene set the groundwork for the raw, unfiltered nature of the series.

Director Dafna Levin hoped the series would convey the apathy of a generation scorned and traumatized: “Growing up is a trauma, anyway you experience it. All of us – the sobbers, the stoned, the fat – dealt with these mini-traumas. It’s excessive, but it’s familiar” (Schiff). The series’ portrayal of trauma is extremely raw; it relies on realism, while the U.S. version focuses on hyper-realism. When U.S. creator Sam Levinson asked HBO’s head of drama, Francesca Orci, what she admired about the Israeli version, she noted its “...raw and honest portrait” of what it’s like to be young, to struggle with your mental health, and be in the throes of addiction (Stack). When asked to elucidate on the controversy surrounding both versions of the show, Levinson highlights the large disconnect between contemporary teens and parents: “...pre-internet, there were more similarities between one generation and the next. And now, I think the gap has grown in a very significant way...it’s a brand new world every five years” (Stack). While it has been argued that Levinson’s highly aestheticized version of the series glorifies sex, drugs, and violence, it is important to note the same critique being applied to the raw and unfiltered Israeli version. Instead, it is worth arguing that the hyperrealism that Levinson’s version offers draws attention to the real-world traumas being depicted, while also helping to emotionally distance oneself just enough to open meaningful dialogue about the controversial situations being rendered.

Final Thoughts

In juxtaposing *Carnivále* with *Euphoria*, a perspective on how HBO has altered its network identity over the last several decades becomes apparent. While Daniel Knauf credits the dissolution of *Carnivále* to contemporary television’s disdain for idiosyncratic narratives and

visual storytelling, the existence and success of shows like *Euphoria* contradict that assertion. Instead, *Carnivále*'s failure is indicative of a larger trend with regard to period dramas on the network, suggesting that even HBO's high production cost model cannot sustain the genre's demands and lack of viewer engagement. It is also worth noting that while only fifteen years separate these two series, the industry has changed drastically in that time.

Current HBO series, such as *Euphoria*, have the added benefit of views from the network's streaming service HBO Max (formerly HBO Go). Although recording technologies were in their prime during *Carnivále*'s run, the series still relied upon multiple airings a week to sustain consistent viewership. Likewise, with limited online engagement for the series, its complex mythos proved difficult to navigate, with many cult followers only finding elucidation through DVD commentary with creators. A highly visual storyteller, *Euphoria*'s Sam Levinson has managed to create an aesthetically striking series that relies on moments of surrealism and expressionism in creative ways that also manage to generate forward plot momentum in a way that *Carnivále* hoped to, but at times fell short of accomplishing.

What both series share, through a close look at scholarship and criticism, is a reminder of the limitations of heralding television as cinematic. In a network that has founded its identity on visual spectacle and operational aesthetics, such vague terminology does little to address what it is that makes these shows unique. Each of these shows conveys the need to speak in a more medium specific way to help acknowledge how unique subjectivities are informing serial narratives and harnessing visual and aural excess in a way that pushes plot forward, while also offering in-depth character exploration.

Chapter Four: Streaming

Like the impact HBO had on cable television – as seen in book, *The HBO Effect* by Dean DeFino - the advent of streaming in 2007 created what we might call “the Netflix effect.” In 1997, Netflix was already responsible for disrupting the home viewing experience with its by-mail DVD rental service. The media company edged out competitor Blockbuster, whose attempts to mimic its rival’s business model proved unfruitful, leading to the company to declare bankruptcy and shutter in 2014. According to Amanda Lotz, the multichannel era began around 1985 and ended in the late 1990s, around the time that DVR technologies were being introduced (Lotz). By the early 2000s, the phrase “cutting the cord,” became popular amongst frustrated customers sick of the rising costs for cable, pay-channels, and satellite subscriptions. Initially a host to DVD-released film and television, Netflix’s streaming service would not produce its own platform original content until the premiere of *House of Cards* (2013-2018) in 2013.

Following Netflix’s model, Hulu launched in 2008 after signing exclusive deals with Fox and ABC networks. As the platform grew, so did its library and distribution model. Unlike Netflix, Hulu began providing “day after” access to episodes as early as 2010 and featured both a commercial-free, paid subscription, and an ad-supported, free version. Hulu released its first scripted original, *Battleground*, in 2012, and began offering live TV subscriptions in 2017. Originally marketed as Amazon Unbox in 2006, Amazon Prime Video was not far behind its competitors, releasing its platform original comedy, *Betas*, in 2013.

The transition towards streaming, while slow-moving, has completely shifted the way in which many scholars discuss television, creating arguments over exactly *what* television even is as a medium. The “cut the cord” movement has allowed a level of viewer agency not previously permitted by cable and satellite subscriptions by not only cutting costs, but also allowing

individuals to pick and choose the content they want. Prior to Hulu's move to stream new episodes of series the day after they are broadcast, many consumers found themselves maintaining cable/satellite subscriptions, or waiting to binge entire seasons of shows on Netflix after their release to DVD. The push towards platform original content in the last decade has truly begun to differentiate the services not only from one another, but also from traditional conceptions of television. Since streaming services operate within the online sphere, they are free from FCC oversight, like other mobile and online applications, including social media. Referred to colloquially as the "gig economy," or "regulatory free arena," by the FCC, this oversight (or lack thereof) came into question when Netflix came under fire with regards to the platform's mobile device usage and net neutrality laws beginning in 2016.

Free from the ratings guidelines that come with advertisers, streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Video still rely heavily on guidelines set-up by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). As unregulated bodies, the platforms also pose new challenges for rating bodies such as Nielsen, as Netflix is extremely tight-lipped about its numbers and consumer viewing habits. Relying more heavily on the TV Parental Guidelines that were established as part of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, today's streaming services evade traditional film ratings in favor of those that meet v-chip criteria. Also part of the 1996 act and a requirement in all televisions manufactured after January 2000, the v-chip allows consumers to block particular programming based on age or content indicators. Television episodes are introduced with a particular age demarcation (**TV-G**, **TV-PG**, **TV-14**, or **TV-MA**), as well as content indicators (**D** – suggestive dialogue, **L** – coarse/crude language, **S** – sexual situations, or **V** – violence). Again, since these guidelines are not enforceable by the FCC, most streaming

services only apply these ratings to their original content as a means of self-accountability and transparency for audiences.

Amazon Prime Video's *The Boys* (2019-) and Netflix's *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-2020) present distinct perspectives on aesthetic excess through the subjective lens of trauma, the impact of streaming on serial storytelling, and how streaming not only redefines television as a medium, but also demands a continued departure from "the cinematic." Armed with creators/showrunners with rich television backgrounds, *The Boys* relies on Eric Kripke's past work on *Supernatural* (2005-2020), while *Kimmy Schmidt* features the dark humor that catalyzed Tina Fey's rise to fame on *30 Rock* (2006-2013). With broadcast television veterans at the helm, both shows follow traditional serial narratives, despite varied modes of distribution. After being purchased from NBC before it even aired, Netflix released *Kimmy Schmidt* in a seasonal pattern, similar to most of their series, which are occasionally released as half seasons. In contrast, following a more traditional model seen with linear television, Amazon Prime Video releases *The Boys* in weekly installments, one or two episodes at a time. Other streamers, such as Apple TV+ and Disney+ follow a similar weekly model.

Despite utilizing serial narratives and following traditional modes of release (in the case of *The Boys*), both shows warrant examination of how their productions and visual and aural styles speak to their distribution via online streaming. Since "cord cutting" is synonymous with mobile viewing on devices such as laptops, cell phones, and tablets, it can no longer be assumed that series are being watched on a large screen, with surround sound, or even within the confines of one's home. Free from the confines of FCC regulation and enforceable ratings, both series also grapple with sensitive, and at times, highly graphic subjective matters, the likes of which are not seen, even on premium cable. Both shows also balance digital and practical effects, with

distinct cinematography in a way that masks the trauma and sensitive subject matter present in their narratives.

***The Boys*: This is NOT DC or MCU**

Marvel first began releasing film adaptations in the early 2000s to lukewarm reception with *Daredevil* (2003), *The Punisher* (2004), and *Elektra* (2005). While *Daredevil* earned \$179 million domestically, *The Punisher* and *Elektra* earned below \$60 million, forcing Marvel Studios to head back to the drawing board. They found success with the *X-Men* franchise, beginning in 2000 and applied that model and universe-building to their Avengers timeline with the release of *Iron Man* in 2008, earning \$102 million domestically. The studio would go on to release, on average, two films per year, until their mega-narrative—that also included the films of Captain America, Thor, Spiderman, Guardians of the Galaxy, Ant Man, Black Widow, Captain Marvel, and Black Panther—wrapped up with *Avengers: Endgame* in 2019 (though singular franchises would continue with limited releases). Together, there are forty films that comprise the MCU intertextual film narrative, separated by different periods. For nearly two decades and six separate phases Marvel Studios has dominated the box office with over forty feature films.

All the superhero narratives released via film and television over the last two decades lead Eric Kripke to create *The Boys*. Much like its graphic novel source material, the series is meant to serve as satirical social commentary on not only the state of contemporary superhero narratives, but our “overt obsession with...anyone in the world with power and influence” (Moon). The series’ main list of characters is full of villainous, dirtbag superheroes in the form of Homelander, The Deep, Translucent, and Stormfront, to name a few. But the diegesis is full of

equally repugnant humans, such as Stan Edgar and Madelyn Stillwell, the president and CEO of multi-billion-dollar entertainment conglomerate Vought Entertainment, respectively.

The series' mocking references to DC and Marvel are apparent through its musical score, imagery, and the manner in which Vought conducts their business. But the series is more than just satire, similar to social commentary offered by *South Park*, and also features questions surrounding morality, racial discrimination, immigration, sexuality, and bodily autonomy. Featuring storylines imbued by murder, rape, hate crimes, and grief, the series' bright, upbeat visual style, at times, seems at odds with its emotionally fraught narrative—a concept worth further exploration. The following sections explore how the series works to visually and aurally create a fictionalized, contemporaneous diegesis that mirrors our own world, while also addressing how this world-building harkens back to previous superhero media. This analysis focuses on how show's aesthetic simultaneously highlights and combats its narrative, and how digital and practical effects contribute to the artifice created by the series. Finally, I address questions of production and distribution via streaming in tandem with a discussion around authorship, and further problematization of “the cinematic.”

Vought Owns This City: Visual World Building

The New York City featured in the diegesis of *The Boys* is at once familiar, but also alien to its viewers. Relying heavily on the use of on-location shooting in Ontario, Canada, contemporary U.S. television's production hub, the series also uses familiar New York City landmarks, like the Flatiron building, for establishing shots. Urban shots of downtown Ontario are used, along with seamless VFX, to recreate the feeling of bustling NYC streets. As characters drive and walk through downtown, visit the city's local stadium, and even Vought headquarters, they, and the audience, are inundated with images of Vought's infamous “Seven.” Posters of the

perfectly branded band of superheroes line the walls of buildings, their faces shining on the billboards above, and their acts of heroism playing on televisions in windows and makeshift Times Square. But it does not stop there, as we follow the protagonist Hughie, into a convenience store in the pilot episode, only to find every bag and box of food and bottle of alcohol or soda emblazoned with one of the members of The Seven.

Similar to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and DC Universe (DCU), the series has the Vought Cinematic Universe (VCU). Not overtly impacting the series' narrative, mentions of conglomerate Vought International's vast media library serve as world-building easter eggs for fans, and satirical looks at real-world conglomerates. For example, Vought Seven (from this point forward referred to as V7) member, Black Noir, becomes the star of his own feature film: *Black Noir: Insurrection*. An entire blockbuster feature created around a villainous hero referred to as the "silent assassin" is ironic enough. (Black Noir is mute.) To add even more commentary and humor, famous actor and *The Boys* producer, Seth Rogen plays a fictional version of himself, promoting the film, of which he is an executive producer. During the promo, Seth says of the film series: "The movies are incredibly violent, and tons of people die, but they're still really good for children" (*The Boys* S1 E6) (Figure 20). This is a direct reference to Rogen's own critique of MCU films, which he feels he, as an adult, cannot get into, as they are "geared towards children," though he does acknowledge that *The Boys* could not exist without them (Sharf). This is the first, but not the last time Rogen pops up within the series, blurring the lines between reality and the series' diegesis.



Figure 20

While offering meta-commentary on the state of celebrity worship, the series also satirizes films from the MCU and DCU through its aesthetic. While product placement within superhero films is covert, if present at all, heroes like Captain America and Spiderman appear on many bottles of soda, bags of chips, and billboards when their films are in theaters. The marketing for the films creates a world wherein these figures are real and endorse the products whose packaging they adorn. The series creates a visual landscape wherein its characters and viewers cannot escape the images of Vought's superheroes; the background of nearly every scene features some sort of reference or advertisement. At the same time, the series' narrative cues viewers into the highly suspect nature of Vought's deliberate commodification of their heroes, deliberately lying to their audience members by heavily mediating pristine public images for their more problematic heroes. The ultimate critique asks viewers to consider their own role in the commodification process of superhero texts and the economic imperatives that surround some of their favorite films. Likewise, the critique of these filmic franchises by a television

series suggests a further reflection on the treatment of superhero films as fleeting events, who rely heavily on outside marketing before their premieres, and the need to create multi-film meta-narratives to achieve a semblance of the serial storytelling seen in a series such as *The Boys*.

