"I'M NOT ALWAYS THE MOST RELIABLE NARRATOR": ON CHARACTER VOICE-OVER AS A RHETORICAL RESOURCE IN HBO'S *EUPHORIA*

ROGER EDHOLM

Name Roger Edholm
Academic centre Mid Sweden University
Email address roger.edholm@miun.se

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ABSTRACT
Voice-over narration features in various ways in contemporary TV series. One recent series that employs voice-over extensively is HBO's *Euphoria*. In the series, the protagonist, Rue, narrates repeatedly in each episode of the first season and critics have labelled her voice-over with terms such as "unreliable" or "omniscient". The aim of this article is to analyze the uses of character voice-over in *Euphoria* and to argue that such analysis requires examining the theoretical terminology often applied to film and TV voice-overs. The article argues that character voice-over should not be defined based on a structuralist narratological conception of the narrator. Rather, voice-over should be approached within a framework of narrative rhetoric and viewed as a medium-specific rhetorical resource. The proposed view, as opposed to one classifying different types of voice-over narrators, is better able to explain how voice-over works in serial storytelling and how this resource is employed in *Euphoria* to create different effects and affect the audience in various ways.

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

The use of voice-over narration in contemporary TV series is widespread and ranges across genres. Voice-over is employed in various ways to serve a variety of functions in such disparate series as *Dexter* (2006–2013), *Enlightened* (2011–2013), *Mr Robot* (2015–2019), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–), to mention just a few examples. However, voice-over in serial narratives, as in cinematic storytelling, is usually connected to a fictional character, in most cases a protagonist. A recent series using character voice-over extensively and in complex ways is HBO's *Euphoria*, which premiered 2019 and was created by Sam Levinson. The aim of the following article is to analyze the uses of voice-over in this series, and to argue that such an analysis requires examining the theoretical terminology related to voice-over narration. More specifically, the article will argue in favor of viewing character voice-over as a medium-specific rhetorical resource, and it will illustrate the benefits of the proposed approach through the example of *Euphoria*.

In this series, the main character Rue, a teenager struggling with addiction, narrates and comments on events and other characters through voice-over in each episode.[1] What distinguishes *Euphoria* from other shows also featuring voice-over is the extent to which Rue's so-called "narration" is employed in each episode. The pilot begins *ab ovo*, in the womb where Rue once was happy, according to her. What follows are images of her birth, three days after the World Trade Center was attacked in 2001, accompanied by the voice of teenager Rue, telling her story from the womb to the present day.

Already in the first ten minutes, then, the viewer is introduced to how voice-over is employed across long spans of time, as well as the particular quality of Rue's voice. In the episodes following the pilot, a noticeable feature is how the voice-over is used to introduce other characters, relating their private lives, family histories, and even their fantasies. A question raised by critics and viewers is about what kind of voice-

1 This article focuses on the first season of *Euphoria*. Two special episodes, airing after the conclusion of the first season, will not be taken into account since they lack the use of voice-over and clearly depart from the serial design established in the eight episodes of the first season, a result in part of the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the series' production. Season 2 premiered on January 9, 2022, after this article was finished, and therefore the episodes in the second season will not be used as examples in my analysis.

