

## The contemporary aesthetics of adolescence: How *Euphoria* uses style to spectacularize representation of modern youth in the articulation of a teenage gaze

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### Abstract

The release of the second series of the HBO hit television series *Euphoria* was met with large popular culture criticism of the stylization of the teenage experience. In this analysis the method of visual rhetorical analysis is used to demonstrate how visual elements of the television series *Euphoria*, in its performance, communicates ideas about how *Euphoria* prescribes audiences a certain way of viewing the experiences of adolescence in a thematically significant way, producing a 'teenage gaze.' *Euphoria* relies on a heavily stylized manifestation of mature themes, described by critics as "aesthetic pretensions," to convey a sense of performance that is well suited to the visual rhetorical analysis of color and light, aesthetics of technology, fashion, and setting (Lawson, 2022). This analysis expands on how these visual elements contribute to spectacularized performance, supported by commercial adoption of the teenage image and experience that is oppressive in the othering of real teens and their authentic experiences. In addition to deconstructing spectacle, this analysis focuses on the role of liminality in the visuals presented by *Euphoria*, and how they negotiate visual and thematic boundaries to produce nostalgia, an essential element of the teenage gaze. The evolution of the teenage gaze, and its study in popular culture contexts, is significant when considering the current sociopolitical environment where youth are often marginalized in the face of crisis. This study of visual rhetoric in *Euphoria* finds that through the articulation of the teenage gaze amongst mature *Euphoria* viewers and producers, the teenage experience is assimilated into mainstream culture by a media industry that can force experience into oblivion through stylized, aesthetic representation.

### Keywords

teenage gaze, aesthetic pretensions, performance, teenage image, *Euphoria*



The HBO television series, *Euphoria*, invites viewers into an electrified world of youthful transgression, made more alluring through a highly stylized depiction of contemporary adolescence and the challenges that come with it. Controversially, *Euphoria* visually explicates dangerous behavior associated with themes of sexuality, substance abuse, addiction, and identity formation through its aestheticization of a version of youth that has widely resonated with global audiences. To contextualize its viewership and pop culture significance, HBO authorities recently confirmed that *Euphoria* had rivaled the classic television program *Game of Thrones* in audience reach, and was the second most watched TV series released by the company, ever (Spangler, 2022).

*Euphoria* follows the unreliable narrator Rue, as she moves through the world of her youth and the ins and outs of an opioid addiction, while also chronicling the trials and tribulations of teenage angst and desperation experienced by her peers, inviting elements of fantasy and reality that grounds the series in a literal and visual euphoria. Critically, the visual aesthetics associated with these dichotomies have been described as “aesthetic pretensions” enacting a visual narrative that is “too stylish” for its own good, where the sense of performance by series creators is perpetuated by the “older folks,” producing it and ultimately undermining the stakes it seeks to embolden (Lawson, 2022). As youth experiences can be marginalized through stylization, this project contends that *Euphoria* is worthy of academic attention, particularly in a context of increasing awareness of youth addiction and substance abuse, and mental health crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, in my examination of *Euphoria*’s visual rhetoric, I argue that the show utilizes visual strategies to spectacularize contemporary youth experiences. In turn, I argue that the spectacularization of youth experiences results in the articulation of a “teenage gaze” that reduces the complexity of youth’s everyday experience for the consumption of older audiences. The manufactured “teenage gaze” produces a nostalgic imagination of young people’s experiences as the visual rhetorical analysis of the first two seasons of the show reveals.

Historically, HBO has relied upon its ‘prestige’ television network reputation to produce bold, distinctive television that elicits “characteristics of exclusivity and prestige, of representing a particular approach to TV style and aesthetics, narrative and storytelling, as well as a way of thinking about television as culture” (Akass & McCabe, 2018, p. 2). The analysis of teen representations in shows such as *Euphoria* is increasingly relevant when considering how depictions of adolescence are rapidly changing, potentially transforming the teen genre through

visual aesthetics, and the way that youth is perceived through narrative constructions in popular culture discourses going forwards. This becomes evident in the production of a “teenage gaze,” a powerful way in which the cultural industries have capitalized on the nostalgia of youth through a return to an idealized past, in the future, while simultaneously packaging it as a way to view the world that is lighter and more glamorous physically and, consequently, spiritually through the function of liminality in visual forms. As a result, I use visual rhetorical analysis to deconstruct functional visual elements of fashion, aesthetics of technology, setting, color and light, and the ways in which these elements work in conjunction with narrative to produce a teenage gaze made significant through the effects of spectacle and liminality.

