Transcending Dominant Depictions of Transness in Contemporary Television:

Trans Fluidity in *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria*

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At least for me,
being trans is spiritual.


You know, it's not religious.


It's not, like, for
some congregation.


It's for me. It's mine.
It belongs to me.

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Abstract

The representation of transgender people in US television has undergone a shift in the last few years as the depiction of transness moved away from heteronormative stereotypes toward a more fluid conception of gender and sexuality. While trans people have been predominantly depicted as hyperfeminine or hypermasculine in television, recent portrayals have demonstrated that there are actually many ways to be trans. This research project analyzes two of these portrayals, the reality television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present) on the one hand and the drama television series *Euphoria* (2019-present) on the other. Through the figures of Gottmik and Jules, this project examines the ways in which *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* represent (white) transness and show audiences that 'trans' is fluid rather than fixed, a verb rather than a noun. Whereas Gottmik embraces his femininity as a trans man, Jules explores the endless possibilities of being a trans woman. Crucial to the depiction of transness in the two case studies is the fact that trans people are involved in their own representation, which does not only result in a depiction that is intricate and authentic but one that is lifesaving and lifegiving too. Considering that 80% of Americans bases their understanding of trans people on what they see in the media, television shows are not merely entertainment but education too. As harmful and inaccurate representation puts trans people at risk, which can range from being misunderstood and marginalized to being discriminated and physically harmed, accurate and 'care-full' representation saves trans lives. Working with television, affect and trans theory, this is ultimately a project of hope, tracing a shift that hopefully continues to transform television and positively affect audiences in the future.

Introduction:

A Project of Hope

At the heart of this research project lies a hypothesis rather than a question: the representation of transgender people in US television has undergone a shift in the last few years as the depiction of transness moved away from heteronormative stereotypes toward a more fluid conception of gender and sexuality. While trans people have been predominantly depicted as hyperfeminine or hypermasculine in television, recent portrayals have demonstrated that 'trans' takes on endless shapes and forms, that 'trans' is fluid rather than fixed. This research project examines this shift and analyzes its implications for television in general and for cisgender and transgender audiences in specific. The following section first delineates the representation of transness in television and film, in order to situate this shift historically.

Since the 1910s, transness has been depicted on the American screen in various ways. The act of transcending gender first appeared in the silent film era, which represented images of transformation and cross-dressing (Steinbock 395). Think for example of Charlie Chaplin dressing up as women in *The Masquerader* (1914), *A Busy Day* (1914) or *A Woman* (1915). While these films involve instances of cross-dressing rather than transness, considering that gender serves as a costume that characters take on and eventually take off, often in a comedic reveal, they have arguably inspired later depictions of transness which feature "cartoonish comic trans figures" (Bell-Metereau 12), such as *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949), *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *Myra Breckinridge* (1970), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and *Tootsie* (1982). Portraying transgender people as a joke or a comic relief was common for the majority of early films. The depiction of transness turned much darker toward the end of the 1950s, however, when laughter turned to fear as the figure of the trans serial killer emerged. For several decades, this figure appeared in popular and commercially successful thrillers like *Psycho* (1960), *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). As they frame transness as

"perverse or hysterical symptoms of a psychotic condition," these films associate trans people with "madness, murder and monstrosity" (Phillips 85). During the 1990s, the fear induced by trans people is replaced with repulsion. It becomes almost a trope for cisgender men to be disgusted by transgender women, retching and vomiting when they 'find out' that a woman they have been intimate with is trans. Notable examples include *Soapdish* (1991), *The Crying Game* (1992), *Naked Gun 33 ⅓: The Final Insult* (1994), *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), *Dude, Where's My Car?* (2000) and, much later, *The Hangover Part II* (2011).

Whether trans people are the joke, the killer or the Kristevan abject, the depiction of transness has largely been negative in American cinema. While there have been positive depictions of trans people, which engage with transness in more respectful ways, such as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Normal* (2003), *Transamerica* (2005), *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), *The Danish Girl* (2015), *3 Generations* (2017) and *Anything* (2018), the trans characters in these films are often "poorly written, falling into offensive tropes and stereotypes about transgender people" (GLAAD, "Where We Are on TV 2019-2020" 30). Strikingly, all of the trans characters in these films are played by cisgender actors. Considering that trans characters are commonly written and produced by cisgender people as well, especially in mainstream films, the depictions usually involve "a cisgender gaze upon transgender bodies and lives, a gaze often focused on the body or the physical transition in a mode of voyeuristic spectacle, and marked by curiosity, wariness, pity, or tragedy" (Henry). For example, *Boys Don't Cry* and *3 Generations* focus heavily on medical transition, rejection and transphobic violence (Oppliger 6). While the involvement of trans people "on the executive team and within the writers' room" likely results in "a different regime of storytelling, especially one that moves beyond fetishizing transition stories" (Martin Jr. 222), hiring trans actors to play trans roles makes for more intricate and authentic portrayals. As actor Jen Richards contends, "if I'm playing a trans character, I don't have to play the transness of it," whereas the portrayal of a trans character by

a cisgender actor quickly becomes reduced "to a performance of transness … rather than as a whole person, of whom transness is one aspect" (Feder and Scholder 00:45:16-00:44:31).[1] Indeed, "there is something unique about trans identities that … is lost in translation when a cis actor embodies a trans character" (221), Alfred L. Martin Jr. writes, adopting a Sedgwickian view, arguing that trans representation can be more than mere simulacra.

Although films have historically taken the lead in terms of trans representation, Rebecca Bell-Metereau writes in 2019 that "television seems to have overtaken film in sheer quantity and variety of depictions in recent years" (9). Strikingly, the representation has not only grown in quantity but in quality too. A greater awareness of trans people has "improved the overall state of media representation," Claire Henry puts forward, "but television has been succeeding over cinema" in the last few years. One of the reasons why television tends to have more thoughtful representation is the fact that television shows allow trans characters to have more elaborate storylines, while films often (exclusively) focus on a character's transness. After all, the creation of "accurate and respectful portrayals often depends on giving characters enough screen time to develop as individuals beyond their gender identity" (Oppliger 91). Be that as it may, early depictions of transness in television actually mirror the negative ways in which trans people were portrayed in film. Examining ten years of transgender representation in television, the media monitoring organization GLAAD wrote in 2012 that only 12% of the depictions were fair and accurate. In addition, GLAAD reported that transgender characters "were cast in a 'victim' role at least 40% of the time" and "as killers or villains in at least 21% of the catalogued episodes and storylines" ("Victims or Villains"). Finally, the most featured profession of trans characters in television was that of sex worker; 20% of all characters were depicted to be

[1] This research project cites several sources from the streaming service Netflix, whose timestamps count down, displaying the remaining time of a film or episode. Whenever timestamps (paradoxically) count backwards in this thesis, they refer to sources from Netflix.

working in the sex industry. Reflecting on her acting career, Jazzmun Crayton illustrates GLAAD's finding by stating: "I've been a prostitute, Prostitute 1, Prostitute 2, call girl, hooker, you know? … at a point, I felt limited … is there anything next?" (in Feder and Scholder 01:12:31-00:01:11:55). While a significant number of trans people, trans women particularly, become involved in sex work because of employment discrimination,[2] television rarely situates it in this context. Rather than engaging with the social reasons why some trans people become sex workers, television shows tend to present sex work as something that trans people simply do (Feder and Scholder). As actor and producer Trace Lysette describes, the problem is that if an audience is "only seeing us [trans people] as one thing, [the sex worker,] without any life outside of that, people are never gonna get to see us as a whole person" (in Feder and Scholder 01:10:19-01:10:08).

Since 2012, the number of transgender characters appearing on television has increased significantly. While GLAAD did not track any regular or recurring trans characters in the 2012-2013 television season, analyzing broadcast and cable networks as well as streaming services, it tracked 3 regular or recurring trans characters in 2014-2015, 16 in 2016-2017, 26 in 2018-2019 and a total of 42 in 2021-2022. In this decade of television, transgender characters appeared in shows like *Glee* (2009-2015), *The Fosters* (2013-2018), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), *Transparent* (2014-2019), *Supergirl* (2015-2021), *The Umbrella Academy* (2019-present) and *9-1-1: Lone Star* (2020-present). Although the number of trans characters is notably rising, the depiction of transness continues to focus merely, or at least predominantly, on the character's gender identity and transition. GLAAD wrote in their 2017-2018 television report that they "[want] to see those characters become integral parts of their series, moving

[2] According to Nick Adams, GLAAD's Director of Trans Media Representation, "the unemployment rate for transgender people is three times the [American] average, and four times the [American] average if you're a trans person of color" (in Feder and Scholder 01:11:23-01:11:17).

beyond focusing solely on their trans identity and telling stories about them as whole human beings" (27). While the majority of television shows fail to include trans storylines that are complex, GLAAD mentions two examples that provide more authentic trans representation: *Pose* (2018-2021) and *The L Word: Generation Q* (2019-present). Citing the involvement of trans people "behind the scenes as writers, directors, producers, choreographers, and crew" as evidence for the change in representation, GLAAD argues that the "focus on having trans people involved in creating these characters and stories allows for greater nuance and moving beyond the 'transition narrative' that we too often see when it comes to trans characters" ("Where We Are on TV 2019-2020" 29).

While *Pose* made history for having the largest cast of trans women of color playing the roles of trans characters of color, following these characters around the New York ballroom scene from the 1980s to the 1990s as they create their own (queer) families, compete in voguing and modeling battles, find love and are affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the television show nevertheless depicts a specific form of transness, as do *Transparent*, *Orange is the New Black* and most other contemporary television shows that incorporate trans characters. Whereas *Pose*, *Transparent* and *Orange is the New Black* present their trans women characters as hyperfeminine, television shows like *The Fosters* and *9-1-1: Lone Star* present their trans men characters as hypermasculine. The concept of hypergender refers to an exaggeration of gender ideology, which may manifest in a person's behavior, appearance and/or heterosexuality (Hamburger et al.; Murnen and Byrne). In other words, hyperfemininity and hypermasculinity are exaggerations of what is typically understood to be feminine or masculine. When it comes to trans representation in television, Kay Siebler's suggestion from 2012 seems to still hold true today, that popular media almost exclusively depicts "transgender-on-the-way-to-transsexual-identities," meaning that trans characters have either transitioned or are about to transition into a specific trans identity: "being a masculine male or a feminine female" (76). While

traditionally feminine or masculine trans identities are valid and common within the trans community, they do not represent the full range of trans identities, in which trans femininity can be masculine and trans masculinity can be feminine, in which transness can be both masculine and feminine or neither masculine nor feminine. Strikingly, the depiction of transness as a fixed identity has slowly started to be challenged in television in the last few years as more fluid conceptions of transness are represented on the screen. As a result, television has seen a shift from trans fixity into trans fluidity, most notably in the drama television series *Euphoria* (2019-present) and the thirteenth season of the reality drag competition *RuPaul's Drag Race Race* (2021). This research project traces this shift by analyzing these two television shows that engage with transness in new and intriguing ways.

Ultimately, this thesis is a project of hope. Apart from tracing a shift that hopefully continues to transform television in the future and analyzing the implications these fluid depictions of transness have on cisgender and transgender viewers, this research project is born out of affect. When *Euphoria* aired in the summer of 2019, the television show affected me greatly. Considering that it is quite a dark show, dealing with addiction, mental illness, (sexual) violence and toxic relationships, it might seem paradoxical that *Euphoria* left me with distinct feelings of hope. Nevertheless, it was the depiction of transness that showed me that being trans does not mean that people have to fit a certain mold nor follow a certain trajectory. By framing transness as fluid rather than fixed, even scripting a minor character to say that "[q]ueerness is infinite" (Season 1, Episode 7, 00:38:05-00:38:08), *Euphoria* deviates from dominant depictions of transness in contemporary television. As a result, the television show affirmed my own transness and pushed me further on my trans journey. Because I did not fit the image of trans femininity I saw depicted in popular media nor in the few trans people I knew digitally, and did not have the desire to take hormones or undergo gender affirmation surgeries, I did not know that I was trans too, that my transness was valid too. Consequently, I held on to the figure

of Jules, who almost became a lighthouse, guiding me through the dark. She allowed me to embrace and explore my own transness, to envision the many possibilities of gender and sexuality that lay ahead of me now that I realized that my femininity was actually trans femininity.

Through the show's depiction of transness in general and the character of Jules in particular, *Euphoria* has also shown me that it is possible for popular media to portray trans people in intricate and authentic ways, that trans people do not always have to be the punchline, the sex worker, the killer or the killed, but even more so, either hypermasculine or hyperfeminine. Observing such a depiction on a popular television show like *Euphoria* made me hopeful about television to come. When the thirteenth season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* aired in early 2021, I was struck by the depiction of trans fluidity once again. However, this time it was trans masculinity that was depicted as fluid rather than fixed, endless rather than confined. Considering that *RuPaul's Drag Race* has been hostile toward trans people in the past, from preventing them auditioning for the show to mocking trans identities,[3] the fact that the show cast Gottmik as the first trans man to compete for the title of 'America's Next Drag Superstar' was a turning point in and of itself. That the show's depiction of trans masculinity rejects hegemonic stereotypes was even more striking. Thus, I encountered two popular television shows that present transness in a way that is unusual for contemporary television, with *Euphoria* depicting trans femininity and *RuPaul's Drag Race* depicting trans masculinity as a fluid phenomenon.

It is important to note, however, that Gottmik and Jules are two white figures. As a result, this thesis solely engages with the depiction of trans whiteness in American television.

[3] Initially, *RuPaul's Drag Race* required contestants to be cisgender (see Kohlsdorf 76). Moreover, the show has used transphobic language and imagery in its earlier seasons, which the third chapter discusses and analyzes in more detail.

Considering that the absence of trans characters of color in popular media is striking,[4] which the whiteness of Gottmik and Jules only illustrate, the shift in trans representation from fixed to fluid might have only occurred for white trans characters. Indeed, the hyperfeminine depiction of trans femininity in *Pose* (2018-2021) and the hypermasculine depiction of trans masculinity in *9-1-1: Lone Star* (2020-present) suggest that trans characters of color, and in these instances Black trans characters specifically, are represented through stereotypes more so than white trans characters. Although further research has to confirm whether this holds true for other popular television shows with trans characters of color, it is clear that my thesis analyzes a specific form of transness, that is white trans fluidity, without engaging with the specificities of other forms of transness. As a result, this research project does not examine trans fluidity of color, or perhaps the absence thereof, which also affects the hope that underlies the entire project. After all, the hope that induced me as a white researcher to write this thesis can be regarded as a specific form of hope, a white hope. While I saw my own trans fluidity reflected on the (popular) television screen and observed a shift in white trans representation, trans people of color most likely encounter the depiction of transness in *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* differently; they arguably need a different kind of hope to imagine a television landscape that moves beyond whiteness to embrace trans fluidity of color too. While this research project is written from a white vantage point and does not engage with trans fluidity in all its complexities, it hopefully provokes future research to consider the representation of trans characters color in more detail and provide a more comprehensive picture of mediated trans fluidity.

In order to map instances of (white) trans fluidity in *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* and consider their implications, this research project works with various theories. The following chapter first delineates the respective fields of television studies, affect studies and trans studies, and engages with prominent ideas and theories that circulate within these fields. Finally, the

[4] See for instance GLAAD's television reports; Martin Jr; McLaren et al.

theoretical framework discusses for each section (television, affect and trans) which theories figure in the analysis of Gottmik and Jules's transness in *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria*. When it comes to television theory, the relationship between screen and viewer becomes most important, although concepts of the cinematic, the complex, linear and nonlinear television play their part as well. Moving on to affect theory, the affective diagram that Ernst van Alphen and Tomáš Jirsa created to illustrate the formal power of affect, arguing that affects can have form and thus should also be considered as such (5), features throughout my thesis, particularly in the chapters that discuss the case studies. Since this is a project of hope, naturally the affect that features most prominently is hope. Working with Mary Zournazi's definition of hope as "the stuff of our dreams and desires, our ideas of freedom and justice and how we might conceive life" (12), hope is crucial for moving forward in life, for imagining a future that is more mindful of and welcoming to trans people, both on screen and off screen, arguably even to imagine a future at all. The final theory section, then, focuses on transness. Taking Sandy Stone's canonical text "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," which was published in the early 1990s, as a starting point, this research project does not simply describe transness as "a genre – a set of embodied texts" (Stone 166), but as a multiplicity of genres, an intertextuality even. As such, trans is a verb instead of a noun, an act instead of a state. Integral to this approach is Dora Santana's concept of "trans-ing life" (216). Finally, the trans theory section signals the importance of trans people's own involvement in the way in which their and other trans stories are told and theorized, whether in academia or on television.

When the fields of television, affect and trans studies have been mapped out and the theory has been established, this research project moves into the analysis of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria*. Working with Van Alphen and Jirsa's affective diagram, this project describes two clusters of affect for the figure of Gottmik, one positive, the other negative. For the figure of Jules, it is the character's story arch rather than an affective cluster that illustrates

the fact that form triggers affect, whether it is through intertextual references, aesthetics or point of view. Ultimately, these affects move through the screen to touch the viewer, inducing empathy for the figures of Gottmik and Jules in particular, and trans people in general, while also educating viewers on the endlessness of being trans, the fact that transness is fluid rather than fixed, and thus can take on many forms. Moreover, as this research project hypothesizes, a fluid depiction of transness in contemporary, popular television is life-saving and life-giving for (white) trans people. Apart from helping trans viewers embrace their own transness, as *Euphoria* did for me, these depictions also remind trans people that they matter, that they too deserve to have their stories told on the small screen.

Considering that "80% of Americans have never met a trans person," as the media monitoring organization GLAAD noted in 2020, "80% of the country bases its understanding of trans people … on what they see in the media." For that reason, a film or a television show is not merely a form of entertainment, but can be an educational tool as well. "Derogatory and inauthentic representation puts trans lives at risk" (GLAAD), which can range from being misunderstood and marginalized to being discriminated and excluded from the workplace, the health care system, and other institutions. In extreme cases, stigma against transgender people can result in fatal violence. Since 2013, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) tracks the total number of trans people who have lost their life to anti-trans violence in the United States. Alarmingly, the number keeps rising each year, from 27 in 2019, 44 in 2020, to a record number of 50 trans people who were killed in acts of violence in 2021. It is important to note that these numbers are likely higher since not all incidents are reported and some are misreported (in which, for example, trans people are misgendered). It should also be noted that the majority of victims are transgender women of color, who are disproportionally affected by fatal violence, facing excessive harm as racism, misogyny and transphobia intersect (sometimes described as

transmisogynoir, see Preston), which makes the need for Black trans fluidity to be depicted in popular media all the more pressing.

While it is unlikely that a transformation in the depiction of trans people in the media ends stigma and puts a stop to the excessive and at times fatal violence that trans people experience, which also needs to be accompanied by political and legislative action according to a 2021 report from the Human Rights Campaign ("Dismantling a Culture of Violence"), the influence media has on both cisgender and transgender people should not be dismissed. As this research project establishes, the affective and educational possibilities of media in general, and popular television shows in particular, are powerful tools in the fight to end transgender stigma and misrepresentation, saving as well as sustaining (in this case, particularly white) trans lives. Before analyzing the ways in which *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* do so, this thesis first lays its theoretical basis, starting with television theory.

Theoretical Framework

Streaming New Imaginaries: Television Theory

The emergence of streaming services in the late 2000s, think for example of Netflix and Hulu, completely transformed how people view as well as consider television. Although Netflix, which was "previously an online DVD-rental" (Jenner 3), has been at the forefront of the most recent transformations of television, the popular service appears to face serious competition with Disney+ and HBO Max, streaming platforms that launched in 2019 and 2020 respectively and quickly gained popularity. Providing a seemingly endless stream of content directly to viewers by means of the Internet, also known as over-the-top (OTT) media service, streaming platforms challenge the linearity of 'traditional television', which schedules a specific program for transmission at a specific time through cable lines and/or satellite transmissions. Through internet-distributed television, the viewer gains more agency, controlling "what to watch, and … when and where they watch television" (Bruun 2). Essentially, "television has been liberated from time and space" (Mosely, Wheatley and Wood 1). The development of internet-distributed television has ushered in a new stage of television history, at least for certain parts of the world. According to Roberta Pearson, the television history of the United States can be divided in three distinct yet at times overlapping periods:

> TVI, dating from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s, is the era of channel scarcity, the mass audience, and three-network hegemony. TVII, dating roughly from the early 1980s to the late 1990s, is the era of channel/network expansion, quality television, and network branding strategies. TVIII, dating from the late 1990s to the present, is the era of proliferating digital distribution platforms, further audience fragmentation, and, as Rogers, Epstein and Reeves [2002] suggest, a shift from second-order to first-order commodity relations (qtd. in Jenner 10).

