

NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY AND MEDIA LITERACY: A THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL FOR THE ANALYSIS OF FICTIONAL TELEVISION SERIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a theoretical and methodological proposition developed to study serial narrative complexity, as defined by Mittell (2015), based on media literacy research, covering audiovisual production and consumption processes. In this context, the aim is to analyse how

narrative complexity stimulates critical understanding and promotes the creative production of interacting viewers in social television. For this discussion, the proposal has been applied to the analysis of the fictional universe of the series *Euphoria* (2019 – HBO) and the backchannel that was generated on X during the screening of the episodes of the second season. It concludes that the series encourages careful reading by building a media repertoire based on the rules of the fictional universe and then inserting these recurrences into new interpretive online contexts. On the social network X, interacting viewers analyse plot nuances, identify narrative, aesthetic and stylistic patterns, and re-signify the story highlighting their media literacy skills.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1990s, studies of fictional US television series have highlighted the process of complexification of the plots. According to Johnson (2006), Lotz (2007), Jost (2016), Pucci Jr. (2016), and Mittell (2015, 2024), technological, creative and market processes triggered these new modes of narrative, style and engagement. Discussions of the characteristics of these new shows converge on three central points: the construction and fruition of narrative arcs of varying amplitude (Johnson 2006, Lotz 2007), the hybridisation of genres and formats (Jost 2016, Pucci Jr 2016), and the creation of dynamic and changeable characters (Nelson 2006).

Since the Network Era, American television shows have been structured based on two narrative models: episodic, composed of arc units that are articulated and concluded in a single episode; and serial, composed of transversal arcs that are interwoven as episodes unfold to constitute a season (Lotz 2007). However, what is observed in contemporary shows is the blending of these narrative types. As Johnson (2006) postulates, the distinction between episodic and serial narratives is becoming increasingly blurred, and plots are exploring new variations and connections between arcs.

Contemporary serial fictional narratives also tend to overlap different formats and genres. This hybridisation includes not only aspects such as the use of comic characters in drama shows and vice versa, but also the blending of styles such as fiction and documentary, the use of narrators, testimonies facing the camera, and the materiality of the camera at the centre of the diegesis (Silva 2015). Finally, discussions within the framework of fictional television series address the popularity of characters whose trajectories are marked by ambiguity. According to Jost (2016), the protagonists of these shows are characters with mutable identities who react to the environment in which they are placed, distancing themselves from the heroic archetype. The author also points out that in addition to greater diversity of representation (racial, social and gender), themes such as relative morality and Machiavellian intelligence are beginning to be incorporated into stories through the figure of the anti-hero.

However, the development of narrative structures, the hybridisation of genres and formats, and the ambiguity of characters have resulted in more dynamic and complex narratives. As Mittell (2015: 36) asserts, this narrative model demands an active and attentive process of understanding from the audience in order to decode both complex stories and the storytelling models offered by contemporary tele-

vision. Although it reached its full expression in *Twin Peaks* (ABC/Showtime, 1990–1991/2018), narrative complexity is rooted in productions from the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as *Dallas* (CBS, 1978–1991) and *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–1987). However, it's important to note that even with the diffusion and popularization of this narrative model, the US TV programming schedule and streaming services are still predominantly occupied by conventional forms (Mittell 2015).

Narrative complexity is characterised by the employment of narrative special effects, guided by constant climaxes and plot twists, which compel the viewer to reconsider their understanding of the narrative at any given moment (Mittell 2015). Another aspect of narrative complexity is the utilisation of storytelling resources, such as fantasy sequences, chronological alterations, and multiple points of view. However, as Mittell (2015) suggests, all of these resources are marked by the absence of flashing arrows. This absence of conventional narrative markers, such as flashbacks or plot summaries, can lead to a lack of clarity or orientation for the viewer.

