Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dún Laoghaire

Department of Design and Visual Arts

Postmodern Television for the Gen Z Audience:

The Appeal of *Euphoria* and *Stranger Things*

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Submitted to the Department of Design and Visual Arts in candidacy for the Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Design for Stage and Screen 2023

Faculty of Film, Art and Creative Technology

Statement of Academic Integrity / Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dún Laoghaire in partial fulfilment for the BA (Hons) in Design for Stage and Screen. It is entirely the author's own work, except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

In this thesis I will discuss the elements of the television shows *Stranger Things* (2016) and *Euphoria* (2019) that categorise them as examples of postmodern television: their mixing of genre conventions and filmic styles, engagement with nostalgia and historiographic metafiction, and most of all their heightened use of intertextual referencing in both allusion and explicitly in-text.

I will examine how both series use these elements to reflect our postmodern culture – they extensively break down the boundaries between the mediums of film, television, gaming, art, and music and explore how closely the culture of mass media intertwines with 'youth culture' and impacts those growing up under its influence. This is done both within the texts themselves, whose narratives revolve around teenagers whose lives are inextricable from the media landscape they live in, and through the invited interaction with the texts, as the shows demonstrate significant awareness of the trans-medial tendencies of their demographic – a generation of young digital natives.

Using theories of postmodernism put forward by Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson and Linda Hutcheon, this thesis will explore how *Stranger Things* and *Euphoria* have captured the attention and approval of the internet generation by reflecting their experiences (both positive and negative) of growing up in the current mass media landscape. Both *Stranger Things* and *Euphoria* show how young people use media to define themselves, to construct their realities and to communicate with each other.

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Introduction

'Postmodernity refers to the state of culture where media is produced in such staggering quantities that it has crossed the boundaries into reality itself and hyperreality prevails'

- The Media Insider, 2022

We live in a cultural landscape which is saturated by mass media. Via the digital technologies that have become an inextricable part of our daily lives, we are confronted with a 24-hour cycle of media content which is virtually inescapable. Cultural theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson have long defined this era of mass media consumption as 'postmodernity'.

Baudrillard and Jameson's concept of 'postmodernity' refers mainly to Western society and culture, and while the development of the internet and other forms of international mass-media distribution have certainly contributed to what many consider 'cultural globalisation' – 'the homogenization of cultural differences across the planet' (Kraidy, 2002) – the complex nature of this globalisation and its impact on different cultures is part of a wider, ongoing discussion in international and intercultural communications studies (Kraidy, 2022). As such, this thesis focuses solely on the 'West' and refers to the society, culture, media, and demographics of Europe and those countries closely linked to Europe through colonization and emigration – the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

Jameson, in his book *Postmodernism, Or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), describes postmodernity as a mass-media-driven culture which has come about as a natural result of the capitalist logic of our society. Capitalism demands that everything be commodified – art, music, film, etc. – and our culture revolves around the consumption of

these commodities (Jameson, 1991, p. x). The messages that we receive from mass media have become so ingrained in our minds that Baudrillard argues we have entered a state of 'hyperreality'. In his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard describes postmodernity as the current point in time in which media images are so ubiquitous that they are replacing our notions of reality. We have been bombarded for so long with so much media imagery that simulates reality (from the internet, movies, TV, games, ads, etc.) that we as a culture have internalised the signs and codes of these simulations as reality itself. In turn, we create new media which simulate these simulations instead of what they originally represented, so that over time the images and concepts appearing in our media are further and further removed from reality, becoming fun house mirrors pointed at each other until the reflections are no longer recognisable. Baudrillard describes this concept as 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal… It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.' (1981, pp.1-2).

We have internalised the signs and symbols developed from decades of mass-media culture to the point where our ability to recognise their artificiality has been eroded. For example, our concepts of historical figures or events are so dictated by media representations that we have come to perceive those representations as truth. Think of the modern cultural concept that accompanies the word 'princess' - it has more connection to fictional Disney characters than to any living or historical daughter of a monarch (*The Media Insider*, 2022).

 Jonathan Bignell points to the films *Apocalypse Now* (1979)*,* and *JFK* (1991) (both dramatized accounts of historical events) as examples of how, in postmodern culture, 'linear time, cause and effect, and the difference between real and representation become

unsustainable', so that film representations become more real to us than the factual accounts of the events they claim to describe (2000, p.66).

Bignell describes in *Postmodern Media Culture* (2000) how this is one of the factors contributing to an effect of postmodernity which is referred to as the 'end of history' (pp.65-70). He cites both Jameson (p.65) and Baudrillard (pp.65-66) in outlining postmodernity as a condition in which history has seemingly ceased to move forward. Jameson argues that our postmodern culture has flattened out the historical past by commodifying and consuming it in the present, resulting in an era which feels as though it has reached 'the end of a historical trajectory' (Bignell, 2000, p.66), 'an epoch in which representations, forms and aesthetic codes from the past are perpetually reworked in the present' (Bignell, 2000, p.65). This can certainly be seen in the current landscape in how the media and aesthetics of certain periods seem to cyclically resurge in popularity – in fashion trends, in the never-ending cycle of reboots, remakes, and new installments of old series and franchises, in the popularity of 'retro' or 'pastiche' media mimicking aesthetics of bygone decades. This reflects a mass media culture rooted in nostalgia which lacks progression or innovation and turns instead to its own history for material. According to Bignell: 'contemporary culture has ceased to move forward, and the past is being perpetually recycled in the present' (p.66).

Baudrillard and Jameson first published their seminal works on postmodernism in 1981 and 1991 respectively, before visual communication technologies such as the internet and social media were as widespread and integral to society as they are today. The internet became available to the public in 1993, and the launch of Facebook in 2004 coincided with emergence of what is known as 'Web 2.0', 'an internet with emphasis on social networking and content generated by users' (Kahn and Dennis, 2023). The first iPhone was released in 2007, and according to *Encyclopedia Britannica* the introduction of smartphones led to an

explosion in the number of Internet users worldwide, 'from about one sixth of the world population in 2005 to more than half in 2020' (Kahn and Dennis, 2023).

If Baudrillard and Jameson's concept of 'mass media culture' was a television in every household, then how far has unlimited and handheld access to all the media of the world pushed us into (or past) what they deemed postmodernity?

Generation Z, born between the mid-90s and early 2010s (Turner, 2010), have never known a life without the internet. They are digital natives, the first humans in history to experience the effects of growing up in a culture entrenched in digital technologies. They are a generation of test subjects, and the results of the experiment are only now being documented. In a 2010 study, 2000 Americans between the ages of 8 and 18 were surveyed on their media usage (Rideout et al.). The report found that Generation Z youth were exposed to media consumption more than to any other activity besides sleeping, with 8 hours total of electronic multimedia use daily. A study by Horowitz Research (2022) found that virtually all (98%) of 13- to 24-year-olds report having a smartphone and using it every day or almost every day. Gen Z habitually absorb information from multiple screens and multiple platforms at once – they may have Netflix on the television while they research something on their laptop and simultaneously check their phone for notifications. This has led to a massive expansion of multitasking behaviours in Gen Z and, as a result, to 'continuous partial attention' (Turner, 2015). As such, Gen Z is trying to keep up with a constant stream of information by paying partial attention to lots of things at once (Firat, 2013). They are voracious consumers of media content – according to Deloitte's 2018 'Digital Media Trends Survey', Gen Z watches a total of 38 hours of video content per week. The survey also found that 70% of Gen Z households subscribe to paid streaming services, with an average of three streaming subscriptions per household. However, Generation Z media habits are showing more

equalised preferences between gaming, music, engaging on social media, and streaming TV or movies – the latter of which was by far the top preference for the preceding generations, Millennials and Gen X (Deloitte, 2021). According to Deloitte: 'As media companies vie for consumers, the next wave of disruption may lie with Generation Z', who are challenging the dominant position that video entertainment has held (2021).

Attention is a more important commodity than ever - the explosion of digital media platforms means that media producers must now compete for our increasingly limited attention (Goldhaber, 1997). For Gen Z, this attention is clearly divided between TV, movies, gaming, music and social media, making it difficult for any singular entertainment product or piece of media to break out in popularity amongst an overwhelmingly vast sea of content. It is becoming more and more rare to identify a universal mega-hit – a 'song of the summer', or the one movie or show that absolutely everybody is talking about – because there's simply too much out there. With on-demand streaming beating out cinema, live TV, and broadcast radio, we have lost the feeling of communality that came with watching or listening to the same things at the same time and having certain pieces of entertainment as shared social reference points. Kyle Chayka writes about the demise of this kind of media 'monoculture' in his article 'Can Monoculture Survive the Algorithm?' (2019), observing that 'if monoculture depends on this feeling of watching together, then streaming makes it more difficult to establish'. Chayka describes how we now create communities and environments online in which to consume and discuss media, to make up for the loss of the widespread sociality of 'watching together' felt during the broadcast era. In order to gain mass popularity and social relevance, shows now rely on generating this kind of online public discourse (Chayka 2019). When something does arrive that is so pervasively popular that it enters into monoculture, it is because it has somehow breached the boundaries of its medium of television and become

'trans-medial' – convergent with different forms of media such as social media, music, film or gaming – thus achieving virality in online spaces.