As the series progresses into its second and third seasons, this blurring between reality and the fictitious Vought universe grows even stronger. Initially, a majority of the series' references are tied to the MCU and DCU. For example, fans have come to expect the pastiche Marvel logo at the beginning of every franchise film, wherein small images of its comic book characters make-up the larger Marvel Comics logo. Along with that image comes the comfortingly familiar orchestral theme music that has become synonymous with the superhero genre. This visual and aural style is copied directly in the VCU, whose logo is a series of images of The Seven (and lesser-known heroes), and orchestral music that sounds familiar, yet eerily incongruous to Marvel's own tune. The pilot episode of the series also features a riff on DCU's theme song for Wonder Woman, which itself is based on Led Zeppelin's famous "Immigrant Song," first released in 1970. Along with the existence of Seth Rogen, we also know that protagonist Hughie loves Billy Joel, and the singer features heavily in the show's soundtrack. Again, this blurring between fiction and reality, as well as the satirical commentary on the MCU and DCU are integral to the series' overall aesthetic.

The third season directly mocks DCU's extended "Snyder Cut" of *The Justice League*, when the series' *Dawn of the Seven* film had to face reshoots after superhero and series antagonist Stormfront was revealed to be an immortal Nazi, and Hitler's right-hand. Real world actress Charlize Theron even plays Stormfront in the VCU film. To further notions of a meta-narrative and intertextuality with the real world, DCU director Zach Snyder himself commented on the show's comedic take, and his tweets contributed to the show's marketing campaign. Billy

Butcher solidifies the existence of *The Boys* parent company, Amazon, when he purchases a Connect Four game through the app on his phone. The Church of the Collective becomes a common thread in the third season, as The Seven member, The Deep, and his wife become members in the cult-like congregation. The existence of the church is meant to be a direct reference to Hollywood's Church of Scientology, with Malcolm Gladwell labeling The Deep the "next Leah Remini," when the hero leaves the church for being a "suppressive person." From a historical perspective, the presence of a portrait of George Washington, references to JFK (and his alleged affair with Marilyn Monroe), and discussion of Hitler and his atrocities, suggest that the United States in the series follows the same (or extremely similar) historical trajectory as our own.

The blurring of lines between reality and that presented within the series serves a larger purpose in better understanding the show's social commentary. This reflexivity also allows the series to create a playful and satirical aesthetic that enriches the viewing experience, and rewards attentive viewing. (Blink and you will miss that bottle of Monistat on Starlight's counter while she brushes with Aquafresh toothpaste while wearing a Billy Joel concert t-shirt). Similar to its graphic novel source material, the series relies heavily on visual excess and satire to create a critical distance between the audience and the graphic content being portrayed. It is necessary to anchor the viewer with a sense of realism by referencing popular culture, given the fact that the audience is being asked to take on a perspective they will never experience in real life (that of having superpowers). With that in mind, the series also grapples with very real issues like rape, physical abuse, and death, that can be jarring when represented in a highly realistic way. Similarly, some of the characters represented are so reprehensible that subjective access to their

past and present is the only way to help viewers find even a shred of humanity in their representations.

Aside from Maeve, the series' knock-off Wonder Woman, and Star Light, a sexed-up Super Girl, *The Seven* is comprised of largely irredeemable monsters. They all did not start out that way, their money, fame, and corporate overlords made them that way. Contributing to their egos are their fans, whose unconditional love and consumerism of their heroes' likenesses is intended to reflect our society's own obsession with stardom. In the case of *Homelander* and *Stormfront*, the two most heinous heroes, their fandom of incels and Nazis are easily called to action via social media and television, reminiscent of famous missteps by celebrities like Kanye West. When Starlight, better known as Annie, joins *The Seven*, she thinks it is her dream come true, only to be sexually assaulted by *The Deep* on her first day and have her costume changed to a tighter, lower cut number by week two. Already self-conscious about her new attire, Annie is horrified when a young fan (adorned in her old costume) tells her she is saving money to buy the new suit, as a group of men in the background demand Annie show them her breasts.

With the exception of heroes like *The Hulk* and *Cyborg*, superheroes in the MCU and DCU possess a magical quality due to being born with their powers. In contrast, despite supes in *The Boys* believing they were born with their powers, they were actually drugged as children by Vought with a serum originally created by the company's founder during WWII to help the Third Reich. Rather than being individuals selected as superior at birth, the heroes presented in the series are those who sold their souls to Vought, children of corrupt parents, orphans, or those seeking fame and fortune in entertainment. In a wholly ridiculous, but still socially biting scene, Butcher and side-kick Mother's Milk find a baby who has been injected with Compound V, and use his laser eyes to escape Vought headquarters, where they are snooping. The scene

demonstrates how low the company will go to create fully controllable superheroes, while also maintaining its satirical ethos as a giggling baby is used to melt the faces of adversaries.

As if Compound V did not have enough negative side-effects associated with its use, it is also a highly addictive substance, with many superheroes using it frequently to boost their powers. Similar to lore surrounding Marvel's *Venom*, not everybody is a hospitable host for Compound V, as proven when Hughie and Butcher both become addicted in the second and third seasons. As a god-like entity in the series, monopolistic Vought and its super serum are often put in direct comparison with religion and miracles. In the fifth episode of the first season, entitled "Good for the Soul," Starlight speaks at a Christian festival, while Homelander, the least pious of all figures, administers baptisms in a tent. While the episode is intended to condemn the bigotry and abuse that can be seen within the Christian faith, it also serves as an enlightening, character-defining storyline for Starlight. Disenchanted with her experience in The Seven, and unwilling to tell the teens at the festival they are hell bound for their sexuality, pre-marital sex, or questioning a higher power, she denounces not only her willingness to continue as part of the Christian church, but also her refusal to be Vought's puppet any longer.

Antiheroes, Villains & Subjective Trauma

Continuing to play with definitions of the antihero and villain, the series' ensemble cast makes it difficult to determine with whom the audience is meant to align. Initially, Hughie is presented as our protagonist, as we follow his heartbreaking pilot arc when his girlfriend, Robin, tragically dies an accidental death at the hands of The Seven-member, A-Train. Previously a fan of The Seven (their posters adorning his bedroom wall), Hughie turns on the team when A-Train is unwilling to issue an apology for Robin's death. In fact, he finds entire support groups dedicated to citizens injured and maimed by superheroes, who have been bullied into silence by

Vought. Eventually, Hughie is approached by Billy Butcher, a mercenary who has his own vengeance tale after Homelander raped and then faked the death of his wife, a former Vought employee. Butcher fits the traditional characteristics of an antihero a la Walter White or Tony Soprano: He is a crude, violent, foul-mouthed drunk, but operates under a larger moral code. Hughie begins the series extremely moralistic, unwilling to kill, or even hurt anyone, but time spent with Butcher and the rest of “the boys,” slowly pushes Hughie more towards an antihero.

With regard to subjectivity, the camera most closely aligns with Billy Butcher as the series’ main protagonist, as his memories are the only ones accessible by the audience. His past life with his wife becomes paramount, not only as justification for his actions, and maintenance as an antihero (and not anti-villain), but also to fully understand the villainous power of Vought Industries and Homelander. While the audience is gifted with direct access to Butcher’s memories, the only insight offered into Homelander’s secretive past is through his interactions with other characters and his sexual proclivities. In the media, Homelander is a God-fearing American hero with blonde hair, blue eyes, donning an American flag as a cape. Behind the scenes, Homelander is revealed to be little more than a lab experiment, created from a random egg donor, and the semen of the strongest superhero in the world (and fellow national treasure), Soldier Boy. Raised in Vought laboratories, the scientist who helped rear Homelander notes that the lack of a family caused him to turn aggressive and violent at a young age, killing multiple female mother-like figures in his life. Unaware Soldier Boy is his father, Homelander spends his childhood idolizing him, whose presence in the third season proves even more violent and depraved than that of Homelander.

Homelander’s stunted development and lack of a traditional upbringing presents itself through specific sexual inclinations, usually around themes of childhood. Possessing a romantic

relationship with Vought CEO Madelyn Stillwell, Homelander usually turns to his partner during times of emotional duress, or rather, anger. Having just given birth to a son via sperm donor, much of Stillwell's focus turns to her baby, much to Homelander's jealous dismay. Operating both as a sexual partner and professional wrangler, Stillwell's ultimate job as CEO is to keep Homelander happy and maintain his pristine public image. Behind closed doors, Homelander's arrested development and past mother issues come to light, as he breastfeeds from Stillwell and is even caught, multiple times, stealing milk bottles from her office. The visual rendering of a grown man – adorned in a cape made of the American flag – is visually jarring for the viewer and goes against the image of Homelander that is presented to the public within the series diegesis. A scene featuring Homelander being literally swaddled by Stillwell, as he cries and suckles her breast simultaneously paints him in a sympathetic and grotesque light. Much like the other maternal figures in his past, Homelander ultimately kills Stillwell after it is revealed she hid a son from him (Homelander raped Billy Butcher's wife, producing a superpowered son). It is important to note, however, that Homelander did not kill Stillwell due to her secrecy over his son, but over her revelation that her maternal acts and sexual relationship with him were nothing more than her doing her job.

A similar sentiment of sympathy and disgust can be applied to The Seven member, The Deep. Like Homelander, The Deep was experimented on as a young child by Vought Industries. Initially presenting with the ability to hear sea life, years of injections with Compound V caused Deep to eventually grow gills, which allow him to breathe on both land and underwater. These gills play an important role in Deep's characterization, as they serve as a great sense of shame and humiliation for the hero. Similarly, the gills, when they are shown on screen, are usually shown in a sexually graphic or way that garners disgust from those around Deep. When Starlight

initially joined The Seven, she was drawn to Deep for his humanitarian work, but immediately becomes disenchanted when he sexually assaults her during their first meeting –an act which sees him exiled to Ohio by Vought. Deep thinks nothing of his assault on Starlight until two episodes later, when an extreme fan verbally and sexually assaults the superhero via his gills. The fan assaulting the hero violently digitally penetrates Deep’s gills, as a close-up shot conveys a grimace on his face, and the reddening of the skin around his irritated gills. Screaming in pain, and begging her to stop, Deep is left scarred by the incident to the point of self-mutilation. Donning prosthetics for the scene, Deep actor, Chase Crawford has noted in several interviews how nauseating the entire scene was to film (Figure 21).



Figure 21

The visual excess present throughout the series not only serves to convey the depraved subjectivity of its characters, but also create a connection to the series’ graphic novel source material. A visual medium, comics rely on dynamic images to tell stories with limited text. By nature, comics are excessive in their visual style, and that trait is clearly transferred to the series,

with this visuality embedded inherently within the show's genre. This visuality also contributes to meta-commentary on the current world, as noted in *Comics and Pop Culture: Adaptation from Panel to Frame*, by Barry Keith Grant and Scott Henderson. The authors note that the comic medium tends to use references "familiar to the reader/viewer, and, as such, create an excess by pointing to meanings that exist outside of the diegetic world" (Grant and Henderson 294). At times, this transference of comic ideals is a bit more direct, as seen in the case of mute character, Black Noir. After suffering a traumatic head injury at the hands of his own teammate, Soldier Boy, Noir maintained the mental capacity of a child. In a season three episode that explores Noir's backstory, the audience is allowed to take on the superhero's subjectivity, which is occupied by adorable, yet foul mouthed cartoon animals. The episode directly references *Roger Rabbit* (1988) and certainly deserves further exploration when discussing the show's use of VFX.

Breaking Down Artifice: Practical vs. Digital FX

When the third episode of the third season offers a closer look into Black Noir's violent past, series creator Eric Kripke notes the importance of the episode's cartoonish features: "When you look at all the different layers of those cartoons, they're these animated characters that only he can see, that he probably could see since Season 1 of the show; they've been around him this whole time. I mean, that's what we're certainly implying" (Maas). The episode relied on animation studio, Six Point Harness to make Kripke's vision come to life, which he described as "if Martin Scorsese directed *Snow White*" (Maas). Within the episode, adorable images of woodland creatures act out Noir's suppressed past memories for himself and the audience. As they reach the point in the story where Noir is beaten by Soldier Boy, tiny limbs, heads, and blood begin to fly. A direct play on children's pizza chain, Chuck-E-Cheese, the episode takes

place in an abandoned Buster Beaver restaurant, with Buster and his friends acting out Noir's past on an abandoned toy theater stage (Figure 22). Again, the immaculately crafted set, along with its animated inhabitants tells Noir's story, as Buster has long served as Noir's internal moral compass, since he accidentally paralyzed a boy in the ball pit at the location when he was nine years old. In a state of arrested development, like Homelander, it is implied that Noir's powers began young, meaning he was tested upon by Vought at an early age.