In the context of social networks, these platforms not only facilitate modes of creation, participation, collaboration, and distribution but also play a crucial role in the perpetuation of the intricacies of fictional universes (Jost 2016). This phenomenon, known as “the propagation of repercussions”, can be understood as a process by which networks spread the consequences of events, altering the way viewers experience and interpret the narrative. In this context, the concept of social TV emerges, referring to the practice of sharing content through social media and second-screen applications that are synchronised with the television program's flow. This phenomenon, as Proulx and Shepatin (2012) and Sigiliano (2024) argue, fits within the broader scope of serial fiction. The content shared by interacting viewers on X, the central platform of this phenomenon, not only reflects plot events but also contributes to the enrichment and expansion of the fictional universe. These interactions facilitate novel appropriations, subversions, and amplifications of the ‘water-cooler’ phenomenon, in addition to the resignification of shared experiences and the consolidation of the concept of social bond (Sigiliano 2024). The integration of engagement actions from all US-based channels is also a salient feature, with posts stimulating appointment television and exploring new facets of the story.

As will be expanded later, aspects relating to the production of complex narratives and the discussion of content in a

social TV environment present a clear dialogue with media literacy. Despite epistemological amplitude, media literacy studies converge into the combination of knowledge and political, social, and cultural practices that enable citizens to think critically about media.

Social networks facilitate modes of creation, participation, collaboration, and distribution that help to sustain the complexity of fictional universes¹. Thus, even with the complexification of shows, platforms propagate repercussions, transforming reception in terms of depth (Jost 2016; Brembilla; De Pascalis 2018). It is in this context that social TV, referring to the sharing of content through social media and second-screen apps synchronous to the television flow, inserts itself in the scope of serial fiction (Proulx and Shepatin 2012, Sigiliano 2024). Content posted by interacting viewers² on X, the central platform of this phenomenon, not only echoes plot events but deepens the fictional universe. They allow for new appropriations, subversions, and amplifications of the water-cooler, in addition to resignifying shared experience and strengthening the concept of social bond (Sigiliano 2024). The phenomenon also integrates engagement actions from all US-based channels, as posts stimulate appointment television and explore new facets of the story.

Highfield et al. (2008) and Iapalucci & Rocchi (2025) affirm that the strong adherence to X in the social TV phenomenon is not by chance: “Twitter has always been the obvious platform for social TV. It’s public, it’s concise, and it’s easy to organize posts around a topic using hashtags” (Wolk, 2015, p. 65). However, Iapalucci et al. (2025, p. 47) highlight that “[...] future research may encounter challenges owing to recent alterations in Twitter’s (now: X) policies, the predominant social medium utilized for the analysis of TV seriality.”

The aspects highlighted by the authors can be observed in the main features of X’s informational architecture. The social interaction on the microblogging platform is based on an always-on temporality that enables the instant sharing of information — only the now matters. According to Iapalucci et al. (2025), this instant temporality is a central feature of the social network and causes posts to spread rapidly through the timeline. Another characteristic of its informational architecture that contributes to making microblogging the central platform of social TV is the focus of social interaction. Unlike

social networks such as Facebook or the defunct Orkut, on microblogging platforms, social interactions are not limited to family, professional, or friendship ties, shifting the user’s focus to the content being produced. In this way, “The live-tweeting community, then, allowed viewers to still feel that they were watching the show with others. Interestingly, these feelings of connectedness with others were still experienced by live-tweeters even if no one acknowledged their tweets” (Schirra et al., 2014, p. 2449).

X’s mode of social interaction contributes to the plurality and expansion of the backchannel: when accessing the microblogging platform, viewers can interact and react to what’s on air with interlocutors beyond their personal contacts, without relying on pre-existing relationships. In this sense, X’s informational architecture reinforces not only the temporality of social TV but also amplifies the conversation around the programming schedule (Harrington et al., 2013; Antelmi et al., 2019).

As expanded later, aspects relating to the production of complex narratives and the discussion of the content in a social TV environment present a clear dialogue with media literacy. Despite epistemological amplitude, media literacy studies converge into the combination of knowledge and political, social, and cultural practices that enable citizens to think critically about media (Buckingham 2003, Livingstone 2007, Borges *et al.* 2022). Buckingham (2003) and Borges *et al.* (2022) state that the epistemological plurality of the field of media literacy studies allows the concept to be constantly updated according to the media context in which it is situated. According to the authors, media literacy can be studied in relation to different languages and expressive media, such as television, radio, cinema, the press, and more recently, digital technologies. In this paper, we adopt Livingstone’s definition (2007: 27), according to whom media literacy is “[...] the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts”.