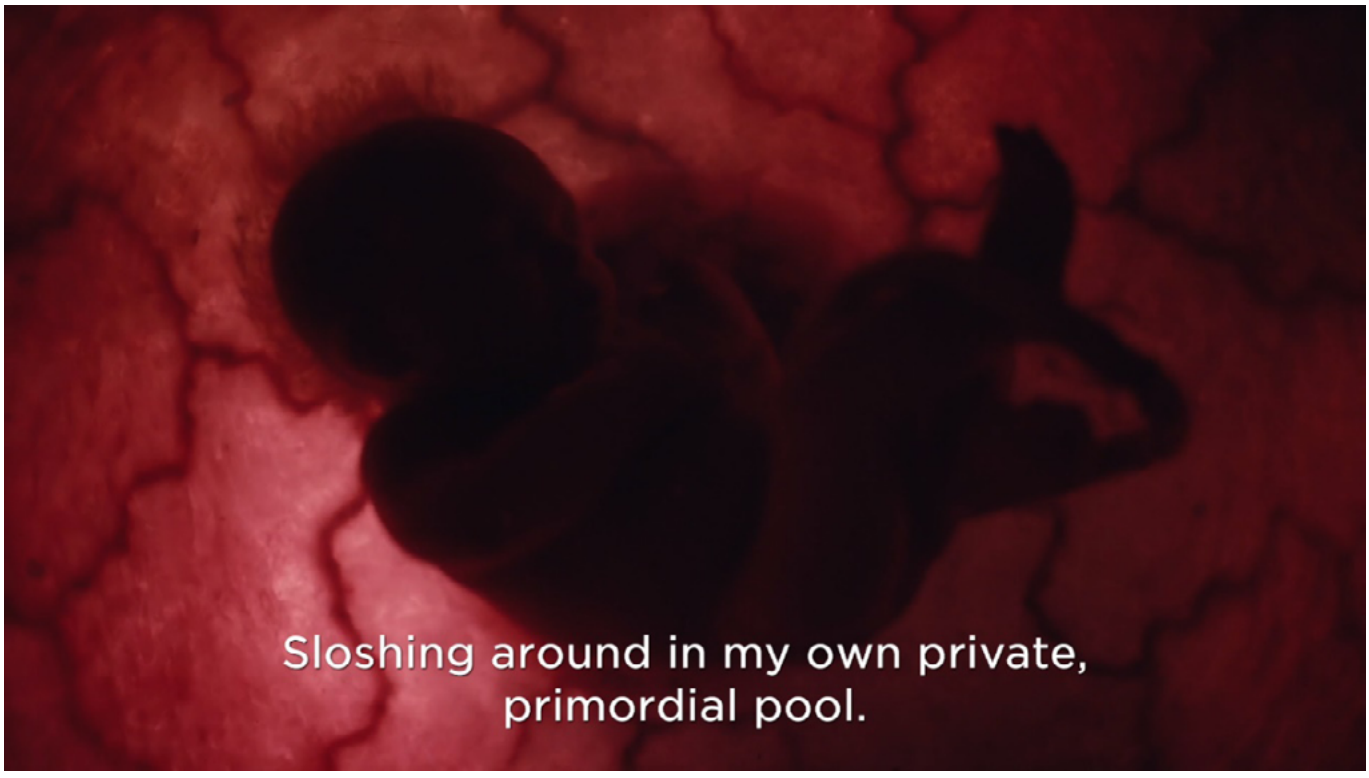

FIG. 1. PILOT 1.01

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over narrator can relate things that other characters have not shared with others, or express feelings the characters themselves may be unaware of.[2] In the mentioned example, a character presumably narrates her own birth and relates how her parents held her "under the soft glow of the television" while they watched "those towers fall over and over again" ("Pilot" 1.01). One solution might be to label Rue an omniscient narrator. However, in the same episode, when the central character Jules is introduced, Rue's comments are limited to what Jules herself has shared about her background. In addition, towards the end of the pilot, during a party where all the main characters in *Euphoria* merge for the first time, Rue's voice-over explains in a self-reflexive manner that "there's a couple of versions of what happened that night" and that she is "not always the most reliable narrator" ("Pilot" 1.01).

In the reception of *Euphoria*, critics have therefore mainly referred to Rue's "narration" as "unreliable".[3] However, to label Rue an unreliable character narrator is misleading if we assume this unreliability to continuously inform her voice-over. This conclusion does not explain her ability to relate certain details about the lives of different characters while, at other times, being restricted to her own subjective and often drug-addled point-of-view. In certain scenes or sequences, Rue might relate statements or express ideas that have been filtered through her fallible perception, while at other times her reliable commentaries on the series' events are vital for our understanding of its progression as well as the relations among characters. Furthermore, since the argument in favor of unreliable narration is often connected to the character's acknowledgment of her own unreliability, there is a certain irony to it: Why trust an unreliable narrator acknowledging her own unreliability?

In order to approach the use of character voice-over in *Euphoria*, we should not view the character Rue as a certain *type* of narrator. This view limits our understanding of how voice-over works by defining it as the act of someone telling a story. Instead, we should approach character voice-over as a protean rhetorical resource, in order to explain the varying functions it serves in this particular series. To elaborate on this rhetorical approach, we need to discuss more generally the problems with theorizing voice-over as narration, and the limitations of viewing voice-over as corresponding to a narratological typology of narrators, as is often the case when voice-over is approached in theory.

2. THEORIZING VOICE-OVER IN FILM AND TV SERIES

2.1. Voice-over as "Narration" or as Rhetorical Resource?

The notion of voice-*over* is usually distinguished from voice-*off*, a term referring to a voice belonging to a character that is simply off-camera. According to Sarah Kozloff, one can distinguish between *off* and *over* based on "the space from which the voice is presumed to originate" (1986: 3). The voice-off speaks from within the story, while the voice-over "comes from another time and space, the time and space of discourse" (3). Yet, there are examples when a voice in a film is both off and over, as discussed by Seymour Chatman (1999: 320), and as such the distinction between voices belonging to either story or discourse in film narration is not always viable. For the most part, though, audiences of film and TV have no problem understanding when to perceive a voice as being spoken over the images that are presented on-screen. This is an easily recognizable convention of cinematic storytelling and when we refer to it, we often talk about it as voice-over narration. However, if voice-over is understood a means for films to tell stories, a resource of film narration, there are reason not to view voice-over as narration in itself. In this section, I aim to elaborate on the theoretical consequences of equating voice-over with narration, understood according to a model of oral storytelling, in which someone, a teller, is recounting events and circumstances.

Kozloff's seminal monograph *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* has been a point of reference for most subsequent discussions of voice-over. In an attempt to define the term "voice-over narration," Kozloff conceives of "narration" as the act of someone communicating a narrative, which she understands as "recounting a series of events to an audience" (3). Her basis for this definition is the notion of "natural narrative," as presented by William Labov (1973). She also chooses to classify different types of narrators, based on Gérard Genette's typology, with the intent to apply what she calls "literary" narrative theory to film and "to

2 The use of voice-over in *Euphoria* initially inspired a "fan-theory" among certain viewers, claiming that the character Rue is in fact dead and therefore omniscient. See, for instance, Lawrence 2019 or Sharf 2019.

3 For example, in his review in *The Dartmouth*, Jordan McDonald states that "Rue is the ultimate unreliable narrator" and goes on to explain that "Rue, as narrator, takes liberties in her storytelling and invites us to trip alongside her" (2019). In *Rolling Stone*, Alan Sepinwall also refers to Rue as "the heroine and admittedly unreliable narrator of HBO's new teen drama *Euphoria*," yet notes that even "when Rue warns us not to believe her, she seems sincere and welcoming" (2019).