Figure 22

As noted earlier, the series' comic book origins are embedded in its visual ethos, both directly (as with Noir's cartoon friends), as well as in more abstract ways. Again, referencing the static nature of comics, dynamism must be created to convey movement from one image to the next. In the case of A-Train, super speed must be conveyed similarly between the page and the screen. To accomplish this task, both the comic and the series make it seem as though static energy is coming off the character, appearing as yellow lightning bolts as he runs. In a scene taken straight from the pages of the comic, Hughie is left holding the dismembered hands and forearms of his girlfriend, Robin, after A-Train runs into her on the street. Using a combination

of prosthetics and VFX, the scene highlights the series' emphasis on artifice, while further suggesting the ramifications of A-Train's superspeed.

Lovingly discussing their future, Hughie holds Robin's hands, as she stands just off the edge of the curb outside Hughie's work. Their brief conversation is interrupted as A-Train, high on Compound V, runs through and literally eviscerates Robin. Unfolding in slow-motion, blood, and human bones (what is left of Robin) are digitally suspended in the air, as both Hughie and A-Train are covered in viscera. As A-Train leaves the scene of the crime, explaining that he simply "can't stop" running, Hughie is left clutching Robin's severed hands in his own (Figure 23). The entire series is founded on the act of breaking down the artifice surrounding superheroes, and ultimately, fandoms and celebrity. It comes as no surprise that the series would therefore build a visual ethos that refuses to shy away from the artifice of special effects. While other contemporary series like *The Walking Dead (TWD)* rely heavily on special effects to create fantastical diegeses, these series often shy away from drawing overt attention to the use of VFX. With *TWD*'s VFX direction coming under fire frequently, with an ill-timed season seven VFX deer still being discussed to this day, critical reception has suggested the show's modest budget (just over \$2 million per episode) and stellar makeup effects led to less funds available for digitally rendered images (Moore).



Figure 23

With a production budget that exceeds \$10 million per episode, *The Boys* places equal emphasis on practical and computer-generated effects. The show's cinematography even works around these effects, often offering close-ups, or even slow-motion renderings, with both techniques featured during Robin's death scene. Armed with a larger budget in the second season, the series' VFX supervisor, Stephan Fleet, was tasked with creating a scene wherein Butcher, Hughie, Frenchie, and Mother's Milk, drive a speed boat into a beached whale. With the whale still very much alive at the time of impact (and briefly afterwards), Fleet and his team were tasked with creating a living, breathing, very large animal. The scene, which took a week to film, was first envisioned as a cartoon rendering, before helicopters were used to film Karl Urban (Billy) captaining a boat on the choppy waters of Lake Ontario. A VFX whale was created for the shots that feature The Deep riding the animal towards the coast, in an effort to block Butcher and the boys from gaining access to land.

The VFX whale in the water transitions to one made of silicon and Styrofoam on the beach, along with moving animatronic tails and mouth. While dynamism was created through the moving tail and mouth, VFX was also used to add comic relief to the scene by having the whale still living after the boat eviscerates it. As Hughie has an untimely meltdown from inside of the whale, covered in guts, with intestines thrown over his shoulder, the whale's large heart (VFX) pulses behind him. Stephan relied on practical effects to blend CG images with prosthetics and animatronics by using techniques such as canons full of fake blood or adding water onto the camera lens. After five months were spent creating the prosthetic whale, and the scene was filmed, the top portion of the fake animal was removed to create a "mechanical bull whale" for Chase Crawford (The Deep) to ride, to add to CG images of the whale in the water.

When asked about the scene in an *Entertainment Weekly* article, actor Antony Starr (Homelander) jokes, "We're doing too much, we're going too far," before noting, "When you see a big sequence like that, it's still anchored in the needs of character. The Boys are trying to get away and The Deep is trying to get back into the Seven. Whilst, yeah it's pretty whacky and it's crazy and kooky and all that, it is anchored in very strong character needs and story" (Romano). As Starr aptly summarizes, the scene serves a multitude of practical narrative, and character-driven purposes. Firstly, the death of yet another sea creature (there was a dolphin and lobster in the first season) at the hands of The Deep, who is trying to desperately redeem himself, presents a largely irredeemable and useless superhero. Second, the ridiculousness of the setting, inside of the whale, highlights Hughie's meltdown, and how bad things gotten if this is his final breaking point. The spectacle of the scene, in this regard, contributes to the operational aesthetics of the series^{69*} and the emotional gravitas of the characters within the scene.

Pushing the boundaries of spectacle even further, the first episode of the series' third season features a familiar supe, Termite, at a raucous superhero afterparty. With Butcher and The Boys now reporting on supe activity for the government (to protect humans), Frenchie is tasked with watching over Termite's activities. While spying, Frenchie catches Termite doing lines of cocaine with a partner, about to engage in consensual sex. Shrunk down, Termite enters his partner's penis, coyly stroking the walls as he nonchalantly walks through. Just as his partner begins to experience bliss, Termite's recent inhalation of blow leads to a fatal sneeze that manages to rip his lover in two, as the superhero returns to regular size. Hearing Termite's screams of horror, Frenchie enters the room and is thrown around by a once again shrunk Termite, who is attempting to climb into Frenchie's rectum to kill him. This scene is in direct reference to Marvel's *What If...* series, wherein *Avengers Infinity War* creators toy with the fan-made theory that Ant-Man could have successfully defeated Thanos, had he entered one of the villain's orifices, and then enlarged himself (Bisset). Writer Craig Rosenberg noted that the episode demanded that "we give the audience the thing that Marvel can't give to them" (Frew). Termite's plan to kill Frenchie is quickly thwarted, as Butcher catches, and then shakes a shrunk Termite in a bag of cocaine, rendering the supe incapacitated.

The aforementioned scene was nominated for a VFX award at the 2021 Virtual Effects Society Awards. To accomplish this scene, VFX supervisor, Stephan Fleet created an 11 foot high, and 30 foot long penis prop, ensuring Termite's tiny size would be to scale for camera (Fallon) (Figure 24). Amazon Prime's in-show trivia offers additional insight into the scene's creation, noting that the penis practical set was actually the final work of production designer Arv Greywal, who was also responsible for the whale scene in season two. Practical effects were also used to render the eviscerated body, using a silicon mold of the actor's torso, similar to the

effect used in the first season to render The Deep's gills and sexual assault. Given the extremely graphic nature of the scene, creator Eric Kripke was expecting pushback from Amazon executives, but was shocked to only receive one caveat: "You're not supposed to show an erect penis... So, we had to be very careful with the design of the penis — 'cause we built it practically. That's a real 11-foot-high, 30-foot-long penis built at great expense. But if you look at it, we had to design in all these wrinkles to make it clear that it wasn't erect" (Romano). The actors on set noted the ability for the scene to come off as both hilarious and tragic at the same time (Romano).



Figure 24

This episode was not the first time Termite has popped up in the series, as the character had two cameos in the show's first season. One cameo occurs when Termite is seen at a supe bar by Hughie and Butcher, with the superhero running across the bar before jumping into a woman's pants. Considering this first appearance in conjunction with his season three scene, it becomes apparent that Termite's primary function for his fans and partners is sexual. Before he

enters his boyfriend's urethra, the superhero can be seen surrounded by a horde of laughing fans, simulating intercourse with a Barbie in a dollhouse. It becomes apparent that his powers are largely viewed as comic relief, and even his own fans do not respect his abilities. The look of horror on his blood-soaked face after ripping apart his partner suggests Termite's genuine feelings for his partner and lack of reciprocation for his own needs also denotes the potential that he was being used by his boyfriend. Termite's panic at Frenchie's ability to leak the events to the public further suggests the control that Vought has over its supes, and the need for them to maintain pristine public images.

The breakdown of this illusion of perfection is best seen in the third season episode entitled "Herogasm." In the series, Herogasm is an annual orgy-filled event wherein Vought's greatest B-list supes engage in drug fueled depravity for a weekend on the company's dime. In *The Boys* comic, *Herogasm* was a six-part miniseries meant to spoof those of Marvel, such as *Infinity War* and *Civil War*, also known as "event runs." While most episodes of the series feature spectacle-laden storylines, "Herogasm" features its own content warning from creator Eric Kripke noting that the episode will feature "airborne penetration, dildo-based maiming, extra strength lube, icicle phalluses, and cursing," and is "not suitable for any audience" (Romano). In keeping with the satire found in the original comic's miniseries run, Kripke intended for "Herogasm" to qualify as an "event," while still maintaining the series' emotional pathos and character development: "We really wanted to give it *major* turns and *majors* reveals because we didn't want it to just be like an episode of Skinemax. We wanted it to be like, 'OK, oh wow, this is *an event* for several reasons" (Gelman). Kripke maintains that while the audience would need to turn to pornography to find content comparable to this episode, the sexual spectacle helps to close existing serial arcs and further character development. With so many of

the supes' identities and childhood traumas tied to their sexual proclivities, it is unsurprising that "Herogasm" serves as the third season finale.

The episode and its gratuitous depictions of sex and violence also further highlight the show's larger ethos, which is founded upon not only the satirizing of the graphic novel, but also general hero worship and notions of celebrity. The series' narrative and visual style also emphasize a consistent theme of transparency, both through its acknowledgement of production, as well as the larger social commentary of the series, wherein superheroes are not all they are cracked up to be. The main mission of *Butcher and The Boys* is to pull back the curtain on just how corrupt supes truly are, and how good at concealing the truth Vought has become regarding their creation of Compound V and other heinous actions. The heroes' images are highly mediated through the press, but the series shows the behind-the-scenes reality, such as *Herogasm*, as a means of dismantling the idea of putting anyone on a pedestal. Likewise, in a technique similar to the anti-realism Sam Levinson attaches to *Euphoria*, *The Boys* never denies its artifice, drawing viewer attention to VFX, and going great lengths (and spending significant funds) to make the unreal appear as real as possible. For example, while a cocaine-fueled, miniaturized man will never actually enter another man's penis in an act of pleasure, the series' VFX team used references and consultants to ensure that the penis and urethra were rendered as realistic as possible, while also maintaining Amazon's standards. Given how much leeway the streamer grants Kripke and his crew, it is worth considering what exactly Amazon's brand implies.

Aesthetics, Fandom & Political Commentary

Amazon Prime Video is not new to progressive content that features representations of more diverse characters, with original series like *Transparent* (2014-2019), *Fleabag* (2016-2018)

and *Upload* (2020-). This programming addresses issue like trans representation and mental illness, as well as death and grief. But *The Boys* does mark its first foray into truly transgressive content, pushing the platform's standards and practices to the brink. As mentioned previously, streaming platforms are exempt from the FCC oversight, and traditional standards and practices associated with broadcast television. In an interview with *TVLine*, Kripke notes that during the first season of filming *The Boys*, he received a phone call from the platform alerting him to the fact that a Standards and Practices Department had been created to monitor the series' content. It is worth noting, according to Kripke, that the department has disapproved of very little, with the creator joking that Amazon seems to only have drawn the line at bestiality (referencing a deleted scene wherein The Deep has intercourse with an octopus) (DeBoer). In the same interview, Kripke goes on to note that the writers' room works diligently to avoid being "exploitative and gratuitous," aiming to created a "heightened show," instead of soft-core porn that can be found on late night cable (DeBoer).

Executive producer Seth Rogen himself has noted the child-like audience that superhero universes appeal to, often negating more mature content. Critical reception of *The Boys* has also noted this, stating that "one of the main complaints about the Comic Book Industrial Complex we live in is that the shows and movie versions, at least, have pretty much no sex. No one's horny, no one's hot for each other, and no one ever, ever does the deed" (Prigge). Not seeking to over-correct, Kripke notes that aside from Aamazon's newly developed standards and practices, there is also a high level of self-censorship on-set. Citing the "Herogasm" finale of season three as an example, Kripke notes that the dailies that were sent off contained content (not aired) that would require an X rating. Again, while the series' main goal is to breakdown the artifice and

illusion surrounding superheroes and their mediated public images, its excess does not go beyond this act, avoiding the pitfalls of gratuity.

Mirroring the series' own risk-taking sensibilities, the third season's narrative sees Homelander pushing Vought's PR boundaries. Fed up with being portrayed as America's hero and serving as the company's puppet, Homelander goes rogue. Much of *The Seven's* time is spent in the public eye: they have their own reality competition show (searching for a new member), film franchises, biopics, and daily news interviews. These appearances are all heavily mediated by Vought's head of PR (Stillwell before her death, and now the terrified and anxiety-laden Ashley). During a news briefing, in front of fans, Homelander completely dismantles the pristine public image Vought has worked so hard to cultivate by expressing his disdain not only for Vought Industries, but mankind in general. In an era where sensationalism rules a nation divided, Homelander sees his public numbers rise, with Vought no longer able to suppress the superhero. This speech, along with Homelander's romantic relationship with Nazi-sympathizer, Stormfront, sees the supe now creating a legion of like-minded male fans akin to modern incel groups.