The approximation between media literacy and contemporary TV series is materialized in two axes: production and consumption. The narrative complexity of these programmes requires viewers to engage closely with the content to comprehend the intricate fictional universes they present (Johnson 2006, Mittell 2015, Pucci Jr 2016). As Johnson says (2006: 64) “[...] part of the pleasure in these modern television narratives comes from the cognitive labor you are forced to do filling in the details”. This assertion is further supported by Pucci Jr’s (2016: 352) claim that “[...] we might say that con-

1 When referring to fictional universes, we consider the serialized fictional television narrative and also the story developments in other media and formats.

2 Interacting viewers are the audience interacting (propagating, retweeting, making content, responding to polls etc.) with the fictional universe (Sigiliano 2024).

fluent evidence suggests television could have a significant role in terms of learning”.

The concept of consumption, particularly in relation to the social TV phenomenon, underscores the creative production of the audience in the backchannel³. When sharing their impressions on X synchronously with episodes airing, interacting viewers explore cognitive abilities through the repercussions of on-air content, the expansion of plot developments, and the resignification of the story. In the backchannel, collaborative networks are formed, engineering collective construction in the process of producing meaning.

Therefore, this paper aims to propose a framework for analysing the creation, circulation and consumption of complex US narratives, with particular reference to media literacy studies. The framework will be applied in an analysis of *Euphoria*, exploring the fictional universe of the second season and comments posted on X in real time, in order to provide a more detailed understanding of the interaction between viewers and the creative production of the show. The choice of the empirical object is justified by a set of characteristics present in the show's narrative. The first point relates to the profile of HBO's serialized fictional productions and its transmedia strategies. According to Leverette et al. (2008), the network's storylines are marked by dense fictional universes and pioneering approaches in the fields of transmedia storytelling and social TV. The second point concerns the number of episodes broadcast and the timeframe in which they aired. A season of a fictional serial narrative produced for broadcast television in the United States typically consists of 24 episodes, aired over at least six months. However, this distribution model is incompatible with the methodological approach of backchannel monitoring, extraction, and coding adopted in this study, as data collection must be carried out synchronously with the airing of the program in order to avoid significant information loss. In this regard, a season composed of eight episodes enables the application of the protocol within a feasible timeframe. Finally, *Euphoria* is guided by narrative and aesthetic elements that align with the concept of narrative complexity proposed by Mittell (2015). Since its premiere in 2019, the show's intricate plot has engaged a large number of interactive viewers, while addressing the conflicts and traumas experienced by a group of students and exploring issues such as substance abuse, prejudice, diversity, sexism, among others.

3 Secondary channel for content sharing formed during a show's airtime.

2. NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY AND MEDIA LITERACY: A THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The dialogue between the field of media literacy and US TV series has been approached from a brief standpoint in the works of Livingstone and Lunt (1994), Livingstone (2007), , Jenkins *et al.* (2009) and Mittell (2015). The authors establish a correlation between new modes of production in contemporary times and serial fiction; however, analyses are directed towards case studies conducted in classrooms, with a focus on children's programming. In the context of work oriented towards consumption and reception, while examining distinct media literacy methodological approaches and epistemological frameworks, Johnson (2006), Jost (2016) and Pucci Jr. (2016) assert that, in addition to new modes of creation, production and distribution, serialised fictional post-network-television narratives are characterised by a shift in the process of meaning-making within the fictional universe.

The authors further posit that contemporary series comprise content (verbal, visual and narrative elements) that demands viewers' cognitive effort, thereby highlighting a shift in the process of meaning-making. This integration of various points of the fictional universe, including transmedia, is a salient feature of these series. In this regard, Scolari (2016) asserts that transmedia actions demand a range of abilities from viewers, such as curation, content management, context analysis and correlation, among others. In essence, the audience must assimilate and interpret the multifaceted layers of a transmedia narrative, which are dispersed across diverse platforms.

Convergence culture, as posited by Jenkins *et al.* (2009), has the potential to broaden the discourse on media literacy. The contemporary connectivity environment fosters new communicative practices, including social interactive abilities in collaborative platforms, such as the concurrent execution of tasks, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, and transmedia navigation.