There are two significant examples of recent USA television shows which have embraced the trans-medial preferences of the Gen Z audience and as such have become cultural sensations: Netflix's *Stranger Things* (2016) and HBO's *Euphoria* (2019). Both series blur the boundaries between mediums by including aspects of cinema, literature, gaming, art, fashion, and music, effectively capturing Gen Z's scattered attention on all fronts. They demonstrate 'a hyperawareness of the qualities of the web 2.0 audience' (Mollet, 2019), generating massive amounts of engagement on social media and dominating popular Gen Z sites such as YouTube and TikTok, thereby gathering enough influence to affect the music charts, as well as fashion and beauty trends amongst young consumers.

Why have these shows in particular captured the imagination of Gen Z enough to become cultural touchstones? I will argue that it is because they embody the 'hyper-postmodern' (Wee, 2005) nature of Gen Z culture, reflecting their experiences in both content and form. Both shows exhibit the common attributes and stylistic qualities of what is considered 'postmodern' film and television. I use 'postmodern' here to refer to the art movement, which can be identified by 'a self-aware playfulness with the codes of a form or a medium' (Bignell, 2002, p.169), achieved through the mixing of genres and conventions, through parody or pastiche, and through intertextual references to both high art and popular culture. Postmodern television relies on the media literacy of the viewer 'so that intertextual references can be recognized and their connotations made part of the characters or the narrative's meaning' (Bignell, 2002, p.171). Media literacy is already essential for Gen Z in their online, media-saturated lives; the codes and references of media are a part of Gen Z language as familiar to them as speech, making postmodern television a form that reflects their habitual modes of

communication. Both *Stranger Things* and *Euphoria* reflect the tendency of young people to adopt the language of popular media into their vernacular – the teenage characters use copious media references as short-hand when communicating with each other, to the extent that their conversations are sometimes incomprehensible to the adults in their lives.

In Chapter One I will discuss the characteristics present in both *Stranger Things* and *Euphoria* that categorize them as examples of postmodern television – their playful mixing of the conventions of different genres and their heavy use of intertextuality. Beyond that, I will argue that both series exemplify what Valerie Wee terms 'hyper-postmodernism', which Wee argues is the next stage of postmodern media, categorized by its heightened use of intertextual referencing that appears in-text, and geared toward a younger and even more media-literate audience.

In Chapter Two I will discuss how the 'hyper-postmodern' aspects of both series are what has made them so popular amongst the Gen Z audience. As Wee (2005) explains, hyper-postmodern texts aim to create a trans-medial experience that reflects and embraces how young people consume media in the postmodern world – in vast quantities and across multiple platforms simultaneously. I will discuss how *Euphoria* and *Stranger Things*' use of trans-medial collages and intertextual references reflect the overwhelming, maximalist experience of life in the postmodern media landscape, as well as how mass media consumption has catapulted the lives of their teenage characters into Baudrillard's 'hyperreality'. I will argue that although *Stranger Things* is a series that seems rooted in the past, it resonates with Gen Z for a similar reason to *Euphoria* – because it demonstrates how in the postmodern era, mass media is the frame of reference through which we understand our world. I will discuss *Stranger Things*' relationship to the media of the past, which represents the postmodern 'end of history', and use it to analyse the Gen Z audience's nostalgia for a

time they never experienced. The mixing of references from decades' worth of music, cinema, and art seen in *Euphoria* also points to this 'end of history' and the undercurrent of nostalgia that can be observed in Gen Z's aesthetic and musical preferences.

Chapter One: Postmodern and 'Hyper-Postmodern' Television

1.1 Genre Mixing and Intertextuality

In 'The Scream Trilogy, "Hyper-Postmodernism," and the Late-Nineties Teen Slasher Film' (2005), Valerie Wee identifies the first phase of postmodern film as 'the first tentative attempts at envisioning the impact of new technologies of mass communication and information processing on the structure of narrative' (Collins, 1993, p.262). Wee summarizes the key elements belonging to this early phase of postmodern film as including 'intertextual referencing, a propensity for ironic or parodic humour, as well as textual and generic mixing' (p.46). Similarly, Bignell (2002) associates postmodern television with 'a self-aware playfulness with the codes of a form or a medium' (p.169), and Woods (1999) describes postmodern television as exhibiting 'many of the features which dominate all other forms of postmodern culture' (p.197), for example: 'Frequent borrowings and slicings, a relentless intertextuality and the pillage of other genres… pastiche and a reworking of pop culture, an effacement of history, and the dissolving of boundaries between high and low art' (p.197).

By these definitions, both Netflix's *Stranger Things* (2016) and HBO's *Euphoria* (2019) undoubtedly classify as postmodern television series. As I will demonstrate, both series borrow extensively from existing media, employing the conventions of film genres and referencing the texts of popular culture.

Mollet (2019) points to how *Stranger Things* contains a blend of the generic conventions of 1970s and 80s; the series is a combination of science fiction, horror, fantasy, mystery and coming-of-age teen drama. *Stranger Things* is up-front about its influences, a patchwork quilt of homages and references ripped from different pieces of famous 70s' and 80s' media. In a

review of the first season, Scott Mendelson describes *Stranger Things* as 'an unabashed rip off of any number of beloved genre classics (*E.T.*, *The Thing*, *A Nightmare On Elm Street* etc.) to the point where each episode should come with a works cited page' (2016). Many fan websites and articles have, in fact, put together their own 'works cited' lists for each season and episode of the show. (See the *Vulture* article: 'A *Stranger Things* Glossary: Every Major Film Reference in the Show, From A–Z', or *Wired*'s interview with the Duffer Brothers 'Every Movie Referenced by *Stranger Things*'.)

Set in the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana in 1983, the first season of *Stranger Things* centres around the mysterious disappearance of a young boy named Will Byers which leads his family and group of friends to discover secret government experiments, a portal to a supernatural realm and a young girl with telekinetic powers. *Stranger Things*' heavy use of generic mixing and intertextuality is apparent from the first episode. When a scientist in a hazmat suit runs from an unseen but audible monster through a 'Kubrick-ian' corridor with flickering lights, it is reminiscent of the 'unseen terror' of the dinosaurs hunting in Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) (Mollet, 2019). The scene in which Will is abducted by the alien monster can be linked to the abduction of Barry in another of Spielberg's classics, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). *Close Encounters* also features a mother's quest to find her alien-abducted son and a parent driven to seeming madness with the knowledge of the supernatural. This is mirrored in the character of Joyce Byers, Will's mother in *Stranger Things*. In another intertextual reference, the show's pilot flashes back to Joyce surprising Will with tickets for them to see the horror film *Poltergeist* (1982) together. After he goes missing in another dimension, Joyce finds she can communicate with Will through the walls of her house, echoing a similar scene from *Poltergeist* (Mollet, 2019).

Perhaps one of the show's most frequently referenced films is another Spielberg classic, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). When Will's best friends Mike, Dustin and Lucas find a young girl named Eleven who has escaped from a secret government testing facility, Mike secretly harbours her in the basement of his home, just as Elliot, the protagonist of the Spielberg film, does with the alien E.T. In an attempt to make Eleven 'blend in' at their school, the boys give her a makeover in a scene that clearly references E.T.'s makeover at the hands of Elliot's sister Gertie. The influence of E.T. on Eleven's character is underlined when Eleven telekinetically lifts a van into the air so that she and the boys can escape the government agents on their bikes - a visual reference to the famous bicycle sequence in Spielberg's film (Mollet, 2019).

Fig.1 Left: *E.T.* (1982) Right: 'Holly Jolly', *Stranger Things* (2016)

The imagery of the boys (and Eleven) on their BMX bikes is frequent throughout the series. Scenes of them investigating throughout the town and exploring the surrounding forest on these bikes evoke images of 1980s' childhood freedom that we have come to recognise from classics such as *E.T*, *The Goonies* (1985) and *Stand By Me* (1986). As Mollet (2019) observes, 'The characterization of the boys' friendship group has its roots in the children's ensemble narratives of the 1980s'.

Fig.2 Left: *Stand by Me* (1986) Right: 'The Flea and the Acrobat', *Stranger Things* (2016)

While the show leans heavily on 1980s' horror and sci-fi tropes, the storylines of the tween and teen-aged main characters also echo the classic themes of the 'teen' or 'high school' movie genre, such as group friendship dynamics and budding first relationships, and contain some of their most common tropes, for example the transformative 'makeover' (Driscoll, 2011, p.2), seen in how the boys update Eleven's look to appear more feminine, the 'love triangle', as seen between the older teens Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan, and the rite of the school dance, as seen in the second season finale's 'Snow Ball', where the series 'again shows a willingness to break down the barriers between film and television as the songs played are instantly recognizable from John Hughes' significant contributions to the 1980s teenage film paradigm' (Mollet, 2019). Hughes is well known for capturing the 1980's teen generation in films such as *Sixteen Candles* (1984) *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Pretty in Pink* (1986). These films became classics of the genre, defining the social hierarchies and high school cliques (the queen bees, the jocks, the rebels, the nerds etc.) now so prevalent in teen film. These archetypes and social dynamics are echoed throughout *Stranger Things* – Will and his friends both embrace and bemoan their status as 'geeks', and Nancy is the a popular girl secretly admired by the loner outcast (Jonathan) despite her jock boyfriend (Steve). *Stranger Things* demonstrates its hyperawareness of the teen genre by referencing its

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'high school drama antecedents through shot re-enactments, character similarities [and] plot mirroring'. (Mollet, 2019) This seamless cross-integration of genres is integral to the narrative structure of S*tranger Things*. As Bady (2016) writes:

> The many different characters in the show actually inhabit different genres: the show is a monster fantasy for some, a sci-fi conspiracy mystery for others, plus overlapping shades of the teen coming-of-age drama, horror movie, mother's quest to find her lost child, sheriff's battle with his past demons in a quest for redemption, the outcast's search for sociality, etc, etc.