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test the universality of several key tenant of contemporary critical lore" (2). The difficulty with her definition of narration in connection with voice-over, according to Kozloff herself, is the fact that the disembodied voice of a first- or a third-person teller in a film never tells the story from start to finish. Instead, we usually hear only a few sentences or fragments. To establish these sentences as narration, she suggests linguistic analysis, and claims that regardless of how much the narrator speaks, and regardless of whether he or she actually recounts the action of the story, the structure of these sentences implies the narrative as a whole. Voice-over narration is therefore separated from "other types of speech by invisible speakers" (5). The aim for Kozloff, then, is to define voice-over as narration based on linguistic criteria and with a particular conception of narration stemming from oral storytelling.

In a related way, Christian Metz (2016) elaborates on the concept of the "I-voice," coined by Michel Chion (1999). The I-voice is said to designate the voice-over of the character who is narrating. It is, as such, the narrating voice of a character identified using the first person singular. At the same time, the status of the I-voice is stated to be "surprisingly imprecise" (Metz 2016: 109). Metz complicates the issue of character voice-over in a way that Kozloff does not, since her initial claim is that "we need a precise definition of voice-over narration" and because her approach is determined by Genette's supposedly "precise and useful method of classifying narrators," as she formulates it (Kozloff 1986: 6).[4] Metz argues that the I-voice can be applied to "a surprising variety of situations" (2016: 109) and that on closer examination several types are revealed. However, in his attempt to pinpoint the I-voice as a narrating voice, his arguments are closely related to Kozloff's view of the voice-over as the teller of the film. Metz explains that the I-voice is the voice of a character, but as long as it speaks and remains invisible, it "blocks its absent body from accessing the Voice of the film" (109). In other words, "it substitutes itself for that Voice and mixes itself up with something that it is not—that is, the point of origin of the narration" (109).

The question of "narration" in connection with voice-over is, as noted, inseparable from the larger issue of film narration. Kozloff approaches the relation between what she calls "the unseen speaker" and the "images presented on screen," and concludes that the voice-over narrator is both subordinate to a more powerful narrating agent and recognized as "the principal storyteller" (49). A voice-over narrator is subsumed by the narrating agent characteristic of film narration—what Kozloff refers to as the "image-maker", a term borrowed from Metz (1974: 21) —but she argues that viewers accept the voice-over as "the teller of the film" (48). For both Kozloff and Metz, then, the voice-over belonging to a character should be separated from the film narrator—the Voice of the film or the image-maker—yet when it speaks, the voice-over is paradoxically recognized as the narrator, the origin of narration.

Approaching character voice-over as narration, it becomes clear that both Kozloff and Metz have to explain when the voice-over is *not* narrating, in order to define the speaking subject as a narrator. They also have to explain the relationship between the voice-over narrator, speaking over the images, and the implicit film narrator. Their argument adheres, in other words, to what David Bordwell identifies as diegetic theories of film narration, insisting on locating the narrator as the enunciator, i.e., "the film's 'speaker'" (1985: 62). Bordwell rejects the idea of a cinematic narrator and the anthropomorphizing of film narration into a narrating agent. On the issue of voice-over, he follows Edward Branigan (1984) in arguing that personified voice-over narrators are "invariably swallowed up in the overall narrational process of the film, which they do *not* produce" (61). One might emphasize that neither Kozloff nor Metz claim that the character voice-over produces a film's narration. They rather argue that the audience perceives the voice-over as the teller of the film, or that this voice becomes mixed up with the origin of the narration. It is nevertheless clear that their view of film narration, in general, informs their understanding of voice-over as a form of narration in itself. By rejecting diegetic theories, Bordwell can instead approach voice-over narrators as a part the overall narrational process of the film. While I agree with his rejection of the cinematic narrator, the focus here lies on questioning the insistence upon assigning character voice-over the role of narrator. The rhetorical approach to character voice-over that I propose permits challenging the assumption that we must a priori define voice-over as narration, and that its use should conform to pre-existing types of narrators.

The notion of rhetorical resources, as presented by James Phelan within his rhetorical poetics of narrative, can be understood as the resources available within a particular narrative practice or medium to communicate with an audience (2017: 25-29). In Phelan's discussion of literary narrative fiction, resources encompass everything from paratexts to narrative arrangements, style, point-of-view, etc. The "narrator" is al-

4 It should be noted that Metz also makes use of Genette's taxonomy, as presented in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980), by applying, for example, his concepts of diegetic levels (Metz 2016: 113). See also Chatman's discussion of voice-over and his employment of Genette's concepts (1999: 321, 327–329).

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so viewed as a resource within this approach, in opposition to classical narratology's view of the narrator as a structural principle inherent in all narrations. The narrator thus become an optional and varying resource of individual fictional narratives. In connection with voice-over, a shift towards narrative rhetoric enable recognizing that the voice speaking over the images can serve the function of a narrator without being one per se. Character voice-over, the focus here, can have narratorial functions without being limited by the definition of a homodiegetic narrator, derived from structuralist narratology. In addition, narrator-functions as such must be explicated in relation to how the voice-over is used in a certain work and within the context of a particular medium.

Although Phelan's focus is literary narrative fiction, he underscores that different media have different resources. As such, the notion of rhetorical resources provides a way to theoretically approach and re-conceptualize voice-over. By shifting the focus to voice-over as a rhetorical resource, our attention will be directed towards how voice-over is employed to create different effects and to affect the audience in various ways within a particular work. As Gilberto Perez notes, "rhetoric looks at the way construction elicits response and the way the work works on the audience" (2019: xix), which is also my intention here. To approach voice-over as a rhetorical resource is a point of departure, then, to understand the various ways in which Rue's voice-over is employed in *Euphoria*. To define her voice-over as narration per se is misleading, and to categorize her as a homodiegetic narrator would create problems rather than clarifying the complex uses of voice-over in the series. Furthermore, to emphasize, as I have done, that voice-over should be approached as a medium-specific resource acknowledges that the use of voice-over in the context of a series must consider the issue of seriality, or more specifically, how voice-over works in connection with, and serves, serial storytelling in television.