Working with the three categories Pearson establishes, Mareike Jenner signals that these periods are primarily delineated through technological shifts:

> TV I is marked by the (increasingly) affordable television set itself, TV II by more affordable and accurate remote controls, cable and satellite technology as well as the VCR, and TV III by DVD and the DVR and digital broadcasting technologies (13).

Considering that the current era of streaming services generates its own specific technologies and changes, Jenner proposes a fourth period (TV IV) in US television history. It is important to note, however, that the boundaries between these four categories are far from straightforward. Rather, they overlap and interact with one another, because the technological shifts in television are not only "relatively slow-moving" (Jenner 13) but also continually evolving.

The fact that television is continually evolving has caused problems for the field of television studies. As a "recent, dynamic and rapidly changing field of work" (Bignell 1), television studies came into existence during the 1990s. "[G]rown out of a variety of institutional seeds" (Gray and Lotz 11), television studies has been heavily influenced by the social sciences, the humanities as well as cultural studies. The absence of television theory, on the other hand, is striking. According to Lorenz Engell, "television has not yet been properly understood or at least formulated" (18) when it comes to conceptual work. "The reason why not one – or even more – theories *of television* have yet been developed," Engell argues, might be "due to the fact that television is constantly and severely transformed during the long period of its dominance as a mass medium" (24). Ever changing, transforming, and evolving, the field seems difficult to grasp and understand for television scholars as they quickly move from one shift to another, studying "how television changed the patterns of communication, the basic social fabric, and the spaces of everyday life," rather than focusing on more theoretical understandings of "the medium's contribution to a culture's modes of thinking and to the emergence and structuring of its basic categories (think of time, event, memory, choice,

evidence)" (Stauff 7). On top of that, the vastness of television as a field of inquiry has made it rather difficult for scholars to provide "useful general insights into the medium" (Bignell 3). Precisely because issues of television, such as its audiences or the role it fulfills in society, are so "multifarious," there seems to be "no tightly focused theoretical perspective [that] can provide us with adequate insight" (Fiske 1). Considering that television theory is markedly absent, is it even possible to speak of television studies as a distinct academic field?

Television scholars seem to answer this question in the positive. According to Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz, doing research on television does not necessarily mean that a researcher is working within the field of television studies. While they state that television is a "ubiquitous enough entity that other disciplines would be remiss in their duties if they did not study it at times, and thus other disciplines and approaches frequently inform television studies," Gray and Lotz find that many researchers "study television with a solitary interest in its programs, its audiences, its producers, or its history and context" (27). As a result, these researchers work with the medium of television more so than that they work in the field of television studies. If a scholar were to adopt a television studies approach, they would take into consideration more than one, but preferably all, of these aspects. In other words, "for television studies to be at all meaningful as a classifier to which some adhere, it should not be synonymous with any and all study of television" (Gray and Lotz 28). When it comes to the issues that are commonly studied within television studies, Jonathan Bignell agrees with Gray and Lotz that researchers focus on more than one of the following areas: "analytical study of television programmes as text; the television industry as an institution and its production practices and organisation; television in contemporary culture and the sociological study of audiences; television history and developments in broadcasting policy" (2). In doing so, researchers tend to work with theories and methodologies from (literary) criticism, semiotics, sociology, media studies (think of radio, film, performance studies) as well as communication studies (Bignell;

Fiske; Gray and Lotz), thus traveling back and forth between different academic disciplines. As this research project works with theories from three different fields (television, affect and trans studies), it adopts a similar approach. Rather than engaging with all aspects of television as a medium, it approaches *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* as texts, using relevant concepts and theories from television studies in the process. Thus, this project works *with* television rather than *in the field of* television studies.

While researchers travel between different academic disciplines, it is important to note that the field of television studies almost exclusively engages with television from the English-speaking world, in particular the United States (Bignell; Holdsworth; Gray and Lotz). Although scholars have challenged and criticized this partial and narrow scope and called for a

> global method [that] may disrupt narratives and theories about the use, purpose, and meaning of television that have developed from a focus situated in specific (Western, Global-Northern) locations of geo-political and economic power, that present themselves as universal, and that allow 'those in power to assert their own interests as conventional wisdom' (Shimpach 8),

the field has extensively worked with and continues to work with what Amy Holdsworth calls "a dominant critical lexicon used to discuss contemporary, predominantly US television" (12). This lexicon encompasses the cinematic, the complex, as well as the distinction between linear and nonlinear forms of television. All of these terms deal with "value judgements that position different types and experiences against one another" (Holdsworth 12), in which a specific type of television is labeled as 'quality televison' (Bignell 8; Jenner 14), which "[carries] value" (Bignell 8) and is deemed to be more cinematic and more complex than other forms of television. This 'value' or 'quality' is predominantly assigned to dramas and documentaries in series or serial form, which consequently turns it into an issue of genre (Bignell 5; Holdsworth 12). At the same time, the idea of something having or being of 'quality' introduces important

and rather intricate questions about the who, the what, the when, and the why of the value judgment, which has much to do with power dynamics. On top of that, "understandings of quality may be different in the different contexts of the television industry, in academic studies, or in the reactions of audiences," Bignell writes. Therefore, "[q]uality can mean different things, depending on what is being discussed and by whom" (8). Considering that *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* are two American television shows, this research project continues the tradition of prioritizing television from the English-speaking world. While a more diverse scope is much needed in television research, the fact that *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* are globally accessible and internationally successful[5] makes it productive for my research project to focus on American television shows. After all, *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* offer cisgender and transgender audiences across the globe a different way of looking at transness and arguably affect more people than for example two Dutch television shows that can only be viewed on a Dutch cable channel. At the same time, the large audience and the global success of the two case studies have arguably more chance of advancing the shift from trans fixity toward trans fluidity.

Apart from considering television through the notion of the cinematic, the complex and/or the (non)linear, television scholars are also interested in the relationship that exists between television and audience. While scholars usually write about television's audience with an 'ideal viewer' in mind, that is, someone "independent, healthy (relatively, anxiously), white, financially secure, gainfully employed, middle aged, and middle class" (Holdsworth 6), John Fiske recognizes that there are always many different viewers, no matter the television program at stake. Drawing attention to the necessity of acknowledging differences, Fiske proposes to pluralize the term 'audience' within television studies. The plural, he argues, does not only

[5] This is established more concretely in the two chapters that analyze *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria*.

acknowledge "that there are differences between viewers of any program that must be taken into account," but it also

> recognizes that we are not a homogenous society, but that our social system is crisscrossed by axes of class, gender, race, age, nationality, region, politics, religion, and so on, all of which produce more or less strongly marked differences, and that these social differences relate among each other in a complexity of ways that always involves the dimensions of power (17).

It is striking that Fiske as a white (and arguably independent, healthy, financially secure, gainfully employed and middle class) man mirrors what Black women have been theorizing for centuries, with Sojourner Truth's 'Ain't I a Woman' speech and Kimberlé Crenshaw's coinage of 'intersectionality' as prominent examples, yet he fails to mention so. While it is crucial to call attention to the, once again, uncredited work of Black female thinkers, adopting Fiske's suggestion to pluralize 'audiences' subverts the idea that "television reaches a homogenous mass of people who are all essentially identical, who receive the same messages, meanings, and ideologies from the same programs and who are essentially passive" (Fiske 16). Therefore, this research project employs the term 'audiences' to signal that the viewers who engage with *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* are not a homogenous entity. In fact, it is crucial for my analysis to distinguish between two (main) groups of viewers: cisgender and transgender. After all, cis viewers engage differently with transness than trans viewers; the former observes and learns about the other while the latter examines the self. Of course, these two groups are not homogenous either. Since the overall engagement with the other/self is arguably similar, it is nonetheless productive for my research to categorize the viewers into two groups, while being more specific about the various cis and trans viewers within these groups where necessary.

When it comes to the *relation*ship between television and audiences, the encounter that takes place is one of dual relationality. On the one hand, television is "a relational object," while

on the other, each television viewer is "a relational being in their connection to other people – regardless of whether those other people are in the room or not" (Holdsworth 29). Through watching television, viewers do not only connect to others who are different to them, but also to the self, as they might see their identity reflected on the screen, which could possibly increase self-understanding or even a sense of confirmation or belonging.[6] For that reason, Lynn Pierce's 'text-reader relationship', which can also be understood as a television-viewer relationship,

> can be used to make sense of the world(s) we inhabit: and, in particular, the way in which we can creatively combine the texts of others with the textual productions of the self to gain a new perspective on our complex 'locatedness' within contemporary culture (qtd. in Holdsworth 24).

In other words, the relationship between television and audiences, with an emphasis on relation, strengthens one's understanding of the self as well as one's understanding of the other. Drawing on the self-other dialectic, this dual strengthening generally happens at the same time. Ultimately, "the virtual space between text and reader," or in this case television and viewer, can be regarded as a space for "meaningful interpretation or communication" (qtd. in Holdsworth 24). Considering that television is commonly interpreted as "a cultural agent … a provoker and circulator of meaning" (Fiske 1), it is exactly this circulation between television and viewer and culture, in any which order, that is closely studied in the field of television studies.

Although this thesis is by no means a television studies project, it examines two case studies that are television shows, treating and analyzing them as texts, and therefore borrows a few concepts from what Holdsworth names 'the dominant critical lexicon' that is used for the study of contemporary (and often) American television. Considering that *Euphoria* is a

[6] In the case of my thesis, the trans characters in *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* are 'other' for cisgender viewers and 'self' for transgender viewers.

carefully scripted and structured drama television series and *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a reality drag competition, which documents 'the real', at least to a certain extent, this research project works with the concepts of the cinematic and the complex as the value judgement differs between the two shows. After all, the genre of drama is generally considered to carry more value and to be of more quality than reality television. Whereas the cinematic involves aesthetically dense or visually innovative qualities (Mills), the complex consists of a sophisticated and nuanced style, which requires "sustained engagement and consideration" (Mittell 46). Another concept from the dominant critical lexicon that this project employs is the distinction between linear and nonlinear television. While both *Euphoria* and *RuPaul's Drag Race* first air on television and their designated streaming service, one episode per week, they can eventually be streamed (and binged) all at once on Netflix, HBO Max and/or WOW Presents Plus. For that reason, most viewers engage with the television shows for a prolonged time, tuning in each week to see their favorite drag queen excel in the competition or follow their favorite character as the story advances. As an important aspect of television studies, the relationship between text and viewer figures in this research project as well, predominantly through the impact *Euphoria* and *RuPaul's Drag Race* can have on cisgender viewers on the one hand and transgender viewers on the other, or in other words, how the two television shows affect their viewers. The following section considers affect more explicitly as it first delineates the field of affect studies and further addresses the theories that this research project adopts.

The Power of Form: Affect Theory

In 1995, the publication of two academic texts heralded the so-called 'affective turn' (Ahern; Anderson) across the humanities as well as the social sciences. Retrospectively named a "watershed moment" (Seigworth and Gregg 6) for the study of affect, the dissemination of these formative texts did not only intrigue scholars across various disciplines, but also generated "two

primary lines, perhaps now even traditions of affect theory" (Ahern 2). The first line of inquiry follows the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, which influenced Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank to write "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold." In this text, Sedgwick and Frank construe affect as a system of innate and "biologically hardwired" (Ahern 2) bodily responses. The second line of inquiry pursues philosopher Gilles Deleuze's (Spinozian) take on affect as "prepersonal intensity" (Ahern 2), located in the very movement between bodies and/or things, whether these are human or nonhuman. This line of inquiry blossomed in Brian Massumi's text "The Autonomy of Affect." When comparing Sedgwick and Frank's text with Massumi's, it becomes apparent that there exists "a certain sense of reverse flow" between the two, which Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg observe as "a certain inside-out/outside-in difference in directionality" (6).

Although scholars have debated the occurrence of an affective turn, arguing that affect theory is a continuation of a "long tradition of feminist scholarship on emotional life" (Anderson 6) and that a multitude of turns took place rather than one specific turn ushered in by a single event or academic (Seigworth and Gregg 19), the impact of these two foundational texts on the study of affect cannot be denied (Ahern; Houen; Seigworth and Gregg; Stanley; Van Alphen and Jirsa; Wehrs). Since 1995, affect theory has been taken up in anthropology, psychology, sociology, politics, cultural studies, literary studies (Houen) as well as queer studies, media and communication studies, art theory, film studies, postcolonial studies, cognitive science and economics (Van Alphen and Jirsa) to such a degree that Eugenie Brinkema asked her rhetorical question in 2014: "Is there any remaining doubt that we are now fully within the Episteme of the Affect?" (qtd. in Houen 3). When it comes to the academic attraction of affect, the theory has evoked interest for a multitude of reasons, which at times seem to contradict one another. Citing the work of a variety of scholars, Ben Anderson names a few reasons, some of which are philosophical in nature, others more political:

> spaces and places are made through affect … affect and thinking are always-already imbricated with one another … affects 'stick' to bodies and as such attach people to inequalities … it is through affects that subjects are constituted by and constitute worlds … representations function affectively … it is at the level of affect that the real effects of forms of power are felt and lived … and affects open up thinking to the dynamics of non-organic life (7).

In other words, affect can be studied from various angles and can thus be adopted in fields that seem dissimilar in object of study, such as film studies and economics.

There are arguably even more reasons why scholars are drawn to affect theory, which differ and/or overlap per discipline. Since affect has been studied extensively yet multifariously across various disciplines, "it is no longer accurate to distinguish between two main strands" (Van Alphen and Jirsa 4). In fact, "these two conceptual currents" that manifested since the 'affective turn', that is Sedgwick and Frank's psychological account on the one hand and Massumi's philosophical-aesthetic account on the other, "have been intermingled to such a degree that it is rather impossible to decide what sets each apart" (Van Alphen and Jirsa 4). As a result, there is not a single or even a dual theory of affect, which is clear-cut and can be applied widely or generally within academia. Seigworth and Gregg argue that such a theory will never exist in the first place:

> if anything, it is more tempting to imagine that there can only ever be infinitely multiple iterations of affect and theories of affect: theories as diverse and singularly delineated as their own highly particular encounters with bodies, affects, worlds (3-4).

Therefore, there are numerous ways to theorize affect and, consequently, to engage with these theories.

Although such a plethora of approaches to affect is not only logical and necessary but also promising and encouraging, the downside is that it confuses and complicates matters of

affect. According to Ernst van Alphen, the term ‘affect’ has been increasingly used in “vague and suggestive ways” (21). In 2019, Van Alphen and Tomáš Jirsa argued that “the concept has been diluted to the point that … we have lost sight of what affect really means: as a phenomenon, as a critical concept, and as an analytical tool” (2). If we lost sight of the meaning of affect, then how do we find it again? What does affect mean and how can it be productively used for critical and/or cultural analysis? It might be useful to start with etymology. The term ‘affect’ can be traced back to antiquity, since the term comes from the Latin word *affectus*, which is often translated as ‘emotion’ or ‘passion’ but also refers to the emotional state in which a person can find themselves, thus one’s ‘disposition’ or ‘mood’ (Houen 9; Van Alphen 23). Anderson has made these ‘dispositions’ or ‘moods’ more tangible by providing a helpful yet inexhaustive list of phenomena which affect might describe:

> background moods such as depression, moments of intense and focused involvement such as euphoria, immediate visceral responses of shame or hate, shared atmosphere of hope or panic, eruptions of passion, lifelong dedications of love, fleeting feelings of boredom, societal moods such as anxiety or fear, neurological bodily transitions such as feeling of aliveness … amongst much else (5).

What these examples make clear is that a body is often ‘overcome’ with affect, which happens unconsciously and undeliberately. At the same time, affect describes a wide variety of phenomena, which invites scholars to use the plural term ‘affects’, rather than the singular ‘affect’. One such scholar is Sedgwick who consistently uses the plural in order to emphasize the “combinatorial complexity” (Anderson 5) that exists between several affects, often working together or affecting one another. Indeed, as Sedgwick writes, affects “can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, *including other affects*” (19, emphasis mine). Thus, affects have the power, or

perhaps the freedom, to attach to virtually anything, and in doing so either intensify or transform the meaning of that which they attach to.

When it comes to the act of affecting, an important duality takes form. Each body, whether this body is human or nonhuman, has the capacity to affect as well as to be affected, two processes that either occur simultaneously or subsequently (Anderson 9; Seigworth and Gregg 3). As a result, affect has a processual nature, always in the act of affecting or being affected, in which 'movement' is more important than 'stasis'. Massumi calls this dual capacity of affect *l'affect*, while he calls the very transmission of affect between bodies *l'affection* (Shouse). In other words, *l'affect* is the condition and *l'affection* the process. Intriguingly, the affective process is inescapable, which Stephen Ahern describes as "the most fundamental insight of affect theory: that no embodied being is independent, but rather is *affected by* and *affects* other bodies, profoundly and perpetually as a condition of being in the world" (4-5). As Seigworth and Gregg argue, affect is synonymous with "forces of encounter" (2), which means that affect is not only affecting all bodies but also arises in the very encounter between two or more bodies. Then, because of "its origin in interaction" (Van Alphen 23), affect is social and relational rather than personal. The sociality of affect becomes even more apparent in the way in which many scholars describe the phenomenon as 'sticky' or 'contagious' (see for example Ahmed), since the affect found in a certain body tends to infect or stick to other bodies it comes in contact with. In the words of Anna Gibbs: "Bodies catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear." Because affect emerges in the interaction between bodies, an important aspect of the theory has to do with relational thinking, which is in line with "actor-network theory, new materialism, and posthumanism" (Ahern 13), theories that are heavily involved with relational ontologies as well.

Affect, then, invites embodied beings to be more in tune with other embodied beings. According to Tobias Skiveren, an affective approach "can facilitate an attunement to the emotional lives of Other corporealities" (qtd. in Ahern 17). Since such an attunement is not always present in academic inquiry, Ahern argues that being "open to the pain, the joy, the fear [of Others] – and to refuse to foreclose the transformative potential of such engagements – is an ethical imperative that must guide our critical practice" (17). After all, affect is seen as "a basis of knowledge" (Houen 3) within but also outside of academic spheres, having the power to teach people a great deal about the 'self' as well as the 'other'. Considering that it is "the affective encounter through which thought proceeds and moves toward deeper truth" (Van Alphen 22), affect theory acts as a promise to engage more thoughtfully with and within the world. In the words of Anderson, this promise "is of a worldly geography engaged with life, one that pays close attention to the subtle, elusive dynamics of everyday living and touches the textures of social life" (7). In terms of this research project, the affect that arises out of the representation of trans fluidity in *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* acts as a basis of knowledge indeed, which deepens a cisgender audience's understanding of transness and allows certain trans viewers to see themselves depicted (even validated) on the screen and others to embrace their own transness. Thus, the depiction of transness affects the relationality between audiences and the self/other.

Ultimately, the study of affect results in new and surprising insights into the realm of relational life. Since the humanities appear to be predominantly concerned with (hidden) meanings that go beyond the literal, which Derek Attridge describes as "allegorical reading" (see Van Alphen 26), adopting an affective approach moves scholars into the unknown. Van Alphen argues that a "hasty flight to (allegorical) meaning can only end up in the already known, in the recognition of conventional meanings, whereas the affective operations … are what opens space for the not yet known" (30). In doing so, affect theory steps away from

morality and engages with ethics instead. The difference between the two is that "ethics is enabled and invigorated by the capacity for transformation; that is precisely by not assuming that there is a given outside of thinking," while morality "operates within the bounds of a given set of conventions, within which social and political problems must be solved" (Bennett qtd. in Van Alphen 30). When scholars are merely looking for allegorical meaning, they conform to a moral code, which tends to be fixed and restricted, but when scholars are open to affective meaning, they are receptive to an ethical response (Van Alphen 30).