Stranger Things' tells the story of its main characters through a mixing and analysis of the genres, styles and tropes of 1980s pop culture. These stylistic homages to the films of the 1980s can be considered what Jameson (1991) calls 'pastiche'.

Pastiche is defined by Mambrol (2016) as an homage to past styles, a mimicking of the 'manner or characteristics of a particular literary work, genre, or author'. Described by Jameson (1991) as 'the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture' (p.65), pastiche is considered central to postmodern film and art as it demonstrates the overabundance of media and the apparent end of new stylistic invention, where 'the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past' (p.65). Jameson connects the 'omnipresence of pastiche' in postmodern media to the phenomenon of 'historicism' – 'namely the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion' (p.66), which points to the postmodern consumers' 'appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself' (p.66). Both Baudrillard and Jameson attribute the postmodern fascination with pastiche or 'retro' media to a nostalgic longing for a false past due to a lost sense of history, a topic which I will discuss further in chapter 2.

Jameson borrows the term 'historicism' from the realm of architecture, where it is used to describe the 'eclecticism of postmodern architecture, which randomly and without principle but with gusto cannibalizes all the architectural styles of the past and combines them in overstimulating ensembles' (p.66). As Mambrol (2016) points out, 'pastiche literally means to combine, or "paste" together, multiple elements. Pastiche, thus, can be seen as a representation of the chaotic, pluralistic, or information-drenched aspects of postmodern society.' This chaotic combination of media elements – the stitching together of the conventions and styles of different decades and genres – can also clearly be seen in *Euphoria*. *Euphoria*, like *Stranger Things*, uses frequent quotation, genre mixing, and intertextuality to tell the stories of its media-saturated teenage characters.

Euphoria follows seventeen-year-old drug addict Rue Bennet and her social circle of suburban L.A. teenagers, including cheerleaders Maddy and Cassie, their more introverted friends Kat and Lexi, and new girl Jules. The series' teens deal with mental health issues, sexuality, and addiction, all while navigating the turmoil of their interpersonal relationships. While *Euphoria's* teenaged main characters are intended to reflect the realities of Gen Z youth today (and they therefore contrast the teens of *Stranger Things'* romanticized 1980s in that they deal with the much darker and more realistic issues of current times) teen narratives in *Euphoria* still contain the hallmark tropes of the teen genre. The classic trope of the 'makeover' which transforms a shy, awkward girl into someone suddenly viewed as attractive is given a contemporary update which reflects Gen Z's postmodern hyper-self-awareness: when Jules makes over Rue in the Season One finale, she remarks: 'I like the way I dressed you, but I'm worried I fucked with your gender expression.' Kat also attempts to carry out this transformation on herself through an abrupt style change in Season One Episode Two, when she begins to wear more rebellious and revealing clothing in order to

alter both her public and her self-image. The teen trope of the love triangle can be seen both

in Season 1 between Rue, Jules, and the mystery boy Jules is messaging online, and in

Season Two in the fraught relationships between Cassie, Maddy, and Maddy's ex-boyfriend

Nate. *Euphoria*, like *Stranger Things*, also echoes many other teen dramas by including a

pivotal school dance in a season finale.

Fig.3 Left: 'The Gate', *Stranger Things* (2017) Right: 'And Salt the Earth Behind You', *Euphoria* (2019)

Like *Stranger Things*, *Euphoria*'s core teen drama narrative is interwoven with the

recognisable codes and stylistic qualities of other film and TV genres. For example, *Euphoria*

includes multiple allusions and references to the classic gangster films and crime dramas of

Martin Scorsese, incorporating many of the director's iconic cinematic techniques to emulate

similar depictions of violence and substance abuse. Bramesco (2019) points this out in a

Vulture article titled '*Euphoria* is High on Scorsese's Supply': '*Euphoria* adopts many of

Scorsese's methods in pursuit of his same artistic goals, employing a hyperkinetic style to

communicate the seductive quality of moral deformity'. This observation is echoed by

Sherlock (2022), who names *Euphoria* 'the *Goodfellas* of teen drama', stating that Scorsese's

'magnum opus' is the best stylistic comparison to the show: '[*Euphoria*] shares many stylistic

hallmarks with Scorsese's 1990 masterpiece: dark humour, fourth-wall breaking, fast-paced

nonlinear storytelling, soundtrack needle-drops, kinetic cinematography, scattershot editing, and voiceover narration.' Scorsese is known for his use of frenetic camera movements – whip-pans, close-up zooms, tracking dolly shots – to convey the constant motion and fast-paced lifestyle of his crooked, and often high, characters. Creator Sam Levinson utilizes similar techniques in *Euphoria's* high-school hallways and underage house parties: 'In *Goodfellas*' case, the rapid pacing captures the hectic nature of a life in organized crime … *Euphoria* uses the same lively techniques that Scorsese used to shake up the stale gangster genre to spruce up the well-worn teen drama genre' (Sherlock, 2022).

The opening sequence of Season Two's first episode gives the audience the long-awaited back-story of kind-hearted drug dealer Fezco. The sequence is a direct homage to Scorsese's gangster films, featuring the same track used in the famous 'cocaine-fuelled helicopter sequence' from *Goodfellas* (1990) – 'Jump Into The Fire' by Harry Nilsson (Danikillwolf, 2022). It follows Fez as he is raised into a life of criminal activity by his grandmother, played by Kathrine Narducci, whose casting is a bit of intertextual referencing and genre homage of its own as the actress also had roles in both Scorsese's gangster epic *The Irishman* (2019) and HBO's iconic crime drama series *The Sopranos* (1999). *Euphoria*'s relationship to Scorsese's gangster films is highlighted in the video essay 'Euphoria loves Cinema' by Danikillwolf (2022) – an in-depth examination of *Euphoria*'s stylistic homages and intertextual references to various films and movements from cinema's history, from 1920s' silent films to 1950s' musicals, 1990s' crime thrillers to early 2000s' indies. *Euphoria*'s hyperawareness of the language of film is apparent throughout the series and is expressed through cinematographic and lighting techniques, music cues and even exact shot replicas lifted from the works of auteurs such as Scorsese, Gaspar Noé and Krzysztof Kieślowski.

While the above mentioned homages and intertextual references certainly display a veneration for the images of film history and pop culture classics, *Euphoria* is far from an uncomplicated celebration of media consumption, as one might say of *Stranger Things*. In fact, *Euphoria* often utilises media referencing and intertextuality to critically comment on the experience of the contemporary teenager in a culture of mass-media, a practice aligning with what Hutcheon (2002) considers 'postmodernist parody'[1].

While Hutcheon agrees with Jameson that a 'rummaging through the image reserves of the past' (Hutcheon, 2002, p.89) is central to postmodernism, she argues against his dismissal of all 'quotation[s] of past forms' as merely shallow, 'decorative' reproductions which flatten out historical context and are lacking of any satirical impulse (p.90). Hutcheon takes a less negative stance than Jameson, believing that postmodern imitation can also be used in an ironic fashion to critically comment on contemporary society. She differentiates this kind of critical imitation and intertextuality, which she calls 'postmodernist parody', from Jameson's notion of postmodernist pastiche:

> I do not want to suggest that there is not a nostalgic, neoconservative recovery of past meaning going on in a lot of contemporary culture; I just want to draw a distinction between that practice and postmodernist parody. The latter is fundamentally ironic and critical, not nostalgic or antiquarian in its relation to the past. (Hutcheon, 2002, p.94)

Examples of 'ironic citation' (Hutcheon, 2002, p.90) which align with Hutcheon's theories of postmodern parody can be seen throughout *Euphoria*.

In two surreal sequences of Season One's seventh episode, Rue acts out a parodic imitation of 1990s detective thrillers, emulating the 'hard-boiled detective' stereotype typical of the genre

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[1] The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'parody' as 'an imitation of the style of a particular writer, artist, or genre with deliberate exaggeration for comic effect'.

(complete with suspenders, cigarettes, dark under-eyes, and a rookie partner in the form of Lexi), to piece together the mystery behind Jules' and Nate's recent suspicious behaviour. Rue is equating her sudden, intense hyper-fixation on finding out the truth with the single-minded focus of Morgan Freeman's genius detective characters, when in actual fact she is in the midst of a manic episode caused by her bipolar disorder. Pape (2019) notes the aptness of this comparison: 'anyone who's intimately familiar with manic episodes will tell you that they have an odd clarity, as if all the threads of the world were suddenly comprehensible and connected.' *Euphoria*'s 1990s crime-thriller genre imitation therefore achieves more than simple homage – by 'linking that aspect of mania to a vintage "cop on the edge" narrative' (Pape, 2019), *Euphoria* depicts the experience of a manic episode the way that Rue, a teenager immersed in the signs and codes of media and film language, would describe it.