Homelander's newfound power is indicative of larger societal issues surrounding toxic fandom, particularly in the age of social media. In a strange fractal of reflexivity, Homelander's season three narrative arc –already a commentary on contemporary politics)—sparked its own politically motivated discussions. From the outset of the series, Homelander had a loyal following of right-wing male fans, convinced that the hero would eventually be revealed as the misunderstood antihero (ala Tony Soprano) that we have all come to love in the last two decades. After Homelander's speech revealed him to be an irredeemable monster, Reddit erupted with former fans calling for the show's cancellation, bemoaning the writing or deleting entire

accounts. Two such users seemed to miss all the political commentary leading up to Stormfront's reveal as a Nazi in the second season, with user "happy scrappy" noting, "Wait, the show is political now? MY HOMELANDER?" with user "anaccount50" lamenting "How could such a historically apolitical show do this now??? I swear they're gonna regret this drastic change. Get woke, go broke!" (r/SubredditDrama; "The Boys Gets Political"). Within subreddit, moderators created a rule wherein "political discussion is allowed but must be relevant to the show in some way and must be civil" (O'Dell). However, after this rule was put in place, any connection made between Homelander and Donald Trump was quickly removed from the thread, even if it was engaging in civil discourse, and the original moderators moved their content to Discord (O'Dell). This disenchantment follows realizations made by lifelong supe fans, such as Hughie, whose real-life experience with A-train (not the polished PR image) opened his eyes to his villainous ways.

Not one for illusion, the series has never hidden its political commentary, even if fans on Reddit threads willfully or ignorantly miss any political analysis. For example, Stormfront is named after a literal white supremacist website on the dark web and notes several times (while building her Nazi following) that people do sympathize with what she has to say' they just don't like the historical implications of the word Nazi. This is proven true when real-life fans of the series began to turn on the show after it is revealed that Stormfront is a Nazi, and Homelander takes over his lover's fandom/army after her death. While Donald Trump is never revealed to be the president within the show's diegesis, Homelander is a direct allegory for Donald Trump and at one point, even quotes George W. Bush. After he causes a plane crashing into the Brooklyn Bridge (killing those onboard and on the bridge), Homelander (nearly verbatim) gives a speech that parallels the one given by George W. Bush via megaphone at Ground Zero, just days after

the 9/11 terrorist attacks, “I can hear you, the rest of the world can hear you, and the people who knocked this plane down will hear from all of us” (*The Boys* S1 E4). Perhaps the most apparent commentary –and most liked supe by right-wing fans—p is Blue Hawk, Vought’s supe presence on the police force. After killing an unarmed Black man on his way home from work, A-Train forces Blue Hawk to attend a gathering at a local community center to apologize. Unappeased by his fabricated apology, community members begin to chant “Black lives matter,” before being violently attacked by Blue Hawk, who meets their chants with “supe lives matter.” The ultimate irony comes when Blue Hawk is later killed by A-Train to avenge Blue Hawk paralyzing his brother at the community center, and his heart is transplanted into A-Train’s body.

For those already familiar with the series’ comic book origins, its political commentary, and visual excess are unsurprising. The comic’s first run was released by DC in 2006 after being created by Garth Ennis, who also created the *Preacher* run for DC. *The Boys* was axed after one year and later picked up by Dynamite Entertainment to finish its eight series run. Garth originally created the series as a scathing commentary to George W. Bush’s handling of 9/11 and existing superhero franchises, contributing to DC’s ultimate cancellation of the comic. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* on June 17th of 2022, Kripke notes that Homelander is driven by “white male victimization and unchecked ambition,” before noting that “those issues just happened to reflect the guy who, it’s just still surreal to say it, was fucking president of the United States” (Hiatt). Kripke went on to question a fan of the series who attended a rally dressed in a Homelander outfit, asking “umm...are they actually watching the show?” noting that, in the second season, the character had already been revealed that Homelander raped Becca Butcher, almost killed his son, and has taken on a Nazi lover. To unpack what could lead fans to misread the series, critic Stuart Heritage suggests that:

“Perhaps the problem is *The Boys*’ insistence on having its cake and eating it. The show tries to make a stand against issues like racism, totalitarianism and toxic masculinity. But it does all this under the guise of a show full of violence, cool fight scenes, exploding heads and...some people are so blinded by all the whizz-bang outrageousness that they can’t see anything deeper beneath that” (Heritage).

Heritage’s critique of the series says more about a select group of fans’ media and politicalliteracy, and less about the show’s aesthetic. The series’ satirical and excessive aesthetic has been present since the pilot episode, and by the second season, is part of the show’s identifiable intrinsic norms. The show itself directly mocks the sensationalist news coverage that frequently flashes across the television screens in the background of scenes. Episodes like “Herogasm” read no different—aside from sex with octopi—than our culture’s obsession with the sex lives of celebrities and the infamous celebrity sex tape scandal. Denying that visual excess or spectacle can have a narrative or character-driven purpose reverts back to outdated conceptions of television studies and suggests that meaningful employment of such sensationalist tactics merely conceals a lack of story.

Production & Distribution

As creatives from the film industry have fled to television over the last two decades, and streaming services have been producing original film and television series side-by-side, conflations between the two mediums have been consistent. Series such as *Altered Carbon* (2018-2020), *The Falcon and Winter Soldier* (2021), *Obi-Wan Kenobi* (2022), and *The Mandalorian* (2019-) have all been described by creators and stars as eight or ten hour long films. Fresh off a fifteen-season run at the helm of CW’s *Supernatural*, Kripke argues that those from the film industry have no conception of “the network grind,” and are “more comfortable

with the idea that they could give you 10 hours, where nothing happens until the eighth hour. That drives me fucking nuts, personally” (Sharf). What Kripke is describing is a prolongation of the three-act structure over potentially eight or ten episodes, leaving too many episodes early on over-supplementing with exposition. While some creatives and critics consider the notion of an entire season of television as an extended film offering a series prestige, it ignores the inherent affordances that the television medium allows.

Offering insight into the affordances of streaming production, Kripke notes that he will not be returning to the constraints of broadcast television. Highlighting the coherency allotted by streaming’s production model, Kripke praises the ability to have entire scripts completed before filming. One can film an entire season before release, while still having time to go back and edit previous episodes to augment particular storylines or add content. While the series’ production follows a more convenient production model, its distribution is more akin to linear, broadcast television, given that the platform releases episodes once per week. Unlike competitors like Netflix that release entire seasons (or half seasons) at a time, Amazon Prime Video relies on the benefits that come with a weekly release model.

One of the main affordances of dropping only one episode per week is the opportunity for prolonged, weekly marketing and critical reception. Instead of critics responding to an entire season at once, weekly installments are dissected and promoted. Likewise, the extra time between episodes encourages weekly fan engagement online. This more traditional mode of distribution also highlights *The Boys*’ more episodic narratives. For example, if a series truly claims to be produced as an eight hour long “film,” releasing episodes in one batch helps to mask the fact that there is a singular three act structure being prolonged over multiple episodes. This can also distract fans from the fact that entire episodes may be offering little narrative

progression. While creators like Kripke embrace affordances that the television medium offers, even outside of traditional broadcast TV, issues surrounding notions of the cinematic still persist, both in critical reception and the very technology used to screen the series.

While viewing the show on an LG flatscreen television, an alert pops up with the very first episode: “When movie content is recognized, you can change to filmmaker mode. This mode expresses the filmmaker’s intentions clearly but may look darker than other picture modes” (LG). Filmmaker mode is not unique to LG, and the technology uses film director (and superhero film critic), Martin Scorsese, and film director, Christopher Nolan, as its poster children. On its website, the creators of filmmaker mode claim that you can “watch your movies and TV shows the way the filmmakers intended. This new picture mode on supported Ultra HD TVs preserves the director’s creative intent and provides a cinematic experience” (www.filmmakermode.com). Ultimately, the technology aims to turn off the motion smoothing commonly found on contemporary televisions and promises to maintain the colors, frame rates, and aspect ratio intended by the filmmaker. While the site ensures that the technology is intended for both film and television, both mediums are conflated by the goal of looking “cinematic.”

Inherent to the notion of streaming is the idea that there is no guarantee that series or films will be viewed in the “ideal” home theater experience. In a post-cut-the-cord era, it is not uncommon for homes to lack a physical television set, and questions have risen as to whether or not the computer is replacing the television. Tablets and cell phones have also enabled viewing on the go, making it difficult to assume any viewer is watching “as intended,” in a dark room with surround sound, in reference to David Lynch’s ideal viewing conditions in the home (Ruimy). While one viewer may be watching an episode from the comforts of their home flat screen, there is a demand for a show or film to look just as good on a cell phone, on the bus

while on the way to work. Devices such as Apple TV, Google Chromecast, and televisions with built-in streaming access are seeking to localize the viewing experience once again in the confines of the home. But streaming services will continue to encourage mobile viewing, and in cases like *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, even feature interactive episodes that necessitate mobile viewing.

Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: The Aesthetics of Concealed Trauma

After finding success with their comedy *30 Rock* (2006-2013) on NBC, Tina Fey and Robert Carlock were asked by the network to create a series for *The Office* (2005-2013) star, Ellie Kemper in 2013. Uncertain about the future of comedy at the network, the series was sold to Netflix in 2014, before premiering on March 6th, 2015 on the streaming platform. Taking place in the fictional town of Durnsville, Indiana, the series follows Kimmy Schmidt as she navigates life after being kidnapped by Reverend Richard Wayne Gary Wayne and being held in an underground bunker for fifteen years. Now twenty-nine years old, Kimmy must come to grips with the ways in which the world above ground has changed and the fact that cult leader Reverend Wayne lied about the apocalypse. The series is marketed as a sitcom and runs for the genre's traditional thirty-minute episodes.

Under the high key lighting and brightly hued mise-en-scène, the series grapples not only with typical millennial struggles (Kimmy is now 29 years old), but also extremely dark themes surrounding childhood trauma, sexual assault, mental illness, and arrested development (Figure 25). At first glance, the series' cheery aesthetic seems to mask its biting social commentary, but similar to *The Boys*, satire is important to not only the series' narrative, but also the development of its complex, and often closed-off, characters. Through privileged, subjective access to characters, the audience is offered a firsthand look at post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and

other forms of trauma, as the series explores characters' present circumstances, informed by visits to memories.



Figure 25

These trauma-informed subjectivities are explored in a variety of ways that borrow from the comedy genre, as well as theory associated with the horror genre. Through exploration of memories from childhood and teen years, the audience comes to understand Kimmy's abusive childhood, and her time spent in the bunker with her fellow "mole women" (colloquial Internet term for the survivors). This perspective is also extended to other ensemble characters such as Titus, Kimmy's roommate, and Jacqueline, Kimmy's employer and friend. The series also frequently features original songs both diegetically and non-diegetically. In a vein similar to the musical numbers featured in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, song and dance numbers are a frequent glimpse into the mind of aspiring Broadway performer, Titus. Due to Kimmy's arrested development (she was kidnapped to the bunker at just fourteen years old), the audience is also privy to her more adolescent imagination via her talking backpack or entire episodes featuring

puppets. Borrowing from horror theory, the “othering” of Kimmy’s trauma is used as a distancing effect, with the series never verbally acknowledging sexual assault until the final season of the series.

This section will explore how the series both utilizes and transgresses normative boundaries of the sitcom genre, while also utilizing affordances of a streaming platform production model. Aesthetics will be explored as it simultaneously conceals and calls attention to the series’ larger theme of trauma. As with *The Boys*, the ways in which the show both converges and diverges with the real world and contemporary society will be analyzed from a social commentary perspective. With notions of authorship in mind, it would be difficult to look at the series’ social commentary without acknowledging Tina Fey and Robert Carlock’s indelible marks. Known for their slightly controversial brand of comedy, the series is not immune from problematic, stereotypical portrayals of millennials, race, and trauma. Lastly, given the discrepancies between the series’ dramatic storyline and cheerful visual style, the chapter will culminate with considerations for the show’s subjective cinematography and mise-en-scène work.

Radical Comedy: Trauma, Humor, and Psychological Distancing

Steve Neale suggests that the aesthetics of genre are tied closely to a given genre’s ability to offer both repetition of familiar generic structures and divergences from those structures. Through his theory, Neale suggests that “predictability is not an absolute quality, but a matter of degree” (Neale 198). Contemporary genre theorist Andrew Horton argues that “comedies are interlocking sequences of jokes and gags that place narrative in the foreground, in which case the comedy leans in varying degrees towards some dimension of the noncomic” (Horton 7). In the case of *Kimmy Schmidt*, the series relies heavily on long-running jokes between its characters

and topically referential commentary, while also featuring storylines that deal with trauma and topical issues. For example, in an attempt to exonerate Reverend Wayne, a group of men referred to as the Innocence BRObject create a documentary about Wayne. In a clip from their footage, a hand can be seen flipping through files of men they deemed wrongfully convicted and the names include Bill Cosby, Harvey Weinstein, and Lord Voldemort. Cosby and Weinstein are topically relevant, as it is intimated throughout the first three seasons (before being verbally confirmed) that Kimmy was sexually assaulted by the Reverend. The inclusion of fictional character, Lord Voldemort, from the *Harry Potter* series is meant to add a sense of levity to the situation, while also acknowledging a famous tweet from Kanye West in 2016 that declared Voldemort innocent. This trope is what Jonathan Gray refers to as comedy's antirite, wherein absurd or satirical behavior forces us to "represent or comment upon reality" (Gray & Lotz 118).