The authors further posit that the contemporary environment characterised by connectivity is conducive to the emergence of novel communicative practices, which are related to the development of social interactive abilities in collaborative platforms. These novel practices include the conduction of simultaneous tasks, distributed cognition, collective intelligence and transmedia navigation. The points brought up by Jenkins *et al.* (2009) can be observed in the context of social TV. In addition to the technological aspect, the audience must

understand second-screen environments, devices, and X's informational architecture to access, browse, share and create content. The hybrid nature of social TV also engenders new sociability possibilities around the program schedule.

The formation of momentary communities in the back-channel expands the watercooler, establishing various ways of sharing ideas and expressions. This network conversational established by social TV makes the interacting viewer assume their interacting role, propagating and echoing the show that was airing at the time. Even though they are fleeting, only assembled while the show is on air, momentary communities create content that not only echoes the scenes, but also explore new perspectives.

The analysis of the fictional universe and the backchannel, as part of the proposed theoretical-methodological framework, is organized through reading keys encompassing three dimensions each, starting from the basic elements of that context and progressing to the insertion of the cognitive repertoire into new structures. (FIG. 1).

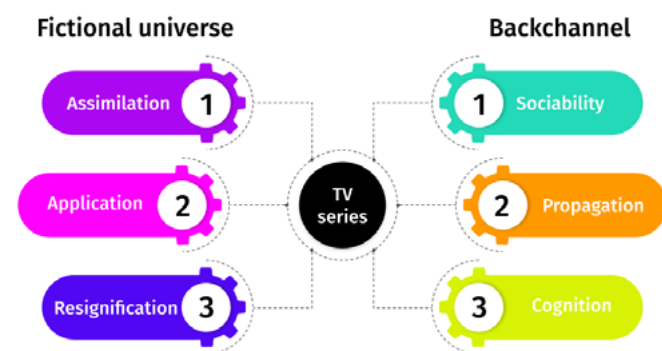


FIGURE 1 - DIAGRAM OF THE THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK (SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025).

The reading key for the fictional universe is composed of three dimensions: assimilation, application and resignification. The aim of this study is to discuss how the fictional universe promotes the development of media literacy, i.e. how the aspects of a complex TV series traverse three moments: the introduction of the fictional universe's rule; this rule working throughout the episodes; and the insertion of the rule in a new context (FIG. 2).

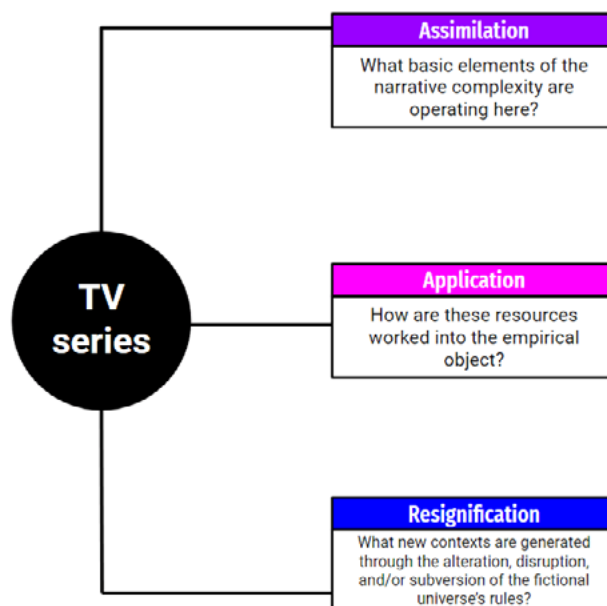


FIGURE 2 – READING KEYS FOR THE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE. (SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025)