Fig.4 Left: *Se7en* (1995) Right: 'The Trials and Tribulations of Trying to Pee While Depressed', *Euphoria* (2022)

In Season Two Episode Three, another parodic sequence explores how Lexi likes to imagine her life as a television series through the mimicking of a behind-the-scenes production documentary, with cast interviews and shots of Lexi directing scenes of her family life from behind the monitor. This sequence, while played for comedic effect, explores Lexi's detached experience of her own life. This seems to comment on the dramaturgical consciousness of the

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postmodern teenager, who exists at all times in relation to a camera lens - either behind it or in front of it. Lexi's imaginary seat in the director's chair reflects Gen Z's commitment to the documentation and structuring of all of life's events as if they were a fiction unfolding for the consumption of others. Lexi's view of herself as an outside observer, watching life through a camera monitor, results in deep feelings of dissociation from events and alienation from her family. I will discuss the heightened self-reflexivity and metatheatricality of Lexi's directorial fantasies, which are expanded upon in later episodes of Season Two, in the next section of this chapter.
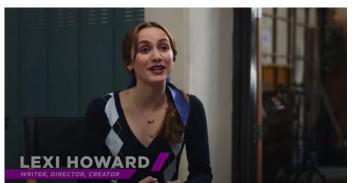

Fig.5 'Ruminations, Big and Little Bullys', *Euphoria* (2022)

While *Stranger Things*' loving homage to all things 80s can be categorized as postmodernist 'pastiche' as it demonstrate a fascination with, and uncritical celebration of, the media images of the past, *Euphoria*'s use of intertextuality and genre imitation in the above sequences can be considered what Hutcheon terms 'postmodernist parody', as they provide an ironic, humorously critical commentary on the characters' thoroughly postmodern hyperconsciousness of media, and their tendency to view their lives and experiences through a dramaturgical lens.

As I have shown in the examples above, both *Euphoria* and *Stranger Things* are built on a framework of cross-generic and intertextual references and, as such, can be classified as what Jameson (1991), Hutcheon (1989, 2002) and Denzin (1991) considered postmodern works. However, as we shall see, these series also exhibit many new characteristics, adapted to the advanced state of postmodernity specific to our current internet age. These characteristics expand on the ideas of postmodern media for a new age and generation, placing the series in the category of what Valerie Wee calls 'hyper-postmodern' (2005).

1.2 Hyper-Postmodernism: Heightened Self-Reflexivity and Media Awareness

Valerie Wee (2005) classifies 'hyper-postmodernism' as a later phase of postmodern film she notes as appearing in the late nineties (p.44). Wee identifies hyper-postmodernism in the cult slasher trilogy *Scream* (1996, 1997, 2000) in its 'heightened degree of intertextual referencing and self-reflexivity that ceases to function at the traditional level of tongue-in-cheek subtext, and emerges instead as the actual text of the films' (p.44). While the references of previous postmodern films merely made allusions, passing winks and nods to other texts, the intertextual references of the *Scream* films are overt and integral parts of the text that are crucial to the plot and characterisation in each film: 'referencing in the *Scream* trilogy is distinctive because it is not restricted to occasional, passing allusions confined to the level of subtext. Instead, a significant proportion of the intertextual referencing in the Scream films functions as text' (p.47). In *Scream* (1996), the teenage characters being stalked by a serial killer attempt to solve their predicament through overt discussion and analysis of the teen slasher genre. They view their situation through the lens of the horror media they have consumed, showing a kind of awareness of the fact that they themselves are

in a horror movie. As Wee points out, 'the films consist of multiple sequences in which characters engage in self-conscious, highly self-reflexive, sustained discussions and commentaries on the nature and conventions of the genre itself' (Wee, 2005, p.47). This self-reflexive, in-text hyperawareness of genre can also be seen in both *Stranger Things* and in *Euphoria*.

In *Stranger Things*, the boys 'obsessively and self-reflexively discuss other media texts' (Wee, 2005, p.47) to make sense of what's occurring in their own story. The boys of *Stranger Things* are fully immersed in the pop culture of their decade; they are superfans of all popular sci-fi, horror, and fantasy media. Their encyclopaedic knowledge of the *Star Wars* film trilogy (1977, 1980, 1983) , the epic fantasy novel *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkein, 1968), and the fantasy tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* proves vital to their survival and to their ultimate success as it provides a frame of reference which enables them to understand and to name the supernatural challenges they face. When we are first introduced to the boys, they are playing *Dungeons and Dragons*. In the game, their team is battling a monster called the 'Demogorgon'. Later, when trying to explain to the boys where Will has disappeared to, Eleven flips the game board upside down to indicate a parallel dimension, and points to the figure of the Demogorgon to describe the monster that lives there. The boys catch on quickly, naming this alternate dimension the 'Upside Down' and the monster the 'Demogorgon'. The boys' terminology frequently baffles the adults of the story, who haven't been primed by pop culture to so readily accept and understand the sudden supernatural goings-on in their town.

In this way, the children are the best equipped to solve the mysteries at the heart of the show and often harness their intertextual knowledge to discover new information before the adults. The boys 'frequently refer to the rules of D&D' (Mollet, 2019) to make strategic decisions,

just as the characters of *Scream* refer to their knowledge of horror tropes to survive the serial killer. This overt, in-text referencing of external media extends beyond *Dungeons and Dragons* – the boys use textual references from a wide range of media as a short-hand to quickly introduce new concepts or questions to each other. In Season One Episode Three, after discovering Eleven's telekinetic abilities, Dustin asks the others: 'I wonder if she was born with her powers like the X-Men or if she acquired them like Green Lantern?' At various points throughout the series, when suspicious of an outsider's trustworthiness, Dustin exclaims 'Lando Calrissian!' This reference to the famously duplicitous character from *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) needs no explanation as the boys immediately understand that Dustin fears they are about to be betrayed. As Mollet (2019) puts it: 'The characters harness their knowledge to help solve the show's principal mysteries, adding this additional layer of hyper-awareness to the narrative'. The boys live by the rules and conventions they have learned from the sci-fi and fantasy genres, thus the show demonstrates a self-reflexivity 'that goes beyond mere postmodern referencing' (Mollet, 2019). In this way, the hyper-postmodern text does not simply reference other media but is at its core *about* the consumption of media, a 'hyperconscious re-articulation of media culture by media culture' (Collins, 1992, p.335).

The show's constant references to other texts serve to remind the audience of its own fictionality, a technique of narrative self-reflexivity which can also be found in *Euphoria*. Narrative self-reflexivity or 'meta-reference' refers to the ways in which a text acknowledges itself as a text, pulling the audience out of the story by reminding them of its status as a piece of fiction (Waugh, 2002, p.2), and is a common characteristic of postmodern media (Woods, 1999). *Euphoria* demonstrates a hyper-postmodern self-reflexivity through 'a 'heightened degree of intertextual referencing' that emerges as 'the actual text' (Wee, 2005, p.44) of the

series, and which frequently reminds us of the fictionality of the show. The parody of 1990s' crime thrillers that I mentioned previously goes beyond a mere allusion achieved through stylistic cues. Rue directly draws the comparison between her actions and the plots of these films, demonstrating the heightened self-awareness of the show:

> So you know how in every '90s thriller, right, Morgan Freeman plays, like, the same semi-psychic black cop … in every movie, he's always calmly putting the fucking pieces of the case together, while everybody else around him is fucking freaking out, saying, "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about, Morgan" … The point is, that's me … I'm Morgan fuckin' Freeman and this is the beginning of the third act. ('The Trials and Tribulations of Trying to Pee While Depressed', *Euphoria*, 2022)

Another example of this heightened form of intertextual referencing can be seen in Season Two's fourth episode, which opens with Rue reflecting on her romantic feelings for Jules. She speaks directly to the audience in her voiceover narration: 'I don't think you understand how much I love Jules'. Then, in a montage of romantic vignettes, she imagines herself and Jules depicted as various famous couples from art, cinema, and history. She poses them together as John Lennon and Yoko Ono, as Jack and Rose from *Titanic* (1997), as Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore in *Ghost* (1990) and as Rene Magritte's *Lovers* (1928), amongst other examples. These pop culture and media references are instantly recognisable: the show is overtly using intertextuality to relay Rue's internal view of her relationship. We can tell from these references that Rue sees her and Jules' romance as grand and epic, but also as doomed or somehow destined to end, as most of the love stories that Rue places herself and Jules into are tragic ones. This scene demonstrates a self-reflexivity similar to *Scream* and *Stranger Things* in that it shows a character analysing their experience through direct reference to external media. However, the self-reflexivity of *Euphoria* is taken to even greater heights than that of *Scream* or *Stranger Things* in Rue's omniscient narration and

fourth wall breaking, and in the meta-sequences of the final two episodes of Season Two, which centre on a school play written by Lexi about the lives of the main characters.

Fig.6 Left: *Titanic* (1997), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) Right: 'You Who Cannot See, Think of Those Who Can', *Euphoria* (2022)

Fig.7 Left: *John Lennon and Yoko Ono, The Dakota, New York, December 8, 1980* (Leibovitz, 1980), *Ghost* (1990) Right: 'You Who Cannot See, Think of Those Who Can', *Euphoria* (2022)

Rue often breaches the boundaries of the narrative completely by explicitly addressing her own status as a fictional television character. Rue holds dialogues with the audience in which she acknowledges that she is a character in a show that is being watched by us. In the pilot episode, Rue recounts the events of a high-school party she attended but prefaces her retelling with this warning to the audience: 'I'm not always the most reliable narrator.' With this meta-reference, Rue breaks the illusion of the 'reality' of the story by both acknowledging herself as the narrator and by directly telling us that what we are watching is a work of fiction.

In addressing us directly, she is breaking the 'fourth wall'. Originating in naturalist theatre, the 'fourth wall' refers to the concept that between the audience and the stage there exists an invisible, imaginary wall, like a one-way mirror, through which the audience watches the play unfold as if they were watching real events. The convention is that the characters of the play are unaware of the audience watching them on the other side of this 'wall' – we assume that the characters of a traditional narrative text are not aware of us, that their world is contained within the three walls of the set and the imaginary 'fourth wall' we place between us and them (Bell, 2008, p.37). In film and TV, the 'fourth wall' is the screen that we are watching the characters through – the cinema screen, or the TV screen. To break the convention of the 'fourth wall' is for a character to peer *through* the screen and to acknowledge the audience, thus breaking our suspension of disbelief and reminding us that what we are viewing is not reality (Bell, 2008, p.203).