### **Method**

In this project I have employed Foss’s (2004) theory of visual rhetoric to explore how *Euphoria* utilizes formal visual elements to construct a teenage gaze. Visual rhetoric is a critical study of the function of imagery in a work that seeks to inform or persuade viewers. This allows viewers to understand and interpret visual symbols, and subsequently their operation in contemporary culture (Foss, 2004). Visual rhetoric allows scholars to assess how communication is performed through images and the symbols associated with them (Foss, 2004). Accordingly, the perspective established in *Euphoria*, through the identification of pervasive visual images and themes through formal visual elements and modes of discourse (components) are enhanced by the study of visual rhetoric. Foss (2004) articulates how this operates, where “Human experiences that are spatially oriented, nonlinear, multidimensional, and dynamic often can be only communicated through visual imagery or other non-discursive symbols” (p. 143). Foss (2004) continues by claiming that “to understand and articulate such experiences require attention to these kinds of symbols” (p. 143).

In its production, *Euphoria* is a proponent of an approach to youth through a teenage gaze, in pursuit of a notably nostalgic worldview, through the exploration of spectacle and liminality, in their formal visual forms, including the aesthetic manipulation of color, form, imagery, medium, setting, and fashion. Liminality uses visual cues to allow viewers to move in and out of reality and fantasy, and the past and present. Alternatively, spectacle speaks to how *Euphoria* uses these aesthetics to spectacularize representations of a modern teenage experience in formation of a teenage gaze. This is best identified and deconstructed through a visual rhetorical perspective as

visual rhetoric is concerned with how visual artifacts are used to communicate with audiences through literal, substantive formal content elements and the symbolic, stylistic nature of images (Foss, 2004). Therefore, visual rhetoric is a method that allows for a close reading of the nature of images produced throughout the series in its imagery that ultimately constructs larger narratives about teenage representation that have allowed for critics to coin terms like “The Euphoria Effect,” a term used to describe the resurgence of Y2K fashion trends made synonymous with the series (Moore, 2022). A rhetorical perspective on visual imagery is also valuable to this study because it provides knowledge of how visual imagery produces discourses that, in the case of *Euphoria*, contribute to the ‘othering’ of modern youth (Foss, 2004).

To deconstruct the images presented throughout the series, Foss (2004) offers a framework for the study of visual images: a focus on the nature, function, and evaluation of the rhetorical text. Meaning is attributed to images through the identification of nature and function in a text, as “colors, lines, textures, and rhythms in an image provide a basis for the viewer to infer the existence of images, emotions, and ideas” to be deconstructed in the process of evaluation of the text (Foss, 2004, p. 145). Therefore, those who study visual rhetoric engage in identification and evaluation of visual elements that produce meaning in a work. These perspectives, used as a method, act as “conceptual lenses through which visual images become knowable as communicative or rhetorical phenomena” and reveal a particular way of viewing images (Foss, 2004, p. 145). Within this analysis I will adopt Foss's visual rhetorical perspective to explore how *Euphoria* utilizes formal visual elements to articulate a teenage gaze, and how the evolution of this gaze results in visual cues that are politically and culturally significant when considering representation of youth discourses through a nostalgic lens.

The nature of the image is defined by “the distinguishing features of the visual image” (Foss, 2004, p. 146). The distinguishing features of an image are delineated through the identification of presented and suggested elements. Presented elements include the naming of the major physical features in the work, including: space, media/medium/technology, color, setting, and imagery (Foss, 2004, p. 146). Alternatively, suggested elements include “concepts, ideas, themes, and allusions that a viewer is likely to infer from the presented elements” (Foss, 2004, p. 146). Therefore, the nature of the image is the connection of presented, physical elements with the

meaning that an image is likely to have for an audience through the suggested, implicit elements (Foss, 2004, p. 150).

The function of the image is an attempt to discover how images are operationalized symbolically. Function is the overall action an image communicates. In this way, the function of an image is to articulate emotional appeals that are generated through intentional design choices within the work (Gries, 2020). Function is identified in the text by taking a rhetorical perspective in analyzing how interpretation of a text may be actionable for an audience (Foss, 2004). Function encourages scholars of rhetoric to adopt new ways of experiencing an image (Foss, 2004). Overall, function is essential to visual rhetoric because it is the avenue for understanding how interpretations of an image can be mobilized in larger ways. To illustrate, “The Euphoria Effect” is the subsequent global fashion influence that has followed the series, which signifies a connection to youth culture in a popular culture context outside of the teen genre (Picchio, 2021). While this may seem abstract, function is not synonymous with purpose, as an image may function in opposition to the purpose a creator has made for that image, or series of images (Foss, 2004). This very well may be the case for *Euphoria*, and the conclusions I will draw in this analysis. Nevertheless, design choices facilitate the visualization of social and political tropes, most specifically the return to the idealized past.