The sitcom has been in flux since the nineties, when *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), the show about nothing, transgressed the genre. With characters grounded, but engaging in surreal situations, the series broke from traditional conceptions of the sitcom genre. *Seinfeld* pushed the boundaries of tropes that began with the situation comedy on the radio as early as the Twenties and Thirties, and the family or work centered sitcoms of the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies. Unlike the family unit featured in *The Goldbergs* (1949-1956), the gang at the bar in *Cheers* (1982-1993), or the newsroom of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), *Seinfeld* brought together a group of unrelated, and mismatched New Yorkers. Jerry, Elaine, George, and Kramer are a seemingly normal group of individuals that find themselves in repeatedly ridiculous situations. In some regard, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* follows the more transgressive tropes set in motion by earlier series like *Seinfeld*.

Kimmy, Titus, Lillian, and Jacqueline are all unrelated adults that are brought together largely by necessity. They come from a variety of socioeconomic strata, divergent ethnic backgrounds, differing sexual identities, and even disparate age groups. Regardless, the unlikely group forms a familial-like bond over the course of the series. The characters in *Kimmy Schmidt* experience surrealism to an almost unrealistic degree, finding themselves continually thrust into over-the-top situations that seek to highlight very real themes of personal and collective trauma.

With all the series' main characters (and secondary characters) appearing as stereotypical caricatures and relying on physical comedy, the grouping creates an insular world where their quirks are normal. It is only in fleeting moments with outsiders that their pasts and current lifestyles are acknowledged as abnormal. But even this juxtaposition is often rendered a façade, as those who call out Kimmy for her odd behavior, are themselves non-normative. For example, when co-creator Tina Fey appears on the series as an Uber passenger-turned-therapist to Kimmy, she notes that Kimmy's recent bout of smelly burps is her past trauma trying to work its way out. Seemingly offering helpful advice grounded in psychological theory, Dr. Bayden herself suffers from alcohol-induced blackouts that completely change her personality. Through primary and secondary characters, the series relies on physical comedy and rapid-fire jokes as a means of discussing weighty themes such as addiction, sexuality, assault, divorce, ethnicity, and grief.

Throughout the series, beginning in the pilot episode, Kimmy suppresses not only the trauma she experienced in the bunker, but also that of a neglectful mother and dim-witted stepfather. These suppressed traumas usually come out in the form of visual and aural comedy. For example, it is revealed that Kimmy was initially kidnapped by Reverend Gary Wayne because she struggled with her shoes (at age fourteen) on her way home from school, after her mother never took the time to teach her to tie her shoelaces. Loyal viewers are rewarded for figuring out that Kimmy's

aversion to Velcro from the pilot is due to the fact that she was kidnapped while trying to fix the Velcro on her shoes. While living with Titus, Kimmy endures night terrors, chews her roommate's nails, screams at the sight and sound of Velcro, and invents elaborate lies when she senses anyone is beginning to recognize her from the news. Before it is stated in the final season that Kimmy was sexually assaulted while in the bunker, the series foreshadows this fact through Kimmy's struggles with intimacy.

While dating an army veteran (Sam) in the second season, Kimmy is forced to begin confronting her suppressed trauma. While at a party both Kimmy and Sam take cover when they hear a dropped bottle shatter. Sam is extremely open about his PTSD from active duty, but after they both jump, he encourages Kimmy to acknowledge her own PTSD, which she denies, and Sam quickly disappears by the next episode. Physical comedy and Kimmy's trauma truly come to a head during her on-again, off-again relationship with Dong, whom she meets in her GED course, but whose tumultuous Visa status keeps the two apart. When the two finally decide to escape to an abandoned romantic hotel for a night alone together, things go comically wrong. Dressed in a children's *Frozen* nightgown (worn with the graphic facing backwards), Kimmy and Dong attempt to become intimate on the spinning heart-shaped bed, but every time Dong attempts to touch Kimmy, she beats him over the head with the phone on the nightstand. The two head to a nearby convenience store for an ice pack for Dong's head, and while there, decide to purchase condoms. The two adults - one in arrested adolescence, the other on the outside of American cultural norms - attempt to understand how condoms work, wondering if they need a banana. As Kimmy awkwardly positions herself on the silk sheet covered bed, Dong heads to the bathroom to figure things out, only to open the door and reveal a face completely swollen shut due to an unknown latex allergy (Figure 26).



Figure 26

Noting television comedy as an “under researched area,” Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering suggest that recent changes in the form of the television comedy raise “fundamental questions about television as a medium in transition” (Lockyer and Pickering). Pickering and Lockyer’s collection focuses largely on the potential for being offensive within comedy’s subgenres and whether individual series can generate a normative code with their audience wherein the offensive can also be funny. Mills suggests that differentiating a sitcom from other genres is just as important as establishing genre conventions: “The sitcom can be understood, for example, as not factual, not news, not documentary” (Mills). It is at this point that Mills’s argument falls into an evaluative dichotomy, wherein sitcoms actively distinguish themselves from more “serious” forms of programming, such as drama, though he avoids evaluative claims about the superiority of more progressive forms within the genre itself. Jason Mittell argues that genre “is a fluid and active process,” determined by repetitive “practices that categorize texts,” which suggests perpetually reimagining existing norms (Mittell). Other theorists, such as

Antonio Savorelli, negate generic confines, and avoid the term sitcom by instead utilizing terms such as “half hour comedy,” or suggesting that the sitcom subgenre denies comedy’s more historical, radical purposes that date back to the Sixties and Seventies (Savorelli).

Current scholarship suggests that the sitcom involves a regular set of recurring characters, existing within an episodic structure within a consistent setting (Mintz 114-115). Antonio Savorelli uses semiotics to analyze a set of series he feels fall outside of his technical definition of the situation comedy, which demands “the use of more than one camera for filming, a soundstage used as a stable set and the existence of a laugh track within the soundtrack” (Savorelli 132). Working with these various attempts to define the sitcom as a genre, it can be argued that *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* relies on some generic conventions in an attempt to create a generic aesthetic that simultaneously welcomes sitcom tropes, while also transgressing clear visual and narrative markers. For example, not unlike *The Boys*, *Kimmy Schmidt* frequently satirizes previous sitcom incarnations, with Kimmy repeatedly thinking she sees characters from *Seinfeld* and *Friends* on the streets of New York City, while modernized version of *Seinfeld*’s theme songs play in the background. Referring to *Friends* as “Six White Complainers,” Dong asks Kimmy to join him in a dance around a fountain they think is from the series’ opening credits, while a Korean version of the theme song plays in the background.

While the series features several consistent sets, such as Kimmy and Titus’ apartment, the stoop outside of Lillian’s house, and Jacqueline’s mansion (and later, apartment), the series also regularly films on location at various New York City landmarks such as Rockefeller Center, Times Square, Dylan’s Candy Bar.. The juxtaposition between the bright,, artificial sets and realistic New York City streets and back alleys serve as a larger metaphor for the series, which masks its darker content with a bubble-gum hued visual style. Again, like *The Boys*, *Kimmy*

Schmidt does not shy away from notions of artifice, using the sitcom's traditional rapid-fire banter to make radical social and political statements that give viewers limited time to react. More weighted social and political critiques are at times seemingly undercut by the ridiculous way they are told, or by being immediately followed by a more innocuous inside joke between characters. For example, critiquing what it is like being a Black man in America, Titus spends a day in the city wherein he is treated better dressed as a wolfman (for his job at the horror-themed singing restaurant) than a queer Black man. As he walks home from work (in costume), multiple cabs stop for him, a police officer wishes him a good day, and a white woman asks him to hold her baby while she searches for something in her bag. Noting that he would never be treated this well as himself, Titus decides he is going to live as a wolfman permanently. The critique on the contemporary state of racism and police brutality is overt, but masked under a level of satire that softens the rhetorical message.

The series also possesses what Peter McGraw refers to as psychological distancing through benign moral violations. Kimmy presents as an almost unreal character; everything from her past to her appearance and behavior makes her, at times, a caricature. She evokes a childlike wonder and innocence not seen in most adults, and her fifteen years in captivity have done little to shake her unflappable optimism. The character of Kimmy, along with the series' overall visual style, distances the audience from the darker themes with which the series continually explores. For example, Kimmy's brightly hued wardrobe coupled with the series' overly saturated cinematography and a penchant for only filming during the day adds a sense of safety when discussing topics like Kimmy's kidnapping. When forced to revisit the abuse she endured in the bunker, Kimmy's act of replacing her friends and the Reverend with innocuous woodland creatures prevents the audience from having to witness her assault firsthand (Figure 27). Instead,

the audience is offered a grizzly cartoon massacre in place of a physical assault between the Reverend and the women of the bunker.



Figure 27

When describing humor as a coping mechanism for traumatic events, Dr. McGraw suggests that laughter does not necessarily negate a fear response but makes the difficult content more palatable. This can be seen when Titus spends his day as a wolfman. There are very serious implications when Titus runs into a police officer and immediately puts his hands up, exclaiming he has done nothing wrong. While the officer wishes Titus (in costume) a good day, the audience is meant to consider the alternative, possibly more violent option to that interaction. Noting the transgressive possibilities of comedy, it is also suggested that audience members can find benign moral violations to simultaneously “elicit laughter and amusement in addition to disgust” (McGraw and Warren). While the act of psychological distancing can help explain the show’s use of humor to deal with real trauma, notions of benign moral violations can help better understand controversies that have surrounded the series.

Authorial Intent: Real World Controversy

Co-creator Tina Fey is not new to controversy surrounding her comedy, with the writer/actor being labeled a misogynist for a joke made at the expense of Taylor Swift during the 2013 Golden Globes, and her long-running workplace comedy, *30 Rock* facing similar scrutiny. While only questioned superficially by critics at the time, *30 Rock*'s episode catalog on Peacock and syndication has been edited to scrub the series of multiple instances of blackface. Jane Krakowski, who also stars in *Kimmy Schmidt*, was featured in two separate episodes in race-changing makeup, and John Hamm (also starring in *Kimmy Schmidt*) appears in two live episodes of *30 Rock* satirizing the series *Amos and Andy*. In a statement issued to the public in 2020, Fey notes that “intent is not a free pass for white people to use these images,” backtracking on her previous defense that the episodes were meant to highlight contemporary racism, while also acknowledging problematic racial stereotypes/tropes (Adalian).

This about-face comes five years after Fey faced similar criticism for race-related jokes in *Kimmy Schmidt*. In the second season of the series, after Jacqueline (Jane Krakowski) divorces her husband and loses her fortune, the audience is offered a subjective look at her upbringing. Fans were shocked to find that Jacqueline is actually indigenous, and left home at a young age after bleaching her hair, donning blue contacts, and denouncing her cultural heritage. Forced to confront her past and the disappointment she has thrust upon her parents, Jacqueline—mostly for comedic value—reclaims her ancestry by dismantling the Washington Redskins football team. In response to criticism of racism – some even referencing the *30 Rock* controversy – Fey set a “goal to not explain jokes,” noting that “we put so much effort into writing and crafting everything, they need to speak for themselves” (Boboltz). Fey goes on to note that “There’s a real culture of demanding apologies, and I’m opting out of that” (Brog). This unwillingness to apologize, though temporary, was written into the second season of the series.

Directly referencing critics of both *30 Rock* and Jacqueline's storyline in *Kimmy Schmidt*, the third episode of the second season features Titus (Tituss Burgess) playing the role of a geisha in a theatrical production. The play is also meant as a not so thinly veiled reference to a controversial rendition of *The Mikado*, an 1855 Gilbert and Sullivan opera put on by an all-white Seattle theatre troupe in 2014. The internet quickly turned on the production, which was filled with white cast members donning yellow-face and black wigs. In the episode of *Kimmy Schmidt*, Titus's play is based on his belief that he was a geisha in a former life. The diegetic Asian-American community, and quickly the Internet, turn on the actor. Rather than ending the episode with Titus acknowledging his racist blunder, the storyline wraps up with the community and Internet resigning itself to the fact that Titus's play is not mocking Asian culture, but rather celebrating it, and his critics are the ones in the wrong. The group harassing Titus, Respectable Asian Portrayals in Entertainment (the acronym, R.A.P.E.) fully acknowledge that they are merely caught up in "offense culture," seemingly blinded by how beautiful the play is – a larger metaphor for the psychological distancing happening in the show itself.