Rue's fourth wall breaks range from small, knowing glances and eyebrow wags toward the camera, to massive meta-sequences in which she completely interrupts the story to put us in a classroom and give us a slide show presentation featuring a step by step guide on how to get away with being a drug addict (*Fig.*9).

Fig.8: Rue acknowledges the camera, 'Out of Touch', *Euphoria* (2022)

The conventions of the 'omniscient narrator' and the 'fourth wall break' are common in postmodern works, but I would argue that what is *hyper-postmodern* about *Euphoria*'s employment of these techniques is how they are used to acknowledge the show as a piece of popular cultural media and to address the structure of the series, Rue's role as a main character, and the audience's reaction to the text – in short, to comment on how we are consuming the story. *Euphoria*'s creator Sam Levinson sums up the hyper-postmodern structure of the show in an interview with *The Los Angeles Times*:

> It feels like the way that we consume stories, or the way that we follow narratives, at this particular point in time is haphazard and meta... It felt like breaking down traditional narratives was the perfect way to tell the story. Breaking the fourth wall [and having a] voice-over that shifts from first-person to omniscient was just part of the DNA of it. (Brennan, 2019)

In the slide-show sequence mentioned above, Rue discusses her relapse (which occurred in the Season One finale) with the audience: 'Now, as a beloved character that a lot of people are rooting for, I feel a certain responsibility to make good decisions. But I relapsed. In all fairness, I did say in the beginning I had no intentions of staying clean, but I get it. Our country's dark, and fucked up...'. At this, we see a short, rapid intercut of news footage, then

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Rue continues: 'And people, they just want to find hope somewhere…'. We then see a quick carousel of images of church services – 'Anywhere. And if not in reality, then in television. Unfortunately, I'm not it.'

Rue is speaking directly here, with visual examples, to the effect of the postmodern media culture on the audience: we are so inundated with media images of all kinds that the lines blur between what is real and what is fiction (Baudrillard, 1981). We are hopeless about the state of the world and turn to media consumption for comfort.

Fig.9: Rue's Meta Presentation, 'Ruminations : Big and Little Bullys, *Euphoria* (2022)

This sequence demonstrates Wee's first identifier of hyper-postmodernism – characters engaging in 'self-conscious, highly self-reflexive discussions and commentaries' on the nature of the text (2005, p.47). Here, Rue engages in an explicitly self-conscious commentary on the desires of the contemporary TV audience as they relate to her character development (or lack thereof), demonstrating how the show's 'circulation and reception [is] worked back into the "text" itself' (Collins, 1992, p.336). This echoes what Wee (2005) notes about the sequel instalments of the *Scream* franchise, which acknowledge their own 'status as popular cultural texts'(p.51).

In the final two episodes of Season Two, *Euphoria* engages in another, more expansive meta-commentary on its own status as a popular series. The episode depicts a school play written and directed by Lexi about her life and the lives of the other *Euphoria* characters. Scenes from the play are seamlessly intertwined with the 'real' scenes of the show, completely blurring the lines between what is real and what is 'staged'. The play is a self-referential mirror of the show itself, complete with caricatures of its main characters, stylised sets, and reconstructions of past scenes. Lexi is a stand-in for the show's creator Sam Levinson: she spends the episode vacillating between a ruthless dedication to her art and an anxious preoccupation with the perceptions of her audience and of potential critics (Seitz, 2022). The episode also reflects *Euphoria's* TV audience, who watch the drama unfold amongst the characters as those characters watch the drama of their own lives unfold upon the stage; Maddy could be speaking for the young *Euphoria* viewers when she exclaims from her seat in the audience: 'Wait – is this fucking play about us?'

Euphoria and *Stranger Things* are far from the only pieces of contemporary media attempting to capture the teenage experience. The teen drama genre is as overloaded as any other in our landscape of media saturation, so why have these two series in particular dominated Gen Z attention in recent years? I believe it is because of their uniquely hyper-postmodern nature, which is reflected both in the structure of these series and in the texts themselves. In the next chapter, I will discuss how the hyper-postmodernism of *Euphoria* and *Stranger Things* is designed specifically to appeal to the Gen Z audience, simultaneously reflecting and exemplifying the mass-media consumption habits of the contemporary teenager.

Chapter Two: Postmodern Media Culture and Youth Culture – The Appeal to Gen Z

2.1 Hyper-Postmodernism: Trans-Mediality

Wee (2005) notes that the characteristics of hyper-postmodernism which she identifies in the *Scream* trilogy came about in large part to appeal to the evolving media literacy and appetites of the mid-1990s teenage demographic. Another of these key characteristics is a propensity for blurring 'the boundaries that once separated discrete media' by 'actively referencing, borrowing, and influencing the styles and formats of other media forms' (Wee, 2005, p.44). Wee notes that the hyper-postmodern text not only references the texts or genres of its own medium (i.e. film or television), but extends its frame of reference to include other media such as music, art, literature and gaming. As I mentioned in the introduction, Gen Z are now consuming entertainment from an even broader range of mediums than their predecessors. As film and television must compete with gaming, music and social media content for Gen Z's attention, the integration of aspects of these other forms of media is vital for a youth-oriented film or series to gain traction amongst its demographic.

Stranger Things engages extensively in this breaking down of trans-medial boundaries in order to appeal to its 'web 2.0' audience. It reaches beyond the medium of television into film, gaming, literature and music, encouraging viewers to identify and explore its wide range of intermedial references (Mollet, 2019). For example, great emphasis is placed on music throughout the text of *Stranger Things* – not only is its synth-heavy score an homage to 1980s' film composers, but 1980s' songs also emerge as key elements of the text. Music

seems to hold mystical powers of protection in the series, with the soundtrack playing a recurring role in saving the characters from supernatural dangers.

The song 'Should I Stay or Should I Go' by The Clash is used to symbolise the relationship between Will and his older brother Jonathan; both boys share a love of the song, and use it in attempts to communicate with each other throughout the series. Will sings the song in Season One when he is trapped in the Upside Down, and plays the song over his cassette player to alert his family to his presence. Jonathan plays the song again in Season Two in order to snap Will out of a supernatural possession. Another 1980s' track plays a life-saving role in Season Four, when Max's favourite song 'Running Up that Hill' by Kate Bush enables her to escape a dangerous psychokinetic villain. *Stranger Things*' in-text use of 'Running Up that Hill' caused it to re-enter the billboard chart and to appear in 2.5 million TikTok videos, demonstrating the reach of the show's trans-medial influence: 'According to Spotify, streams of the song shot up by more than 9,000% after it featured in the episode' (Silberling, 2022).

Music is also a vital aspect of the trans-mediality of *Euphoria,* which similarly breaks down the boundaries of its medium by integrating music (along with many other forms of media, including social media, news media, classical and modern art and animation) into its structure and storytelling. According to Shafer (2022): 'In HBO's "*Euphoria*," music isn't just a supplementary factor to the plot — it's arguably as important as the characters themselves'. This can be seen in the show's episode titles, many of which are named after songs. Beyond these title references, *Euphoria* employs a staggering number of needle-drops throughout the series. Unlike *Stranger Things*, however, *Euphoria*'s soundtrack is wildly diverse, prioritising thematic and tonal relevance over commitment to any genre or era, and reflecting the musical tastes of a generation of Spotify users that have instant access to every song ever made. Coscarelli (2022) describes *Euphoria*'s integration of its soundtrack as 'a TikTokian shuffle

of aural and visual stimuli, bouncing between genres, eras and moods' from 'the underground to the instantly recognizable, the 1950s to the 2020s.'

The songs featured in *Euphoria* also tend to gain huge streaming boosts and viral popularity through sites such as TikTok. Billboard reports that songs featured on *Euphoria* have earned a streaming increase of up to 2,316% (Robinson, 2022). Spotify reports that Sinéad O'Connor's 'Drink Before the War' 'saw a staggering 26,900% increase in streams after it was featured in Season 2 episode 5' (Spotify, 2022).

 Wee (2005) emphasises the importance of music in the trans-medial strategy of the hyper-postmodern film, stating that one of the 'cornerstones' of the *Scream* trilogy's marketing campaign was its music, 'which was tied to the additional publicity (and revenue) that could be derived from releasing the films' soundtracks' (p.53). This is clearly the case for *Euphoria*, which further dissolves the boundaries between television and music through the original score written and composed by British musician Labrinth, containing songs featuring the vocals of lead actress Zendaya. The original songs 'All for Us' and 'I'm Tired' are performed by Zendaya and Labrinth in full-length music-video style sequences on the show. Wee suggests that this inclusion of the stylistic and aesthetic qualities of promotional material such as the music video is a marketing strategy of the hyper-postmodern text (p.52). If so, then it is clearly an effective one: the 'All For Us' sequence, which featured at the close of the Season One finale, has 38 million views on YouTube.