2.2. Voice-Over and Seriality

Although studies of voice-over have focused mainly on fiction film, the use of voice-over in TV series has also drawn some attention. There have been discussions of how voice-over typically functions as a narrative device in series as well as books and articles focusing on particular shows that feature voice-over. Since Kozloff was the starting point for the discussion in the previous section, it seems fitting to start this brief survey of the relation between voice-over and seriality with her attempt to extend the narratological typology of voice-over narrators to television as well. According to Kozloff, narrative theory can "provide crucial help in analyzing television narrators" (1987: 81) and she goes on to mention examples of series employing narrators that she regards as conforming to traditional narratological categories. One might say, then, that Kozloff's main purpose here is to apply an existing typology of narrators to the medium of television, not to examine how serial storytelling transforms the uses of voice-over and how it works in a particular series. Put differently, her approach is top-down, while the rhetorical approach to voice-over is bottom-up, viewing it as resource put to use within a particular medium.

However, Kozloff is not the only one with a narratological interest in voice-over in TV series. "The analysis of recent TV series is of particular narratological interest, since during the 1990s TV series increasingly began to employ experimental narrative techniques like multiperspectivity and unreliable narration as well as innovative functionalizations of voice-over narration and of audiovisual presentation of consciousness," writes Allrath et al. (2005: 4). According to the authors, "voice-over narrators seem to constitute the most obvious equivalent of the narrators one encounters in literary texts," but they also note that "there is a crucial distinction between narrators in written narratives and voice-over narrators in that the latter typically cannot be conceptualized as the *source* of the information conveyed by the visual track, which, after all, constitutes much of the story" (14). What they refer to as voice-over narrators are then said to be "a partial equivalent of literary narrators" and these narrators can, according to Allrath et al., be categorized with Genette's existing typology. In this regard, as the authors themselves note, they approach voice-over in the same way as Kozloff.

Allrath et al. also focus on certain features of voice-over connected in particular to serial storytelling, apart from just discussing the uses of voice-over common to both film *and* TV. The authors note that voice-over narration in series may play a prominent role, "thus becoming one of the main structural features of a series," yet they do not explicate what this entails. They mention the use of voice-over in series such as *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) and *The Wonder Years* (1988–1993), where it is both recurring and noticeable, but they do not explain how or why the voice-over becomes what they call one of the main *structural* features or how it works across episodes. The only aspect of voice-over that Allrath et al. focus on is how voice-over is used to provide summaries. Since serial storytelling depends on the gaps between episodes, there is a need to remind viewers about previous episodes, as is in the

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traditional recap sequence. Voice-over can thus offer a "technique of providing viewers with a short summary of previous story developments to facilitate their understanding of the current episode" (15). Jason Mittell also makes this connection between voice-over and "the mechanics of serial memory" (2015: 180). He explains that series can use diegetic strategies of dialogue and visuals cues as the primary means of making viewers recall events of previous episodes, but they can also use voice-over "to convey story information via a more self-conscious mode of narration" (183). Although voice-over is used to activate viewer's memories and to facilitate comprehension across episodes, as noted by Allrath et al. and by Mittell, viewing voice-over mostly as a means of providing story information risks reducing its complexities by making it into an expository device.

Voice-over should not, I argue, be forced to conform to a narratological typology of narrators. Nor should it be reduced to a narrative technique that simply provides viewers with information. Voice-over, as I will demonstrate in the following analysis of *Euphoria*, should rather be approached as a complex and varying resource of serial storytelling. To elaborate on this view, the resource of the voice-over can be connected to what Sean O'Sullivan refers to as serial "design," namely "the particularity of a series, its specific systems of habits, preferences, and protocol" (2019: 60). Attention to design, as O'Sullivan explains, depends on "our familiarity with the particular shape and infrastructure that a serial has chosen for its basic narrative unit, or segment" (59). In my analysis, the notion of design will provide a means to explicate the relation between voice-over and seriality in *Euphoria*, yet I will also show how recurring patterns in the series can *work* in different ways from episode to episode. Design is thus a useful term to identify the particular shape of individual episodes in a series, while also forcing us to recognize the varying uses of compositional patterns.

3. CHARACTER VOICE-OVER AS A RHETORICAL RESOURCE IN *EUPHORIA*

3.1. Characterization, Iteration, and the Materiality of Voice

Voice-over in *Euphoria* serves many functions. It provides commentary and character background, navigates among scenes and storylines, and reminds viewers of events in previous episodes. If "narration" is taken to be the communication of narrative, then the uses of voice-over in the series can scarcely be understood as corresponding to this definition. As I have noted and will continue to illustrate here, if Rue is understood as the someone who is telling the story, this raises questions related to how she might know certain things. Calling Rue the teller of the series creates problems in connection with, for example, how voice-over is used in relation to other characters. The voice-over is consistently used as a means of characterization, to create the protagonist through her own voice. Yet, not only Rue is shaped by the voice-over. Other characters in the series are also introduced through Rue's voice.