The evaluation of an image consists of the assessment of the potential rhetorical impact of the image and its overall legitimacy as a visual artifact. The evaluation component allows scholars to determine whether an image is “congruent with a particular ethical system or whether it offers emancipatory potential” (Foss, 2004, p. 147). Critics focus on images’ contemporary and historical contexts, subject matters, communication channels, and forms, and how these components work in conjunction. In this study I will use the evaluation aspect to identify how *Euphoria* might be subversive in its articulation of a teenage gaze.

The visual rhetorical approach employed in this study is also influenced by and relies upon classical Aristotelian rhetoric as it focuses on the show’s emotional and logical appeals. Aristotle’s three rhetorical *pisteis* derive from communicative acts of the speaker, speech, and the audience (Longaker & Walker, 2011). This analysis is concerned with the speaker and the speech presented by *Euphoria*, with emphasis on *pathos* (emotional appeal) made to the audience, and *logos* (logic and reasoning) inherent in the direct argumentation made by the visual artifact (Longaker &

Walker, 2011). These aspects of Aristotelian rhetoric are essential to the interpretation of nature and function within a text, and ultimately inform the evaluation of meaning.

### **The Teenage Gaze**

Through its formal visual elements, *Euphoria* develops and articulates a teenage gaze that produces social implications beyond its function within the series by removing teenagers from competitive, academic and peer-based environments into illicit, transgressive settings where everyone dresses well. *Euphoria* invites viewers to see the world through a teenage gaze, an unreliable perspective informed by age and inexperience, made desirable for audiences seeking a return to the (idealized) past, when the future seemed more appealing. In *Euphoria*'s representation of modern youth culture – supported by visual components of fashion and highly stereotypical depictions of a teenage worldview related to space and setting – stylized youth can be packaged as a fetishized view of one's own youth or past. *Euphoria* invites adult viewers to receive a sense of gratification or pleasure by looking at the teenage experience, therefore the teenager being represented is the bearer of the gaze, which makes the mature spectator the empowered individual in the interaction – the one executing the powerful act of looking. As a result of being subjected to television representations within a commodified cultural industry, the teenager also becomes a capitalist product, partaking in symbolic exchange in the market economy (Olin, 1996). Accordingly, the teenage gaze is an often oppressive point of view that draws from youth for the adult creators and viewers of *Euphoria*. As Olin (1996) suggests, a gaze invites desire for self-completion through another, where one gets to look and one gets to be looked at, and consequently extends beyond gender differences to other differences, like age, experience, and identity that accompany adolescence. In its logical and emotional appeals through the function of visual rhetoric in the components of setting, fashion, color, and medium, *Euphoria* creates a teenage gaze. A gaze confers meaning upon a work through the viewers' reception of the text, in an ongoing negotiation between the art and audience (Reinhardt, 2023).

When considering the formation of the teenage gaze, one must evaluate the visual rhetoric presented by the settings and spaces which contribute to the distinct and stylized way of viewing the world in *Euphoria*. Throughout the series, there is a use of settings and spaces that become liminal as they intertwine reality with fantasy in ways that are visually and narratively difficult to delineate, as exemplified by color and light and unreliable narration. In reference to liminality, I

will rely upon the term as presented by Victor Turner (2002) in his exploration of social process and experience, where liminality is defined by a cultural phenomena's relationship to boundaries and thresholds that classify and locate states and positions in cultural space; liminality is a transitional experience. The concept of liminality, in this context, facilitates the identification of spaces in the HBO series where fantasy is contrasted with reality. This is especially pertinent to the experience of youth where real experiences are intertwined with naivety and desire (and in *Euphoria* mind altering substance abuse) and loosely separated from the imaginary. Liminal spaces in the series are always associated with settings that are stereotypical when considering representations of teenagers in mainstream media. These spaces include fairgrounds, bowling alleys, roller rinks, school dances and plays, and house parties. While these design choices may seem arbitrary or predictable in the production of a television show about teenagers, and highly contentious to critics who have described them as a "millennials' revisionist fantasy" within the HBO media environment, the ability to contrast reality with fantasy within these spaces contributes to the articulation of a teenage gaze. When characters enter these spaces they act as a visual cue for events that can be perceived as imagined as opposed to real (Esquire Editors, 2022). I argue that *Euphoria* presents curated cliches within classically stereotypical teenage environments, like the high school dance and fairground carnival, to audiences to contribute to a distinctly stylized teenage gaze, supported by the use of color, fashion, and technology.