The assimilation dimension refers to the ability of the show to present elements related to narrative complexity, comprising aspects associated with aesthetics, stylistics and narrative, which form the basis for defining the points that will actually recur in the plot (FIG. 3). As previously indicated, narrative complexity is derived from four core elements: narratological fruition, temporal displacement, tridimensional characters, and the use of ironic, self-referencing components. Narratological fruition constitutes the basic level of narrative complexity and is configured through the parallel development of micronarratives (episodic) and macronarratives (serialized), establishing a balance between self-contained arcs that conclude at the end of each episode and those that unfold across entire seasons. By shifting between episodic and serialized formats, the series broadens its thematic and generic scope, resulting in a unique stylistic hybridity. This aesthetic multiplicity is especially evident in the episodic structure of the narrative, incorporating various formats and allowing secondary characters to assume central roles at specific moments. Temporal displacement is one of the main pillars of the televisual storytelling poetics proposed by Mittell (2015). In narrative complexity, a single episode may present multiple temporalities, intertwining present, past, and future, as well as parallel realities and alternative versions of the fictional universe. The third point concerns the characters. According to Mittell (2015), they are de-

veloped gradually and fragmentarily, leading the audience to establish a parasocial relationship. The author also highlights the rise of anti-heroes within narrative complexity, both in drama and comedy. In other words, the universe surrounding anti-heroes is tenuous and contradictory, requiring viewers to constantly interpret the characters' motivations, actions, and vulnerabilities in order to identify and make sense of the paratext. Finally, Mittell (2015) argues that complex narratives feature metalinguistic (or self-referential) and ironic elements. According to the author, these devices reinforce the rules of the fictional universe while also generating new interpretive layers within the story. In this context, the plot explores ironic self-reflexivity, referencing its own paratext.

In this regard, the initial phase of analysis will focus on the empirical object to identify the presence of these elements. It is noteworthy that a plot's complexity does not necessitate the manifestation of all the fundamental characteristics delineated by Mittell (2015). *Game of Thrones* (2011 - 2019, HBO), a series that, while guided by this narratological model, does not exhibit characteristics of self-referencing or ironic elements, nor does it engage with self-reference and self-deprecation. In essence, assimilation functions as a foundational principle, shaping aspects that recur in the show and are reinforced, deepened and/or expanded through transmedia strategies.

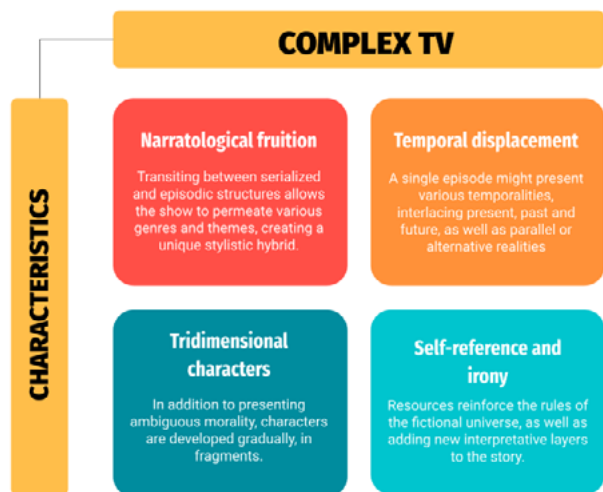


FIGURE 3 – ELEMENTS THAT COMPRISES THE ASSIMILATION DIMENSION ARE DRAWN FROM THE CHARACTERISTICS OF NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY. (SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025)

Following the identification of the fundamental elements of narrative complexity that operate in the empirical object, the subsequent dimension will address the manner in which these resources are integrated into it. The application dimension, therefore, encompasses the recurrent elements of the story, reflecting on the guiding principles for the construction and delineation of the specific fictional universe's rules. It is imperative that these rules are emphasized not only in the pilot but throughout the entire season. The third and final dimension encompasses the insertion of these recurring elements in new interpretative contexts, altering, disrupting and/or subverting these rules, even if temporarily.

The backchannel reading key is guided by three dimensions: sociability, propagation and cognition (FIG. 4), and intends to discuss how media literacy is operating in the creative production of interacting viewers on social TV.

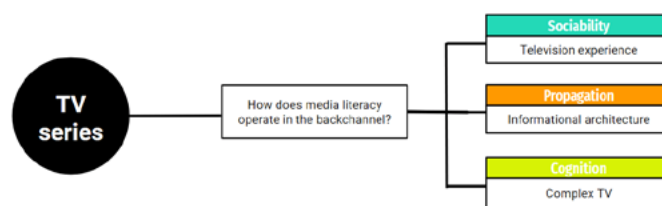


FIGURE 4 – BACKCHANNEL READING KEYS. (SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025).