In a review in *The Independent*, Annabel Nugent criticizes the show for its "solipsism" and states that despite its "cold opens (each episode focuses on one character), the series is *filtered entirely through Rue's blinkered narration*" (my emphasis, 2021). Nugent argues that the show's "tunnel vision leads to wonderful complexity in our protagonist," yet it also "gives rise to the undeniable feeling that *Euphoria's* other characters [...] are being shortchanged" (2021). Her critique expresses a wish that the series should have focused more evenly on the many different characters, while at the same time recognizing the fact that Rue is the protagonist. Nugent's comment regarding the use of voice-over in the beginning of each episode also shows how she understand the voice-over as narration and as presenting Rue's recounting about other characters. She is referring here to a recurring feature in the series design, namely that at the beginning of each episode of the first season, the season finale excepted, one of the series' characters is portrayed. This recurring feature of *Euphoria* might be described as character portraits, which provide background as well as direct, detailed characterization of each character. These portraits are dominated by Rue's voice-over, yet we should not, as I will argue here, refer to these portraits as one character's narration about another. These portraits are indeed presented in Rue's voice, yet the voice-over is most often removed from the character of Rue herself, from her feelings towards and knowledge about the other characters. Instead of a particular narratorial slant—what Nugent refer to as filtered narration—the voice-over is dominated by detailed commentary about the character's family and inner life. The voice-over is also at times filtered through the character's own perspective. By approaching character voice-over as a rhetorical resource, I aim to argue for a different way of understanding the use of voice-over in connection with the portraits of other characters. My analysis will underscore the links between seriality and characterization, and demon-

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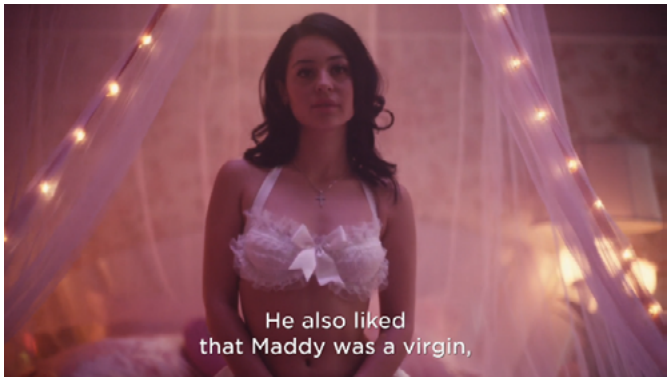

FIG. 2. (2.01)

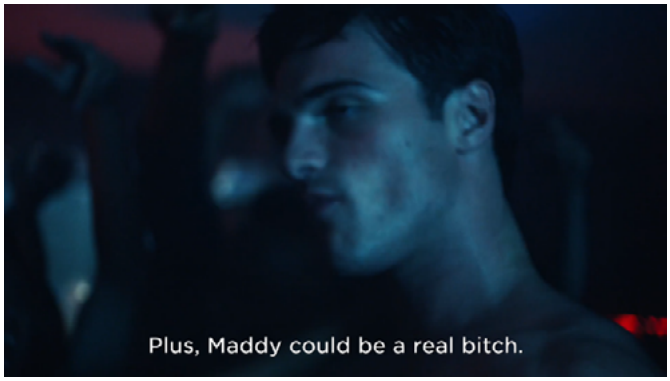

FIG. 3. (2.01)

strate that the "solipsism" of *Euphoria* should be understood in thematic terms, rather than as a question of who is telling the story.

The first example of a character portrait, involving a character other than Rue, occurs in Episode 2, when Nate is introduced. The voice-over is very detailed, telling us about his body fat at a particular age and how he hates locker rooms full of naked guys, providing a mental list of his likes and dislikes about women, and so on. We are also told how he loves to protects his girlfriend Maddy and we see his fantasies about killing a hypothetical kidnapper. Nate's perspective is also reflected when the voice-over provides us with information that turns out to be false: "He also liked that Maddy was a virgin" ("Stuntin' Like My Daddy" 2.01), we are told, but in Episode 5, when Maddy is portrayed, we get confirmation that she is not. Moreover, there are instances of free indirect discourse, when Nate's thoughts are expressed in Rue's voice: "Plus, Maddy could be a real bitch" ("Stuntin' Like My Daddy" 2.01).

The employment of voice-over in Nate's portrait is repeated in the character portraits presented in the following episodes. These character portraits can be said to create what O'Sullivan refers to as iteration, in that the portraits provide continuity between episodes and a recognizable compositional pattern. The portraits also serve to navigate and remind the viewer about events in previous episodes, as in the traditional recap sequence. However, Rue's voice-over is used so extensively in these character portraits for thematic and aesthetic reasons as well.

To understand this, we cannot focus primarily on what the voice-over says, but rather analyze how it speaks. This is matter of narrative form, as I have illustrated, yet also a matter of the material qualities of the voice-over, as discussed by Ian Garwood.[5] The materiality of the voice-over should be approached in connection with the visual aspects of the series, which immediately becomes evident in *Euphoria*. Already in the first image of the first episode, Rue's voice speaks in relation to a particular isolated space: the womb. This is a recurring pattern in the series, the way the voice-over invokes a sense of safety, but also loneliness and isolation. During the party in the first episode, Rue is talking to the character Fez, and their dialogue turns into a monologue reminiscent of Rue's voice-over, because of the way she speaks and because the background sounds fade away. In the scene, the distinction between non-diegetic voice-over and diegetic sound becomes blurred, and the scene underscores how Rue's voice is often connected to a particular space, a space that is protected, isolated, or solipsistic, depending on the sequence.