### **Setting**

*Euphoria* offers a unique visual performance in the way it manufactures and manipulates certain settings to capture feelings of both unease and empowerment connected to the experience of youth in a timeless way. In season one this is exemplified in the culture *Euphoria* creates surrounding the teenage bedroom as a setting of extreme vulnerability and self-discovery. It is within the bedroom space that characters experience the most narrative and physical visual vulnerability. The design of a setting is what constructs these moments for viewers where the bedroom is a space for transformation. Throughout the series the bedroom acts as an arena for coming of age. For example, Maddy's character (Alexa Demie), is the most popular person in high school and has a bedroom that emulates her appeal to others, cast in delicate pink lighting with a gauzy curtain sheathing her bed frame. Her characterization introduces her own innocence as an emancipatory tool in her relationships with others, especially men, presenting her power as



emanating from the command of her own femininity (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Likewise, this behavior is also evident in the characterization of Kat (Barbie Ferreira). Particularly, in her exploration of the world of pornography, as she seeks self-empowerment and confidence through ‘camming,’ a practice where individuals perform acts that are sexual in nature in front of a webcam for financial compensation. Kat’s bedroom space also visually reflects features of her character and personality, with a shiny brass bed, large mirror, and cast in hazy gold lighting. These engendered characterizations would not be successful without the curated bedroom setting, where physical attributes of set design act as visual cues that heavily contribute to the audience’s perception of intimacy and privacy.

**Figure 1**

*Kat’s Bedroom in Euphoria*



*Note.* From [Kat’s Bedroom] [photograph], by HBO, 2022a, House Beautiful (<https://www.housebeautiful.com/shopping/home-accessories/a39228634/euphoria-characters-beds/>).

**Figure 2**

*Cassie’s Bedroom in Euphoria*





*Note.* From [Cassie’s Pink Bedroom] [photograph, by HBO, 2022b, House Beautiful (<https://www.housebeautiful.com/shopping/home-accessories/a39228634/euphoria-characters-beds/>)].

Alternatively, season two offers a unique use of setting, curating a design that appears to be vintage in nature, with suburban homes taking on design qualities of the 1970’s facilitated by the visually rich properties of the Kodak EKTACHROME film (Kodak, 2022). The mid-century modern home design is illustrated through carefully styled features including wood paneling, floral wallpapers, brass fixtures and furniture, which all work alongside the rich saturation of color and grain inherent in the film this season is shot on (Figure 3). This is an interesting design choice because it is contradictory in nature, opposed directly by the technology used within these spaces throughout the season, including smartphones and laptops, that characters are made to rely upon to give weight to their modern teenage experience. Therefore, this is an intentional design choice that well demonstrates how *Euphoria* is highly aestheticized to produce a certain type of imagery connected to nostalgia, which achieves visual continuity in set design for the enactment of the

teenage gaze in an aesthetically vintage environment. The result is a gaze inauthentic in logical appeal.

### Figure 3

*Intimate Living Spaces, Continued*



*Note.* Filmic aspects of set design.. From [Kat on Bathroom Floor] [Photograph], by Eddy Chen, 2022a, i-D (<https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/wxd78y/euphoria-bts-photos-eddy-chen>).