Similar critiques have been lodged with romantic lead character, Dong Nguyen, a Vietnamese immigrant who delivers Chinese food, speaks only broken English, and has a penchant for math. Most criticisms of Dong are met with acknowledgment that the character brings Asian-American visibility, since so few Asian men are cast as romantic leads. While a more holistic view of characterization within the series better explains Dong's representation, it certainly does not excuse potentially harmful stereotypes. Integral to the series is the notion of outsidership, after all, even Kimmy herself (a white, cisgendered woman) is an outsider due to her past trauma. Male characters within the series find themselves placed on either side of a dichotomy wherein they are empathetic outsiders, or villainous cisgendered, white, wealthy men.

Titus is a gay, Black man trying to make it in show business, and Dong is an extremely kind-hearted individual who accepts Kimmy as she is, baggage and all. In contrast, Reverend Richard Wayne Gary Wayne is a charming sociopath and sexual predator, Julien Voorhies (Jacqueline's husband) is a philandering husband who neglects his children, and Logan Beekman (Kimmy's former boyfriend) is a wealthy Wasp who gets Dong deported when he feels romantically threatened.

Asian-American critic Kat Chow feels that much of the success of *Kimmy Schmidt's* likeability lies in the empathetic anchoring of characters like Titus and Dong and challenges criticisms surrounding the series' depictions of Asian stereotypes. Chow doubts that "viewers who have qualms with Dong would have been satisfied if he'd been written as a sort of anti-stereotype — a Don Draper-esque smooth talker" (Chow). This would be particularly difficult to digest given that Reverend Wayne (ironically played by Jon Hamm, whose most famous role is that of ad man, Don Draper) already possesses those attributes, and the audience is meant to see him as the series' antagonist. It is also suggested that questions surrounding stereotypes should be viewed on a more macro-level, noting that such condemnations of Dong's characterization would not be so insistent if there were more frequent and diverse depictions of Asians in mainstream media (Chow). Dong's representation is particularly important to the maintenance of the series' cheerful and hopeful aesthetic, as he is in America to find a better life for himself. Himself an outsider, Dong loves everything about New York, and is often more aware of pop culture-related jokes within the diegesis than Kimmy herself. With regard to the Reverend, his character is simultaneously ignorant and arrogant, creating a critical distance that helps make his actions more digestible, while also leading to a charismatic character whose ability to win over a

jury with a guitar and a smile speaks to larger societal issues with cisgendered white men in power.

Cinematography and Mise-en-Scène

The pilot episode features Kimmy adorned in hot pink pants, a flowery shirt, her purple Jansport backpack, and a yellow cardigan with butterflies; Kimmy is visibly distinct from the people she passes on the streets of New York City. Newly freed from the bunker, she is fully embracing the world she thought had ended, and the fifteen years she has lost are rendered visually on the screen. Already 29 years old, Kimmy stops for a glitzy pair of light-up Skechers sneakers before being confused by automatic faucets and hand dryers, treating the subway like an amusement park ride, visiting a playground, and bingeing on candy for dinner. The trauma she has endured for the last fifteen years is hidden under the guise of arrested development and an enchantment with all the ways the world has progressed in the last decade and a half. While Kimmy is a master at evading her own mental health, the series establishes a repetitive generic norm wherein Kimmy is a harbinger of guidance, frequently helping her friends make the right choice, even when she cannot do that for herself.

Normally covered in a wash of high key lighting, the series' cinematography and mise-en-scène works to create a vibrant setting for Kimmy's new life. The series' three seasons rarely feature episodes taking place at night. This choice seems deliberate when considering that Kimmy spent fifteen years in a dimly lit underground bunker with no access to sunlight. During the pilot episode, Kimmy and her fellow molewomen shield their eyes from the sun as they are rescued from the bunker, and the series maintains a daytime setting until the twelfth episode of the first season, when the mole women revisit the bunker during Reverend Wayne's trial. The

portion of the bunker that the women occupied is little more than a dirt floor with cement walls and a small overhead light that is powered by the women running a hand crank 24/7.

The mole women's bunker wardrobe consists of braided hair and neutral colored, floor length, long-sleeved dresses (stereotypical to modest dress associated with the Mormon church). Kimmy's world and clothing after leaving the bunker juxtapose the colorless life she endured for fifteen years (Figure 28). While the bright hues reflect Kimmy's desire to escape the drabness she endured for so long, the colorful diegesis also suggests Kimmy's attempts to reclaim her lost teen years and her psychologically arrested development. Despite paying the lion's share of the rent, Kimmy is confined to a closet in her apartment with Titus, but she welcomes the space not only because it is her own, but because she decorates it with the same vibrancy as her clothing. Frequently desiring images from the past as a coping mechanism, Kimmy frequently thrifts items from the streets of New York, a sentiment shared by Titus, whose love of all things past, such as his cassette tape collection, is largely due to monetary causes. Regardless of their lack of income, Kimmy and Titus create a visually rich apartment with a maximalist design that serves as a symbol of both Kimmy and Titus' personalities.



Figure 28

Deviating from traditional sitcom tropes, the series is not filmed in front of a live studio audience, does not feature a laugh track, utilizes a single-cam style (as opposed to multi-cam), and frequently films on location. The realism offered by filming at NYC landmarks is often contradicted by the series' more videographic elements, including the opening credit sequence. In a first season episode entitled "Kimmy Rides a Bike!" a charlatan masquerading as a cycling instructor asks the entirely female cast to "find their bliss" via a happy place in the mind. Unsurprisingly, Kimmy's "zen space" is a Lisa Frank style cartoon beach, foreshadowing more animation to come in the second season. As Kimmy embarks on her therapy journey with Andrea (Tina Fey), we learn that Kimmy developed a coping mechanism while in the bunker via a "happy place," that features the protagonist as a Disney princess, surrounded by woodland friends. Upon first foray into Kimmy's subjective happy place, cartoon Kimmy can be heard singing "When I'm feeling sad or mad and wish that I were dead, I hide inside my mind and sing a happy song instead!" (*Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* S2 E10). As the song continues, the audience can notice that the woodland creatures singing along are important characters from Kimmy's life, such as the other mole women, Titus, Lillian, and her mom.

Concerned about Kimmy's coping mechanism, Andrea pushes Kimmy to embrace her repressed memories, transforming her happy place into an animated hellscape. After a cartoon Reverend Wayne enters the forest, Kimmy and her friends rip him and her fairy godmother/mom to shreds, as cartoon blood splatters the camera lens. Kimmy accuses Andrea of "breaking her happy place," before self-actualizing and realizing that she suffered mental trauma long before her time in the bunker, most notably at the hands of her neglectful mother. This subjective look into Kimmy's psyche contrasts with previous access the audience has been offered, which

usually revolves around brief glimpses at life in the bunker, but fits more in line with depictions of Kimmy's sentient purple backpack named Jan.

Screwball Comedy: Puppets, Cartoons, & Original Songs

Kimmy's Jansport bag is at once a symbol of her lost childhood and home to her limited physical possessions in the pilot episode. Filled with the money she received from the government, Kimmy is devastated to lose Jan in the pilot while at a nightclub, but the relief she feels at finding her bag and its contents (aside from the money) shows that the backpack holds special meaning for the protagonist. Throughout the first and second seasons, Jan is anthropomorphized as a singing, dancing puppet. Symbolically, Jan represents Kimmy's childlike imagination, which kept her and her other mole women alive during her time in the bunker. In the episode, "Kimmy Meets an Old Friend!," Kimmy contemplates dumping a rock filled Jan in the Hudson River after a children's book she wrote is rejected by Random House. Kimmy explains, against Jan's protests, that she is an adult now, and must let go of her past. A phone call from a child who found, and loved, *The Legends of Greemulax* (Kimmy's book), spares Jan's "life." Anthropomorphized Jan returns in the final season of the series to attend Kimmy's wedding, and it is revealed that Kimmy's husband, Prince Frederick (Daniel Radcliffe), can also talk to Jan, conveying that he is, in fact, Kimmy's soulmate.

Returning to notions of psychological distancing, the series utilizes puppets again for its Mr. Frumpus storyline. In the first episode of the third season, "Kimmy Gets Divorced?!", Titus auditions for *Sesame Street*, after Kimmy alerts him that the series has moved to HBO. At his audition, Titus must interact with the character Mr. Frumpus, who is being operated by *Sesame Street* producer, Lonny Dufrene. Seemingly nailing his audition, Mr. Frumpus, who appears as an older white man, propositions Titus for sexual favors in return for a job on the show. He tells

Titus while locking the door: “Before you get something you want, you have to do something reeeeeally hard...Come on, let’s do this, my pill’s kicking in!” (*Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* S3 E1). Titus rebuffs Mr. Frumpus’s advances, and in keeping with sitcom norms, comes to a revelation about his own love life and boyfriend, noting that status and money are not necessary to earn love. Not foreseeing the way in which the #MeToo movement would erupt months after the episode was released in 2017, the episode gained notoriety for its critique on the entertainment industry and its audition practices.

Mr. Frumpus returns in the eighth episode of the fourth season, titled “Kimmy is in a Love Square!” Ronan Farrow, a journalist credited with relaunching the #MeToo movement in 2017, also appears in the episode, calling Titus to do an interview about his experience with the puppet. While on the phone with Ronan, we revisit that day with Titus, seeing additional, upsetting interactions between the actor and puppet. Clearly traumatized by his experience, Titus becomes nervous and hangs up on Ronan. Later in the episode, when discussing his PTSD with Kimmy and Lillian, we once again revisit that day with Titus, as he admits that he “touched it,” referring to Mr. Frumpus’ tiny felt penis (which is, in fact, shown onscreen). Titus exclaims, “I touched it, okay! I touched it, and I still didn’t get the job” before exclaiming, “I don’t want to be defined by that one horrible day” (*Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* S4 E8). Speaking from her own experience, Kimmy assures Titus that while no one should be forced to tell their story, she thinks it is important that he does. Unconvinced, Titus turns on the television to find that victims of sexual assault are being invited to perform a Broadway number at the upcoming Tony Awards and fully acknowledges that he is a victim that must tell his story.

Before Titus can cash in on his moment, an excerpt on *Fox Kids News* reveals that Titus’ rival, Coriolanus, beats him to the punch and is being ripped apart by the media. With Mr.

Frumpus being labeled “an American hero,” Coriolanus is branded nothing more than a fame-hungry actor looking for his big break. After an episode full of soul searching, and encouragement from his ex-boyfriend, Mikey, Titus comes to Coriolanus’ defense and shares his experience with Ronan. His interview saves Coriolanus’s image, but does little to advance Titus’s own career, though it does start the process of winning back his true love, Mikey. When discussing the initial Mr. Frumpus storyline, co-creator Robert Carlock notes that the series always had a goal of avoiding placing characters in current events: “When we conceived of the show, we never thought we would tell topical stories” (Watkins). The series tapped *Sesame Street* alumni, Bill Barretta, who, despite his initial hesitation, decided that the series is “so far-fetched,” his initial qualms with offending his alma mater dissipated.

In an interview that speaks to the series’ psychological distancing through its fantastical narrative and aesthetic, with the puppeteer claiming: “I thought, [*Kimmy Schmidt*] is so farcical in nature and silly and fun” (Watkins). As the #MeToo movement began to pick up traction on social media, and more actors and actresses began to come forward, Carlock and Fey had to come to terms with their initial authorial intentions (or lack thereof) changing. In an interview, Carlock notes: “As journalists started to do all the hard work and a lot of other people came forward with a lot of courage, we realized, well, that’s the *premise* of the show, and it would be strange not to start telling those stories” (Watkins). Speaking to the season four, episode eight scene, Carlock notes “This is a puppet, but *people* do this. How do you get to a place where your brain thinks that this is okay? Hopefully, you have all those emotions at once when you when you look at that little orange tube” (Watkins) (Figure 29). Commenting on the insidiousness of sexual assault, the episode highlights the fact that while Mr. Frumpus, the puppet, goes down for his crimes, his puppeteer is never accused of any wrongdoing.



Figure 29

While the series' use of puppets and animation is an important aspect to its subjective storytelling, so too is the show's reliance on original musical numbers. While Carlock maintains that the writers' room did not aim to put characters in real-world situations, the opening credits to the show, created by The Gregory Brothers, directly relates to the group's famous series, *Autotune the News*. Responsible for several viral videos, The Gregory Brothers got their start in the early 2010s by autotuning political pundits and news stories to make it seem as though those featured are singing. *Kimmy Schmidt*'s theme song revolves around an autotuned newscast from the pilot episode, wherein a witness to the molewomen's release notes that "females are strong as hell" (*Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* S1 E1). The man responsible for the viral interview, Walter Bankston (played by Mike Britt), appears throughout the series, warning other characters of the dangers of fame and virality. The character of Bankston, it turns out, is based on real-life man, Charles Ramsey, who was responsible for rescuing three young girls from a cult/kidnapping situation years prior to the show's premiere.