In the character portraits, this quality of her voice makes the viewer perceive the characters of *Euphoria* to be isolated as well, living in their own worlds, so to speak (Figs. 3–4). The depiction of teenagers presents how the different characters are trapped in their own lives and often unable to communicate their thoughts and feelings to others.

Other characters are thus characterized through Rue's voice also for *thematic* iteration, that is, to establish and repeat certain themes throughout the series. These portraits are presented in Rue's voice but the voice itself is removed from Rue as a character, as demonstrated. Therefore, we should not understand the portraits as *narrated* by Rue, either through

5 Garwood is critical of Kozloff for connecting all types of voice-over to narrative, and for foregrounding voice-over's expository qualities at the expense of its material properties and effects. While recognizing voice-over as a type of dramatic narration, Garwood focuses on its material aspects, on how voice-over is "materialised by a vocal delivery characterised by as certain composure" as well as the "technology through which the voice is recorded and projected" (2013: 105–06).

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FIG. 4. (3.01)

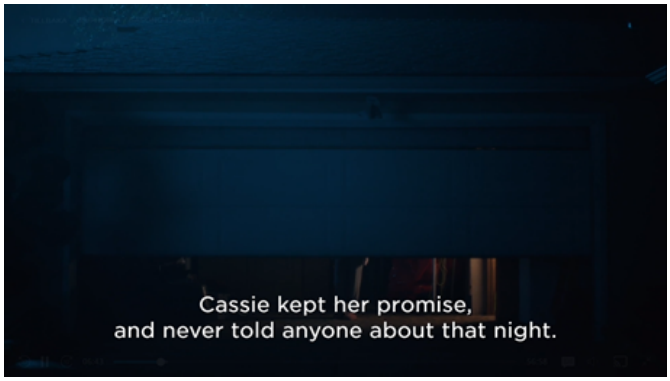

FIG. 5. (7.01)

omniscience or unreliability. The portraits provide the viewer with an intimate view into the lives of different characters, and the particular qualities of the voice of Rue provide a thematic as well as narrative coherence in the series.

However, the portrait of one character provides grounds to note the particular relations between Rue's point-of-view and the voice-over's presentation. In Episode 4, Jules's background-story is presented and we learn about her past, revolving around her sexual identity and her stay in a mental hospital. This character portrait follows the established pattern from previous episodes, summarizing the transition from childhood to teenager. But contrary to most of the other portraits, the presentation of Jules also includes a transition from sadness and trauma to possible happiness. It is in this regard, in the creation of a "happy ending" to Jules's background story, that the interference of Rue the character is perceivable. The story of Jules ends with her meeting Rue, a meeting described as "the night she met her new best friend" ("Shook One Pt. II" 4.01). This might be taken as a plain fact, yet it clearly functions as a conclusion to the story of Jules's life to date. The way this is stated by Rue indicates that it constitutes wishful thinking. This is underscored by the mention of a possible future together in New York, a dream implicitly attributed to Rue via the voice-over that, later in the series, is presented explicitly as Rue's own fantasy. In the three prior episodes, we have seen how Rue quickly becomes very attached to and almost obsessed with Jules, and that she is very keen on making her happy, as well as being happy together with her. The perspective in Episode 4 does not, then, come across as Jules's own, but rather Rue's narratorial slant, an expression of her concern for and feelings towards Jules. This portrait stands out in this regard, being the only one to characterize a character with whom Rue is close.

However, the narratorial slant is not a consistent feature in the presentation of Jules. Rather, it should be seen as a local effect, a way to use voice-over to create interpretative responses in a particular scene or sequence. This is important to note, since it illustrates the possibilities of approaching voice-over as a rhetorical resource. The approach enables acknowledgement and comprehension of how this resource can work to create different effects within a recurring feature of the series design. The voice-over can neutrally report facts about the characters' lives and thoughts, while it can also be filtered through the characters perspectives, as well as being connected to Rue, both as a compositional function and as a character in the story. These varying effects, and the way they affect the viewer's perception of these different characters, cannot be properly acknowledged if we begin with the conclusion that Rue, the character, is the narrator in these portraits, telling us about the lives of others. One problem with that approach, illustrated by Nugent's review, is that the portraits become more about Rue than the characters being presented. As I argue, the solipsism of *Euphoria* should not be related to a conventional notion of voice-over narration, but rather is more accurately understood in connection with the thematic and narrative coherence provided by the voice of Rue.

3.2. Serial Progression and the Wandering Voice of Rue

As discussed in previous sections, to define voice-over as narration and to view the character speaking as type of narrator creates theoretical as well as interpretative problems. If Rue is perceived as the narrator of *Euphoria*, she will likely come to be seen as unreliable. By adopting an approach to charac-

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ter voice-over as a rhetorical resource, we are better able to understand how the effects, functions, and affects produced by the voice-over are local as well as form of iteration. The effect of unreliability, for instance, may be used in a particular scene or episode, but it does not make Rue into an "unreliable narrator" per se. Similarly, the voice of Rue can be recounting the lives of other characters while, in the next scene, being at a loss to explain what is happening to her own character.

In this section, I want to look closer at how Rue's voice wanders between different points in time and why. If a voice-over narrator is perceived as the one recounting the events or telling the story, it will imply a retrospective act of narration. In some series, we find such a voice-over, where the voice is speaking from a certain narrative situation or particular occasion consistently. There are also examples of shows where the voice-over primarily uses voice-over interior monologue, i.e., to present what a character is thinking. The combination of retrospective telling and vocalized thoughts is also common in films and series. At times, however, it is not clear from where the voice speaks, and it is not uncommon to find a voice-over serving as a kind of invisible viewer, commenting on the images presented.