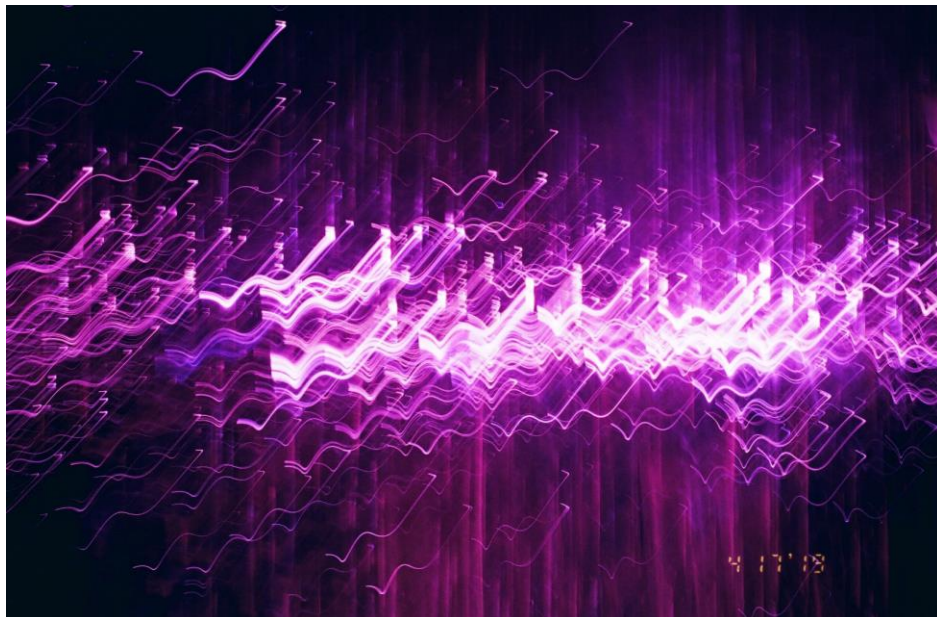
### Color and Light

As formal visual components, color and light are used throughout the entirety of the series to allude to a sense of reality and fantasy within liminal spaces. Color and light work together as cues for liminality in imposing thresholds between what is real and what is imagined for unreliable narrator Rue and the other characters as they navigate the world through varying emotions and states of sobriety. Fantasy and escapism become the main thematic elements associated with light and color throughout the series, as suburbia is frequently transformed into an environment that is made illicit as intermittent neon lighting imbues exceptionally average-looking single-family homes with an element of magical realism (fig. 4 and fig. 5). Alternatively, sepia tones, desaturated, and low contrast lighting and color return viewers to reality, where fantasy is

abandoned, and an element of narrative and visual reliability are restored as neon colorways go away. The intentionality behind the color and lighting decisions become more apparent in the liminal, curated environments as these spaces are the main arenas for fantasy, elevated through highly emotional experiences connected to substance use and sexual behavior. *Euphoria*'s producer and writer Sam Levinson describes the intention of reception for these design choices as “We wanted this show to be a sensory experience more than anything. And I do think the audience response has been in large part due to the way that it looks” (Kodak, 2022, para. 4).

**Figure 4**

*Light as a Visual Cue*



*Note.* Intermittent neon lighting transforms household environments. From [Light Leaks 1] [Photograph], by Eddy Chen, n.d.a, Eddy Chen Photography (<http://www.eddychenphotography.com/recent/#itemId=5fa8fd1136ca92025d675df0>).



**Figure 5**

*Light as a Visual Cue*



*Note.* Intermittent neon lighting transforms household environments. From [Light Leaks 2] [Photograph], by Eddy Chen, n.d.b, Eddy Chen Photography (<http://www.eddychenphotography.com/recent/#itemId=5fa8fd1136ca92025d675df0>).

**Aesthetics of Technology**

Levinson acknowledges that color associated with medium is used in pursuit of a “visual mission” that is connected to an “emotional expression before a logical one. So, our approach for this [year] was to make the show look like a reflection of a memory or something we’re looking back upon. And for us, those memories all started on film” (Kodak, 2022, para. 6). The glossy neon-color ways used in season one transition to deeper, warmer, and more textured visual elements of color and vintage set design, and to some extent fashion in season two on account of the shift in medium from digital videography to film (Kodak, 2022). Functionally, this allows viewers to not only gaze upon the characters in the show, but to place themselves within the setting through the vintage and communal elements of the film medium that is highly relatable to mature viewers who experienced youth without the easily accessible and affordable digital photography. Ultimately the aesthetics associated with the film medium evoke the nostalgia required for the fulfillment of the teenage gaze through a return to the past inherent in the use of film. Film invites

a sense of antiquity and community because it is a one-to-one production method where continuous patterns of light produce a visual pattern (Figure 6), this direct materiality of the image invites intimacy among viewers because its production is less manipulated and more direct in intention (Rose, 2016). The film medium, in opposition to digital videography, also invites an appraisal of the social and political realities in which Levinson is advocating for by using visual elements to convey a sense of nostalgia for the past, while also constructing a representation of modern youth culture for a large audience. One could argue that *Euphoria* is avant-garde in its capacity to adapt the film medium for television, in addition to its rebellious fashion and dynamic lighting processes.

### **Figure 6**

*Protagonist, as shot on Kodak EKTACHROME*



*Note.* Aesthetics associated with the film medium in Season 2. From [Rue in Natural Light] [Photograph], by Eddy Chen, n.d.c, Eddy Chen Photography (<http://www.eddychenphotography.com/recent/#itemId=5fa8fd1136ca92025d675df0>).