Sociability refers to the ability of the audience to express themselves and to share their impressions simultaneously with a show's broadcast. In this way, the dimension is focused on the television experience, covering the water-cooler appropriations, subversions and amplifications in the shared experience and the social bond in the context of social TV.

Propagation refers to the ability to use characteristics of X's informational architecture to expand the reach of content published on the backchannel. This dimension can be observed in the adoption of indexation, the use of multimodal resources, the textual limitation of tweets, the creation of threads, the formation of collaborative networks from asymmetric connections, and so on. The third and final dimension encompasses the discussion of complex narratives, which demand cognitive strategies connected to attention management, polysemic reading, long-term memory, and the parasocial relationship to the show's characters.

3. *EUPHORIA*: CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING AND CREATIVE PRODUCTION

Following the definition of the reading keys and their respective dimensions, the theoretical-methodological framework will be applied to analyse the second season of the series *Euphoria*. The programme, created by Sam Levinson, focuses on Rue, a teenage girl grappling with substance abuse following the death of her father, while concurrently delving into the intricacies of the lives of a group of high school students, shedding light on their individual struggles and vulnerabilities. Comprising eight episodes, the second season of *Euphoria* aired in January and February 2022. It also includes transmedia actions carried out by HBO and HBO Brasil during the season's broadcast. The monitoring of these strategies encompassed 22 general and specific X, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok pages, amounting to a total of 1,226 publications, in addition to the two websites that constitute HBO's domain and HBO Brasil's Spotify profile. The analysis of the fictional universe is anchored in three dimensions: assimilation, application and resignification. The objective of this study is to demonstrate, based on the previously discussed concepts, how the second season contributed to the development of media literacy. The assimilation dimension encompasses the show's capacity to present elements pertaining to narrative complexity, thereby establishing a foundation to comprehend the story's recurring aspects. *Euphoria*'s fictional universe comprises resources that play a significant role in understanding the plot, which were methodically introduced to viewers throughout both seasons and special episodes. Mittell's (2015) four points, i.e. narratological fruition, temporal displacement, tridimensional characters, and the use of self-referencing, ironic resources, operate in the HBO show (FIG. 5).

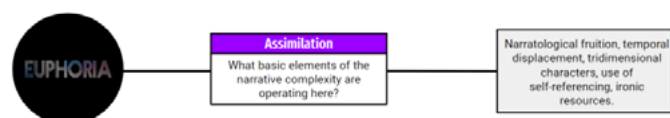


FIGURE 5 – SYSTEMATIZATION OF THE ASSIMILATION DIMENSION. (SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025).

Following the identification of the fundamental components of narrative complexity that operate within the show, the subsequent stage of the analysis focuses on the application of these resources in the fictional universe of *Euphoria* (FIG. 6). In other words, the objective is to ascertain how the characteristics of this narratological model manifest themselves in the second season of the show.

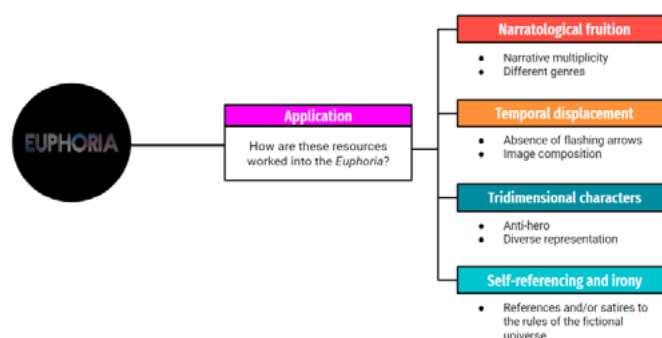


FIGURE 6 - SYSTEMATIZATION OF THE APPLICATION DIMENSION.(SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025).

Narratological fruition integrates the manner in which the show explores narrative multiplicity, whether by interweaving various arcs within the same sequence and/or evoking macro-narratives that connect disparate episodes. This phenomenon is exemplified in the episode entitled *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird*, wherein the conflict between Rue and Jules is intricately interwoven with dialogues from the first season finale and the special *Fuck Anyone Who's Not a Sea Blob*. In the same episode, the scene in which the protagonist goes to Lexie's house explores narrative multiplicity through the interweaving of plots related to Rue's escape, Cassie and Nate's discovery of infidelity, and Lexie's discomfort.