The concept of ethics is critical for the study of affect. Apart from constituting a promise to engage more compassionately with(in) the world, affect theory has also been recognized as an 'imperative' if the world "is to learn to respond how contemporary forms of power, and their specific violences, work on and through affect" (Anderson 7). In other words, a certain sense of urgency and necessity is at stake with the study of affect, which does not only recognize but also illuminate the role affect plays in power structures and relations. According to Anderson, "[u]nderstanding how power functions in the early twenty-first century requires that we trace how power operates through affect and how affective life is imbued with relations of power, without reducing affective life to power's effect" (8). After all, one of the reasons why scholars have turned to affect is to address and tackle their concern with the marginalization and/or silencing "of specific experiences (often gendered or raced)" (Anderson 8). Affect, then, is particularly useful to address the silencing and marginalization of transness in popular media. After having been absent or portrayed negatively at first, trans characters were later depicted to adhere to normative stereotypes of hypergender, in which their transness was restricted to two categories (hypermasculine or hyperfeminine). Affecting their audiences in a different way by illustrating that transness is fluid rather than fixed, *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* counter the silencing and marginalization of transness in popular media. These television shows do so

by giving transness a new or at least more authentic voice, even allowing trans people to be involved in the storytelling.

In the field of affect studies, scholars engage with one aspect of affect primarily, which is the way in which it affects a subject. Reconstructing and building on Eugenie Brinkema's argument, Van Alphen and Jirsa write that scholars working with affect theory tend to "completely [disregard] textuality and close reading in favor of vague embodiment and for privileging the affected subject – meaning the affected critic or theorist – with its personal emotions and feelings" (4), which results in a failure to engage with affect in all its dimensions. They assert that "affects *can* have form and should therefore not" solely "be understood in terms of expressivity or interiority, but rather as formal dimensions, such as, in the case of the cinema, colours, light, and rhythm" (4). According to Van Alphen and Jirsa, what Brinkema ultimately argues is that form has the capacity to evoke, or perhaps more accurately 'trigger', affect. The term 'trigger' is useful for understanding the inner workings of affect. Adopting the definition that the Oxford English Dictionary maintains, Van Alphen and Jirsa write that "the verb trigger means to activate, to stimulate, to initiate a change of state, or to spark off," or in other words, the triggering that occurs within and because of affect "produces, generates, provokes, and, eventually, opens" (4). Yet what exactly is being triggered? When it comes to affective processes, a dual triggering seems to take place. It begins with a source that triggers affect,

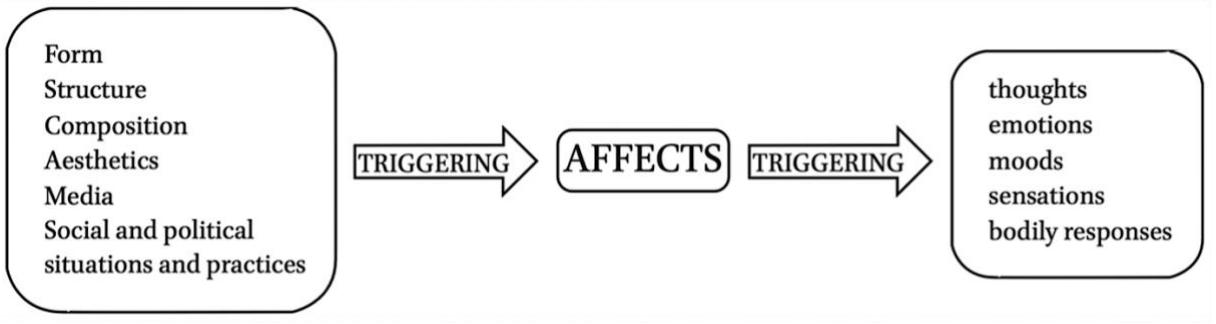

Figure 1. Diagram showing the affective process (Van Alphen and Jirsa 5).

which then advances to trigger a certain response. In other words, affect is not only 'being triggered', but it 'triggers' too. In order to clarify the dual triggering that occurs in an affective process, Van Alphen and Jirsa created a diagram (figure 1). This diagram agrees with Ahern and Brinkema that there are actually many sources that trigger affect, which then illicit a variety of responses, whether these materialize as thoughts, emotions, moods, sensations and/or bodily responses. Moreover, the depiction of three distinct stages decenters the 'affected subject', which has been the focal point in most affect scholarship. It does so by drawing attention to the first stage in the affective process too, rather than merely focusing on the final stage. According to Van Alphen and Jirsa, it is worthwhile to focus on the moments "during which 'the affective trigger is pulled'" (5). When it comes to *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria*, the affective trigger is activated through formal elements such as camerawork, (post)production and costume.

While affect triggers responses, it does not necessarily mean that these responses are productive or positive. It is true that affect has been and continues to be constructed as a promise as well as an imperative, yet "there are no ultimate or final guarantees – political, ethical, aesthetic, pedagogic, and otherwise – that capacities to affect and to be affected will yield an actualized next or new that is somehow better than 'now'" (Seigworth and Gregg 10). In fact, affect can be a threat as much as it can be a promise. In all probability, however, it is a combination of both. The push and pull between promise and threat has prompted Lauren Berlant to coin the term 'cruel optimism', for example, which considers desires that might actually be obstacles instead. Considering that affect elicits responses that can be either positive, negative, or a combination of both, Seigworth and Gregg argue that affect actually "bears an intense and thoroughly immanent neutrality" (10). In other words, affect is neither inherently good nor bad, yet has the capacity to be both. That said, "the neutral can always be colored

more hopefully" (Seigworth and Gregg 13) and in order to move forward in the world, the neutral arguably should be colored more hopefully.

After all, when there is no hope "what is left is *death* – the death of spirit, the death of life – where there is no longer any sense of regeneration and renewal" (Zournazi 16). It is striking that even the etymology of the word 'promise' suggests that hope is needed to advance in life and not be frozen in the past or the present: as Sara Ahmed observed, "the word 'promise' comes from the Latin *promissum* 'to send forth'" (35). While I do not intend to dismiss or diminish the value that lies in analyzing negative affects or "bad feelings (shame, disgust, hate, fear, and so on)" (Ahmed 30), which are not only important objects of study but also fundamental aspects of life, I agree with Ahmed that much of academic scholarship is invested with negativity (30). Setting off in a more positive direction, this research project centers around 'hope'. Adopting Mary Zournazi's definition of hope, it is "a basic human condition that involves belief and trust in the world. [Hope] is the stuff of our dreams and desires, our ideas of freedom and justice and how we might conceive life" (12). Ultimately, hope is what keeps people going, what keeps people alive. As it is "built on belief and faith, and the trust there is a life worth living in uncertain times" (Zournazi 16), hope might be the most vital affect in life.

Importantly, it was the starting point of this research project, inducing me to analyze the exact moments in contemporary television that made me feel hopeful about trans representation. Thus, in a way, affect triggered this research. While *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* were the sources of hope, it was the intensity of this specific affect that caused me to embark on this research project in the first place. In line with Van Alphen and Jirsa's diagram of affective processes, a dual triggering occurred, in this case revolving around hope. Considering that hope is "also about a spirit of dialogue" (Zournazi 12), it seems only logical that my hopeful disposition can be traced back to trans people's intimate involvement in the representation of transness in the two television shows that form the case studies of my research project.

According to Zournazi, any conversation that wants to be productive, whether it is "individual or political, written, spoken or read," needs to harbor "the ability to hear, listen and give" (12). After all, when "a dialogue is not permitted there can be no space for exchange," which means that "words and ideas become self-enclosed and the exchange becomes a kind of monologue" (12). Such a monologue not only produces a partial picture but also reinforces information that is 'already known' and possibly harmful.

When it comes to the depiction of transness, *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* do not take up the heteronormative stereotypes that tend to circulate in popular culture, but rather allow trans people to tell their own stories that conceive of gender and sexuality in more fluid terms. This is crucial since "reflections, conversations and dialogues build new social and individual *imaginaries* – visions of the world that create possibilities of change" (Zournazi 12). It is precisely thoughtful conversation and collaboration that "can let new ideas, views and expressions emerge" (Zournazi 12). As a result, popular media might depict the fluid reality of transness more often rather than pursuing harmful stereotypes. Considering that "there is a profound need for marginalized readers to discover selves reflected in a world that otherwise denies their very existence" (McCallum and Bradway 10), a depiction of transness that is fluid rather than fixed, endless rather than bound, is not only lifesaving but lifegiving too. When trans people seek this identification and find it in shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria,* it might "fuel a hope, or demand, that [popular media] should accurately, clearly, and positively represent queer lives and experiences" (McCallum and Bradway 10), an affective charge that propels the shift in trans representation. However, the whiteness of Gottmik and Jules illustrate that their trans fluidity is a step forward for white trans representation only; that the shift in trans representation is far from finished and needs to take more steps in order to be lifesaving and lifegiving for trans people of color too.

While hope is the central affect in this research project, the diagram that Van Alphen and Jirsa created to explain the dual triggering that occurs in an affective process features prominently as well. Considering that form plays a crucial role in television in general and *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* in particular, the diagram is used to analyze the depiction of transness in these two television shows and the affect it evokes. Before this project engages with its case studies, however, it first situates transness in the third and final theory section.

Trans-ing Life: Trans Theory

One of the most prominent sources of trans knowledge production, the academic journal *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (*TSQ*), published an article in the beginning of 2019 that announced the end of transgender studies as an academic field. Provocatively opening with the statement that "[t]rans studies is over [and if] it isn't, it should be" (Chu and Harsin Drager 103), the text caused quite a stir in academia. Apart from being *Transgender Studies Quarterly*'s most-read article in 2019, it also featured in the top ten most frequently read journal entries for Duke University Press, *TSQ*'s publisher (Stryker, "Introduction"). Unsettling the field of transgender studies, Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager's article "After Trans Studies" elicited a variety of responses, some in favor of the text, others not. More than a year later, *Transgender Studies Quarterly* dedicated a section of their August 2020 issue to this text specifically, publishing four of the many responses Chu and Harsin Drager evoked. Before engaging with the counter-text "Before Trans Studies," this section first reconstructs the main arguments in "After Trans Studies."

At the core of Chu and Harsin Drager's text lies the assertion that the field of transgender studies has fundamentally been a failure. Whereas Susan Stryker argued in 2004 that "transgender studies can be considered queer theory's evil twin" ("Transgender Studies" 212), originating from the same academic lineage – that is, feminism and sexuality studies – yet

disrupting its academic family, Chu and Harsin Drager claim that transgender studies is actually "the twin that queer studies ate in the womb" (103). Signaling the absence of distinct theories and debates, the two academics find that transgender studies has been unsuccessful in distinguishing itself from queer theory and, to return to Stryker, disrupting its family ties. As a result, the two fields have become synonymous. Furthermore, Chu and Harsin Drager lament the lack of friction between transgender scholars. Instead of productive debates and conversation, they observe an excess of optimism and agreement. Finally, Chu and Harsin Drager address the paradoxical absence of 'trans' in transgender studies, considering that "the most cited texts about trans people and in trans studies have been the work of non-trans (i.e., cis) scholars recycling the same citations, concepts, and metaphors" (104), which strongly ties the field to queer studies.

While Chu and Harsin Drager attended the funeral of transgender studies in 2019, Cassius Adair, Cameron Awkward-Rich and Amy Marvin were eagerly awaiting the birth of the field in 2020 when they published their response to Chu and Harsin Drager's text, "Before Trans Studies." In stark contrast to the article they respond to, the three scholars argue that "trans studies has not yet happened" (306). Even though it might seem like transgender studies is barren ground since the seeds that were sown a handful of decades ago are growing either slowly or not at all, Adair, Awkward-Rich and Marvin propose that "the field has not yet happened, not because its seeds were flawed from the beginning but because the sprouts have been struggling in poison soil of the contemporary university system" (307). Because of two factors, Adair, Awkward-Rich and Marvin contend that those involved in transgender studies have simply not had the chance to grow colorful and beautiful flowers yet. On the one hand, trans scholars have continuously had to discover for themselves that the field of transgender studies is much richer than becomes apparent in gender and queer theory courses, which tend to give minimal attention to transness. On the other, trans scholars have constantly had to

convince editors and reviewers that pursuing trans knowledge production is valuable, and thus battled "institutional skepticism" (307). On top of that, Adair, Awkward-Rich and Marvin write that the field of trans studies is a privileged playground where some (read: white, wealthy) scholars run freely whereas others are relegated to the sideline, of which my own research is only an example. After all, my whiteness has not only granted me "unquestioned access" (Johnson 19) to academic spaces but also made it easier to afford tuition fees in the first place considering that I have experienced (and continue to experience) considerably less social inequalities as a white person born into a upper-middle-class white family than for example a trans person of color. Because of social disparity, Adair, Awkward-Rich and Marvin critically ask whether it is possible to speak of the end of the field when some people have not even had the chance to participate. For them, "the 'great failure' of trans studies is that we can't all afford to write … that most trans intellectuals are not afforded the time, money, energy" (309) to conduct and publish research.

Even though Adair, Awkward-Rich and Marvin recognize the absence of trans knowledge that Chu and Harsin Drager address in their article, whether it is through issues of access to the academic institution or through the overall (mis)representation of the field by cisgender scholars, the three academics fundamentally disagree with the notion that positivity hinders trans epistemology and that a lack of friction results in the "sort of dogmatic, fragile church of agreement that Chu and Harsin Drager attribute to trans studies" (314). Turning to the etymology of the word 'field', Adair, Awkward-Rich and Marvin emphasize that the term on the one hand refers to a somewhat militant 'battlefield' or 'hunting ground' but on the other to a more neutral or even affectionate "space that might be cultivated, made habitable, or left alone" (313). In the case of the latter, the field of transgender studies can act as a 'shelter' rather than a 'battleground'. Considering that trans people already face a disproportionate amount of hostility in life, a space that cultivates "practices of care and communal cultivation" (Adair,

Awkward-Rich and Marvin 314) seems highly needed. Indeed, a hostile environment would not only estrange trans people from producing knowledge in the field but would arguably also propel them into dangerous mental territory when not even transgender studies is able to provide them with a safe space. The field would never start growing flowers and silently but definitively move from 'yet to happen' into 'never to happen'. Strikingly, Adair, Awkward-Rich and Marvin's desire for a positive rather than a negative space mirrors Ian Khara Ellasante's call for "care-full practice and intention" (426) within the field of trans studies. Ellasante's affirmative approach features throughout this research project, most explicitly in the way in which *Euphoria* and *RuPaul's Drag Race* approach transness. After all, the television shows have *care*fully crafted their image of transness as the next two chapters establish in more detail. Moreover, as a researcher working with trans theory on the one hand and hope on the other, I also adopt a care-full practice that is invested in positive rather than negative affect.

While Chu and Harsin Drager criticize the lack of friction in trans studies, they do not disavow optimism completely. Working with Lauren Berlant, they argue that it is impossible to write outside of optimism as it is the very matter through which people relate with the world. At the same time, Chu and Harsin Drager gesture toward an optimism without hope, which they call 'bitter optimism', describing it as "the bitter disappointment of finding out the world is too small for our desires, and especially the political ones" (206). Considering that transgender studies is a field of embodied knowledge, and that this specific knowledge is full of pain and disappointment,[7] it is important and productive to work through emotions that sting. According to Chu and Harsin Drager, bitter optimism leads to a more comprehensive and fuller engagement with the reality of being trans. While there definitely needs to be room for an engagement with negative affect such as pain and disappointment, which will create a more

[7] See for instance Susan Stryker's seminal work "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage" (1994) or Dean Spade's "Mutilating Gender" (2006).

comprehensive picture of transness, disavowing hope and replacing it with bitterness seems to be turning into a dead-end street. Ultimately, giving up hope is giving up life, whether that life is academic or not. And for trans people, giving up hope is not an option. As multiple trans writers have pointed out, such as C. Riley Snorton, Ian Khara Ellasante and Blas Radi, hope is necessary for trans people to exist and to continue to exist, which holds true for the field of trans studies as well. Without hope, transgender studies is a sinking ship in a bitter sea. It needs longing, dreams and desires in order to endure and transform. When Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker launched *Transgender Studies Quarterly* in 2014, they picked a very specific marketing line: 'we're changing gender'. Reflecting on the journal's trajectory, Stryker writes in 2020 that "the work in this journal changes gender. And changing gender is part of changing the world in ways that help us live in it, or die trying" ("Introduction" 304). Considering that changes and transformations only occur through hope, particularly for a better future, we trans people cannot do away with this positive affect. Instead, we have to work actively with and through hope, even when at times we feel like giving up.

One such transformation that has come to the fore in the field of transgender studies deals with the two-fold question of 'by whom?' and 'for whom?' While the field's domination by the theory and approaches of cisgender scholars has already been discussed as well as the absence of transgender scholars who do not always have the privilege(s) to fruitfully work in the field, another point of concern can be found in the fissure between academic and non-academic domains. As Craig Womack poignantly asks:

> What is the relationship between our theories and the people we are theorizing about? Do the subjects of our theorizing see themselves in the same way as we describe them in books, journal articles, classroom lectures, and so on? How do we bring their self-representations into our theorizing? (369).

Although Womack is specifically talking about indigenous knowledge production, these questions seem relevant for academic scholarship in general, whether academics write about indigenous, Black, brown, disabled or trans people.[8] The only productive way to engage with Womack's question is to write *with* instead of *about* the specific people that academics are theorizing about. In the field of transgender studies, many scholars have signaled the importance of this approach (see for instance Ellasante; Radi; Stryker, "Transgender Studies Today").

When such an approach is adopted successfully, academic knowledge is knocked down from its pedestal and the "worshipping at the altar of the wisdom of the Theorist" (Powell 15) is halted. The floor would be opened up to other forms of knowledge production that are equally important, and in some contexts arguably even more important, considering that a significant number of the subjects of academic theorizing exist outside of academia. "Academic discourse, after all," as Malea Powell writes, "isn't at the center of the lives of most of the humans on the globe" (15): it is simply one of the ways in which knowledge is produced. Considering all of these different epistemological modes together, for instance the myriad ways in which transgender people understand transness, will not only lead to new and saturated insights but might also dismantle "some of the barriers that preclude many trans people from seeing themselves reflected and participating in transgender studies" (Ellasante 424). Treating television as a source of knowledge production, in which trans people are closely involved, this research project takes a step in the direction of decentering the epistemology of academia. Since popular culture reaches a larger and more diverse audience than privileged academics, such trans knowledge production might even have more impact. In a way, it also allows non-academic trans people to participate in transgender studies, not by writing academic texts but by mediating transness. After all, both engage with trans knowledge production.

[8] These and more (social) categories often overlap in intricate ways, see Crenshaw.

Now that the field of trans studies has been mapped, this research project discusses some of the theories and terms that play an important role in the analysis of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria*, starting with the most imporant term for this project, which is 'transgender'. In the 1990s, the term 'transgender' entered academic as well as popular discourse. The rapid rise in usage and interest can be partly explained by the development of the World Wide Web, which happened around the same time (Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges"). Employed as an umbrella term, 'transgender' signaled gender variance and encompassed a wide variety of identities that did not conform to the gender that was assigned at birth (Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges"; Tompkins; Williams). The symbolism of the umbrella does not only create an (imagined) community of gender nonconformists, but it also connotes a shelter "from the hard rain of discrimination" (Singer 259). While the umbrella brings together modes of transness that are binary (trans men and women) and non-binary ("those who identify as agender, androgynous, demigender, gender fluid, genderqueer, and other identities that go beyond traditional gender categories" (Beemyn 299)), and thus comprises a multitude of specificities and experiences, there is a certain unity in transness that makes it useful to work with the term 'transgender' as an umbrella. After all, the essence of nonconforming is the same: a transgender person rejects the gender that they were assigned at birth and adopts a different gender or transcends the idea of gender altogether. It is only the execution that differs per identity, even per person. It is important to note, however, that the symbolism of the umbrella "should arrive with a disclaimer: One size does not fit all" (Singer 261), and to remember that the classificatory practice is useful only to a certain extent – it does not account for the specificities that differ between binary and non-binary trans people, even between people within these two categories. This research project, therefore, employs 'transgender' as an umbrella term, but distinguishes between certain categories of transness where necessary.