Fig.10 Left: Max is saved from possession by her favourite song, 'Dear Billy', *Stranger Things* (2022)

Right: Rue's 'All for Us' musical sequence , 'And Salt the Earth Behind You', *Euphoria* (2019)

In *Euphoria*, another full-length musical performance is given to singer-songwriter Dominic Fike, who stars as Eliot in Season Two. The casting of Fike, already a popular musician amongst the Gen Z audience, and the inclusion on the Season Two soundtrack of an original song by Lana Del Rey are both calculated inter-medial moves on the part of *Euphoria*'s creators, who are well-aware of the benefits of strong tie-ins to other entertainment mediums. Wee uses the *Scream* franchise as an example of how entertainment companies 'exploited the [teenage] demographic's devotion to multiple forms of media and entertainment by extending the *Scream* experience across a range of other contemporary media' (p.52), including soundtracks, features in youth-oriented magazines, and music videos on MTV. To appeal to a generation consuming increasingly diverse forms of media and entertainment, the content of these teen-oriented texts evolved to contain specific stylistic qualities or sequences that would allow for cross-media promotion, for example musical sequences that could 'be repackaged as promotional music videos [as in *Fig 10*], or stylistically sophisticated images that [could] be used in television trailers or print campaigns' (Wee, 2005, p.52).

Where *Scream* was designed with music videos and magazine spreads in mind to achieve popular status amongst young people, current film and television productions undoubtedly rely on the internet to generate their popularity with the Gen Z audience. As the largest generation on the planet, Gen Z comprise about one third of the world's population (Miller and Lu, 2018), and are therefore a vital demographic of consumers to target.

In order to be successful, current media must display a trans-mediality in order to capitalise on the potential of the internet for widespread promotion amongst Generation Z. This can 'directly affected the nature, style, and aesthetics of the [texts] themselves, as well as the teen audiences' experience of and interaction with those texts' (Wee, 2005, p.52). The new hyper-postmodern texts aimed at the internet generation include baked-in elements that are designed to achieve virality online, such as musical sequences that can be viewed and proliferated as individual pieces on YouTube or Spotify, hidden intertextual clues and references that encourage viewer analysis and online discussion on platforms such as Reddit, heavily stylised aesthetics that can be copied and made into fashion or makeup trends on Instagram and TikTok, or snappy, quotable dialogue that lends itself to meme-ification on Twitter. Both *Stranger Things* and *Euphoria* seem to employ this strategy of 'stylistic and aesthetic excess … directly shaped by marketing and promotional considerations' (Wee, 2005, p.52), as evidenced by their domination of these social media sites. Thus the 'style, content, and aesthetics [of the hyperpostmodern text] are invariably tied to macro-industrial forces' (Wee, 2005, p.58).

This is an example of how 'postmodernism replicates or reproduces – reinforces - the logic of consumer capitalism' (Jameson, 1983, p.125). In *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* (1983), Jameson highlights how the position of contemporary art has shifted within our capitalist, consumer culture. Where modern art was oppositional, 'always in some mostly

implicit ways dangerous and explosive, subversive within the established order', in the postmodern era, art has been completely absorbed by that established order. Art is now central to cultural production – even 'the most offensive forms of [contemporary] art – punk rock, say, or what is called sexually explicit material – are all taken in stride by society, and they are commercially successful' (Jameson, 1983, p.124). Therefore, the message or meaning of contemporary or postmodern text is secondary to its formation as a consumer product. No matter how subversive a contemporary film or television series appears, no matter how sharp the critique of contemporary society, that film or series still exists within the consumer culture to make a profit. As much as *Stranger Things* is a pastiche celebration of 1980s childhood adventure, it is postmodern in that it is designed to keep young people inside and watching Netflix. As much as *Euphoria* is an ironic critique of mass-media culture, it requires its audience to remain hooked on that same media; a key aim of programming a show such as this is, of course, for viewers to keep paying the HBO subscription. The trans-mediality and hyper-stylised aesthetics of both series are features which command the Gen Z audience's attention as habitual media consumers, demonstrating that 'the formal features of [postmodernism] express the deeper logic of late, consumer or multinational capitalism' (Jameson, 1983, p.125).

2.2 Youth Culture, Referencing, and Hyperreality

The intermedial, self-reflexive nature of the hyper-postmodern text was motivated by the increase of new technologies and digital media from the late 1990s on (Wee, 2005, p.51). With many different forms of media (both past and current) now easily accessible and in endless circulation, audiences could consume a wider range of media, and therefore became more literate in the signs and codes of each media form. With the media of all decades and

genres now visible at the same time and on the same platforms, cross-contamination inevitably began to occur, and 'these conditions accelerated the shift toward self-reflexivity and semiotic excess in media texts that revolved around the appropriation and absorption of other popular entertainment texts'(Wee, 2005, p.51). This had a huge impact on the culture of the Western teenager, who was more exposed to technology and, therefore, consuming more media – be it film, television, music, or videogames - than any previous generation. The hyper-postmodern characteristics of the new media of the late 1990s were designed specifically to appeal to this 'culturally literate and media-saturated' (Wee, 2005, p.51) demographic:

> These characteristics of hyper-postmodernism clearly articulate and accentuate the central role that entertainment texts and the media play in the teen lifestyle. Discussions of films and other entertainment media dominate teen interests and concerns. Media texts and their consumption often function as the topics of teen conversation, exchange, and even identity… (Wee, 2005, p.52)

Both *Stranger Things* and *Euphoria* emphasise the dominating force of media culture in the lives of young people and reflect just how much they think and communicate through references to popular media texts. In *Stranger Things*, the boys settle arguments and communicate more clearly with each other through *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars* and *Dungeons and Dragons* metaphors. These pieces of media have given them a code of ethics, a communal language, and a means through which to map out and understand what is happening in their world. In this way, the show doesn't just utilise references: it is actually *about* references. As Keeble points out, *Stranger Things* explores the way people – especially young people – communicate through patterns of reference or allusion' (2017). This appeals to the Gen Z audience, whose colloquial language is steeped in internet parlance and comprised of an ever evolving web of media references incomprehensible to anyone not

constantly online [2]. Gen Z recognise how the boys incorporate the pop culture of their time –
the games they play, the movies they watch, and the books they read – into a language of
references that only they can speak fluently.

 As described above, the media saturation experienced by the teens of the 1980s and 1990s
drastically impacted youth culture and language. This can clearly be seen in *Stranger Things*
in how the boys can communicate fluently and naturally with each other through media
reference but struggle to maintain open dialogue with their parents. The success or failure of
the parents of *Stranger Things* to communicate with their children hinges on their willingness
to embrace their kids' media-saturated experience and participate in their media-coded
language. When Mike's father Ted attempts a stern talk with his son, he uses a football
metaphor: 'This is trike twenty. You're on the bench, son. If it'd been my coach, you'd be
lucky to still be on the team,' (Season Two Episode One, Madmax, 2017). Mike, who has no
interest in sports, is visibly confused and unimpressed. This shows how Ted's poor
knowledge of his son has led to a complete lack of understanding between them. Joyce
Byers, on the other hand, makes efforts to connect with her sons through sharing the media
that they enjoy. In Season One, Joyce uses the shared experience of watching the film
Poltergeist with Will to communicate with him after he has been taken to the Upside Down.
The evident generational gap might speak to the alienation Gen Z kids feel from their own
parents' generation, Generation X, who grew up in a vastly different media landscape to the

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[2] Current Gen Z vernacular consists largely of reference to internet 'memes'. From the Greek word mimēma,
meaning 'that which is imitated', a meme is a phrase, image, concept, or any combination of these which holds a
specific meaning or connotation, usually joking or ironic, and that spreads rapidly by means of imitation among
internet users, the joke altering slightly each time – a perfect example of Baudrillard's precession of simulacra
(1994). The ultimate examples of postmodern media, memes emerge daily, coming into popularity and fading to
obscurity seemingly at random. Some memes require layers of context to understand and might reference any
number of pieces of media or pop culture events, so to be able to parse the referential language of Gen Z is to be
always online, constantly consuming new content so as not to miss the context of the next joke. The language
evolves as fast as internet posts can appear and disappear.

one which exists now. This alienation is explored in depth in *Euphoria*. However, *Stranger Things* itself exists in both the media worlds of Gen Z and Gen X, with its 1980s' media referents providing potential common ground between the adults who grew up with them and the teens now discovering them. *Stranger Things* encourages both generations to watch together, equally reminiscent of adolescence for Gen X and reflective of adolescence for Gen Z. Thus, *Stranger Things* has the potential to provide the intergenerational bridge for its viewers that *Poltergeist* provided for Joyce and Will, allowing connection through a shared media experience.

The generational gap between teens and parents, while significant in *Stranger Things*, seems almost insurmountable in *Euphoria*, where the Gen Z kids and their parents don't even seem to exist in the same world. As I mentioned, this is intentional on the part of the show's creator Sam Levinson, who wanted to explore the distinct alienation of Gen Z that has been brought about by the internet age. Levinson describes the fundamental difference between the Gen Z experience and that of older generations:

> I think what's different about this time is that at least pre-internet there were more similarities between one generation and the next. And now, I think that gap has grown in a very significant way. I think part of what's so difficult to try and navigate the world at this age right now is there is no map. There's no compass, there's no one to guide you one way or another. Because it's a brand-new world … When 60-70 percent of all interpersonal conversations and relationships exist through text messaging or social media, it's hard to get advice from a parent who didn't grow up in that world. (Stack, 2019)

Thanks to the rapidly evolving nature of technology, social media, and the internet, Gen Z and the teenagers of *Euphoria* are experiencing a total immersion in hyperreality; the ever-evolving signs and codes of its media are their native language as they live their lives just as much online as off. In the first sequence of the pilot episode, Rue explains that she was born

just days after 9/11. We see, in a flashback, Rue's parents holding their new-born baby in a hospital room, transfixed by the footage on the television. Rue narrates: 'My mother and father spent two days in the hospital, holding me under the soft glow of the television, watching those towers fall over, and over, and over again.' We see archival footage of the terrorist attack, and hear the recorded speech of George W. Bush. This postmodern mass-media consumption is Rue's very first experience on earth. It sets up the thesis of Euphoria: What is this media culture doing to the generation who are growing up so deeply entrenched in it?