This narrative complexity is further enhanced by the show's navigation across different genres. This is evident in specific sequences, such as the opening of *You Who Cannot See, Think of Those Who Can* (S02E04), where Rue and Jules draw on various pop cultural references, including animation, paintings and film. This phenomenon is also evident in various other scenes, such as the second season's final two episodes, entitled *The Theater and Its Double* and *All My Life, My Heart Has Yearned for a Thing I Cannot Name*, respectively. In these episodes, a significant portion of the narrative is dedicated to the exploration of theatrical language, as depicted

by the production of *Our Life* on stage at East Highland High School.

In the second season of the television programme *Euphoria*, temporal displacement is characterised by the absence of the conventional ‘flashing arrows’ technique. Instead, changes in chronology and in-universe diegesis are signaled by the granularity of image composition. In the opening episode of the second season, entitled *Trying to Get to Heaven Before They Close the Door*, for instance, in addition to the introductory flashback, the episode explores three distinct moments during the New Year’s party: the arrival of guests, the altercation between Fezco and Nate, and the journey to Laurie’s residence. However, the sequence of events is not explicitly conveyed through graphic elements such as “5 hours earlier” or “10 hours later”. In this sense, chronological linearity is highlighted through editing, necessitating audience attention and subsequent organisation of facts through hypothetico-deductive reasoning, thereby filling in informational gaps.

The characters in *Euphoria* are three-dimensional, thus reinforcing the rise of the antihero in contemporary television series. In addition to being guided by their ambiguous morals, some of the show’s characters also represent minority and marginalized social groups, thereby expanding the series’ diversity. In the sequences featuring Rue in *Ruminations: Big and Little Bullies* and *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird*, the character’s psychological and emotional complexity gradually unfolds in accordance with the narrative’s progression, deviating from a simplistic interpretation based on archetypal oppositions. This complexity is exemplified by Rue’s approach to navigating the story’s conflicts and contradictions. This approach enables the exploration of themes such as adolescence, opioid addiction and neurological disorders through a multifaceted and profound lens, fostering parasocial relationships with viewers by evoking empathy and emotion.

In addition to the depiction of a diverse range of identities, body types and sexualities, the character of Rue, a Black, bisexual woman, challenges stereotypes through the manner in which her narrative arcs are developed in the show. In scenes focusing on Rue and Jules in *Trying to Get to Heaven Before They Close the Door*, *You Who Cannot See, Think of Those Who Can*, and *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird*, the narrative does not reduce the characters to their gender identity and expression. The couple challenges conventional standards by exploring other issues common to adolescents, extending beyond the confines of the LGBTQIA+ experience.

The use of irony and self-reference, akin to other facets of narrative intricacy, is a hallmark of *Euphoria*’s fictional universe. Consequently, plot elements are perpetually reinforced and referenced across various points, compelling viewers to engage in polysemic interpretation of the show. The series employs a multifaceted array of levels of complexity. These range from straightforward references to framing devices that recur throughout the series, such as in *All My Life, My Heart Has Yearned for a Thing I Cannot Name*, where we observe Fezco and Rue in a hallway, to an “alternate” version of the para-text depicted in *The Theater and Its Double*, evident in the sequences of the “Our Life” performance. In the season finale, Lexie’s play recreates various important moments of the series, where meaning-making involves an understanding of the “original”, Rue’s ambiguous telling, and Lexie’s version of it, bringing more density to self-reference.

The show also finds irony in Rue’s ambiguous morals, reflected not only in the relationship the character has with her family and friends, but also in the manner in which she recounts the events of the story. The manner in which the series satirises the protagonist’s Machiavellian intelligence can be observed in her rendition of Bobby Darin’s *Call Me Irresponsible* in *Ruminations: Big and Little Bullies*, where the character engages in a light-hearted jest about her own irresponsible and unreliable nature. The series not only highlights the protagonist’s moral contradictions, but also explores humour by showing Rue, under the influence of drugs, singing and dancing to the verses, “Call me irresponsible, call me unreliable, throw in undependable, too”

The third dimension is that of resignification, which involves the insertion of these elements of narrative complexity into new narrative, aesthetic and/or stylistic contexts. This involves the alteration, disruption and/or subversion of the fictional universe rules, even if only briefly. Rue’s narration is a recurring element since *Euphoria*’s pilot, and the first information is that she is an unreliable narrator, indicating to the audience that her perspective on facts is dubious. This establishes a foundation for the viewer to recognise that not all of the protagonist’s actions are accurate. Throughout the first season, Rue’s voice functions as a contextual marker, illuminating the character’s past, which is consistently introduced at the commencement of each episode, and her internal emotional landscape and inconsistencies.