Since the term ‘transgender’ is commonly abbreviated to ‘trans’, this project uses both interchangeably. Within academic and activist circles, the abbreviation is regularly supplemented with an asterisk, as in trans*. While the asterisk can fulfill many functions, for instance “mark a bullet point in a list, highlight or draw attention to a particular word or phrase, indicate a footnote, or operate as a wildcard character in computing and telecommunications,” it is mostly the last function that is relevant for the term ‘trans’ as the asterisk is used to “open up *transgender* or *trans* to a greater range of meanings” (Tompkins 26). The symbol connotes an internet search, in which the asterisk can be added to the end of a word to instruct the search engine not only to look for the relevant word but also for any characters that can be added to it. Since the term ‘transgender’ has been criticized for mainly focusing on a particular mode of transness, that is the binary identity of trans man and woman, thus excluding other forms of transness (Beemyn; Tompkins), the asterisk draws attention to the fact that trans is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of identities. As a perceptible symbol, * does so unmistakably.

However, a certain irony is attached to the symbol since “typing ‘trans*’ into a search engine yields only results that include the trans- prefix, thereby reinscribing the very conceptual limitations of trans being argued against by those who advocate using the asterisk” (Tompkins 27). Moreover, the etymology of ‘trans’ already signals that the term encompasses more than one identity, which makes the asterisk “superfluous” – in Latin, trans means “both ‘across, on the other side of’ and ‘beyond,’ so the term fits both binary and nonbinary transgender individuals” (Beemyn xxiv). This research project employs ‘trans’ without asterisk, and thus re-emphasizes the etymological roots of the umbrella term, precisely because it already signals gender nonconformity in all its shapes and forms. After all, being trans fundamentally means going ‘beyond’ gender assigned at birth, whether this beyond adheres to a binary or non-binary mode of transness. Moreover, the computational limitation of the asterisk undermines its usefulness, as it excludes non-binary trans identities without the prefix ‘trans’ such as

genderqueer or agender. Therefore, it might be more useful to define the terminology in each context, signaling whether trans is used as an umbrella term and whether trans refers to binary and/or non-binary forms of transness.

At its core, transness demonstrates that gender, "as it is lived, embodied, experienced, performed, and encountered, is more complex and varied than can be accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender ideology of Eurocentric modernity" (Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges" 3). While trans people have always existed, albeit in different forms, spaces and cultures (think for example of the *mujerados* and *morphodites* in Native America, the *hijra* in India, the *mahu* in Polynesia, the *kathoey* in Thailand, the *travesti* in Latin America or the *xanith* in the Arabian Peninsula), the umbrella term 'trans' mainly focuses on the Western configuration of transness (Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges"; Whittle). Since the case studies *Euphoria* and *RuPaul's Drag Race* are very much embedded in Western and specifically American culture, this research project adheres to a localized definition of transness. Considering that the trans figures in both television shows are white, their transness is not simply a Western but also a white transness. It is important to recognize, however, that current ideas of trans and transness

> are born and reborn of dynamic tumult, sustained by movements, debates, and transgressions that are transnational and anything but monochrome … born of Black, brown, Indigenous, immigrant, genderqueer, and nonbinary folks; of activists and artists and addicts; femmes and fairies; butches and banjee girls; *leitis* and *fa'afatama*; aggressives and studs; queers and queens; Two-Spirits and travestis; street kids and sex workers; and, yes, scholars too (Ellasante 422).

While some of these groups identify with the umbrella term 'trans', others do not. Since *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* employ the term 'trans' to define the figures of Gottmik and Jules and mediate their transness, this research project mainly adheres to the Western

configuration of (white) transness. However, the notion that transness is "anything but monochrome" (see quote above) should be highlighted as it figures in Western ideas of transness too. After all, many trans identities are grouped under the umbrella term 'trans', while the transness of Gottmik and Jules is depicted as limitless rather than bound.

Returning to the now canonical text "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," Sandy Stone describes transness as "a genre – a set of embodied texts" (165) in the early 1990s already. While Stone accounts for the "ambiguities and polyvocalities" (166) that exist within transness, I would go one step further and describe trans not as a single but as a multiplicity of genres, not as one set of embodied texts but as an intertextuality, in which different identities, ideas and experiences inform and influence one another. After all, 'trans' is always evolving. It is not a fixed term, but a fluid descriptor that can be adopted and employed in infinite ways. Trans becomes more of a verb rather than a noun, something one does rather than something one is. Indeed, it is an act to transcend gender assigned at birth: "it is transitioning in the world by transcending, trans-ing life" (Santana 216). It is important to note that the transcension is not a box that can be ticked off, an achievement or a destination, at least for most people. Rather, being trans and trans-ing through life is a continuing process. These notions of transness feature throughout this research project, and are accompanied by a trans optimism in which hope propels trans people forward. Moreover, the necessity of writing and theorizing *with* instead of *about* trans people, and thus the desire for trans people to be involved in trans epistemology, is woven into the analysis of transness in the following two chapters,[9] which consider *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* respectively.

[9] While Gottmik describes his relationship with trans masculinity through formal features of reality television (for example the confessional), the actor who plays Jules has been involved in the mediation of trans femininity through writing, producing and costuming.

Crashing the Cis-tem:

Trans Fluidity in *RuPaul's Drag Race*

In the 1990s, self-proclaimed 'supermodel of the world' RuPaul Andre Charles rose to fame when he released his debut album. While the musical project achieved commercial success in the United States, it was specifically the hit single "Supermodel (You Better Work)" that propelled Charles to international stardom. With the single peaking at number 2 on Billboard's Dance Club Songs in 1993 and at number 45 on the Billboard Hot 100 in the same year, Charles had his "breakthrough moment" and "started touring the world" (Daw). Apart from climbing the charts, the single rotated heavily on American cable channel MTV. Airing the music video that depicts Charles in full drag, MTV introduced drag to an audience that might not be (too) familiar with the art form. Following the mainstream success of "Supermodel," Charles signed a modelling contract with MAC Cosmetics in 1994, becoming the first drag queen to work with a cosmetics company. Continuing the visibility of drag in mainstream spheres, MAC distributed several advertisements that portrayed Charles in her drag persona RuPaul.[10] Then in 1996, two years later, *The RuPaul Show* became the first talk show to be hosted by a drag queen. With a total of 100 episodes that aired on the American cable channel VH1 and a range of remarkable guests (think for example of Diana Ross, Cher and Kurt Cobain), *The RuPaul Show* was another milestone for Charles personally as well as for the art of drag generally.

It was during this time that producers Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato approached Charles with the idea of doing reality television. Initially, Charles declined as he believed that "the climate was too hostile and reality TV seemed too mean-spirited" (qtd. in Abramovitch).

[10] Charles's 1995 autobiography *Lettin It All Hang Out* includes the now famous quote: "You can call me he. You can call me she. You can call me Regis & Cathy Lee; I don't care! Just as long as you call me." Considering that Charles is indifferent about pronouns, this project uses 'he' when Charles is out of drag and 'she' when Charles is performing as her drag persona RuPaul.

Figure 2. Still from the opening sequence of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Season 13, Episode 1). World of Wonder, 2021, Netflix.

It took a decade for Charles to relent when, in his own words, it finally "seemed like the timing was right" in the late 2000s, as he thought "the hostility towards people who dance to the beat of a different drummer had lifted a bit" (qtd. in Abramovitch). According to Charles, "there seemed to be this easiness in the air" when the "Bush Administration was over" and the "fear-mongering from 9/11 had died down" (qtd. in Abramovitch). Consequently, Charles partnered up with producers Bailey and Barbato to create *RuPaul's Drag Race* (figure 2) and, as Charles would say: the rest is *her*story. The show aired on Logo TV, an American cable channel that launched in 2005 and created content for queer people specifically, labelling itself 'the channel for gay America' (Edgar 135). Considering that American television had been actively targeting a queer audience in the 2000s, "promoting the idea that gay people were part of mainstream culture" (Parsemain 95), it is not surprising that Charles finally took up Bailey and Barbato's offer to create (drag) reality television toward the end of the 2000s.

Premiering in 2009, *RuPaul's Drag Race* quickly became Logo's "highest-rated program" (Brennan and Gudelunas 2). The premise of the show is simple: Charles invites a

number of drag queens to compete for the title of 'America's Next Drag Superstar'. In terms of genre, *RuPaul's Drag Race* blends elements from competition shows like *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway* with distinct features from the ballroom scene, an underground subculture where Black and Latin queer people, many of whom were trans, found a home and a family to not only be celebrated for who they are but also compete against each other in vogueing and modeling battles. Thus, *RuPaul's Drag Race* was on the one hand a classic example of reality television while on the other a unique and pioneering exposition of queer and drag culture. During each episode, the drag queens participate in challenges that range from acting, impersonation, stand-up and improv to choreography, design, runway and make-over. While the winner of each week receives a prize, the two queens who deliver the weakest performance compete in a lip-sync battle which determines who stays and who 'sashays away'. At the end of the competition, when most contestants have been eliminated, one queen is crowned America's Next Drag Superstar and takes over the reins from the previous superstar, the first being RuPaul of course. Since 2009, the show has aired 14 seasons and subsequently crowned 14 winners.

Over the years, the drag competition has become a cultural phenomenon. With high ratings, views and social media engagements, *RuPaul's Drag Race* moved its 9th season to the more mainstream cable channel VH1 in 2017, which has aired every season since. Whereas current seasons are first broadcast on national television, previous seasons can be streamed on subscription services like Hulu and Paramount+ in the United States, which continues the increasing accessibility of the show. Strikingly, *RuPaul's Drag Race* used to be available on Netflix as well (Lovelock). While the show was eventually removed from the North American catalog, it can still be viewed in the Netflix library of a wide variety of countries across Europe, Asia, Africa and South America, which invites a global audience to engage with the drag competition. On top of that, the exclusive drag streaming service WOW Presents Plus brings

the show to 279 countries across the globe, which a chart on their website reveals. The international success of *RuPaul's Drag Race* becomes even more apparent through the many franchises that followed the original US version. The drag competition took the world by storm with the premiere of *Drag Race Thailand* in 2018, followed by *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* in 2019, *Canada's Drag Race* and *Drag Race Holland* in 2020, *RuPaul's Drag Race Down Under*, *Drag Race España* and *Drag Race Italia* in 2021, and *Drag Race France* in 2022. Considering that *Drag Race Belgique*, *Drag Race Philippines* and *Drag Race Sweden* are currently in production, the *Drag Race* universe keeps expanding with no definitive end in sight.

It is thus clear that the drag competition has not only become a cultural but also a global phenomenon. Zooming in on the United States once again, there have been several spin-offs shows, most notably *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars*, in which competitors from previous seasons return to the competition for a second, sometimes even a third, time. While the international franchises and the various US spin-offs are flourishing in their own right, the success as well as the impact of *RuPaul's Drag Race* itself seems to be the greatest, perhaps because that is simply where it all began. In 2016, the show was presented its first Primetime Emmy Award when Charles won 'Outstanding Host for a Reality or Reality-Competition Program', a category he continued to win five consecutive times. With a total of 48 nominations and 24 Emmy awards (Television Academy), the drag competition continues to be recognized and praised by arguably the most prestigious organization that awards television excellence. In addition to winning a large number of Emmys, *RuPaul's Drag Race* made *The Guardian*'s list of the '100 best TV shows of the 21st century' (Abbott et al.). If that is not all, Charles was named one of *Time*'s '100 Most Influential People in 2017' for celebrating queerness and bringing drag into the mainstream, while she became the first drag queen to receive a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2018 (Hollywood Chamber of Commerce).

Although Charles claims that drag is "the antithesis of mainstream" (qtd. in Nicholson), there is no denying that *RuPaul's Drag Race* has proven the opposite to be true. After fourteen seasons of the highly popular competition, Charles has shown that it is very much possible to mainstream the art form. Charles has transported drag from an underground subculture to the cultural stage of reality television, from queer night life to the homes of thousands, perhaps even millions, of people across the world. It is important to note, however, that *RuPaul's Drag Race* has only mainstreamed a specific type of drag, which Lore/tta LeMaster and Michael Tristano Jr. poignantly describe as "commercial drag" (4), a consumer product that is easily digestible for mass audiences. In normalizing and mainstreaming drag, the competition show has not only simplified what it means to do drag but also erased significant elements of the art form. While drag is essentially "heightened gender expression for the sake of performance" (Peppermint qtd. in Mic 00:18:01-00:18:11), in which men, women and non-binary people play with notions of masculinity, femininity and/or androgyny in countless ways, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, particularly its earlier seasons, presents drag as 'female impersonation', the act of cisgender gay men dressing up as women. As a result, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has created a watered-down but most of all commodified version of drag. The show has made drag intelligible for a mainstream audience that might not be familiar with drag and/or queerness, and in doing so has created "a particular understanding of drag" (Lovelock 158) that is easily digestible. After all, the idea of drag as female impersonation is much easier to grasp and consume than a performance of gender that can take on innumerable iterations.

Until season 13, RuPaul declared "Gentlemen, start your engines and may the best woman win!" before the contestants entered the main stage each episode. The host's popular catchphrase reinforced the notion that drag is a transformation from man to woman, in which both categories reproduce hegemonic stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. This is all the more surprising considering that drag can be understood as subversive and counter-hegemonic

at its core – after all, the art form exposes the artificiality and performativity of gender (Butler; Edgar). That said, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has mainly advanced a definition of drag which sees the contestants as traditionally masculine before and traditionally feminine after their drag transformation. As various scholars have pointed out, the show ultimately reproduces normative discourses that tend to be misogynistic, transphobic, racist and/or classist (Collins; Edgar; Goldmark; LeMaster and Tristano Jr.; Parsemain; Strings and Bui; Upadhyay; Zhang). Because the drag competition views femininity through the eyes of cisgender gay men, which regularly results in mocking the vulva (think for example of the term 'fishy' which indicates femininity but fundamentally suggests that the genitalia of a cisgender woman smell like fish, or the acronym CUNT (Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent) which the show uses to assess the performance of any contestant), Ava Parsemain writes that *RuPaul's Drag Race* "reinforces homonormative privilege: men have power over women and gay men have power over everyone in the LGBT+ community" (101). While transgender women have always been a fundamental part of drag culture and cisgender women partake in the art form too, whether they perform femininity as drag queens or masculinity as drag kings, there seems to be no place for women in *RuPaul's Drag Race*. In fact, the show has created a hostile environment for trans women since the first episode aired in 2009. The extensive use of pejorative terms with regard to transness is striking. From 'tranny', to 'ladyboy', to 'she-male', the show has repeatedly pushed the idea that doing drag is similar to being trans, despite the fact that the former is a performance and the latter an identity, while insulting transness in the process.[11]

One transphobic slur that has been particularly present within the show is 'she-male'. In a nod to *America's Next Top Model*, the drag competition used to have their own version of 'Tyra Mail', a cryptic message that the host Tyra Banks sent her contestants prior to each

[11] See O'Halloran and Parsemain who provide useful overviews of transphobic language and imagery in the first few seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

challenge, hinting at the task ahead. In the context of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the drag queens receive 'she-mail', often accompanied by the soundbite "ooh, girl, you've got she-mail." The slur also appeared during a mini-challenge in the fourth episode of season 6 where contestants were shown a close-up of a celebrity and had to guess whether this person was a cisgender woman or a cisgender drag queen, or to use the phrasing from the challenge, whether the celebrity was a "biological woman" or a "psychological woman" (O'Halloran; Parsemain). The close-ups pictured muscular legs, breast implants and poorly blended makeup, examples that can be interpreted as failed attempts at normative femininity. Moreover, Charles introduced the challenge by uttering "female!" in a high-pitched tone, followed by "or she-male!" in a raspy low-pitched tone, while a screen depicted an illustration of a woman in pink with the word 'female' and a woman in blue with the word 'she-male' written underneath it. While Jonathan Doucette described the mini-challenge as "an opportunity for cis gay men to re-draw the very gender lines that they claim to push against," it is also blatantly transphobic. The segment diminishes trans women by mocking them with the term she-male and portraying them as 'lesser' women than "biological women."

Apart from including the degrading term 'she-male', which originated in pornography (Halberstam 12), the segment also conflated drag queens with trans women, insinuating that a drag queen is a 'psychological woman' rather than simply a drag queen. Although a (binary) trans woman is not a 'psychological woman' either, simply a woman,[12] the idea has circulated in trans discourse.[13] Rafi D'Angelo perfectly encapsulates the problematic of the mini-

[12] As a social category, 'woman' encompasses cisgender and transgender women. While their journey is different, considering that trans women have to transcend the gender that inadequately represents them, both cis and trans women identify as women and thus are 'real' women (see for example Bettcher).

[13] Think for example of the dubious notion of 'being born in the wrong body', which maintains that a trans person has always been trans mentally but only becomes 'fully' trans after transitioning (Engdahl; McQueen).

challenge when he writes that it is offensive "to put [certain] drag queens, who pretend to be *something like* women as a profession or hobby, in the same category with trans women – which is to say, real women" since the latter do not have cisgender male privilege after they take off their drag but "are women every day [which] comes with the threat of ridicule, exposure, and violence." Unsurprisingly, the 'female or she-male' segment was criticized extensively when the episode aired at the time, by members within as well as outside of the trans community. As a result, Logo TV issued the following statement in a Facebook post:

> Logo wanted to thank the community for sharing their concerns around a recent segment and the use of the term 'she-mail' on Drag Race. The episode has been pulled from all of our platforms and that challenge will not appear again. Furthermore, we are removing the 'You've Got She-Mail' intro from new episodes of the series. We did not intend to cause any offense, but in retrospect we realize that it was insensitive. We at the network sincerely apologize.

Logo TV eventually reuploaded the episode to streaming platforms without the offending mini-challenge, while keeping their promise regarding the phrasing of 'RuPaul Mail'. From season 7 onward, the messages were introduced with "she done already done had herses," a phrase Charles once overheard at a fast food restaurant (see Season 7, Episode 14).

Besides transphobic segments and terminology, trans contestants have also been notably absent throughout the series. For a considerable amount of time, trans people were not allowed to audition for the show; the drag competition's website once established that "contestants must be born male, be over the age of 21, and not identify as transgender" (qtd. in Kohlsdorf 76). Even though openly trans drag queens were not able to apply, there have been a handful of contestants who came out as trans during or after their season aired. In 2010, Kylie Sonique Love revealed in her season's reunion that she is currently transitioning (Season 2, Episode 12), which made her not only the first trans contestant on the show but also the first woman to come

out as trans "on network television" (Whitworth 143). Three years later, in 2015, Monica Beverly Hillz became the first contestant to come out during the show when she told RuPaul and the other judges on the mainstage that she is a trans woman, a "secret" she had been hiding since she entered the competition (Season 5, Episode 2). The weight of concealing her true identity had prevented her doing well in the challenges, she admits in tears. During the reunion, Charles revisited this emotional moment when he asks Monica whether "a girl [can] be a drag queen and a trans woman at the same time." As the drag queen powerfully explains, "Drag is what I do. Trans is who I am" (Episode 14, 00:51:12-00:51:05). This statement emphasizes the fact that drag is performance art, something that someone *does*, and that it can be performed by *anyone*, rather than being strictly reserved for a specific identity (that is, cisgender gay man). In other words, Monica reminds *RuPaul's Drag Race* that drag is not limited to gender identity.