Fig.11: 'Pilot', *Euphoria* (2019)

Euphoria explores in depth how the postmodern culture of media consumption has skewed teenagers' perceptions of reality and entered them into 'hyperreality'. Rue and the rest of her teenage cohort view their lives almost completely through the lens of the media they consume, building their realities from the images and concepts given to them by this media, thereby constructing the hyperreality that Baudrillard (1981) described. In the case of the lovers montage (*Figs*. 6 & 7), Rue casts herself and her girlfriend as the leads in a simulation of romances which are based on simulations of romance. In *Titanic* (1997), Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet portray an imaginary vision of a pair of star-crossed lovers in

what is a simulation of a real-life event – the sinking of the Titanic. The film is already a simulation of the real world. In Rue's fantasy of herself and Jules on the prow of the ship in a scene lifted directly from the film, she is creating a simulation of a simulation. Baudrillard (1981) calls this new kind of image a simulacrum – an image which is based on a simulation, not on reality, and yet has become more real to us than reality itself. 'These images [are] in essence not images, such as an original model would [make] them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant with their own fascination' (Baudrillard, 1981, p.5).

 Baudrillard describes the 'precession of simulacra' as the process of reflections through which an image passes until the reality it originally referred to is erased: 'Such would be the successive phases of the image: it is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.' (p.6) The simulacrum no longer reflects reality but reflects itself, it is 'never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference' (Baudrillard, 1981, p.6).

According to Baudrillard, the proliferation of these images in postmodern culture have eclipsed reality and created a 'hyperreality' of imagery which serves only to hide the fact that our once-held notion of reality no longer exists – 'It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality … but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real' (1981, p.13).

For example, in postmodern culture, our understanding of romance comes primarily from media depictions rather than from real-life examples. To Rue, these depictions or 'simulations' of love encapsulate love itself. They are more real an example of love to her than, say, the real life relationship between her mother and father. Rue's (and Cassie's, Maddie's and Kat's) definitions of romantic love come from the movies, not from real life.

This reflects Baudrillard's idea of postmodernity in which media images define reality, in which images are 'murderers of the real, murderers of their own model' (1981, p.5).

The teenage characters of *Euphoria* (and the Gen Z audience) are, as Denzin puts it, 'voyeurs adrift in a sea of symbols. They know and see themselves through cinema and television' (1991, p.vii). They possess an inherent dramaturgical self-consciousness born from a culture in which 'reality is a staged, social production' (Denzin, 1991, p.x) based on images.

The *Euphoria* teens' use of media imagery to define their realities is apparent throughout the series. In Season One Episode Six, Rue and her friends attend a Halloween party in fancy dress. Each girl draws on pop culture references for their costumes, dressing as famous film characters. Rue is Marlene Dietrich's androgynous character Amy Jolly from the 1930 film *Morocco*, and Jules is Claire Danes' Juliet from Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) (a scene between Rue and Jules in the pool at the party also directly references this film – see *Fig. 13*). Kat is Thana from the film *Ms. 45* (1981), a character who enacts revenge on her attackers by dressing as a nun and shooting them at a Halloween party, Cassie is Alabama from *True Romance* (1993), a call girl seeking true love, and Maddy is the streetwise teenage prostitute Iris from Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976). Each of these costume choices reflect the characters' exploration of their identities at this point in the series and the personas that they want to project to the world. Jules' costuming throughout the season shows her embodying a girlish innocence, reflected here in Juliet's angel costume, and Kat's Thana costume projects an image of threatening strength and anger that masks her deep fear of being hurt. Rue, like Amy Jolly, is world weary and melancholy, and Cassie and Maddy choose young female characters who are sold to and used by men; Cassie's with wide-eyed ideals of true love, and Maddy's with a false sense of maturity and self-reliance that masks an abusive situation.

*Fig.*12 u/puzzlehead94, Reddit (2019)

Above: The Halloween costumes worn by the girls in 'The Next Episode', *Euphoria* (2019)
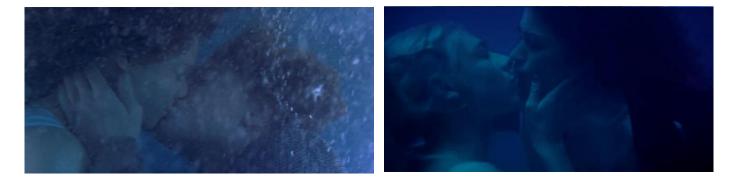Below: Their film referents

*Fig.*13 Left: *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) Right: 'The Next Episode', *Euphoria* (2019)

Maddy especially demonstrates how she has constructed an identity largely inspired by the women she sees in films and on the internet. Rue explains in Season One Episode Three that Maddy idolises the character of Ginger McKenna in *Casino* (1995) (another Scorsese film) - 'Seriously, Sharon Stone in *Casino* was like Maddy's spirit animal'. As Bramesco (2019)

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points out: 'Materialistic, hypersexual, and adept at playing with men, Maddy immediately identifies an aspirational figure in Stone's Ginger McKenna'. Maddy recognises that Ginger is viewed by her mafioso boyfriend as little more than an object to be possessed, but admires Ginger's manipulation of that fact to get what she wants. As such, in Maddy's violent relationship with Nate in Season One, 'she overlooks the elements of abuse between them and focuses on the fever-pitch life-or-death romanticism' (Bramesco, 2019). Nate even gifts Maddy a similar fur coat to the one that Robert de Niro's character gifts Ginger in the film.

The opening sequence of this episode depicts Maddy learning from films and online videos how to sexualise herself completely to please men like Nate, showing how different the *Euphoria* teenagers' media usage is from the 'innocent' mass–media consumption of the pre-internet era seen in *Stranger Things*, where the messages the kids have absorbed from media are depicted as positive and helpful rather than harmful. *Stranger Things* earnestly celebrates media consumption, highlighting the importance of media culture in shaping teenage identities and forms of communication. *Euphoria's* hyper-postmodern techniques, on the other hand, hold a mirror to its Gen Z audience's obsessive and toxic relationship with media consumption.

Euphoria reflects the experience unique to Gen Z of growing up in a completely unrestricted and unmonitored mass media landscape, and the damage that causes. As Travers (2019) points out, *Euphoria* 'shows how a generation lives and learns via an unfiltered, constantly accessible internet, which is a reality past generations didn't go through.'

The effects of this new reality can also be seen in how Nate and his male peers have built their concepts of masculinity and sex from mass-media imagery. Characters such as Nate and McKay do not seem to comprehend the lack of reality in the media they consume – they don't see the violence and hypermasculinity of films, videogames and online porn as

distorted simulations but as examples of how men should behave in the real world. As such, they simulate these behaviours with each other and in their treatment of the female characters. This is demonstrated in the show's pilot episode, in a scene in which college freshman McKay and high school senior Cassie are hooking up at a house party. When McKay makes a move that Cassie finds violent and upsetting, he is genuinely surprised at her negative reaction. The scene is paused mid frame and replaced suddenly with a frenetic burst of blurred, grainy close-up clips of internet pornography which serve to illustrate the point that Rue makes in a voiceover – that access to a staggering quantity of imagery depicting sexual violence and degradation of women has completely normalised it in the eyes of the show's young men. This has caused a complete disconnect from reality in how the teenage male characters view women and what they perceive as acceptable treatment of them.

Euphoria uses these kinds of visual media 'collages' – video clips from the internet, rapid montages of pop culture images (as in *Figs. 6 & 7*), news footage (as in *Fig.11*), pictures from the characters' phones, or scenes from movies they're watching on their T.Vs – to reflect the overwhelming nature of the image-based, media saturated world we live in. They are visual assaults which demonstrate the experience of an endless torrent of graphic content. As Norman K. Denzin writes in *Images of Postmodern Society*:

> 'The new information technologies turn everyday life into a theatrical spectacle… The result is an over-abundance of meaning; an ecstasy of communication which delights in the spectacle itself and finds pleasure in the pornography of excess that flows from the media's desire to tell everything.' (1991, pp. 8-9).

According to Turner (2015), this 'high volume of technology consumption has the potential to disrupt neurological development' in Gen Z youth. The 'instantaneous nature' of contemporary online media can lead to difficulties with emotional regulation and attention.

'I think that's part of why, when you look at young people, anxiety rates are higher [and] depression is higher' Levinson comments in an interview with Travers (2019) for *IndieWire*, stating that the effects of the internet and digital media on young people was something that he wanted to portray in 'a way that [felt] honest'. In embracing the chaotic, maximalist [3] nature of existence for Gen Z in a world online, *Euphoria* succeeds in its honest portrayal of Gen Z's postmodern reality.

A common criticism of *Euphoria,* however, is that its Gen Z characters are not realistic – that 18-year-olds would not really be listening to Sinéad O'Connor or be familiar with Martin Scorsese's filmography, and that the musical and visual references of the show indicate a generation born much earlier than the late 1990s. 'Everyone on the show is obsessed with rap that came out before they were born', writes Pierre (2022) in an article for *Pitchfork* titled 'The Euphoria Teens' Taste in Rap Is Ridiculous'. Coscarelli (2022) makes a similar point in the *New York Times* article 'Why the Euphoria Teens listen to Sinéad O'Connor, Tupac and Selena'. But this pillaging of old music and regurgitation of old styles *is* reflective of Gen-Z culture; today's young people engage in excessive borrowing and recycling of the aesthetics, music and media of bygone decades (Lang, 2020).