## **Fashion**

One of the most polarizing aspects of *Euphoria* for audiences and critics is the fashion it employs and the influence it has had following the show's release. Throughout the series, wardrobe

design is used to articulate the freedom and fluidity of identity construction that is attached to how characters are dressed and made up. *Euphoria*'s element of fashion is both widely criticized and celebrated by both high and low fashion following a revival of campy Y2K style and whimsy. Berman (2022), writing for *TIME* magazine, argues that, in part, *Euphoria* has triggered an era of people vibrantly, unapologetically embracing the 'bad taste' associated with the lightness of Y2K style: "What we're dealing with is a full-blown cultural moment" (para. 4). The article continues "The 20-year nostalgia cycle, climate-change nihilism, information saturation, streaming-era content overload, and our collective Long COVID of the soul have converged in a tidal wave of tackiness" (2022, para. 4). This fashion phenomenon and trend-spotting in *Euphoria* has been heavily covered by many major fashion outlets, most notably *Vogue* magazine and its international counterparts, in an attempt to decode decisions made by costume designers in their stylization of teenage characters in ways that are incongruent to a teenager's life, as most modern teens cannot afford the labels (detailed extensively by *Vogue* magazine) that the characters in *Euphoria* are wearing, and later representing outside of the television landscape (Bhatt, 2022). The fashion in the series demonstrates that the teenage gaze does not equate to the teenage experience or accurate representation, but is a stylized way to package the perspective of youth through dress (Figure 7). Characters navigate and display their identity, body image, and sexuality through the way they dress (Figure 8), contrasting bold and risk-taking looks with the reintroduction of twee to the mainstream, in addition to narrator-Rue's found fashion. Most real teenagers are not conceptually or financially able to wear the fashion that *Euphoria* is notorious for. While characterization in *Euphoria* relies upon the visual form of fashion, authentic experience and identity building that is essential to the awkwardness of the real teenage experience minimally relies on how one styles oneself in the highly physical sense of fashion. The fashion-reliant characterization in *Euphoria* highlights the capacity of aesthetics and self-presentation in identity-building and allows viewers to vicariously experience unrealistic external expression. Ultimately, fashion has the capacity to endear viewers to a version of the teenage experience that is commercially appealing.

Within the function of visual rhetoric, the visual signs associated with fashion are designed to inspire indistinct feelings within the viewer according to costume designer Heidi Bivens, who took an abstract approach to connecting fashion with film. When interviewed, costume stylist Bivens stated that "Things don't always have to make sense to evoke feelings from the audience," and "Ultimately in watching *Euphoria*, I think the whole team has created an opportunity for the

viewer to feel something, whatever that may be” (Bhatt, 2022, para. 5). This disjointed approach to costume design works illogically, like many other visual aspects in *Euphoria* (such as the medium of technology) pointing to the evolution of a heavily stylized aesthetic. Fashion aesthetic is used to provoke emotion, adaptable to a teenage gaze that allows audiences to negotiate with the work through its (commodified) reception while also achieving some sense of self completion. The project of creating nostalgia for a younger version of ourselves is fulfilled in the way that we dress, color, and frame the world.

**Figure 7**

*Y2K Fashion*



*Note.* Fashion employed for character development. From [Maddie, Cassie, Kat, Fashion] [Photograph], by Eddy Chen, 2022b, i-D (<https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/wxd78y/euphoria-bts-photos-eddy-chen>).



**Figure 8***Bold Fashion Decisions*

*Note.* Kat, Barbie Ferreira's character is used to present the bold, and often sexual looks, associated with *Euphoria* in the mainstream, popular culture media. From [Kat in Red] [Photograph], by Eddy Chen, 2022c, i-D (<https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/wxd78y/euphoria-bts-photos-eddy-chen>).

**Spectacle in *Euphoria***

In view of a dominant understanding of teenage life, *Euphoria* offers a representation of youth that is rooted in spectacle, which is used to enforce the teenage gaze. *Euphoria's* creators and producers failed to consider how this ultra-stylized depiction of teenage life influences the way that real-life young people can be viewed by mainstream culture. They also failed to acknowledge the social and political realities that teenagers, and the adults that gaze upon them, face today. The current cultural landscape for teenagers is significantly darker than in the past, political and personal crises are much more devastating for youth today, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF, n.d.). This has resulted in a shift in genre where teenage dramas have subsequently become thematically darker using gothic noir and horror styles and genre, including programs like *Riverdale* and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Elgenaidi, n.d.). As a result, it is important to highlight how spectacle is used within the series to achieve the teenage

gaze. Debord (1994) states, “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (p. 12). The spectacle of *Euphoria* conveys how people can acquire youth by changing the way they look at and construct their world, while authentic experiences in life are being replaced by spectacular representations of life (Debord, 1994).