While RuPaul seems to agree with Monica and even turns to the camera to claim that "the only requirement for being here is the desire to be America's Next Drag Superstar and the only thing we screen for is charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent" (00:51:02-00:50:46), it took the show another four years to cast a drag queen who was openly trans before entering the competition. Because of the general hostility toward trans people in the drag scene,[14] and, I would argue, in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the contestant Peppermint only felt comfortable to talk about her transness after five episodes were filmed. "There's a lot of people who think that drag queens are not trans and shouldn't be. And there's a lot of trans people who think that drag queens have no place in the trans community," Peppermint shares in a confessional, "I wanted to really get to know the girls before I came out to them. I was afraid" (Season 9, Episode 6, 00:19:07-00:18:51). The relief Peppermint feels after having told her fellow contestants that she is trans and the happiness she experiences for being truly accepted is palpable in that same confessional, where she grins widely with her eyes closed and shares in a sing-song voice that

[14] See for example Horowitz; Litwiller; Mic.

she is "so happy right now." Considering that this scene functions as an empowering moment in the show, which is only underlined by subsequent episodes,[15] *RuPaul's Drag Race* appears to suggest that trans women are not only 'legitimate' drag queens but are also welcome to audition for the show.

For that reason, it is all the more surprising that Charles confessed in a 2018 interview that he would "probably not" accept cisgender women nor trans women who have had gender reassignment surgery. According to Charles, drag "loses its sense of danger and its sense of irony once it's not men doing it, because at its core it's a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture" (qtd. in Aitkenhead). Using Peppermint as an example, who did not have gender affirming surgery until after the competition finished, he then claims that within the show: "[you] can identify as a woman and say you're transitioning, but it changes once you start changing your body … it changes the whole concept of what we're doing." Thus, Charles adheres to a narrow definition of drag, which maintains that only cisgender men should be drag queens. Responding to her controversial statement, while only adding more fuel to the fire, Charles wrote in a now-deleted Tweet that "You can take performance enhancing drugs and still be an athlete, just not in the Olympics" (qtd. in Brown). Considering that *RuPaul's Drag Race* is commonly framed as 'the Olympics of Drag', since it provides the largest platform in the world for drag performers, Charles equates trans women who are transitioning to doping athletes. In other words, the drag host accuses these women of 'cheating', as if having breasts or a vulva enhances one's drag performance.

Ultimately, Charles genders an art form that is fundamentally genderless (Mic). When drag is merely a transformation from man to woman, the ability to hide male genitalia and create a female illusion, the art form is reduced to body parts. Moreover, it misses the point that drag

[15] For example, Michelle Visage, a main judge on the show, tells Peppermint that she never has to choose between being a trans woman and a drag queen, but can be both at the same time (Episode 12).

is not merely 'a f-you' to masculinity and androcentrism, but also to "gender norms in general," as Peppermint eloquently argued in an interview with Mic (00:01:13-00:01:22). After all, the art form plays with notions of both femininity and masculinity, at times even with androgyny. Drag thus challenges ideas of gender altogether.[16] Charles eventually issued an apology for the statements he made. "Each morning I pray to set aside everything I THINK I know, so I may have an open mind and a new experience," she wrote on Twitter, "I understand and regret the hurt I have caused. The trans community are heroes of our shared LGBTQ movement. You are my teachers" (qtd. in Brown). Following this controversy, there have been significantly more trans people on the show, even trans women who have had gender affirming treatment. Most notably, season 14 had a total of five trans contestants, one of which, Willow Pill, became the first trans drag queen to be crowned America's Next Drag Superstar.

From employing transphobic language to reinforcing a narrow understanding of drag, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has not always created a welcoming environment for trans people. However, as the seasons progressed, more trans people appeared on the show. While some were openly trans in their respective season (such as Monica Beverly Hillz in season 5, Peppermint in season 9 and Kerri Colby in season 14), others came out after their season aired (such as Carmen Carerra in season 3, Miss Fame in season 7 and Gigi Goode in season 12). Strikingly, there have been trans contestants on all but two seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race,* which only underlines the fact that trans people play an active role within the drag community. In season 13, the drag competition substituted RuPaul's catchphrase "Gentlemen, start your engines and may the best woman win!" for the more gender inclusive "Racers, start your engines and may

[16] It is important to note that Peppermint's definition of drag as heightened gender expression is not accepted by the entire drag community. In fact, some people strictly adhere to the idea that drag is female impersonation, the transformation of cisgender men into drag queens. In other words, the definition of drag leads to contestation within the drag community.

the best drag queen win!" Following a history of transphobic incidents, *RuPaul's Drag Race* implements changes to be more mindful of as well as welcoming to contestants who are women[17] or non-binary people rather than 'gentlemen'.

In season 13, *RuPaul's Drag Race* took another step in the direction of trans inclusivity when the competition cast their first – and up to this point only – trans man: Gottmik (figure 3). Considering that previous trans contestants have all been women or transfeminine individuals, there has not been a transmasculine perspective on the art form of drag. This lack of representation follows the general absence of trans men in popular culture, who scarcely appear in television, film and other forms of media, particularly in comparison to trans women (Banks; Balend; Bendix; Feder and Scholder). Yet when they figure in popular media, the representation tends to conform to normative stereotypes that depict trans men as hypermasculine (see for example *Boys Don't Cry* and *The L Word*). The representation of Gottmik on *RuPaul's Drag Race* is, therefore, even more meaningful as the drag queen does not only illustrate the fact that trans men partake in the art form of drag but also that trans men are not exclusively hypermasculine, nor have to conform to normative stereotypes. As Gottmik tellingly declares when he introduces himself in the show: "I think I'll bring a different angle to this competition" (Episode 1, 00:32:28-00:32:25). By competing as a feminine trans man, Gottmik rejects popular conceptions of transness. Just as cisgender men can be feminine, trans men can be so too. In a confessional, Gottmik shares that his femininity has actually "held [him] back from transitioning" for a long time. "I'm not like every trans guy I've ever seen, so strong and masculine," he shares in a confessional. "One day, I was just at brunch, all of my guy friends around me. I realized they're so feminine, so just because I have a feminine side does not mean

[17] Both trans and cis. Although there have not yet been cisgender women on the US version of the show, in the third season of *RuPaul's Drag Race UK*, which aired in late 2021, Victoria Scone became the first cisgender woman to compete in the *Drag Race* franchise.

Figure 3. Still from Gottmik's confessional (Season 13, Episode 1). World of Wonder, 2021, Netflix.

I'm not a guy too. If these bitches are guys, I'm a guy" (Episode 10, 00:25:19-00:24:55). As this recollection makes clear, Gottmik embraced his femininity and was consequently able to embrace his transness as well, finding solace in the fact that men, both cis and trans, can be feminine without being deemed less of a man. It is important that Gottmik tells his story on a popular television show like *RuPaul's Drag Race* as it deviates from the dominant depiction of trans masculinity in television and film. As a result, it offers cisgender audiences a different way of viewing transness. Strikingly, contestants as well as judges on Gottmik's season recognized this early on. During the second episode, drag queen Olivia Lux tells Gottmik that he is "changing the shape of drag" (00:29:01-00:29:00), while main judge Michelle Visage emphasizes the fact that he has "a story to tell" (00:15:50-00:15:48). By including these examples in the final cut of the episode, *RuPaul's Drag Race* signals to viewers that Gottmik doing drag as a feminine trans man is new for the show as well as that they should observe this story carefully. Considering that Gottmik's story reaches a large audience, it broadens people's conception of transness, specifically that of cisgender people who might only experience

hegemonic representations of trans men that depict them as (hyper)masculine. At the same time, Gottmik's femininity might be a comfort to other feminine trans men who struggle with their gender identity and/or their desire to do drag.

Thus, there is an educational element to the figure of Gottmik, a manifestation of hope that might change the audience's current understanding of trans masculinity as well as the future depiction of trans men in popular media. After all, hope is the "force that keeps us moving and changing – the renewal of life at each moment, or the 're-enchanting' of life and politics" (Zournazi 274), which colors the educational possibility of Gottmik even more hopeful. Indeed, this different engagement with transness hopefully continues beyond *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The platform on which this educating takes place should not be overlooked. While reality television is often considered less 'cinematic' and less 'complex' than dramas and documentaries, and thus viewed as carrying less value (Holdsworth; Bignell; Jenner), sometimes described as 'trashy' (Parsemain), it still has educational possibilities. After all, reality television that "focus[es] on extraordinary subjects who deviate from the norm invite viewers to observe the Other and to learn about alternative identities" (Parsemain 96). Constructing *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a "teacher" as well as a "classroom," Colin Whitworth believes that the show is a "queer pedagogical tool" (148), which brings queer identities, issues and history to the small screen. Because it is television, the drag competition educates through affect rather than reason. As Parsemain writes, *RuPaul's Drag Race* "invites viewers to understand queer," and in the case of Gottmik specifically trans "experiences and issues through empathy" (112) and emotions. The affective practice that is connected with reality television "bypasses reason and logic and goes directly to the gut, evoking elemental emotions" (Demory 73). Because the viewer is affected, they are made to think – or in the words of Rosalyn Diprose: "the other affects me, gets under my skin, and that is why I am made to think" (116). In the context of Gottmik,

however, the viewer might not only be induced to think but also to *re*think the normative notions of transness that they are familiar with.

The environment in which *RuPaul's Drag Race* takes place complicates matters of affect considerably; the encounter between viewer and television screen is complexly mediated. After all, the 'reality' in reality television is constructed, or, as Parsemain describes it, "synthetic" (112). The real is dramatized and enhanced not only to heighten dramatic tension, to create 'good' television, but also to trigger empathy (Deery; Parsemain; Weber). The way in which a reality television show is filmed, produced, edited, marketed and even shared on social media distort as well as enhance the real. Although it might seem paradoxical, *RuPaul's Drag Race* even deconstructs and exposes the production process in order to emphasize the 'real' of reality television. In contrast to other reality shows that hide the camera, the crew, and any other element that suggest that a show is being filmed rather than that people are simply being observed, *RuPaul's Drag Race* frequently allows the viewer to hear the voices of producers, to see crew members at work, and to peek behind the curtain before RuPaul enters the main stage by showing flashing lights and mixing desks. During the makeover challenge in season 9, contestants even had to transform actual crew members into drag queens, an episode that was filled with 'behind the scenes' footage (Episode 10).

This transparency invites the viewer to believe that "they are granted access to what is 'really' happening" (Parsemain 110), which ultimately obscures the fact that the show is manufactured more so than that it is genuine. Similarly, confessionals signal that the contestants are speaking the truth while the transformation scenes in the workroom, in which the queens get ready for the main stage while often having deep conversations with each other about topics that range from racism and queerphobia to eating disorders and strained relationships with family members, seem authentic and unscripted, spontaneous even. Although the conversations and emotions that these segments illicit are real and allow viewers to relate to as well as feel

for the contestants, the producers "encourage participants to talk about certain topics, to display certain emotions and to contribute to the narrative while the editing builds suspense and manufactures reactions" (Parsemain 112). Because there are many formal and aesthetic elements in the show that trigger affect which then triggers a certain response, it is useful to revisit Van Alphen and Jirsa's affective diagram (see figure 1 on page 30). When it comes to reality television in general and *RuPaul's Drag Race* specifically, affect can be triggered by means of camerawork, transitions, cuts, music, sound effects, conversations, questions, answers, word choice, makeup, fashion, and so on. It might not always be clear whether these features are scripted or unscripted, real or synthetic. More often than not, the boundaries between the staged and the spontaneous are blurred in reality television, which results in a feature being simultaneously real and distorted. Importantly, these features often work together in an affective process. For example, it is the combination of language, camerawork and music that creates a shocking moment on the main stage, whether a contestant reveals a 'secret' or RuPaul eliminates two instead of one queen at the end of the episode.

Gottmik's trajectory on *RuPaul's Drag Race* can also be understood through (a combination of) formal elements that advance his narrative. Gottmik's storyline as the first trans man on the show, who does not only educate on transness but also empowers other trans people, triggers affect in the viewer, which ultimately triggers empathy, hope, and, in the most utopian vision, change. Even though Charles has never had a trans man on the show, there is a certain ease and relatability about Gottmik which makes for a seamless integration of a new gender identity into the social world of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The main reason for this is Gottmik's sense of humor. When he introduces himself in the first episode, he explains his drag as follows: "I am a transgender man, so born a girl, transitioned to a guy, dress like a girl for money. Very that" (00:32:25-00:32:16). Combined with the spark in his eyes and an infectious laugh, Gottmik is an approachable character who does not take life too seriously. In fact, the queen

pokes fun at the performativity and artificiality of gender throughout the series, from stating "I am a woman today!" (Episode 10, 00:13:52-00:13:50) when she[18] is dressed as fellow competitor Kandy Muse in the makeover challenge, whose makeup is more traditionally feminine, or telling the judges that she performed well in a comedy challenge because of testosterone: "It is the 'mones. They get me good" (Episode 12, 00:13:15-00:13:13), both examples followed by bursts of laughter from Gottmik, the judges as well as the other contestants. In the first example, the music stops for a split second right before Gottmik tells her joke, while it has a more upbeat tempo right after. Through the music, the show enhances the humor, signaling to viewers that this is a funny moment, in which the split second of silence indicates the punchline, and the change in music acts as an invitation to laugh alongside Gottmik and the others. Then in the second example, the punchline is indicated by the sound effect of a rising tinkle, followed by a split second of silence, although this time it functions as anticipation for what Gottmik says next, that is, the joke. As soon as the judges start to laugh, the music continues. Because of lighthearted moments like these, set up by Gottmik yet enhanced by postproduction, the viewer feels at ease with the contestant, which ultimately increases the empathy they feel for him. Be that as it may, the empathy that Gottmik evokes in the viewer can be traced back to two affective clusters in particular, one positive, the other negative. Considering that affect is a sticky substance, leaping from one body to another, the affects that Gottmik experiences in the show move through the screen to infect, and thus affect, the viewer. After all, when people tune in to *RuPaul's Drag Race* to watch contestants perform week after week, they do not merely observe the drag queens but also feel for and with them.

[18] Since Gottmik uses he/him pronouns out of drag and she/her pronouns in drag (Episode 2), this project does the same, alternating between male and female pronouns depending on the context.

The first cluster of affect associated with Gottmik encompasses pride, joy and confidence. In essence, this cluster is a celebration of the self. Gottmik is proud of his gender identity, which translates to his drag. On the runway, the drag queen is not afraid to show the scars on her chest. In fact, Gottmik celebrates the gender-affirming mastectomy he underwent a year before being cast on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. When the contestants walk in a fashion show early on in the competition, Gottmik is wearing a long black gown of which the top half drapes sideways over her torso, leaving a considerable section of the chest bare. Underneath a bejeweled nipple cover, Gottmik's scarring is clearly visible. As the drag queen walks the runway, and confidently models the look she has put together, Gottmik's voice-over states: "Ever since I got my top surgery, I love having my chest out, let me tell you that. I am living for it and I never want this feeling to go away" (Episode two, 00:43:30-00:43:21). A few episodes later, the drag queen proudly shows the full scar, wearing nothing but a comically small dress that covers only the genitalia. This time around, Gottmik's voice-over shares that

Figure 4. Still from *RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked!* (Season 13, Episode 6) showing Gottmik's mastectomy scars. World of Wonder, 2021, Netflix.

she would never have walked the runway practically naked before getting his mastectomy: “I couldn’t be happier with how I look right now” (Episode 6, 00:20:28-00:20:24). Both examples illustrate the sheer joy that Gottmik experiences when he can truly be himself, as well as the confidence gender-affirmation, in this case top surgery, gives him. At the same time, Gottmik is noticeably proud of the fact that he is trans. Instead of hiding his scars, he proudly displays them on the runway, not only showing the viewers what a transmasculine chest looks like but also what gender-affirmation does to people’s self-esteem (figure 4). The eruption of pride and joy is tangible when Gottmik lights up the runway, a feeling the drag queen ‘never wants to go away’.

During other moments in the show, Gottmik also celebrates his transness. For example, in episode 10, Gottmik enters the workroom in a pastel blue and pink jumper, the colors split in the middle, which references the trans flag (00:29:32-00:29:22). A few episodes prior, Gottmik is literally dressed as a couture version of the flag, with straps of pink and blue fabric billowing behind her as she walks, exaggerated by the bedazzled leaf blower she brought with her on stage, the detail of blowing wind strengthening the trans flag reference even more (figure 5). These examples illustrate that Gottmik wanted to bring transness to *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, and celebrate it in the process. The positive cluster of affect culminates in a moving speech that Gottmik delivers in the final episode of the series. Coming very close to winning the crown, the drag queen tells RuPaul: “My whole life, I was told I couldn’t do drag, let alone be on this show. And now I’m standing with you on the main stage of the top four, so I could not be prouder” (Episode 16, 00:12:08-00:12:00). While Gottmik must have been disappointed that she did not place first in the race, she exudes elation for having made it this far. Halfway through the speech, Gottmik opens her arms as if embracing the journey she has made in the competition and turns to the camera to tell the audience how proud she is. Throughout the competition, Gottmik has demonstrated that trans people, and trans men specifically, can not only do drag

Figure 5. Still from Gottmik's runway presentation showing a bedazzled leaf blower which moves straps of pink and blue fabric on a current of air (Episode 4). World of Wonder, 2021, Netflix.

but do it well too. Considering that trans drag queens were not even allowed to audition for the show at first, it is empowering to see one succeed on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. After all, Gottmik's trajectory provides the audience with positive imagery of transmasculine drag queens, which might shift their imaginary of drag. At the same time, it might inspire other trans men to pursue drag too.

Ultimately, Gottmik is breaking the mold in various ways, which the drag queen already proclaimed when she entered the workroom with the phrase "Time to crash the cis-tem" (Episode 1, 00:33:10-00:33:06). This self-reflexive saying can be regarded as Gottmik's catchphrase, as it followed him throughout the competition. Strikingly, it constitutes the first as well as the last words she said in the show. When Gottmik was told to sashay away in the finale, she concluded her moving speech with a reminder for the viewers at home, addressing the camera directly with her hands in the air: "And let's crash the cis-tem, you guys" (Episode 16, 00:11:59-00:11:56). While the phrase emphasized in episode 1 that Gottmik is the first trans

man on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, breaking with the show's history of transphobia by demonstrating that trans people, in particular trans men who have not been featured before, can not only be drag queens but also excel in the competition, as Gottmik's narrative slowly unfolded, 'crashing the cis-tem' also came to signal the normative conception of transness as either hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine, which the drag queen successfully shattered by showing that trans men do not have to conform to hypermasculinity. Then in the final episode, Gottmik invites, arguably even urges, the audience to continue his work, to not let the crashing end here. "And let's crash the cis-tem, you guys" can not only be understood as a call to trans people to audition for *RuPaul's Drag Race* or a call to trans men to not be afraid to embrace their femininity, but also a call to cis people to keep broadening their understanding of trans and recognize that transness by definition transcends expectations and frames; that it is not fixed but fluid.

Through moments of pride and joy and confidence, in which these affects often overlap and strengthen each other, Gottmik seeks to induce empathy in the viewer. In turn, the viewer is invited, triggered even, to feel joyous about the drag queen living his life authentically and freely, and might even wish other trans people are able to do the same. While formal features of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, such as the confessional and costume, trigger positive affect in viewers (that is, sensations of pride, joy and confidence that stick from the television screen to the audience), the affect subsequently triggers empathy – for Gottmik in particular and for trans people who deviate from images of hypergender in general. Through affect, the narrative that Gottmik develops in *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which the show enhances through matters of (post)production, educates on the endlessness of being trans, helping viewers understand trans people better, perhaps even making them a (greater) ally. Moreover, Gottmik's narrative can be understood as life-saving, or life-giving, for trans people specifically. Seeing a trans person be proud, joyful and confident on the television screen, especially on an influential platform like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, possibly induces them to be proud, joyful and confident too. Gottmik acts

as proof that it is not only possible but also liberating to embrace one's transness, even if it does not conform to the normative conception of transness as either hypermasculine or hyperfeminine.