As Jameson writes, 'in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum (1985, p. 115)' . Lacking any distinctive, era-defining media of their own, Gen Z curate their style and their media preferences the same way that *Euphoria* curates its soundtrack – in that 'TikTokian shuffle' (Coscarelli, 2022) of aural and visual references from different genres and eras. Having grown up in the postmodern 'end of history', with

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[3] Maximalism, the opposite of minimalism, is an aesthetic of excess. With the philosophy of "more is more", maximalism embraces quantity and overabundance.

access to the archives of decades worth of media, Gen Z don't need to have lived through the past in order to engage in nostalgic recreations of it: 'This access to information is most clearly seen in the nostalgic sartorial references to the past that the teens of *Euphoria* (and, IRL, on TikTok and Instagram) make regularly' (Lang, 2020). The hyper-postmodern teen is aware of a vast amount of media both past and present, and the hyper-postmodern text continues this media education by reintroducing classic texts to young audiences. As Wee argues in relation to the *Scream* trilogy and the earlier generation of teens that comprised its target audience:

> *Scream* and its sequels also function to increase teen awareness of other media texts, introducing older texts, such as *Psycho*, to new and younger audiences. These references encourage a new teen generation/audience to seek out and consume these older texts. In doing so, the intense intertextual references also keep these older texts relevant in terms of media literacy. (2005, p.52)

The resurgence of older media texts via reintroduction in new media is a phenomenon which has only intensified in the intervening years. *Euphoria* engages in this media education by reintroducing older texts to younger audiences, as does *Stranger Things*. The 'nostalgic longing for the past, coupled with an erasure of the boundaries between the past and the present' (Denzin, 1991, p.vii) is a signifier of postmodern culture, and *Stranger Things* in particular is a series that traffics heavily in nostalgia.

2.3 Nostalgia and Historiographic Metafiction

While Hollywood has always romanticised bygone eras in its films and television shows, Mollet (2019) identifies a new trend of sentimentality for the media of the 1980s that can be found in *Stranger Things* as well as in films such as *Super 8* (2011) and *Guardians of the*

Galaxy (2014). Steven Spielberg's 2018 film *Ready Player One* (based on the 2011 novel of the same name by Ernest Cline), in which citizens of the near future escape into a virtual reality game filled with nostalgic 1980s pop culture references to hunt for 'easter eggs'[4] left behind by the game's creator, speaks to this growing trend. 'This nostalgic trend comprises of references to the music, films and political undertones of the [1980's], embracing the themes and cinematic language of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. Thus, intertextuality is at the heart of the mediation of nostalgia' (Mollet, 2019). Also released around the time of *Stranger Things* and further proving the postmodern appetite for nostalgia was the reboot of the 1980's family sitcom *Full House* entitled *Fuller House* (2016)*,* the 2016 remake of the classic 1984 supernatural comedy *Ghostbusters*, and *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), a new installation of the cult 1990 drama series.

As I have said, Jameson (1991) and Baudrillard (1981) believe that our postmodern fascination with the imagery of the past is due to our lack of any sense of existing in a period of history ourselves. As Baudrillard writes,

> Whereas so many generations, and particularly the last, lived in the march of history … today one has the impression that history has retreated, leaving behind it an indifferent nebula, traversed by currents, but emptied of references. It is into this void that the phantasms of a past history recede, the panoply of events, ideologies, retro fashions - no longer so much because people believe in them or still place some hope in them, but simply to resurrect the period when at least there was history. (1981, p. 46)

In a society that feels a distinct lack of historical place, 'this history … celebrates its resurrection in force on the screen, according to the same process that used to make lost myths live again. History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth' (p.46).

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[4] Originating in gaming, an 'easter egg' refers to 'an extra feature, as a message, image or video, hidden in the programming of the video game and revealed by an obscure sequence of keystrokes or commands.'
In movies and television, an 'easter egg' can be 'a hidden message, a cryptic reference, iconic image, or inside joke that fans are intended to discover' (Dictionary.com)

Jameson (1991) uses the architectural term of 'historicity' to identify 'a more generalised manifestation' of the same process of stylistic pastiche in commercial cinema – citing films such as *American Graffiti* (1973) as belonging to a new group of 'nostalgia films' which attempted to capture the images of the past and to define that past by its styles and generations. 'The nostalgia film 'restructure[s] the whole issue of pastiche and project[s] it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the 'generation' (p.66). Postmodern works that engage in nostalgic pastiche create a new collective imagining of the 'past' that has little similarity to the real, lived history of their referents. Thus, as Jameson notes, 'the incompatibility of a postmodernist 'nostalgia' art language with genuine historicity becomes dramatically apparent' (1991, p.67).

These films 'approach the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image, and '1930s-ness' or '1950s-ness' by the attributes of fashion' (Jameson, p.66), much like how *Stranger Things* conveys '1980s-ness' by the attributes of the fashion and media of that decade. The past, in this case the 1980s, is effaced, becoming instead 'a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum' (Jameson, 1991, p.66). The audience's awareness of this collection of images – the past media which has come to define our stylised, hyperreal conception of the 1980s – is essential to the structure of the series, thus the intertextuality of *Stranger Things* (and of all 'nostalgia' media) is 'a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect, and the operator of a new connotation of 'pastness' and pseudo-historical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces 'real' history' (Jameson, 1991, p.67).

These images of '1980s-ness' replace our concept of the 'real' 1980s, becoming what Baudrillard (1981) describes as 'hyperreal': 'an invocation of resemblance, but at the same

time the flagrant proof of the disappearance of objects in their very representation' (p.47).

Baudrillard writes that the images of history in contemporary cinema 'shine with a sort of hyper-resemblance that makes it so that fundamentally they no longer resemble anything, except the empty figure of resemblance, the empty form of representation' (1981, p.47).

Stranger Things' postmodern relationship with nostalgia and its portrayal of the 1980s can be considered what Hutcheon calls 'historiographic metafiction'. Hutcheon develops this term in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) to describe the inherently fictional nature of 'history' as we see it in certain postmodern texts: 'What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past' (Hutcheon, 2004, p.89). Our notion of 'history' is a construct shaped by how it is told to us and how it is imagined by us, filled with prejudices and misconceptions, and is not necessarily accurate to the truth. Historiographic metafiction is fiction that is aware of this – it bases itself in history, but 'knows its relationship to the past is constructed' (Krause, 2016).

Stranger Things knowingly conjures the 1980s of our collective imagination, a vision of history that is more cultural construct, more fantasy, than accurate depiction of what life was really like. It is what Baudrillard describes as a simulacrum – an image based not on reality but on previously constructed images of reality (i.e. based not on the 1980s but on the Spielbergian images of the 80s). It is a 1980s twice removed from reality, a past that never actually existed in real life. The show's creators themselves were only born in 1984. They did not experience adolescence in the 80s, but *Stranger Things* 'doesn't yearn for the real 1980s, the lives of actual suburban kids or single mothers living in backwater USA.' (Krause, 2016) Rather, the show 'reaches back to our fictional past, our cultural past, the movies we grew up on and the books that littered our floors when we were young' (Krause, 2016).

This is precisely how Svetlana Boym defines 'nostalgia'; as 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed' (2007, p.7), a description which I think encapsulates the postmodern audience's obsession with constructing our present with the media of the past.

It brings to mind the teen characters of *Euphoria* who represent the youth culture of today, disillusioned with their present, lacking any artistic or stylistic innovation to place them in a distinct period of 'history', grasping at the clothes and music and movies of bygone decades to simulate a reality that has disappeared. They are nostalgic for a historiographic past that was constructed for them through media images but did not, in fact, exist. As Krause (2016) says, 'the past we study and exploit is not one we lived through, but instead the one we continue to see through the flickering images of a movie screen.'

Conclusion

The popularity of both *Stranger Things* and *Euphoria* amongst the postmodern audience is evident from the shows' record-breaking viewing statistics. *Stranger Things*' fourth season earned its place as the second most-watched series of all time on Netflix and the top English-language series on the platform (Hailu, 2022). When the last episodes of *Euphoria's* second season were premiering in March, it was the number one show on HBO Max for seven weeks, making it the most viewed series on HBO in almost twenty years besides *Game of Thrones* (2011) (Romanchick, 2022). These viewing statistics can be directly linked to the shows' domination of social media – the series both have record breaking levels of engagement on popular Gen Z sites such as YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter, with users generating viral content along with discussions of the shows.

In this thesis I have argued that both *Stranger Things* and *Euphoria* have found success with the media-saturated Gen Z audience because they are, at heart, postmodern series which reflect the postmodern media landscape that Gen Z have grown up in. They exemplify postmodern television in their heavy use of genre mixing and intertextuality, and in their relationship with nostalgia and the 'end of history' – the recycling of images of the past into the media of the present. Beyond these characteristics of postmodernism, they also embrace what Wee (2005) described as 'hyper-postmodernism' – a heightened level of self-reflexivity, and a trans-mediality which breaks down the boundaries between previously distinct media forms and is crucial to capturing the divided attention of Gen Z. The trans-medial, intertextual nature of the shows appeal to Gen Z as they reflect the tendency of young people in our postmodern culture to communicate through reference to popular media, and also the Gen Z experience of living in a hyperreality constructed by the images and signs of decades' worth of mass media at their fingertips.

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