The real-life childhood images and videos of the series' actors flash on the screen as the auto-tuned song plays, and the viral video of Bankston and the molewomen appears. The digital scans of images and home video from the actors' pasts offer a sense of realism that the series itself lacks. The opening sequence also sets the groundwork for one of the series main themes, which is: what happens after you have gone viral? Kimmy's earwormy Disney-esque song in her animated happy place serves as another important moment of subjective musicality, successfully conveying Kimmy's proclivity to idealize her life inside her mind. In a vein more similar to the musicality of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, the series parodies Beyoncé's hit song and video "Hold Up," from her award winning *Lemonade* album in the third season episode entitled, "Kimmy's Roommate Lemonades!."

Creating a song entitled "Furiosity," Titus envisions an entire music video in his mind, with his own personalized lyrics, upon seeing that his boyfriend Mikey has moved on from him. Opening with the spoken word lines, "I tried to change, to be sweeter, prettier, less...gassy," a giddy Titus adorned in a golden dress, can be seen taking a bat to various items lining the streets of NYC as he sings, "Hell no, I ain't playing with you, Michael, Uh uh, I ain't fooling with you, Michael...what's worse being heartbroke or roach bits, heartbroke or roach bits?" (*Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* S3 E2). This access to Titus's subjectivity not only offers cultural relevancy (via Beyoncé) and comedy (via the redone lyrics), but also allows the audience to better understand Titus's heartache, a fact that he hides from Mikey for the remainder of the third season. As much as the series' original intention was to avoid real-world issues, the series instinctually references reality through topical cultural references, political commentary, and its continual treatment of trauma.

Interactive Endings

On May 12th, 2020, the series released the one-off special episode, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. The Reverend*, which featured an interactive narrative. Previously, the show aired a series finale on January 25th, 2019, that successfully wrapped up the serial storylines for its main ensemble of characters, including protagonist Kimmy Schmidt. The fourth series wrapped up with Kimmy a successful young adult author, Titus is famous and married to Mikey, Lillian is a noteworthy activist in the community, and Jacqueline is a well-respected talent agent. In the special, years have passed, and the friends are still in each other's lives, prepping for Kimmy's upcoming wedding to a prince. One character not addressed much in the season four finale was the Reverend, who is still serving his prison sentence. In the interactive episode, Kimmy, after sifting through Jan (her backpack) finds a book that helps her realize that the Reverend had a second bunker of girls.

The episode features the same bright, highly stylized aesthetic as the main series, but the characters' appearances now reflect their new stations in life. Kimmy, still adorned in bright colors and prints, dresses like an adult, trading in her light-up Skechers for flats and heels. Titus still dresses eclectically, but now in name brand clothing that he can finally afford with his successful acting career. Kimmy's adult wardrobe reflects the closure she found in the season four finale, leaving the viewer to make choices for a strong, self-possessed, and actionable Kimmy. The special, despite standing alone, requires a serial accumulation of character knowledge on behalf of the viewer to make choices that are in-line with those that would be made by the characters themselves. This necessitates that the first four seasons of the series successfully created a strong sense of character alignment and attachment, according to Jason Mittell, and explained earlier in this dissertation.

Timing-wise, the episode premiered at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced lockdowns beginning in March of 2020. With the majority of society confined to their homes, 2020 saw the rise of ‘comfort TV,’ as noted by critics such as Danielle Turchiano. Seeking a form of escapism, Turchiano suggests that viewers were seeking out television as a means of “self-soothing and coming down from the stresses of their workday and the global news cycle. In times of self-isolation, familiar voices of beloved characters can become even more important, especially if one’s loved ones are miles away” (Turchiano). By the end of March 2020, “consumption of non-linear content via internet-connected devices, such as smart TVs and other multimedia devices, rose week after week in March, hitting its peak the week of March 23, 2020” (Nielsen Research). With so many viewers turning to streaming and watching on digital devices, the interactive special’s release had perfect timing.

Similar to the way in which the series had a penchant for calling attention to artifice and acknowledging its use of generic sitcom tropes, the special maintains consistency by calling attention to its interactivity. Throughout the episode, the viewer is allowed to make low stakes choices for various characters that have the potential for high stakes consequences (Figure 30). For example, when given the option to cut to the chase or engage in small talk with the Reverend in prison, the latter choice finds Kimmy watching the Reverend hit his head and die before she can figure out where the other bunker is located. While the interactive element of the episode gives the viewer a heightened sense of agency, ‘wrong’ choices, such as the one mentioned above, prompt the screen to turn to black while a character from the series stands before the screen to tell you that you made the wrong choice and should try again. The episode simultaneously acknowledges the artifice of the ‘choose your own adventure’ format, while also maintaining the series’ diegesis by not having anyone break character.



Figure 30

After watching through the episode twenty times, making different combinations of choices, critic Sam Adams claims that there are twelve potential endings for Kimmy and her friends (Adams). The episode promotes multiple viewings by the fact that one particular ending features the phrase “you win!” plastered across the screen for the viewer. This winning ending features Kimmy getting her happily ever after by saving the women from the Reverend’s other secret bunker, and then marrying her prince. The agency associated with the episode, as well as the suggestion that there is a right and wrong way to engage with the episode’s options suggests a referentiality to video games. Borrowing from ludic theory, Sara Cole’s *Identity and Play in Interactive Digital Media* suggests that “video games are participatory and active, which requires analysis of text and of the narrative unfolding within play experiences” (Cole 95). Cole goes on to note that “player contribution to play is the distinguishing factor” in video games, an argument that does not hold up against the interactivity and viewer contribution to this episode of *Kimmy Schmidt* (Cole 95). The series’ willingness to take advantage of the era of convergence of digital

media, as well as the exigence of the pandemic, speaks to further issues in creating a medium specific methodology, while also acknowledging the fluid nature of what constitutes television programming.

Final Thoughts

Ending this dissertation with a chapter on streaming is intentional, as it is the direction that television is headed. While scholars and critics continue to grapple with how we define television as a medium in today's fractured media landscape, these two series discussed in this chapter represent the ways in which platform original series can simultaneously take advantage of the affordances of streaming, while also still recognizing the benefits of more linear television programming. For example, the fact that *The Boys* is released on a weekly basis harkens back to more traditional modes of television distribution, but its graphic content represents the potential that a non-FCC regulated distribution channel can offer. While *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* released entire seasons at one time, the series finale features a choose-your-own adventure option that would not be possible on broadcast television. Insisting that viewers watch the episode on an internet capable device, the episode calls attentions to the possibilities that streaming has to offer with regards to viewer engagement.

Through satire, both series also offer biting social commentary on contemporary society and media. With distinct visual styles that call attention to artifice, both shows also rely heavily on an aesthetic of excess that highlights the subjective trauma being explored by their respective narratives. These series also help to raise important questions surrounding the continued use of terms such as cinematic and videographic when discussing television series, particularly when digitally filmed series are simultaneously employing VFX with more traditional cinematography.

Furthermore, despite operating on streaming platforms and being produced side-by-side with films, both series rely heavily on both episodic and serialized narratives.

Conclusion

The series featured in this dissertation suggest that since 2000, serial television has been more willing to embrace non-normative perspectives, while also privileging increasingly complex characterizations. While previous definitions of excess style, such as that defined by John Caldwell, suggest a commodification of the image or style free from narrative or character-driven consequences, the featured grouping of series argues for reconsideration. Across network, basic cable, premium cable, and streaming, series are utilizing style as a means of presenting experiences and perspectives to viewers that they would otherwise not be able to access. Likewise, stylistic excess is helping shows to create a distinct aesthetic that helps them simultaneously create a consistent internal logic, while also distinguishing themselves from a continually growing queue of viewing options.

The long-form nature of serial television suggests a need to create a vernacular that frees television programming from being defined as vacantly excessive, or one that can only be defined derivatively in cinematic terms. It is worth noting how seriality impacts not only production of these series, but also their distribution, given our current era of convergence and prioritization of streaming. With long-form storytelling comes the benefit of exploring complex characters at a depth not granted by the temporal constraints of film. However, the long-form nature of television also presents its own obstacles with regards to maintaining a particular visual style in the long term, while also preserving a steady audience against an increasingly fractured landscape. As this dissertation argues, one of the ways the programs analyzed overcome these obstacles is in their ability to create intentionally motivated stylistic excess that also privileges non-normative perspectives in an aesthetically immersive manner.

While contemporary depictions of trauma, mental illness, disability, and addiction are not free from criticism, they appear more readily on television than ever before. Such depictions do not escape stigmatization, but the series presented in this dissertation argue that there is a growing trend towards stories that portray non-normative perspectives in a way that demands further discussion. For our purposes, non-normative perspectives include real-life situations such as addiction, mental illness, Alzheimer's, and physical/mental trauma. These are perspectives that affect a minority of the general population and whose depictions on television help to offer an experience that the audience may not otherwise find in the media. Likewise, non-normative perspectives can also include traits such supernatural abilities that no human will ever experience, therefore, we rely on fictionalized subjectivities to make these experiences come to life. Regardless of whether the subjectivities explored in previous chapters are fully grounded in reality or not, their aesthetic explorations offer insightful commentary on not only contemporary social issues, but also the human condition.

Notions of collective trauma traditionally position media (television in particular) as a holding environment for important social and political conversations. After 9/11, scholars like Lynn Spigel began to note the way in which television has struggled to discern what the American populace was looking for as broadcasters attempted to wipe the medium clean of violence and trauma, while also noting a newfound distaste for comedic distractions (Spigel). While Spigel's work looks at how depictions of nationalism against a singular enemy united the public through television, more contemporary discussions have also looked at the rise and popularity of the serial killer in mass media. In *Serial Killers in Contemporary Television: Familiar Monsters in Post 9/11 Culture*, Christine Daigle and Brett Robinson argue that the events of 9/11 triggered a very real obsession with the human perpetrators responsible. Deviating

from notions of the other that are often explored as a distancing technique within the horror genre, contemporary programming has fed audience's post 9/11 fascination with understanding the human psyche and acts of violence.

It can also be argued that as this fascination with violence and the psyche has grown, so has an appreciation for larger conversations surrounding lived experiences and the human condition. Previously taboo topics such as addiction and mental illness have become more engrained in our cultural discussions, thanks to the advent of social media in the early 2000s. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit have allowed for individuals' inner-most thoughts to be shared with the world at the click of a button, finding solace and understanding in a global community. It only makes sense that first generation media such as television begin to follow suit by addressing such topical conversations. While television has always operated as a cultural litmus, reflecting the time within which a series is produced, such discussions are often featured in singular "special" episodes. What makes the series addressed in this text so distinct is the manner in which they have engrained non-normative perspectives into their larger aesthetic, further informing their narratives and characters.

Through concepts like John Caldwell's televisuality, these series utilize stylistic excess to offer viewers the opportunity to experience otherwise inaccessible subjectivities. Concepts of collective trauma and chosen trauma have existed within psychology since the early Seventies. First theorized in 1972 in response to a natural disaster, collective trauma helps to explain the way in which a group, community, or society at large experiences a shared traumatic event, and how they work to construct meaning from said trauma. This theory helps explain how society, and in turn our media, respond to events like 9/11, as well as the recent COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in 2020. In contrast, the theory of chosen trauma is more selective and finds a

population working to generate meaning through transgenerational trauma. Considered a collective traumatic experience of those living today, 9/11 is also a chosen trauma, in that those who were not even alive to experience the event are asked to experience the trauma on the anniversary each year. So, why are these definitions important to the series presented in previous chapters?

As mentioned earlier, television has always been a social and cultural litmus, reflecting important discourses of its historical moment. With that in mind, the medium has served as a holding environment of sorts, or a place where sensitive subject matter and experiences can be explored from a safe psychological distance. This is not to argue that television acts as a purely therapeutic space—as it prioritizes entertainment first and foremost—nor is this dissertation arguing that these series are the first to offer subjectivity on the screen. Instead, the eight series presented use the subjectivity we have come to expect from visual media to emphasize non-normative and even deviant perspectives, allowing audiences the chance to access a world beyond their own experience or find an experience that mirrors their own. These series also use stylistic excess in a manner that not only distinguishes them from a vast programming landscape but is also intrinsically tied to notions of narrative and character subjectivity.

Chapter Recap

United under the guise of broadcast television production standards, ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-) and NBC's *Hannibal* (2013-2016) appear superficially divergent but share common themes surrounding the rendering of abnormal/non-normative subjectivities. Itself a play on the original *Gray's Anatomy*, Dr. Henry Gray's illustrative medical books from the 1850s, *Grey's Anatomy* brings the same level of spectacle as its namesake, with much of the series' visual excess involving the site of the physical body. Most episodes of the series follow

an episodic/serial format, wherein there is a “case of the week” for the surgeons to complete. In order to meet the expectations set forth by the medical drama genre, the series has a certain obligation to maintain a sense of realism that is grounded not only in human anatomy, but the ethical realm within which Meredith Grey operates. While the series does offer fantastical storylines, such as unexploded IEDs inside a chest cavity or multiple patients impaled on the same pole after a train derailment, one way in which the series helps to differentiate itself is its use of the body as a source of stylistic excess. Along with subjective perspectives that give insight into the mind of Meredith, the audience is also offered a firsthand experience when the camera takes on the viewpoint of various surgeons, offering a first-person perspective of the surgical field. For those outside of the medical profession, this is a perspective not readily accessible.