Although Metz's notion of the I-voice is limited by its focus on the usage of the grammatical first person, and thus forces the voice-over to be defined as a narrating subject, he also states that the I-voice is more than just "I": "While it is the voice of a character, it is also—owing to its invisibility—multiple, jumbled, and overarching. The notional place that it emanates from is subject to displacement and obfuscation, and sometimes it seems to be everywhere" (108). Character voice-over might thus be viewed as a floating "subject" with a "wandering deixis" (111). In other words, the voice-over often speaks in ways that transcend common ways of defining characters as narrators—as illustrated in the previous sections—and the voice-over can speak from different places and at various points in time. This might not be a problem for Metz, but his theoretical vocabulary, like Kozloff's, is unable to accurately account for this characteristic of voice-over. With the proposed rhetorical approach, the focus in no longer on who is speaking, or from where, but rather on how the voice works in a particular scene and across several episodes.

In *Euphoria*, Rue's voice-over does not emanate from any consistent occasion. It wanders among different positions. In the pilot, for example, Rue is initially speaking from a ret-

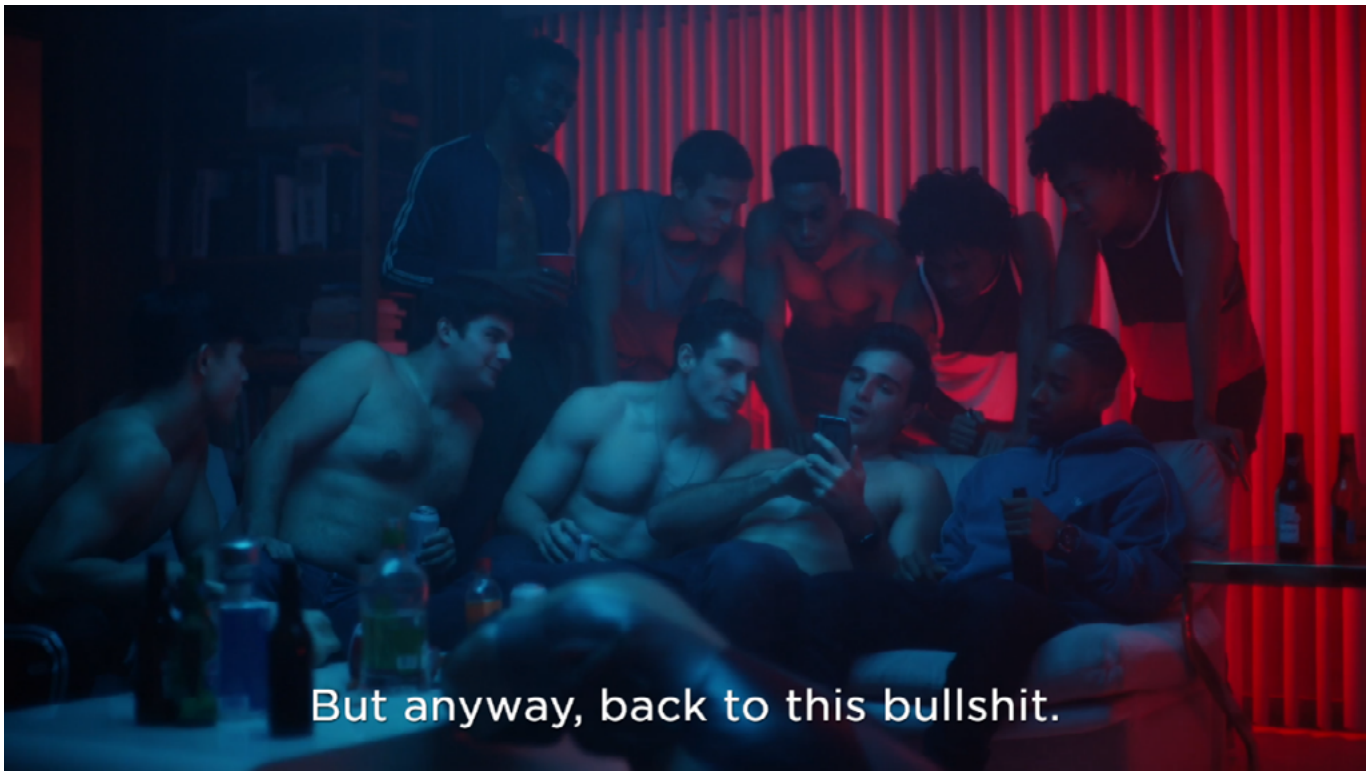

FIG. 6. (1.01)

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rospective position, looking back on events. First, in regards to her own life and upbringing and then, in regards to the events and characters that will dominate the first season. "It was the end of summer, the week before school started. I had no intention of staying clean. And Jules had just moved to town," Rue narrates, recounting the start of the events that will transpire ("Pilot" 1.01). Although the viewer does not yet know how the different characters will interact, Rue alludes to events that have not yet happened, creating curiosity: "In truth, I didn't have much of an issue with Nate until all the bullshit with Jules" ("Pilot" 1.01). This kind of retrospect telling, often used to provide exposition, is combined in the pilot with direct commentary on the scenes being shown. Rue's voice-over has the function, in these cases, of orienting the viewer as the episode moves among different locations and characters.