On top of that, the drag queen plays a part in filling the gap of transmasculine representation that is so pressing in popular culture. When the contestants have an arguably prompted conversation about the importance of representation in episode 13 when they get ready for the main stage, Gottmik shares: "I really didn't see anyone like me ever on TV. And even when I did see, like, the Chaz Bonos and, like, the trans guys on TV … that is too masculine. That is not me" (00:34:21-00:34:09). Because Gottmik could not fully relate to any character on television, whether fictional or non-fictional, it delayed his transition. When the scene cuts to a confessional, which makes the setting more personal and intimate as Gottmik appears to speak to the audience directly, he confesses: "If there was someone like me on TV when I was a kid, there would have been years shaved off of my little journey" (00:34:05-00:34:58). The main reason for this is that children, specifically those who deviate from the norm, "cannot be what they cannot see," as Yance Ford paraphrased Marian Wright Edelman, the founder of the Children's Defense Fund. "And it's not just about children," Ford continues, "I cannot be in the world until I see that I am in the world" (in Feder and Scholder, 00:13:24-00:13:01). Representation, then, is necessary, for people to feel connected, to survive even. After all, it can be lonely and scary to feel disconnected from the world, when there seems to be no one, in real life nor in television, who is like you (Feder and Scholder). Thus, the representation of Gottmik on *RuPaul's Drag Race* is life-saving as well as life-giving, permitting young people to envision themselves as trans adults. As King NiiLee wrote in a powerful tweet, "My trans agenda is not to turn cis children into trans, but it's to turn trans children into adults," a statement which perfectly applies to Gottmik and the importance of trans visibility on *RuPaul's Drag Race* as well.

The second cluster of affect, which is negative rather than positive, and involves anxiety, shame and distress, strengthens the first cluster as it shows the opposite, exposing what happens when trans people are not welcomed in certain spaces or embraced for who they are. The discomfort and cruelty that trans people experience on a regular basis, simply because they transcend a gender that they were assigned involuntarily at birth, impacts their life greatly. It can even affect situations in which they are not necessarily unwelcome. Because trans people have often experienced negative encounters, especially in new environments, the distress from these previous encounters latches on to the present, causing anxiety about the encounter they are currently having, making them worry about the what-ifs of the situation (Levitt and Ippolito; Reisner et al.; Zentner and von Aufsess). In episode 2, for example, the contestants learn about Gottmik's gender identity before he has had the chance to tell them personally, which disorients him. The main challenge of that week is to write and perform a verse in RuPaul's song "Condragulations." When it is time for the drag queens to work on their choreography, they hear the song for the first time as well as each other's lyrics. The verse Gottmik wrote begins with the line "Gottmik was born a girl, baby," which is enough for the queen to pull out his earphones immediately after hearing it. It is difficult to watch. Gottmik physically recoils from the music, his face contorting with unease, his body shivering and his hands moving up and down his face beyond his control. The second his earphones are out, he throws his head back and utters a startled, almost appalled, sound. In other words, Gottmik is overcome with affect.

The tenseness of the scene is amplified by sound effects, followed by music that is serious, almost foreboding, in tone. Strikingly, Gottmik's verse is the only one this episode plays during the choreography scene. It could be that the other rehearsals create less dramatic tension, but this scene also fits with Gottmik's narrative as the first trans man on the show, who is struggling with his gender identity in this moment, but comes out on the other side and continues to nearly win the race. After Gottmik recoiled from his own verse, the episode cuts

to a confessional in which the queen revisits the rehearsal: “I don’t know what’s going through their heads. I should not even be focusing on that. Like, who cares?” (00:31:39-00:31:34), which illustrates that no matter how comfortable a trans person is with their identity, it can still be extremely nerve-racking for them to disclose the fact that they are trans, especially when they do not yet know if an environment will react supportively or not. When it comes to season 13, the other contestants might have been surprised, but Gottmik’s transness seems to be no issue at all. In fact, the queens seem to fully support their fellow contestant. “I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders,” Gottmik shares in a confessional later that episode, “Cards are on the table. My normal, slightly narcissistic, confident Gottmik headspace took back over” (00:28:14-00:28:05). The sense of relief that Gottmik feels after receiving support rather than hostility from the other contestants is as significant as the combination of anxiety, shame and distress. While the drag queen’s negative response is so visceral and palpable that the viewer can easily be affected by it, feeling for Gottmik and hoping he will break free from it, the supportive environment which embraces Gottmik for who he is and induces a state of relief, does not only signal to trans viewers that it is possible to have positive encounters but also to cis viewers how important it is for trans people to feel supported. If transness would be less of an issue in society, normalized rather than demonized, gender identity would not have to be a cause of anxiety for trans people. By continuing to cast more trans(masculine) people as the seasons progress and embracing transness as part of drag as well as part of queer life, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* might help in this regard, albeit tentatively. Gottmik might be the first trans man on the show, but he does (and arguably should) not have to be the last. Indeed, Gottmik could be the catalyst for a new engagement with transness in *RuPaul’s Drag Race* specifically and perhaps even television more broadly. In any case, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*’s engagement with trans fluidity acts as a source of hope for future depictions of transness.

From episode 2 onward, Gottmik feels more at home in the competition, realizing that he does not have to worry about being trans, that his identity is a cause of celebration rather than contempt, at least in this environment. As a result, he flourishes. Gottmik excels in the challenges, even wins two, and never has to 'lip-sync for his life' and face the possibility of elimination. While the drag queen is not overcome with negative affect again after the rehearsal for "Condragulations," he revisits some difficult moments from the past. Repeatedly told that he cannot do drag because he is a trans man, his drag became a mask he could hide behind. As Gottmik shares in a confessional, "I would not go out unless I was in drag, because people just thought I was a normal, cisgender gay man wearing a wig" (Episode 10, 00:25:45-00:25:37). The drag queen painted on a stark white face to hide his femininity, literally putting on a mask. While his clownish makeup initially protected him from exclusion and allowed him to do drag, it eventually became a stamp rather than a mask, an aesthetic choice. In season 13, white foundation with heavy black eyeliner and a black lip featured as his signature face, while he painted on a less clownish and more human face regularly too.

Although Gottmik's femininity could be expressed through the art form of drag, it held him back from transitioning. As he deviated from the image of a hypermasculine trans man he was familiar with, Gottmik might have felt that he was not trans enough. It must have been difficult to embrace his femininity through the performance of drag while trying to suppress it in his gender identity. "The level of depressed I was before my transition was so crazy, it was so awful," Gottmik tells fellow contestant Kandy Muse in episode 10. "The second I pinpointed what it was and fixed it, it just showed me, like, how much power I had. I just stopped caring … I literally pulled myself out of the darkest shit you could ever do, and now I can look in the mirror and be happy for once" (00:24:54-00:24:31). When the episode leads to this scene, the music stops for a few seconds, which was cheerful before, announcing a heartfelt statement. As soon as Gottmik uses the word 'depressed', the music returns, although this time the tone is

much more serious. The music gradually gets more upbeat, however, and reaches a light and clear timbre when the drag queen talks about how the decision to transition improved his state of mind, all elements signaling an inspiring moment in the show.

Ultimately, this scene emphasizes the significance of accepting and loving the self, which fits in with the overall theme of the drag competition.[19] As RuPaul calls out at the end of each episode, "If you can't love yourself, how in the hell are you going to love somebody else?" While this mantra can be criticized for promoting a toxic form of self-love, in which a person is only deemed worthy of affection when they have finished the difficult journey to fully accept and celebrate the person they are, it plays a significant role in the show. Moments of self-love feature prominently throughout *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a practice that this scene with Gottmik sustains. These stories are important and should be told, considering that depictions of queer people tend to focus more on pain rather than joy at times, especially when it comes to trans people (Marzano-Lesnevich; Sandercock). Moreover, these stories hold the power to inspire and reassure people. Hearing about the pain Gottmik went through in the past, but then seeing the unconditional love that surrounds him now in the present, from himself as well as from his fellow competitors, might comfort trans people who are in a dark place mentally, as it demonstrates that there is light at the end of the tunnel and that darkness last not always. Gottmik has come out on the other side and so can they. At the same time, the painful moments that Gottmik revisits increases the empathy viewers, both cis and trans, feel for him, since it is such a contrast from the joyful and confident person he is throughout most of the competition.

As this chapter has demonstrated, *RuPaul's Drag Race* employs several formal features to offer audiences a different way of viewing transness. While the confessional allows Gottmik to share his (perspective on) transness with viewers in his own words, costume enhances his story as makeup and dress translate the verbal into the visual. After all, Gottmik's costume

[19] See Daggett for an extensive analysis of the self-love discourse within *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

depicts the feminine trans masculinity he has described through words. However, it does not simply depict his feminine trans masculinity but celebrates it too, which the recurrence of the trans flag symbolism or the prominence of Gottmik's mastectomy scarring illustrates. Apart from the confessional and costume, postproduction also plays a crucial role in offering audiences an engagement with transness that deviates from the dominant, hypermasculine depiction of trans masculinity that circulates in popular culture. Through framing, editing and integrating music, *RuPaul's Drag Race* induces and sometimes increases affect in viewers, who subsequently feel for and with Gottmik. Ultimately, it is affect that educates a cisgender audience and affirms a transgender audience. This affective process has been outlined by Van Alphen and Jirsa's diagram (figure 1). After all, form triggers affect which then triggers an emphatic response, which can be a more "care-full" (Ellasante 426) understanding of transness or feelings of recognition and affirmation.

In a broader sense, these formal features construct a narrative of hope, not only for future seasons of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which hopefully continue to depict and celebrate trans fluidity, but also for future television to engage with transness more deeply and authentically rather that depicting instances of hypergender. Considering that reality television allows trans people to tell their own trans stories in an extensive manner through television's seriality, it is a productive vehicle for depicting trans fluidity. The next chapter moves from reality television to fictional television to analyze the possibilities of this different vehicle through the drama television series *Euphoria*.

As Beautiful as the Ocean:

Trans Fluidity in *Euphoria*

When the drama television series *Euphoria* aired on American cable channel HBO in June 2019, it quickly became one of the network's most watched and discussed shows. While the first episode attracted a total of one million viewers after linear showing on television plus nonlinear viewing on HBO's streaming platform (Andreeva), it also captured people's attention on social media. On Twitter, for example, #EuphoriaHBO trended at number one in the United States and number three worldwide shortly after the episode aired, cumulating a total of 155 thousand mentions in the first twelve hours after airing (Andreeva). When the second season premiered in January 2022, *Euphoria* attracted twice the number of viewers, drawing a total of 2.4 million. Strikingly, HBO's streaming platform had so many viewers that the app crashed when the episode was made available (Hipes). After the second season aired its final episode, *Euphoria* became HBO's second most watched show with an average of 16.3 million viewers per episode, preceded only by *Game of Thrones* (Maas). The show's social media engagement also increased as *Euphoria* became the most tweeted about television show of the decade in the United States (Spangler).

Euphoria is an American adaptation of the Israeli television show *Oforia* or אופוריה, which aired on cable channel HOT from late 2012 to early 2013. The original version painted "a rough portrait" of Israeli teens in the nineties who were depicted to engage excessively in drugs, sex and murder (Schiff). Nearly a decade later, Sam Levinson, the creator of *Euphoria*, reworked certain themes, characters and storylines[20] into an entirely different context. While the Israeli and American show share the same title, and both depict the lives of a group of fictional 17-year-olds, *Euphoria* portrays teenagers from a middle-to-upper-class community

[20] For instance, both shows include a teenage drug addict, a child drug dealer and a fat girl seeking confidence through sex (Schiff).

in California in the late 2010s rather than middle-class Israeli teenagers from the 1990s. Fundamentally, *Oforia* acts as a source of inspiration: in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Levinson shared how *Oforia*'s "raw and honest portrait … of drugs and being young" informed, influenced, but most of all inspired *Euphoria* (qtd in Stack). As Julio Perez, the show's supervising producer, poignantly describes, *Euphoria* reflects "all the agonies, the ecstasies that life can be for a teenager" (Euphoria, "Visions of Euphoria" 00:00:25-00:00:31), dealing with addiction, sobriety, relationships, mental illness, gender identity and body confidence, among other issues.

The first season of *Euphoria* begins with its lead character and narrator Rue Bennett returning home from rehab after she overdosed on drugs. As the episodes progress, viewers learn that the complex character struggles with various mental disorders. When Rue is fourteen years old, her father with whom she is very close passes away from cancer. In order to cope with his illness, but even more so his death, which intensified her anxiety and bipolar disorder, Rue turns to drugs. Throughout the two seasons, *Euphoria* depicts Rue's battle with addiction, sobriety and mental illness while being a teenager, showing certain peaks but even more valleys. While Rue's narrative functions as the main thread, weaving in and out of the show's tapestry, *Euphoria* also stitches in other stories. The first season adheres to a clear structure, each episode focusing on one of the seven main characters in particular. These episodes begin with flashbacks that depict the backstory of Rue, Nate, Kat, Jules, Maddy, McKay and Cassie respectively. The season finale, episode 8, connects their stories through a winter formal, an American high school dance taking place between homecoming and prom, which brings these characters and storylines together as they attend the same event, knotting the previous episodes together. After having established the storylines of its seven main characters in season 1, *Euphoria*'s second season is freer in structure. While it introduces the backstories of three minor characters from the first season whose role becomes more prominent in the second season (that

is Lexi, Fezco and Cal), season 2 mainly continues to weave new and colorful threads into the tapestry that was created in season 1.

In addition to being freer in structure, *Euphoria*'s second season also experiments more with genre and form. Although the television show constructs a fictional, dramatized narrative throughout season 1, clearly "produced with expressive and narrative ends in sight" (Branco 5),[21] the genre somewhat shifts in season 2 as drama[22] turns into melodrama. Returning to the etymology of melodrama, Jonathan Goldberg argues that the heightened interaction of music (*μέλος*) and drama (*δρᾶμᾰ*) in media, whether it takes the shape of a film, a novel, a television series or an opera, creates the melodramatic (155). In other words, melodrama is a remediation, a composition of different media, in which "music, text, and image enhance each other" (Goldberg xi) to create new meanings. Adhering to the more traditional definition of melodrama, that of being 'overly dramatic', the interaction of music and drama tends to result in "a mode of excess" (Brooks 199), an exaggeration of emotions, events or even reality. As is commonly maintained, melodrama "exaggerates and intensifies, magnifies, makes much of little," but, as Goldberg argues, it is "always also trying to find thereby a means to express something else, trying … to draw us to some core experience of meaning difficult to come by otherwise" (76). Whether this meaning reaches a "noumenal realm" (Brooks 54) and signifies a capitalized "Truth" (Goldberg xi) or simply describes something that has been hidden or marginalized, the interaction of the musical, the dramatic and the visual allows a new, metaphorical meaning to emerge.

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[21] In contrast to the realist environment of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which appears to be unscripted and spontaneous, *Euphoria* is very much scripted and staged, a dramatized story that is acted out on screen.

[22] In terms of genre, 'drama' can be regarded as *Euphoria*'s main genre, whereas the show's high school setting, the age of its main characters as well as the issues they are grappling with results in 'teen drama' and 'high school drama' being subgenres.

Strikingly, the final scene in *Euphoria*'s first season already alludes to the melodramatic turn that occurs in terms of genre. While music has played a crucial role during the previous episodes, which can be seen in the original score by Labyrinth which mixes classical music with hip-hop and electronic music to create a unique sound that is distinctly recognizable for the show, the placement of Labyrinth's own voice becoming "an unseen ethereal thread connecting all of the central figures" (Greene) in *Euphoria*, the interaction between music, text and image in the final episode is strongly melodramatic. The season climaxes in a musical number that depicts Rue's relapse (Episode 8, 00:57:10-01:02:07). Having stayed clean for most of the first season, Rue breathes in a white substance through her nose in the last five minutes. As her body is being pulled into the air by an invisible force, through which *Euphoria* signifies that the character is high on drugs, Labyrinth's song "All for Us" plays, a brooding song with a dark bass and choral chanting. Zendaya, the actor who plays Rue, sings several lyrics, which her character then performs in the scene, such as the line "too much in my system,"

Figure 6. Still from *Euphoria* showing Rue on top of a choir during the musical number (Season 1, Episode 8). HBO, 2019, HBO Max.

another reference to the drug relapse. Combining *μέλος* with *δρᾶμᾰ* in this dreamlike, almost hallucinatory musical number, *Euphoria* revisits the main reason for Rue's drug addiction: the overwhelming grief she experiences at her father's death and her inability to process it. Rue is dressed in the maroon sweatshirt she has been wearing throughout the season that once belonged to her father, even dances with him for a split-second while the line "daddy ain't at home" plays. Moreover, the character is being thrown around by a large choir dressed in maroon robes, the outfits signifying her grief while the movements illustrate her not having control of her body (on the one hand because she is unable to move past the pain of losing her father and on the other because she is high on drugs). As Rue is depicted to climb on top of the choir (figure 6) and then fall backwards (representing a relapse in the most literal sense), the screen fades to black and the music stops while Labyrinth whispers "until then," a line that arguably refers to the second season. Instead of ending the first season with Rue inhaling drugs, *Euphoria* depicts the character's relapse in a melodramatic and aesthetically dense scene, in which music, text and image tell a more complex and nuanced story than would be possible if Rue was simply portrayed to breathe in a white substance through her nose.

Whereas it is primarily the final scene in season 1 that employs melodrama, season 2 includes many melodramatic scenes. For that reason, Rue's relapse in the form of a musical number appears to act as a bridge between the two seasons. Already in the premiere, one scene stands out as particularly melodramatic. The nucleus of this episode, as well as the primary location, is a New Year's Eve party that all of the main characters attend. Toward the end of the episode, *Euphoria* highlights the main characters from the previous season that also play an important role in season 2: Rue, Jules, Cassie, Maddy, Nate and Kat. By flashing a bright light at each of these characters for a split-second, *Euphoria* captures these six characters in a specific state, almost as if they are taking a photograph. It is thus highlighting in quite a literal sense. Essentially, this scene is an affective montage, which does not only reacquaint the audience

with the characters that they grew familiar with in season 1, implicitly recalling the events and emotions the characters went through in the previous season, but it also foreshadows the fact that this season is darker and less hopeful for most of these characters. Indeed, the expressions of Rue, Jules, Cassie, Nate and Kat in these moments is serious, disturbed almost, the affect amplified by instrumental music that has an ominous beat and a crescendo in pitch each time the spotlight shines on one of the characters (Season 2, Episode 1, 00:53:26-00:54:12).

To give one more example of a melodramatic scene that figures in *Euphoria*'s second season, the show places Cassie inside a Mexican mural[23] in episode 4 (figure 7). Surrounded by countless bouquets of flowers, the music stops as a tear rolls down Cassie's cheek, her eyes swollen from crying. After the character inhales shakily, an electronic song starts playing, energetic and anxious in tone. This scene arguably reflects the hopelessness of Cassie's

Figure 7. Still from *Euphoria* showing Cassie enclosed by bouquets of flowers (Season 2, Episode 4). HBO, 2022, HBO Max.

[23] Levinson shared that this scene was inspired by Mexican muralism, particularly murals from the turn of 21st century (Euphoria, "Enter Euphoria – Season 2 Episode 4").

storyline: while being desperate for the attention of her best friend's ex-boyfriend, whom she has fallen in love with and has sexual encounters with, she also dreads the truth coming out eventually, which will most likely devastate her friendship with her best friend Maddy. Portrayed as the virgin Mary, whose scriptural innocence juxtaposes her own complicated innocence (or perhaps lack thereof), Cassie becomes an animate reenactment of a Mexican mural, a certain *tableau vivant*. While the 'mode of excess' is clearly at stake in this scene, through the abundance of flowers and the glamorous costume, it also illustrates the fact that melodrama is a remediation of music, image and text (in this case, the intertextual reference to art). Moreover, melodrama is employed to portray the anxiety that the character Cassie experiences in an aesthetically pleasing and visually complex manner.

As a result, this scene demonstrates that *Euphoria* is a complex and cinematic show. The second season in particular "grows rich through sustained engagement and consideration" (46), which Jason Mittell defines as one of the characteristics of televisual complexity. Such an engagement invites the audience to interpret certain scenes, such as Cassie's *tableau vivant*. Moreover, as Brett Mills describes, cinematic television series "[prioritize] the visual more than what is assumed to be typical for television" (58), which holds true for *Euphoria*, considering that the scenes analyzed above could easily feature in a music video. On top of that, the show's second season is shot entirely on Kodak film, while the first season was shot digitally (Euphoria, "Enter Euphoria – Season 2 Episode 1"). Considering that analog film is grainy and more saturated than digital film and thus produces a much more intimate, even nostalgic visual, it was clearly an aesthetic choice to shoot the entire season on Kodak. As Marcell Rév points out, *Euphoria*'s director of photography, "season 1 [has] … a very in the moment, very present feel to it, [while season 2] feels like some sort of memory of high school" (Euphoria, "Enter Euphoria – Season 2 Episode 1" 00:01:19-00:01:30).