The replacement of authentic experience is significant as dichotomies of reality and fantasy, given life by spectacular representation, subvert mainstream expectations of a lived teenage experience (Debord, 1994). Debord advances the idea that spectacle cannot be placed in opposition to this reality, “Thus the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity” (Debord, 1994, p. 14). In this way, the ‘real’ activity of images identified by Debord, working with the spectacle that falsifies reality, is evidenced in *Euphoria* through its extensive appropriation of liminality to construct an emotional spectacle that is connected to nostalgia among mature viewers (Debord, 1994, p. 3). Youth is fetishized and consumed by viewers, which produces an oppressive social relationship between teens and adults that is mediated by images of a spectacularized teenage experience (Debord, 1994). As Olin (1996) suggests, the analysis of the gaze is an attempt to address the consequences of looking, and as the teenage subject becomes the object of the gaze. When teenagers are made to be exotic in their representation, they ultimately lose their own sense of self mastery as real, independent subjects (Olin, 1996, para. 17). Ultimately, *Euphoria* produces an image of the teenage experience that is widely adopted commercially through its spectacularization, and is therefore oppressive in othering real teens. This is well demonstrated by the non-teenage cast of *Euphoria* participating in Fashion Month, where some characters represented major brands such as Prada, Saint Laurent, Valentino, and Balenciaga (De Klerk, 2022). As a result, the significance of *Euphoria* as an HBO program with wide viewership lies in its contribution to programming that is connected to a visually aesthetic, yet inauthentic, representation of the teenage experience on mainstream television.

### **The Liminal in *Euphoria***

In its spectacularization of the teenage experience through the teenage gaze, *Euphoria* relies on liminality, and the boundaries it creates visually and thematically, to produce a feeling of nostalgia. Turner (2002) outlines how in the transitory phase of ritual, where communities,

cultures, and individuals move and change in social life, liminality presents itself as a threshold of ambiguous conditions in relation to states and positions in cultural space (p. 327). This way of moving through the world is demonstrated by symbols through which societies ritualize social and cultural transition (Turner, 2002). *Euphoria* works to use formal visual and thematic symbols, including curated clichés, fashion, color, light, and technology to communicate liminal, transitory spaces for a new way of viewing youth through the teenage gaze. Liminality monopolizes idealized aspects of youth and is expressed through the manipulation of color and rhetorical function of visual aspects (Turner, 2002). As this occurs, liminal phenomena rely on the “sacred” working in conjunction with the homogenous (society) to present a “moment in and out of time” (Turner, 2002, p. 360). Therefore, *Euphoria* allows mature viewers to co-opt the gaze of youth for their own pleasure through the show, as a cultural artifact, by the sacred elements of liminality that allows for a new relationship to one's identity.

*Euphoria* is transformative in this capacity to put forward a notion of liminality in a visual sense. As well, due to its potential to push viewers to assess their relationships to larger structures of society and *communitas* (social relationships) in the transition of time related to the experience of adolescence communicated in *Euphoria*'s liminal visuals (Turner, 2002). Therefore, *Euphoria*'s ability to create a visual world that weaves the past with the present makes liminality essential to articulating the teenage gaze. “These cultural forms provide men with a set of templates or models which are, at one level, periodical reclassifications of reality and man's relationship to society, nature, and culture” (Turner, 2002, p. 373). In this way, *Euphoria* communicates an emotional appeal of pathos in its style and aesthetics. Therefore, the teenage gaze provokes desire and nostalgia in viewers beyond a physically emblematic change in appearance or behavior. Instead, it induces reactions in the way that one relates to youth discourses. Put simply, the ways that individuals orient themselves towards society is greatly impacted by the cultural industry, which is delivered – in a contemporary sense – through popular culture phenomena like *Euphoria* in its liminal aesthetics (Turner, 2002).