As Rue guides the viewer between scenes, the viewer is invited to share her perspective. When she refers to a particular scene as "bullshit," her voice, in combination with the visual composition, creates a critical distance that makes the viewer perceive the characters from her point of view (Fig. 5). In these instances of commentary, the voice-over is not a part of any kind of retrospective telling. Rather, Rue comments directly on the images being presented to the viewer, sometimes just in passing. "I mean, right?" she states, to underscore the absurdity of a certain scene, without further explanation ("Pilot" 1.01).

In most episodes, Rue's voice-over is also used to express what she is thinking in certain situations. A scene might begin with retrospective narration and then move into interior monologue. In Episode 2, for example, a drug dealer forces Rue to take Fentanyl at gunpoint, and she first comments on the scene in retrospect: "Now, I'm not gonna lie. That's when I started to get a little scared" ("Stuntin' Like My Daddy" 2.01). Later on, just before she takes the drug, we can her praying: "Dear God, I know I've been a cunt for, like, a lot of my life, and I was mean to Lexi and my family and I'm so, so, so sorry, but just please God, I'm begging you, do not let be die tonight" ("Stuntin' Like My Daddy" 2.01). In this example, the voice-over relates what Rue is thinking in this situation. In other scenes, Rue's voice can also be speaking in the present tense and be connected to her experience in a particular situation, yet the function might be different. In Episode 6, Rue is together with Jules at a party and Jules becomes very drunk, acting in ways that concern Rue. The voice-over relates to us that "this doesn't feel good," yet the main function of Rue's commentary is to move on to the explanation for Jules' behavior. The scene ends with Rue stating: "I just wish she'd told me about last night" ("The Next Episode" 6.01).

If this is taken to be Rue's thoughts at the time of action, it inevitably becomes improbable. How can Rue, in this situation, wish that she knew about last night, when she has no knowledge about what has happened to Jules? Although the statement might take the form of interior monologue, based on tense and deixis, its function is not to present what Rue is thinking but rather to motivate the following flashback, which only involves Jules. The function of the voice-over at the end of this scene is thus connected more to narrative progression than the interior of our protagonist. In Episode 7, one can find a similar example when the voice-over is used to vocalize Rue's paralyzing depression. In these scenes, mainly involving Rue lying in bed, we hear her thoughts and the scenes are limited to her isolated, interior point of view. Yet, when it becomes necessary to move away from Rue, the voice-over can shift from interior monologue to retrospective commentary from beyond her point of view: "But I wasn't the only one feeling down," we are told, a remark used to transition from Rue to Jules, and Jules' problems, of which Rue herself, at the time, knows nothing about ("The Trials and Tribulations of Trying to Pee While Depressed" 7.01).

These examples, together with several others, can be viewed as further motivation for why we should approach character voice-over rhetorically, instead of as corresponding to traditional notions of first-person (character) narration. The way the voice-over works in *Euphoria* is not limited, as we have seen, by any particular narrative form—retrospective telling, interior monologue, commentary, etc.—but rather uses different forms to serve a variety of functions, depending on the sequence and the series' over-all patterns. Metz is correct when he states that the voice of a character in a voice-over is multiple and overarching, and that the notional place from which it emanates is subject to displacement and obfuscation—and that sometimes it seems to be everywhere! By approaching character voice-over as a rhetorical resource, rather than through the limiting notion of the I-voice, or ideas about the character narrator, we are better able to explain this multiplicity and how this resource might be employed. This analysis of *Euphoria* thus aims to provide a variety of examples that illustrate how the effects, functions, and affects produced by the voice-over within and across episodes are local as well as forming a recurring pattern in the series.

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4. **CONCLUSION**

The aim of this article has been to analyze the uses of voice-over in HBO's *Euphoria* and to argue that doing so requires examining the terminology typically used to conceptualize voice-over narration. *Euphoria* has, in other words, been presented as a test case for a broader discussion on voice-over and its connection to narration as well as seriality. Therefore, the theoretical suggestions in the article are intended to be generally valid in regard to voice-over as a resource in film and, especially, TV series. Furthermore, the analysis has underscored the necessity of paying attention to how this resource is employed in a particular series. As Perez notes, a rhetorical approach deals in specifics and its "generalizations particularize" (2019: xxi), which has also been the ambition of my discussion of *Euphoria*.

The article has to a great extent retained the established terms used in discussion of this phenomenon in film and TV series. It has not been my intention to provide a new theoretical vocabulary or present neologisms, but rather to theoretically rethink the issue of voice-over in relation to a specific example. The notion of character voice-over has been promoted, since the term is intended to avoid connecting voice-over a priori to the role of a narrator. A character voice-over is, as should be clear by now, quite simply the voice of a character speaking over the visual track. The follow-up question to this explanation might then be: Who counts as a character voice-over? Is the unidentified letter-writer in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's classic film *A Letter to Three Wives*, or the unseen blogger in *Gossip Girl*, an example of character voice-over? Or do only characters presented on-screen, as part the story, qualify as character voice-overs? To me, such questions stem from an assumption that we need to categorize different speakers or tellers, and that we accordingly can sort examples into established categories. The notion of a character voice-over as a rhetorical resource is instead a generalizing term that is dependent on particular examples. The term may be imprecise, according to Kozloff's point of departure, but it is useful, as I have demonstrated. By aiming to determine what kind of narrator Rue is, and accordingly what she can tell us, we fail to understand the complex workings of voice-over in *Euphoria* as well as how this resource creates different effects and affects the audience in various ways. The interpretative responses generated by the voice-over can only be determined by looking at and listening to particular scenes and sequences, as well as recognizing the ways in which the voice of Rue becomes an integral part of the series' design.

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