Beyond the meticulousness in terms of visual imagery, for example through the use of melodrama and film stock, *Euphoria* is also highly conscientious in its storytelling. While the show's depiction of addiction and sobriety is intriguing, depicted as a complex and nonlinear journey that affects relationships in devastating ways, its portrayal partly inspired by Levinson's own experiences with drug addiction (see Stack; Zendaya), this thesis is predominantly interested in the ways in which *Euphoria* represents transness. As one of the main characters in the show, the trans girl Jules represents a carefully crafted and intentionally staged encounter with transness. Strikingly, Ellasante's desire for "care-full practice and intention" (426) within the field of transgender studies in particular and trans epistemology in general can be observed in the representation of 'trans' in *Euphoria,* which becomes apparent from the moment the character is introduced in the fictional world of the show. Because Jules is introduced through the eyes of Rue, the audience encounters her as an idealized character, which ultimately offers an alternative view of transness in television. After all, trans characters have been depicted negatively for the majority of television history (GLAAD "Victims or Villains"; Henry; Oppliger).

Deviating from this negative depiction, the first season of *Euphoria* establishes Jules as an (idealized) love object. When Rue's mother picks her daughter up from rehab and proudly tells her that she is "about to start a brand new chapter," Rue looks out the car window, observing a colorful girl ride her bike in the distance. Foreshadowing the important role Jules fulfills in this new chapter, Rue's voiceover[24] states that "Jules had just moved to town" when

[24] Rue fulfills a dual role in *Euphoria*: that of protagonist and that of unreliable narrator. The unreliability becomes apparent in the fact that some scenes are hallucinations or visions when the character has either taken drugs or experiences extreme emotional highs because of her bipolar disorder. Furthermore, *Euphoria* alludes to or simply addresses Rue's unreliability throughout the series, for example having Rue's voiceover state that "there's a couple

Figure 8. Still from *Euphoria* showing Jules riding her bike framed by the inside of a car (Season 1, Episode 1). HBO, 2019, HBO Max.

the car passes the girl riding her bike. The way in which *Euphoria* frames this scene invokes the 'love at first sight' trope that is common in literature and other media. Noticeably intrigued by the new girl in town, Rue raises one eyebrow and turns around to watch Jules until she is solely a speck in the distance. As Jules is being observed, the soft and slow sound of a string instrument plays in the background, interspersed with an electronic tinkle. The affective quality of the music, which is dreamy and quite romantic, becomes enhanced by *Euphoria*'s choice of lighting. Bathed in soft afternoon light, which is suffused with orange and gold hues, Jules's body is framed in an aureole that represents her as holy and divine, indeed as an ideal creature (Season 1, Episode 1, 00:07:53-00:08:40). As Rue reflects in season 2, it was in this exact moment, when she noticed Jules for the first time, that she fell in love with her (Episode 2, 00:28:38-00:28:44). As Rue's love object, Jules is quite literally framed through the eyes of the

versions of what happened … it all depends on who you ask, and to be honest I'm not always the most reliable narrator" (Season 1, Episode 1, 00:34:45-00:34:53).

show's protagonist. During the scene that introduces Jules to the audience, the camera is situated in such a position that it appears to be placed inside Rue's eyes. A shot that depicts Rue looking out the window is followed directly by a shot that is filmed inside the car, which captures Jules riding her bike enclosed by the actual frame of the car (figure 8). Thus, the viewer literally encounters Jules 'through the eyes of Rue'.

The following episodes establish Rue and Jules's relationship. In order to do so, *Euphoria* employs the classic trope of star-crossed lovers: the notion that two characters are predestined to be together yet are prevented from being so due to some unlucky circumstance. In other words, these characters are "thwarted by the influence of malign stars" (Weis 123). In the case of *Euphoria*, the show predominantly frames Rue's addiction as the malign star that prevents these star-crossed lovers from pursuing a healthy, happy relationship. While the love that Rue and Jules feel for each other is depicted as profound and irrefutable,[25] *Euphoria* indicates that the timing is not quite right. Through the character of Ali, Rue's addiction sponsor who guides her on her journey to recovery, *Euphoria* implies that it is difficult to recover while simultaneously pursuing a romantic relationship (see Special Episode Part 1). Indeed, Jules figures as a drug to Rue throughout season 1. Although Rue is sober for the majority of the season, the character substitutes the high she used to experience from drugs with the high she experiences from love. While the drug analogy becomes apparent in the script when Rue claims in episode 5 that "there is not a thing on the planet earth that compares to Fetanyl. Except Jules" (00:06:35-00:06:43), it also figures in a passionate kissing scene, the camera spinning around

[25] For example, in a special episode that centers Jules's perspective, *Euphoria* connects the line "Rue was the first girl [who] didn't just look at me … she actually saw me" (Special Episode Part 2, 00:09:53-00:10:02) with a close-up of Rue's face waking up to look at Jules with an expression that exudes pure love. Shot in a soft, yellow light and accompanied by an operatic voice singing in soprano, the scene illustrates the purity and depth of Rue and Jules's love, arguably even the cosmic intervention of predestined love.

Rue and Jules at a dizzyingly speed (Episode 8, 00:41:17-00:41:28). By ending the season with Rue's relapse, which is triggered by a miscommunication between Rue and Jules, *Euphoria* becomes a tragedy that strengthens the trope of star-crossed lovers, illustrating that the relationship between Rue and Jules was indeed doomed from the start. As the lover's scheme to run away from home concludes with Jules disappearing and Rue staying behind, Rue no longer experiences the high from love and returns to the high from drugs.

Through this ill-fated ending, *Euphoria* seems to reference the play that has become the archetype for star-crossed lovers: *Romeo and Juliet*. Indeed, *Euphoria* has an intertextual relationship with the Shakespearian play in other, more discernable ways to emphasize the star-crossed nature of Rue and Jules's relationship. First of all, the names can be considered intertextual references as Romeo has morphed into Rue and Juliet into Jules, which corresponds to Levinson's vision of Rue and Jules as "real soulmates" (qtd. in Euphoria, "Enter Euphoria: Special Episode Part 1). While Rue and Jules are constructed as modern versions of these classic characters, the allusion becomes most explicit in *Euphoria*'s Halloween sequence (Season 1,

Figure 9. Hunter Schafer as Jules in *Euphoria* on the left (Season 1, Episode 6, HBO, 2019, HBO Max) and Claire Dane as Juliet in *Romeo + Juliet* on the right (20th Century Fox, 1996, Disney+).

Episode 6) when Jules is depicted as Juliet; costumed in a long white dress with angel wings, in a direct reference to the Juliet from Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film *Romeo + Juliet* (figure 9). During the Halloween sequence, *Euphoria* even mirrors certain scenes from Luhrmann's film, such as the underwater kissing scene, while Jules also drunkenly recites some of Juliet's lines from Shakespeare's play (00:28:45-00:29:15).

While *Euphoria*'s intertextual layers strengthen the show's construction of Jules and Rue as contemporary star-crossed lovers, the costuming of Jules as Juliet through name as well as Halloween dress also amplifies the show's initial depiction of Jules as a traditionally, even hyperfeminine character. Apart from Juliet, who canonically figures as a feminine character in popular culture (such as Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*), *Euphoria* employs other cultural references to establish Jules's femininity, most notably Japanese anime. Directly following the scene that introduces the audience to Jules through the eyes of Rue, a conversation between Rue and her friend Fezco adopts another character's viewpoint to describe Jules. Through Fezco's scripted observation that Jules "came in yesterday looking all Sailor Moon and shit"

Figure 10. Still from the Japanese anime television series *Sailor Moon*. Toei Animation, 1992.

(Season 1, Episode 1, 00:08:47-00:08:51), *Euphoria* links the trans character to the hyperfeminine characters from *Sailor Moon*. Moreover, this intertextual reference also becomes apparent through costume for Jules. Indeed, most of the costumes that Jules wears in season 1 take clear inspiration from the Japanese anime (figure 10). Protecting the earth from supernatural villains, the schoolgirls from the television series *Sailor Moon* (美少女戦士セーラームーン) are drawn in bright colors and short tennis skirts. In line with the "sometimes overtly sexualized, always intensely cute" (Vincent ix) image of the female superhero from Japanese anime, Jules's costume generally involves vibrant colors and a wide array of tennis skirts and mini dresses. On the first day of school (Season 1, Episode 2), for instance, Jules is costumed in a tartan blue tennis skirt, a long-sleeved dark blue shirt, a mesh top embroidered with daisies layered on top, a bright yellow backpack which matches the color of her nails, and icy blue eyeshadow.

Apart from referencing *Sailor Moon* through costuming and writing, *Euphoria* brings in another Japanese anime series to establish Jules's femininity. While Fezco compares Jules to *Sailor Moon* in terms of dress, Jules is scripted to be interested in a different series: *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (魔法少女まどか☆マギカ). Outlining the rest of her day, Jules shares with Rue that she will "do some homework [and] binge-watch Madoka Magica" (Season 1, Episode 2, 00:31:27-00:31:31). In addition, a scene earlier that episode depicts Jules intently watching anime. While the camera merely captures the side of Jules's laptop screen, therefore obscuring what series the character watches, the animated dialogue in Japanese as well as the sound effects of whooshes, shatters and quick breaths that are quintessential elements of an anime fighting scene suggest that Jules is watching anime, arguably even *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*. Similar to *Sailor Moon*, this series focuses on a group of schoolgirls with magical powers who fight supernatural evil. Strikingly, the signature color of *Madoka Magica*'s titular protagonist, pink, features heavily in the costume of Jules as well, another example of the character's

Figure 11. Madoka Kaname from the Japanese anime television series *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* on the left (Shaft, 2011, Netflix) and Jules from *Euphoria* (Season 1, Episode 4, HBO, 2019, HBO Max) on the right.

intertextual femininity. As a traditionally feminine color, the use of pink enhances *Euphoria*'s portrayal of Jules as hyperfeminine in season 1. While the color features in Jules's hair[26] and several outfits, pink is employed most prominently during episode 4. Costumed in a pink dress with red accents and vibrant pink hair that closely resembles *Madoka Magica*'s protagonist, Madoka Kaname, Jules almost transforms into an anime character during the carnival scene (figure 11). Besides connoting femininity, the color pink also signals love. Considering that Jules is portrayed in a pink costume in the episode where she at long last meets Tyler, the boy she has fallen in love with online, *Euphoria* employs the color to reflect the character's frame of mind.

[26] For the first half of the season, the ends of Jules's hair are dyed a faded pink.

Moreover, the amorous color is starkly juxtaposed with the foreshadowed outcome of the meeting between Jules and Tyler. Two episodes prior, a scene depicts the two characters texting. While Jules messages Tyler that she does not yet know his name, only the alias he uses online, the camera slowly spins to move from Jules's room into another space that closely resembles Nate's room. As the camera stops spinning and focuses on the other texter (Nate), who is lying down on his bed with his phone in hand, these visual cues reveal to the audience that Tyler does not exist, that Tyler is actually Nate taking on another identity to trick Jules (Season 1, Episode 2, 00:55:19-00:55:54). Considering that Jules does not learn the truth of the situation until she meets 'Tyler' at the end of episode 4, her pink costume for this episode enhances the dramatic irony that *Euphoria* employs by contrasting a color that signals love with the heartbreak that the audience anticipate ensuing. Indeed, the catfishing incident affects Jules greatly, which *Euphoria* establishes in the following episodes through costuming, particularly color symbolism. Up until episode 4, the season's midpoint, *Euphoria* has mainly used costuming to delineate what kind of character Jules is. However, from episode 4 onward, Jules's hair, makeup and dress figure as representations of her character arc, reflecting the transformative journey that the character is scripted to undergo.

In episode 5, for example, the color of Jules's hair is altered for the first time in the television series. Instead of pink, the ends of Jules's blonde hair are blue, a color that connotes quite a different meaning. Considering that this episode proceeds from Nate's deception, *Euphoria* employs the color blue to depict the disappointment and pain Jules experiences after having been misled by the person, perhaps more accurately the phantom, she has fallen in love with. While the color pertains to Jules's hair, it also figures in the character's makeup and dress. In the first scene that features Jules after she found out that Tyler does not exist, she is costumed in a blue button-up and a choker with a small blue charm (00:13:05-00:13:10). The tightness of the necklace implies that the character is metaphorically 'choked up' by sadness whereas the

Figure 12. Still from *Euphoria* showing Jules's blue outfit that establishes the character's sadness (Season 1, Episode 5). HBO, 2019, HBO Max.

color and round shape of the charm connote a teardrop. In terms of makeup, the outer parts of Jules's eyes are painted blue and the inner parts bright red (figure 12). The exaggerated redness symbolizes that Jules's eyes are irritated and swollen from crying, which becomes more explicit when Jules is depicted crying in a bathroom stall a few scenes later (00:22:35-00:22:52). Apart from these scenes at school, the color blue also appears at other moments in the episode. At a restaurant with her father, for instance, Jules is costumed in a long-sleeved mesh top layered with a short-sleeved mock neck, both blue (00:32:11-00:33:10), which continues *Euphoria*'s use of costume to reflect Jules's mood.

Although the sadness grows into anger as the episodes progress, Jules is first depicted to search for a certain numbness, an escape from emotions. Drinking excessively during the

Halloween party, Jules attempts to numb her mind because, as a flashback reveals to the audience, Nate coerced her to file a false witness report earlier that day (Episode 6, 00:43:26-00:45:07). Using the nude images Jules has sent to 'Tyler' as blackmail, Nate protects himself from being convicted after having physically abused his girlfriend Maddy through Jules's police report. During this episode, Jules's hair is neither blue nor pink. In fact, it is stripped of color and simply presented as blonde. The blankness of the character's hair perfectly encapsulates the blankness that Jules is searching for in terms of frame of mind, desperately trying to forget that she committed a crime by making a false statement to the police. Additionally, the blonde hair evokes a certain seriousness, heightened by its juxtaposition with Jules's brightly colored hair from before, the more natural color emphasizing the serious nature of Nate's blackmail as well as the emotional impact it has on Jules.

While *Euphoria* uses the symbolism of alcohol to establish that Jules is not doing well mentally, drinking excessively to numb her feelings in the Halloween sequence, the television show illustrates the character's wish to escape further in the next episode by scripting Jules to flee her hometown completely. Suggesting that Jules was unsuccessful, or perhaps only temporarily successful, in evading the thoughts and affects that plagued her, she visits friends from her old school during this episode, quite literally running away from the situation at home. Embracing her friend TC passionately, having clearly missed them, Jules later tells her old friend that she is "not in the best place [mentally but] came here so [she] wouldn't have to think about it (Episode 7, 00:34:25-00:34:28). Employing the metaphor of a hallucination to act out what Jules is envisioning in her mind, *Euphoria*, however, details that even when Jules is away from home, she is still afflicted by Nate's deceit and coercion. At the same time, the sadness it has caused her in previous episodes has turned into anger, which is emphasized and even foreshadowed by Jules's costuming. As Jules embarks on the train that transports her to TC, the character's hair is streaked with bright red. The vibrancy of the color is amplified by the muted

Figure 13. Still from Euphoria showing the red streaks in Jules's hair that establish the character's anger (Season 1, Episode 7). HBO, 2019, HBO Max.

tones of the outfit Jules is costumed in, the beiges and cottony blues (figure 13). In contrast, the warm and aggressive red connotes a heatedness, an anger that becomes explicit later in the episode. As a dramatic feature, color thus features to establish Jules's mood in these episodes – the sadness, numbness and anger the character experiences after her search for heterosexual love and validation online.

Attending a rave with the friends from her old school, Jules is depicted to hallucinate an encounter with Nate. Inhaling some type of drug before entering what appears to be a (rave) warehouse, the camera turns upside down as Jules and her friends become surrounded by strobing lights, a mass of dancing people, and a combination of electronic music with hypnotizing club beats, elements through which *Euphoria* sets the scene for the rave party. Jules's hallucination begins with discovering Nate across the room, whose costume consists of

a 90s tracksuit, glittery makeup and some sort of mohawk hairstyle, which differs greatly from the character's regular costuming that blends elements from wealthy private school pupil with high school jock.[27] Through Nate's (uncharacteristic) rave costume, *Euphoria* hints that the character is a figment of Jules's imagination rather than a physically present being. Apologizing to Jules, the hallucination of Nate tells Jules that he is "Tyler … the person that [she] fell in love with," which prompts Jules to imagine pushing him away with a primal scream, choking him with both hands while claiming she wants to kill him (Episode 7, 00:49:45-00:49:57). Through this scene, *Euphoria* establishes that Jules's anger reaches a subconscious level, which also, or perhaps specifically, surfaces when Jules is under the influence of a hallucinogen. In terms of costume, the color red does not only feature in Jules's hair during the rave scene, but also in the character's makeup. Her neon red eyeshadow, which appears more prominent in the strobing, fluorescent lights of the scene, reflects Jules's anger and irritation.

Through the use of costume, particularly color symbolism in hair and makeup, *Euphoria* represents as well as enhances Jules's character arc. While the first few episodes depict Jules searching for (heterosexual, cisgender) male validation, through the character's traditionally feminine costume as well as online dating scenes,[28] Jules eventually breaks free from a (trans) femininity constrained by the desire of cis-hetero men. At the end of the first season, Jules has undergone quite the transformation. The character is no longer portrayed as the hyperfeminine, anime-inspired girl from the first half of the season. Alongside the changes in hair color, from

[27] Throughout season 1, Nate is pictured in crewnecks with sportswear logos, low-top sneakers, button-downs, polos and/or chinos.

[28] In Episode 1 for example, Jules is depicted to swipe through a dating app, eventually meeting up with a cis-hetero man (00:13:13-00:14:00).

pink to blue to blonde to red to black,[29] the outfits that Jules is dressed in also shift throughout the season, becoming less feminine and more androgynous as the episodes progress. While the color pink barely features toward the end of season 1, *Euphoria* also costumes Jules in pants and sweaters more than tennis skirt and tightly fitted mesh shirts in the second half of the season. This shift toward a different understanding of femininity, which is more androgynous than traditionally feminine, becomes apparent in episode 7, which depicts a conversation between Jules and her new friend Anna. Reflecting on her trans femininity, Jules admits that she has framed her womanhood around men: "In my head it's like if I can conquer men, I can conquer femininity" (00:37:10-00:37:22). Challenging this notion, Anna asks Jules why she requires a man to feel more feminine, to which Jules has no answer. Through this question, *Euphoria* signals the constrained femininity that they had their character adhere to in previous episodes while the television show also references the dominant depiction of trans (hyper)femininity in popular culture that is connected to male desire. In doing so, *Euphoria* establishes, or at least foreshadows, the turning point in their trans character's engagement with trans femininity.

The special episode that centers Jules's perspective returns to the conversation between Anna and Jules. Framing the episode as a therapy session, which allows the audience a glimpse inside Jules's mind and continues Jules's character development, *Euphoria* engages with transness in more depth than season 1. At the beginning of the episode, and thus the therapy session, Jules elaborates on the conversation she had with Anna about desirability, sharing the following with her therapist:

[29] In the season finale, which portrays Rue and Jules's plan to run away from home, the streaks in Jules's hair are black rather than red (Episode 8). Considering that Jules is the only character that actually leaves, the bold color signals her determinacy in this moment. At the same time, black symbolizes the darkness that Jules experiences mentally. As the character reflects in Special Episode Part 2: "a bunch of shit all happened at once … and I felt like if I didn't get out, I was gonna fucking die" (00:16:13-00:16:27).

> Basically, uhm, I feel like I've framed my entire womanhood around men, when, like, in reality, I'm no longer interested in men, like, philosophically. Like what men want. Like, what men want is so boring, and simple, and not creative, and, like, I just, like, I look at myself, and I'm like, how the fuck did I spend my entire life building this? Like, my body, and my personality, and, like, my soul around what I think men desire. It's just like... it's embarrassing (Special Episode Part 2, 00:04:19-00:05:17).