Along with the excess provided by visual renderings of the body, the series also offers subjectivity through Meredith and her assumed battle with hereditary Alzheimer’s. Included in this journey are subjective views of Meredith’s struggle with her mental health, which could be a larger symptom of forthcoming neurodegenerative condition. Although seemingly divergent on the surface, *Hannibal* shares *Grey*’s affinity for treating the body as a site of excess, but with far less concern for realism and a greater emphasis on artistry. Used as a method of psychological distancing from the series’ heavy use of violence, fine art aesthetics are employed when rendering the bodies of victims, with some scenes directly referencing particular tableaux from famous paintings of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. While this fine art aesthetic is engrained into the series visual style, narrative, and even its characters (Hannibal himself is an aesthete), it can also be related to the series placement on NBC, a major broadcast network. In order to meet particular rules for standards and practices, as well as FCC ratings, the series’

artistic flare serves almost as concealment for its more gratuitous violence, allowing for more room to convey the true depravity (and artistry) of Hannibal Lecter.

It is rare for the series to actually show Hannibal in the act of killing, instead, our subjective perspective usually involves a POV shot while Hannibal is cooking, with the implication that he is serving up a portion of his latest victim. The show's stylistic excess not only highlights the deviant behaviors of both Hannibal and Will Graham, but also allows for a particular level of psychological distancing by likening its most violent scenes to fine art. While Hannibal leans more toward a deviant and depraved subjectivity, the subjectivity offered on behalf of Will shortens the psychological distance by acknowledging Will's placement on the spectrum. While not offered as an excuse for his own preoccupations with death, POV shots combined with aural cues help simultaneously convey Will's innate gift to take on others' subjectivities, while also acknowledging the dangers that come with such a skillset. *Hannibal's* aesthetic blurs the lines between protagonist and antagonist by allowing viewers to take-on deviant perspectives, while the aesthetic of *Grey's Anatomy* grounds itself in a realism that highlights the complex system that Meredith must navigate as she tries to do right by her patients.

Utilizing the affordances offered by loosened cable standards for content, CW's *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019) and FX's *Legion* (2017-2019) both utilize aesthetic excess as a means of conveying mental illness. For *Crazy Ex's* Rebecca Bunch, musicals are her coping mechanism for a traumatic childhood and her adult battle with borderline personality disorder. Through a series of misguided romantic relationships, strained friendships, an abusive mother, and misdiagnoses, Rebecca clings onto life by seeing the world in a series of theatrical performances. The artfully crafted sets and costumes highlight the series' use of original songs that offer further

insight into Rebecca's state-of-mind. Ultimately, the series' visual excess is used by Rebecca herself as a technique to distance herself from the pain she is experiencing, as well as a tool for understanding a world she feels she does not belong in. Forced to take on Rebecca's unique outlook, the audience must sympathize with Rebecca's unique subjective experience, helping to lessen the negative impact of some of her more problematic choices. Just as important to this experience and the show's aesthetic, is the series' employment of sound, as its original score references and parodies contemporary songs and contingent events. In this regard, the series is firmly rooted in our contemporary moment, in contrast to *Legion*, which engrains temporal ambiguity into its aesthetic.

Protagonist turned antagonist David Holler presents the first series that utilizes a "superhuman" perspective. This means that the show's subjectivity must render a fictionalized experience in a way that makes it feel real to the audience, leaving the creators to determine what this abnormal experience would look like if it were real. To help ground this subjectivity in reality, David spends his life thinking he is schizophrenic, and once he finds out he has superpowers, their symptoms very much mimic those of schizophrenia. The way David's mind and memories are rendered are just as visually elaborate as real scenes of the series, both worlds sharing an ambiguous style that makes them difficult to place in a particular time period. This temporal displacement blurs the lines between reality, David's memories, and his hallucinations, pulling the viewer further into the protagonist's own delusional perspective. Like Rebecca, access to this subjectivity is necessary to help the viewer remain aligned with David once he ascends into his more villainous form. Both David and Rebecca offer unique subjective experiences that help better explore themes of mental illness in ways that show the darker side to

illness, while maintaining the emotional distance that the other series in this dissertation also possess.

In the history of television studies, HBO holds a special place as the network that helped to push the boundaries of what could be shown on the small screen regarding graphic content. Despite over a decade of time elapsing between the two series discussed, *Carnivàle* (2003-2005) and *Euphoria* (2019-) both fit HBO's consistent network identity with the former series demonstrating one of the earliest examples of the trend towards non-normative subjectivities. Unlike *Legion*, which grounds its supernatural subjectivity under the guise of mental illness, *Carnivàle* anchors Ben Hawkins' supernatural abilities in historicity and biblical themes. Operating simultaneously as a visual backdrop and character foil, the Dust Bowl, as a historical event, imbues every aspect of the series with visual and historical excess. Through its aesthetic, the series transports its audience to the 1930's Great Plains and relies on a particular sense of historical realism in its production, utilizing historians as executive producers and imposing historic images into its visual storytelling.

This sense of historical realism itself is non-normative, as viewers of the series would not have been alive to experience the time-period firsthand—at least not in the target demographic. The series' realism also helps to ground its penchant for biblical themes, iconography, and hallucination. Chosen as an Avatar, instead of suffering from any sort of mental illness or physical disease, Ben's subjectivity is informed by the trauma associated with poverty and his supernatural abilities, which have haunted him since childhood. While no audience member will feel the weight of the world's fate on their shoulders the way that Ben does, there is a relatability in his subjectivity, as seen through explorations of his memories and childhood. This exploration

of a subjective past is shared by *Euphoria*, though in a much more realistic and contemporary manner.

Suffering from multiple mental illnesses and active addiction, Rue Bennett offers an unreliable subjectivity where reality and fantasy converge in nearly undistinguishable ways. Due to the near constant nature of Rue's subjectivity, every aspect of the series is touched by Rue's altered mental state. To convey Rue's subjectivity, the camera fluctuates between POV shots and obscure, non-traditional angles that require modifications during the production process. With an emphasis on a young, ensemble cast, wardrobe and makeup are used to explore the ever-changing interiority of each character. These shifts and changes in physical appearance help clue the viewer into any given character's state-of-mind, as well as how much time has elapsed in a particular episode or slew of episodes. When considering notions of non-normative subjectivities, the series' largest praise comes in the way in which it renders Rue's obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, and addiction visually and aurally. For those unfamiliar with such disorders, the way they inform the show's aesthetic demands that viewers take-on Rue's affliction alongside her, regardless of age, ethnicity, or mental health. The show's excess, which includes depictions of sex and violence, as well as its cinematography and mise-en-scène, does not glorify the way the characters live, but rather highlights the skewed way that those in active addiction or suffering from mental illness can see the world around them.

Exempt from FCC oversight and the traditional constraints of broadcast and cable standards and practices, Amazon Prime Video's *The Boys* (2019-) and Netflix's *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-2019) push the boundaries of excess by attempting to resist gratuitous representations of trauma. To help avoid the pitfalls of gratuity with regards to depictions of sex and violence, series creator Eric Kripke ensures that the graphic content of the series serves

larger narrative and character-driven purposes. Contrary to the myth of the unflappable superhero that we see represented in the Marvel and DC franchises, *The Boys* offers subjective looks at extremely traumatized men and women who have been forced into “herodom” against their will, resulting in various levels of deviancy in adulthood. While characters such as Homelander are fully positioned as villainous, the series’ use of subjectivity forces audiences to acknowledge that all villains are created, and that the way Homelander was raised and the abuse he suffered is reflected in his lack of morality. The graphic, and at times absurdist, nature of the series’ aesthetics helps to create a certain level of cognitive distancing as audience members make connections between characters/situations within the series’ diegesis and those in real life. A similar level of psychological distancing can also be seen in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, though it serves a slightly different purpose.

Throughout the series, Kimmy herself is in denial about the trauma she endured while held captive in the bunker and often uses humor and her imagination as means of distancing herself from her past experiences. The audience is forced to take on this cognitive distancing when we enter Kimmy’s mind filled with animated woodland creatures and her talking backpack. Generically and aurally, the series indirectly comments on contemporary social issues to hint at Kimmy’s sexual abuse and childhood trauma while also relying on comedy to help create enough critical distance to allow viewers the ability to still find humor in the sitcom. Through allusion, comedy, an original soundtrack, and a brightly colored aesthetic, the series begs audiences to simultaneously acknowledge its themes of trauma, while also denying their presence just enough to still find humor in the way in which such situations are presented. Loyal viewers are rewarded for taking on a trauma informed perspective in the final season, as Kimmy finally acknowledges, verbally, the severe trauma she has endured. It is worth noting how

important genre is to *Kimmy Schmidt*, as the series' placement in reality lacks the same level of fantasy as *The Boys*, whose diegesis itself creates a sense of psychological distancing.

Critical & Theoretical Obstacles

Since the convergence era began in the mid-Nineties, scholarship within television studies has struggled to agree on several matters. Most notably, a clear historical timeline delineating the medium's history is constantly under debate, with scholars disagreeing about how many golden ages TV has experienced, and the timeframes they encapsulate. Likewise, there has been a growing disagreement over how we define the medium itself. Historically tied to the home via a physical box, the medium has strong ties to femininity and the domestic sphere that still remain difficult to shake. Given its domestic origins, television has long been associated with distracted and interrupted viewing, a perspective that was challenged by the introduction of more complex narratives in the Eighties and Nineties. Previously demarcated from film by notions of liveness, the shifts in the medium presented by DVR technologies in the late Nineties, and streaming in the mid-2000s forced critics and theorists alike to question how they defined television in more medium specific terms.

Cord cutting and a push towards streaming on mobile devices has further forced the medium away from its earliest definitions, making medium specific methodologies increasingly difficult to develop. Likewise, a contemporary conflation between film and television productions, an influx of filmic talent to television, and the placement of series and films side-by-side on streaming platforms helps explain the critical application of cinematic concepts to contemporary serial programming. However, as noted in this dissertation, there is a growing push from critics and series creators, such as Eric Kripke, for an acknowledgement of the institutional and industrial factors that impact television production, and in turn, its aesthetic and

narrative forms. While theorists like Jeremy Butler and Jason Mittell have called for more medium-specific means of discussing television style, a theoretical waiting game has ensued, with scholarship largely failing to take on such a task with a medium in constant flux.

Future Research & Final Thoughts

Looking forward, I wish to see this research continue its attempt to clearly define the notion of intentional excess explored in these chapters, as well as additional contemporary examples of its employment. The goal of such clarity would be to better understand how aesthetics are being used by series to create distinct aesthetic identities in an extremely competitive field. It is also worth considering how we define television under the current concept of convergence, particularly whether television can still be localized as a medium, or if it is more readily defined by its production, distribution, and viewing practices. Given the fact that the film industry has been changed by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in an increase in home viewing, the domestic sphere no longer seems a defining characteristic of the television medium. Likewise, mobile devices have changed the way audiences consume not only television, but written text and film, as well. Therefore, the long-form storytelling and creation of serial aesthetics seems more important than ever. I would like to see future research better understand how seriality can help better elucidate potential routes for defining a medium specific framework that leaves behind television's past emphasis on liveness and reconstructs what the medium's current ebb and flow looks like with streaming in mind.

Another point of interest is a closer examination into the role that serial aesthetics play in the creation of referential meta-commentary on current social, cultural, and political activities. Given the rise in series that privilege non-normative experiences, it seems necessary to further explore how television is using aesthetics to transgress previously stigmatized topics and create a

space for meaningful discussion and commentary to take place. Such readings, however, depend upon not misreading aesthetic excess as an empty vehicle for a self-consciousness of style. With terminology clearly defined, it is possible to better understand how contemporary series are acknowledging artifice and using an excess of style to provide direct commentary on present day social structures.

Along with explorations of non-normative perspectives through subjective informed aesthetics, the eight series presented offer greater insight into the current state of the television medium. By organizing series by mode of distribution, disparities in production practices are highlighted, and the mutual impact between production and aesthetics can be emphasized. As television continues to progress towards a more ala carte, streaming-based landscape, the fourth chapter offers the most realistic look at what the medium can offer with regards to distribution and content. Free from the traditional confines of outdated ratings systems, it can be argued that the future of television will continue to occupy itself with notions of excess. However, as these shows convey, this excess serves larger narrative and character-driven purposes.

As this trend of subjective, aesthetically-driven series continues, the potential to tell previously marginalized and restricted stories continues to grow. For those, such as myself, whose lives have been in some way touched by trauma, addiction, mental illness, or disease, the offering of such subjectivities can create meaningful conversation. In this regard, television as a medium can continue to operate as a holding ground for non-normative perspectives that make them more accessible. In the same regard, the medium's longform storytelling can also create rich worlds wherein perspectives beyond the human experience can be accessed and enjoyed as though they are firsthand.

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