*Euphoria* also connects viewers to a sense of faith in the context of liminality where there is an observable maximization of the religious, opposed to a secular depiction of addiction (Turner, 2002). *Euphoria* uses explicitly visual ways to depict addiction as complete obedience to a force that is both unseen and larger than oneself. In particular, the depiction of addiction as a godly,

religious experience, such as where Rue visually manifests “sacred folly” in complete acceptance of the pain and suffering her addiction causes herself and others (Turner, 2002, p. 370). This imparts a relationship to faith that liminality is characterized by its connection to ritual symbols (visual rhetoric) and the transcendence of literal boundaries or thresholds in what is real and what is imagined (Turner, 2002). The protagonist, Rue, is often removed from her body in purely visual ways as the experience of drug use sets in. This is communicated symbolically using a fantasy approach that is implicit to the teenage gaze, in addition to music and fashion details.

### **Figure 9**

*Main protagonist, Rue, in the throes of addiction and holiness.*



*Note.* Representation of Rue’s addiction demonstrating liminality. From [Rue in Holy Addiction] [Photograph], by Eddy Chen, n.d.d, Eddy Chen Photography (<http://www.eddychenphotography.com/recent/#itemId=5fa8fd1136ca92025d675df0>).

### **Conclusion**

Following an expansive visual rhetorical analysis and evaluation of the first two seasons of *Euphoria*, I conclude that through the articulation of the teenage gaze amongst mature *Euphoria* viewers and producers, the teenage experience is assimilated into mainstream culture by a media industry that can force youth experiences into oblivion through stylized, aesthetic representation.

*Euphoria* appropriates images of teenage experience and spectacularizes them through vibrant, gripping visual aesthetics that encourage a return to an idealized past that targets mature viewers and producers who can occupy a teenage gaze. Through the teenage gaze, audiences force themselves onto and into the images we see on television, both consciously and passively. This is socially and politically dangerous as it contributes to the othering of youth through a gaze that glorifies the past towards an idealized future, while neglecting the realities youth face today.

The evolution of the teenage gaze is increasingly relevant in the current socio-political environment where youth are often marginalized in the face of crises. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how young people are easily and systemically left behind in a crisis, mental health issues are now commonplace amongst young people, and a sense of pessimism has been imparted on their view of the world (UNICEF, 2022). Moving forwards, further analysis of youth discourses in popular culture, and the ways in which the genre is rapidly growing and changing on television call for greater scholarship. This is especially true of media reception, such as the widespread critical response to *Euphoria*. While highly qualitative, this visual rhetorical analysis reveals how there can be larger social implications when constructing teenage experiences for television audiences in a visually aesthetic way. Revisiting Debord (1994), contemplation of the spectacle put forward by *Euphoria* is important as spectacle is a product of reality. Therefore, any representation of youth that is designed for shock and awe in its bold depictions of fashion, sexuality, violence, addiction, and mental health crises speaks to an alienation of youth that could be concerning, as images can influence beliefs and desires (Debord, 1994).

This becomes increasingly relevant given the rapid politicization of youth, with figures like Greta Thunberg rising and demonstrating greater youth engagement with political activism in response to global issues. As the United Nations (2013) outlines, young people demonstrate a creative, dynamic force of innovation and political participation in response to the barriers they continue to face globally, including poverty, educational adversity, discrimination, and limited employment opportunities compared to previous generations. The United Nations (2013) contends that political participation of young people in formal, institutional settings is low in comparison to older citizens throughout the world, and that political participation of youth is dependent on cultural and socioeconomic contexts (p. 1). As a result, cultural industries and their representations of youth can contribute to tensions that are inherent in the politicization of youth, as young peoples'

relationships with politics and the adversity they face is complex. It is known that youth are both politically engaged and disengaged, but the idea that the youth are apathetic to political engagement is untrue, as political power is often withheld from young people by electoral strategies of (older) political figures (Amiwala, 2020). To better engage young people in new and relevant ways, socially and politically, there must be better consideration of the consequences of the representation of teenagers, and who is looking at them, as depictions of mental health and addiction issues in mainstream media may be disenfranchising and belittling in significant ways.

Finally, *Euphoria* is successful in producing meaning through aesthetics that extend beyond the series, as demonstrated by the capacity of visual rhetorical evaluation. Overall, the rhetorical impact of the images in the show are a spectacularization of youth. As a result, *Euphoria*'s legitimacy as a visual artifact is observable in popular culture and its critiques. This visual rhetorical analysis reveals how *Euphoria* is subversive in the articulation of youth discourses through its spectacularizing teenage gaze. In its framing of formal visual elements of color and light, fashion, setting, and technologies of display, *Euphoria* ultimately returns some viewers to a romanticized past, while looking towards the future, creating a legacy of aesthetically pretentious and culturally controversial representations of the teenage experience.

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