Through this scripted confession, *Euphoria* establishes the transformation that Jules has undergone in terms of self-understanding. While the conversation with Anna functioned as the catalyst for a new engagement with womanhood and trans femininity, the therapy session allows Jules to share this new development with the audience. In the first half of season 1, the character conformed to a hyperfeminine norm (portrayed through costume) and found validation in the attention and approval of men (portrayed through a montage of sexual encounters with older, cisgender, straight or straight-passing white men).[30] While Jules has slowly started to shed hyperfeminine layers of the self throughout season 1,[31] the quotation above illustrates that the character is not only conscious of the role men have played in her construction of femininity but also that she wishes to break free from men's desiring gaze even further: "I'm no longer interested in men, philosophically."

Ultimately, Jules's special episode develops the character outside of her relationship with Rue. While Jules has been presented as an idealized character in season 1, the therapy session releases Jules from the loving perspective of Rue and instead depicts Jules's perspective. Considering that the audience has only observed Jules through the eyes of Rue, they have also only encountered transness through a cisgender lens. By centering Jules's own

[30] See Season 1, Episode 4, 00:06:32-00:07:21.

[31] This is for example depicted through the character's increasingly androgynous costume or her exploration of queer love with Rue.

(trans) perspective, then, *Euphoria* invites the audience to view transness through a transgender rather than a cisgender lens. While Jules breaks free from the desiring gaze of men and Rue throughout the television show, the audience arguably breaks free from the cisgender gaze by (involuntarily) trans-ing their gaze. As a result, *Euphoria* does not simply challenge the male gaze, "the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle" (Mulvey 14), but goes one step further to challenge the cisgender gaze that is commonly placed upon the representation of transness in popular media (Henry).

While *Euphoria* employs the transgender gaze by framing the special episode as a therapy session in which Jules shares her own understanding of trans femininity, it also constructs an image of transness that is more fluid than fixed, thereby trans-ing the dominant depiction of 'trans' in contemporary television. "At least for me, being trans is spiritual," Jules tells her therapist, "It's not for some congregation. It's for me ... And I don't ever want to stand still … I wanna be alive. That's what this has always been about … staying alive" (00:14:40-00:15:08). Scripting Jules to describe transness, to define what it means for her to be trans, this scene is the show's most explicit engagement with transness. Through the metaphor of a spiritual journey, *Euphoria* depicts transness as a continuing process, a verb rather than a noun, an act of staying alive. The emphasis on the processual nature of transness reemphasizes what Jules already briefly described in season 1, when she reflects on her transition: "I remember walking out of Sears with my first pair of heels … I got started with that and then it was clothes and then it was makeup and eventually hormones and I just kind of kept leveling up" (Episode 7, 00:35:54-00:36:35). Rather than a destination, a final level to be reached, transness is depicted as an activity, the ongoing act of "transcending, trans-ing life" (Santana 216).

Indeed, Jules continues to transcend over the course of *Euphoria*, to explore the endless possibilities of being trans, which the television show mainly illustrates through costume. In

season 2, for instance, which follows the special episode in terms of time, Jules's long blonde hair is cut into an androgynous bob, described as a "Kurt Cobain … haircut" (Episode 3, 00:51:08-00:51:10). Another prominent feature of Jules's costume in season 2 is a binder, a piece of clothing that flattens a person's chest and thus reduces the appearance of breasts. Although binders are generally worn by transmasculine people, whether they are trans men or non-binary people, which *Euphoria* emphasizes in episode 3 through minor character Elliott stating that "most trans girls don't wear binders, right?" (00:22:49-00:22:52), the television show illustrates that trans people do not adhere to a singular script. Apart from having shorter hair and wearing a binder, Jules is also depicted in baggier clothing, often in darker, earthier tones, which is quite a departure from the brightly colored tennis skirts, mini dresses and tightly fitted mesh shirts that were fundamental elements of Jules's costume in season 1 (figure 14). Instead, Jules is regularly depicted in graphic t-shirts, sweaters and loose-fitting pants. In terms of makeup, the colorful eyeshadow and glitter from season 1 is replaced with graphic black eyeliner. Overall, Jules's costume reflects the character's break with hyperfemininity. Through

Figure 14. Still from *Euphoria* showing Jules's costume in season 2 with an androgynous bob, graphic black eyeliner and darker colors (Episode 1). HBO, 2022, HBO Max.

this change in costume, *Euphoria* establishes that Jules is exploring transness on her own terms rather than adhering to a fixed image of trans femininity that is based on the desiring gaze of cisgender, heterosexual men.

The endless possibilities of trans femininity that is represented through Jules's transformation in costume also becomes apparent through a melodramatic metaphor that *Euphoria* employs in the special episode. During this episode, Jules shares with her therapist that she has been thinking about ending her hormone treatment. While the character does not want to quit her estrogen injections, she wishes to remove her puberty blocking implant, Supprelin, which "stops [her] voice from dropping and [her] balls from getting bigger. *The kind of shit that men wouldn't find desirable*" (00:12:16-00:12:25, emphasis mine). By scripting their trans character to readjust hormone treatment, *Euphoria* further emphasizes Jules's departure from the desiring gaze of men, who find characteristics that are traditionally perceived as masculine (such as a deeper, lower voice) less desirable than those perceived as feminine. Additionally, this scene illustrates that Jules does not conform to a specific, fixed understanding of trans femininity by demonstrating that the character's wish to change hormone treatment does not lessen her transness nor does the absence of sex reassignment surgery.[32] After all, Jules's womanhood is never questioned in the series or depicted as deficient. The special episode even affirms her womanhood by using the ocean as a metaphor for transness in general and trans femininity specifically.

[32] As *Euphoria* has established earlier in the series, Jules has both male and female genitalia, which does not adhere to the dominant conception of a trans woman who does not have any 'male' characteristics at all. The first season, for instance, depicts the outline of breasts as well as a bulge in Jules's underwear (Episode 1, 00:49:19-00:49:45) while the special episode mentions Jules's testes.

Wishing to remove her puberty blocking implant, Jules delivers a monologue on hormone treatment. As she delves deeper into the reasoning behind her initial reaction to hormone treatment, the character states:

> I've always thought of puberty as a broadening, or a deepening, or, like, a thickening, which I think is why I was always so scared of it, you know. Because in my head, women were always small, and thin, and delicate … So, the thought of puberty, like, this irreversible forever fucking metamorphosis was just like fucking terrifying. And, you know, that, when it happened, I'd just end up on the other side, like, stuck, or even worse, just like, a man, like, through and through. And then femininity would always be this elusive, distant thing, you know. Like unreachable. But then I think about beautiful things that are also broad, and deep, and thick, and I think of something like the ocean... And I think... I wanna be as beautiful as the ocean. Cause the ocean's strong as fuck and feminine as fuck and both are what makes the ocean the ocean. My grandmother used to live by the ocean. And when we'd go visit, we'd go down to the beach, and I'd just close my eyes and I'd just swim and swim and it didn't matter, like, where I was going or what could happen. Sometimes I pray to the ocean" (00:12:28-00:14:30).

By defining the ocean as a broad, deep and thick phenomenon, *Euphoria* emphasizes its vastness and endlessness, which resembles the way in which the television show delineates Jules's transness. In fact, having Jules state that she wants to be "as beautiful as the ocean," as broad and deep and thick, as strong and as feminine, strengthens the likeness between the large body of water and the boundless trans body.

While Jules describes "the irreversible forever fucking metamorphosis" of puberty, the episode does not use music to enhance the script. Instead, the silence of the scene places more emphasis on the text as, in terms of sound, Jules's words are the sole focus of attention. Only when Jules considers the ocean as a beautifully broad, deep and thick entity, *Euphoria*

Figure 15. Still from *Euphoria* showing Jules being baptized by the ocean (Special Episode Part 2). HBO, 2022, HBO Max.

supplements the scene with song. Introducing the sound of a high-pitched string instrument, accompanied by an operatic voice singing in a low, deep tone, *Euphoria* highlights the spiritual element of the ocean metaphor while also accentuating the ocean's deepness and thickness through the low-pitched singing voice. The operatic voice gradually increases in loudness until it reaches a crescendo when Jules talks about swimming at her grandmother's house, praying to the ocean. As the music swells and eventually crescendos, a close-up shot of Jules's face is interspersed with shots of the beach. Arguably the most important image is of Jules lying on the sand, waves washing over her body, as if the character is being baptized by the ocean (figure 15). Through the combination of text, image, and music, *Euphoria* creates another melodramatic scene. The artistically exaggerated use of opera music, metaphor and ocean imagery create a conception of transness that the television show has not yet explored, at least not this explicitly, that being trans is not only a spiritual act but also an ocean of possibilities.

An important aspect of Jules's special episode is the involvement of Hunter Schafer, the actor who portrays *Euphoria*'s trans character. While Schafer informed and influenced how Jules was characterized in season 1 through collaborating with the show's costume designer (Euphoria, "All for the Style") as well as the show's creator,[33] it was particularly the production of the special episode that Schafer played a crucial part in. As Levinson revealed, "Hunter's been involved in every step of the process. From the work that [the show's cinematographer] and I do, shot listing, and storyboarding, and writing. Hunter's been a part of all that" (Euphoria, "Enter Euphoria: Special Episode Part 2"). As a result, Jules's special became the only episode that was written collaboratively; Levinson features as the sole writer for every other episode in season 1, season 2 and the first special. The fact that this unique collaborator was Schafer, a trans woman, should not be overlooked. For accurate and authentic representations of trans people, for instance in popular television shows such as *Euphoria*, it is crucial to write and theorize *with* instead of *about* trans people. Otherwise, trans representations are informed by dominant depictions of transness that tend to reinforce a singular understanding of transness based on stereotypes, as becomes clear in GLAAD's annual television reports or in films such as *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), *The Danish Girl* (2015) or *Anything* (2018).

The necessity of involving trans people in trans epistemology, which I would also extend to trans representation in popular media, has been signaled by scholars such as Ellasante, Radi and Stryker. Reworking the "nothing about us without us" philosophy from disability activists in the 70s and 80s into a trans context, Stryker established a 'knowledge with' instead of a 'knowledge of' approach ("Transgender Studies Today"), while Ellasante articulated an

[33] In an interview with EW, Levinson shared that he had a six hour conversation with Schafer about the show and her own trans experience, after which he "wanted to do her and the character justice [by weaving] as much of who she is into the DNA of this character because she's a rare individual … an incredible artist" (qtd. in Stack). In other words, Schafer's own transness essentially influenced the depiction of Jules's transness.

"intentional 'about us, for us, by us' orientation" (424), which are not only useful tools for academic theorizing but also media representation. After all, these approaches likely result in an authentic and accurate representation rather than a harmful reinforcement of stereotypes that depict transness in incorrect or in the very least incomplete ways. When it comes to *Euphoria,* Schafer used her own experiences as a trans woman to create the fluid depiction of transness in the special episode, reworking some of her creative writing into the script: "Even some poetry that I wrote when I was 18 made it into this episode" ("Euphoria: The Craft" 00:01:27-00:01:37). Strikingly, the show's depiction of transness as an ongoing process, a verb rather than a noun, as well as an ocean of possibilities that a trans person continuously explores throughout their life seems to reflect Schafer's own conception of transness: "I think I was around [Jules's] age when I started to understand that transitioning wasn't this point A to point B sequence … If I've learned anything from being trans for my whole life, it's that, you know, the spiral kind of never stops" (00:01:48-00:02:21).

Through a transformation in costume and scripted engagement with transness, *Euphoria* portrays Jules's departure from a hyperfemininity that is shaped by the desiring gaze of cis-hetero men. Rather than continually adhering to this constrained version of (trans) femininity, Jules is then depicted to explore the ocean of possibilities that transness offers her. In other words, the trans fixity that *Euphoria* establishes in the first half of season 1 eventually shifts into a trans fluidity, where transness is painted as endless rather than bound. While this transformation provides a different way of considering transness, it is specifically Jules's special episode that invites audiences to view transness through a transgender rather than a cisgender lens. Releasing Jules from the loving perspective of Rue, the special episode scripts the character to share her own story and subsequently explain what transness means to her: a spiritual, processual experience. Importantly, the transgender lens that becomes explicit in this episode has been partly constructed by the trans actor who portrays Jules, Hunter Schafer,

whose close involvement can be seen in *Euphoria*'s "care-full" (Ellasante 426) depiction of transness. As a (melo)dramatic television series, in which characters tend to encounter conflict which they either resolve or succumb to, *Euphoria* has productively depicted Jules's character arc throughout the two seasons and special episodes, the serial format allowing for an extensive character transformation. The fact that a popular television show like *Euphoria* engages thoughtfully with transness generates a hope for future television to continue to depict transness as a fluid rather than a fixed phenomenon. At the same time, Schafer's involvement in the representation of Jules's transness might be a hopeful sign that popular media will continue to create depictions *with* rather than *about* trans people.

Conclusion:

Transcending Dominant Depictions of Transness

RuPaul's Drag Race and *Euphoria* offer audiences different ways of looking, different ways of viewing trans people in popular culture and engaging with transness in mainstream media. Therefore, the television shows invite their audiences to see transness differently, literally (on the television screen) as well as figuratively (in their minds). Instead of a noun, a particular state, *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* depict transness as a verb, a continuing process in which trans people are able to explore the endless possibilities of being trans. Through the characters of Gottmik and Jules, the television shows illustrate that trans people do not adhere to a singular script, a particular understanding of transness; that trans people do not have to conform to the dominant conception of trans people as either hypermasculine or hyperfeminine that circulates in popular culture. While Gottmik explores his femininity as a trans man through the performance of drag, Jules undergoes quite the transformation as a fictional trans woman, her gender expression shifting from hyperfeminine to more androgynous over the course of the television show. In other words, *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* depict transness as a fluid rather than a fixed phenomenon, in which femininity and masculinity are not necessarily antithetical but can be adopted and explored by trans people in various ways. A crucial component of the "care-full" (Ellasante 426) representation of transness in these two television shows is trans people's own involvement. While *RuPaul's Drag Race* allowed Gottmik to share his own story through its reality format, *Euphoria* closely collaborated with Schafer to create Jules's character and trans journey. What these instances show is that involving trans people in the writing, directing and/or producing of trans portrayals in popular media tend to create deeper and more truthful accounts of transness.

Although the invitation to encounter transness in a different light primarily educates a cisgender audience, who might only be familiar with the dominant conception of transness as

fixed or might not be familiar with transness at all, it also works affirmatively for trans people who might believe they are not trans enough because they fail to conform to a singular script of transness, that is, being either hypermasculine trans men or hyperfeminine trans women. At least, it worked this way for me. At the same time, the positive depiction of Gottmik and Jules as complex characters whose narrative goes beyond transitioning shows a trans audience that it is possible for popular media to portray trans characters intricately and authentically. Subsequently, trans viewers are reminded that their stories matter and deserve to be depicted on the television screen too. Although *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* affect their cisgender and transgender audiences in different ways, the fact that both are television shows increases their affective quality. As a vehicle, television produces a more sustained and elaborate encounter with recurring themes and characters than for instance film. Its serial and relational nature lends to a more intricate and even intimate engagement with fictional trans characters like Jules or non-fictional trans characters like Gottmik, and their transness. The seriality and relationality of television might even be necessary for trans fluidity to be mediated 'care-fully', providing time and space for trans storylines to move beyond the stereotypical transition narrative so common in popular media (Oppliger). Considering that viewers are exposed to trans characters for a prolonged time, specifically when television shows air one episode per week and the encounter with transness stretches over at least two or three months, which is true for both *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria*, there are myriad moments in which the depiction of trans fluidity affects viewers.

Because the mediated image of transness is scripted and staged, viewers learn about transness through affect rather than reason. As trans characters, both fictional and non-fictional, affect audiences, they sometimes induce empathy but almost always prompt viewers to think. Whether the depiction of trans fluidity encourages a cisgender audience to understand trans people better or a transgender audience to feel validated, it has the power to educate the other

as well as the self. Apart from affecting and educating audiences, *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* predominantly generate a hope for future television to continue the shift in depiction, to continue to portray transness positively, but even more so as a fluid phenomenon, an ocean of possibilities. Popular culture, then, depicts trans people more truthfully and invites a cisgender audience to deepen their understanding of transness. Considering that 80% of Americans engages with transness through media, the way in which trans stories are told matter, not only for cis audiences to learn about trans people but also for trans audiences to see themselves reflected on the screen, sometimes even acknowledge their own transness. After all, transness has been depicted negatively for the majority of American television (GLAAD "Victims or Villains"; Henry; Oppliger), which has constructed a specific image of trans people. While trans characters are no longer solely portrayed as serial killers, homicide victims, sex workers or causes of laughter and disgust, popular media commonly depicts transness through a hypergendered lens, which fails to recognize the complexities and endless possibilities of transness. The hope that *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria* offer is necessary to imagine a future where transness is depicted more intricately and authentically so that audiences engage differently with transness and the marginalization of and violence against actual trans people hopefully subsides.

While this project analyzed two extremely popular and influential television shows that portray transness as fluid rather than fixed, further research has to confirm whether the shift in representation continues beyond *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Euphoria*. This research could, for example, consider trans characters in (popular) television shows from the next five years to evaluate whether future television transcends the dominant depiction of transness in popular culture; whether hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity actually become displaced by (hyper)fluidity. Moreover, further research should examine the question of race in more depth, which this thesis has not sufficiently undertaken. The absence of trans characters of color in

popular media is striking,[34] which the whiteness of Gottmik and Jules only illustrates. Apart from being represented in larger numbers, white trans characters might also be depicted as fluid more so than trans characters of color, which the hyperfeminine and hypermasculine depiction of transness in *Pose* (2018-2021) and *9-1-1: Lone Star* (2020-present) for example suggests. What role the intersection of (at least) race and gender[35] therefore plays in the depiction of trans characters of color is an important and intriguing question for further research to pursue. A more intricate engagement with mediated trans fluidity of color results in a more comprehensive picture of transness in popular media, which presumably exposes the steps television and film have to take still to not only present trans characters of color more authentically and accurately but also challenge and hopefully transform the white hope that fluid depictions of transness currently generate. As trans people we *all* need hope to go forward in life,[36] whether this life is mediated or lived.

[34] See for instance GLAAD's television reports; Martin Jr; McLaren et al.

[35] Often other axes of difference too, such as class.

[36] Trans people of color arguably even more so as they are disproportionally affected by social inequalities and violence (HRC, "Dismantling a Culture of Violence").

Acknowledgments

The epigraph on page 2 is from Jules's special episode (00:14:39-00:14:51),[37] a quotation that orbited my mind while writing this thesis. The following acknowledges the matter that allowed this thesis to become a project that I am both passionate about and proud of.

A glimmer of hope that affected me in the summer of 2019 has developed into an elaborate research project. It was hope that encouraged me to explore transness academically as well as philosophically, to invest my energy in a subject that was important to me on a personal level and to trace a shift in trans representation that I noticed slowly unfolding in contemporary television. The depiction of trans fluidity on the small screen that interrupts and hopefully eventually discards trans fixity has affirmed my own transness, allowing me to finally see myself depicted in popular media and to embrace my transness that took on different shapes than images of hypergender I encountered in television, film and social media. Having introduced me to embodied knowledge, the gender studies minor I took in 2019 helped me envision this project, which started to fully take shape in early 2022.

Over the past seven months, I have set many early alarms. As I feel most inspired in the hours before noon, I've written most of this thesis in my pajamas at the dining table, opening the doors to my balcony to feel the morning breeze. While sculpting this thesis, I benefited greatly from my supervisor Anna, who encouraged me to pursue my glimmer of hope in the early stages of this project, but who even more so motivated me throughout the process with inspiring (online) conversations and positive feedback, especially when I was beginning to feel discouraged or overwhelmed. At the same time, they pushed me to dive in deeper, to rewrite, refocus and reconnect where necessary, which has made me grow as a researcher.

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[37] *Euphoria*, Special Episode Part 2, HBO, 2021, HBO Max.

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