The incongruity between Rue’s version of events and the fictional universe’s rules, as illustrated in the special episode *Trouble Don’t Last Always - Part 1: Rue*, becomes evident when the character references the plot of the first season’s fifth

episode, *03 Bonnie and Clyde*. In this episode, Rue discusses with Ali the idea of getting matching tattoos, but ultimately deciding against it. This statement is in direct contrast to the scene in *03 Bonnie and Clyde*, which depicts the two characters in Ash's tattoo studio without any explicit indication that it is a fantasy sequence. Through the correlation of different episodes, viewers are able to confirm that Rue is indeed an unreliable narrator.

However, in the second season finale, this fictional universe rule is changed, acquiring new interpretative layers and reverberating in other stylistic, aesthetic and narrative recurrences in *Euphoria*. In the episode entitled *All My Life, My Heart Has Yearned for a Thing I Cannot Name*, the final sequence is narrated in a verbal tense that has not been previously heard in the show. For the first time, the protagonist refers to the events in the past as if she is already in the future. This shift prompts a close reading of the show, fostering the audience's ability to establish a correlation between the cause (A) and the effect (B) of the fictional universe. The audience must identify the new verbal tense, evaluate its impact on previously aired narrative arcs, and discern its influence on subsequent episodes (FIG. 7).

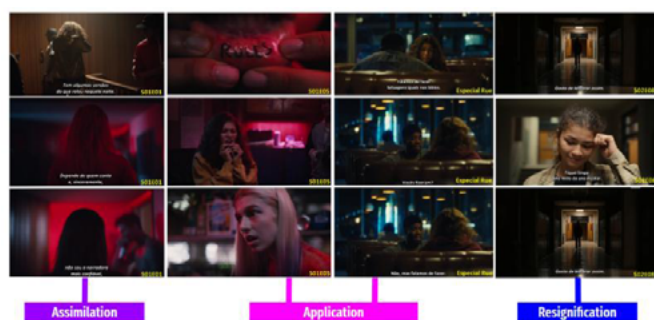


FIGURE 7 – DIMENSIONS OF THE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE
 READING KEY IN RUE'S RECURRING NARRATION⁴ (SOURCE:
 AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025)

4 Translation – left, top to bottom: There's a couple versions of what happened that night. / It all depends on who you ask, and to be honest, / I'm not always the most reliable narrator. / Assimilation. Middle, bottom: Application. Middle-right, top to bottom: We talked about getting matching tattoos on the inside of our lips. / Did you? / No, but we, we talked about it. Right, top to bottom: I'd like to remember it that way. / I stayed clean to the rest of the school year. / I'd like to remember it that way. Resignification.

The modification of the fictional universe rule has also been demonstrated to engender new meaning-making in other recurrences, which can be observed, for example, in temporal displacement and cinematography. Until this point, the chronological changes in *Euphoria* were limited to the past and present, with the show exploring one character's flashback at the start of each episode, thereby deepening their characterisation, and the rest of the story unfolding in the present. Consequently, the fictional universe was comprised of two chronological lines: 1) past, and 2) present. However, with the alteration in Rue's narration, a new temporality – 3) future – is introduced into the fictional universe, thereby expanding the possibilities of plot events and extensions.

In order to analyse the backchannel, the protocol for data monitoring, extraction and codification developed in the *Observatório da Qualidade no Audiovisual* [Audiovisual Quality Observatory] was adopted (Borges *et al.*, 2022). This protocol is structured in three stages: filtering parameters; monitoring and extraction; and codification and visualization. The first stage consisted of limiting the backchannel filtering parameters extracted from X's Streaming API. In the second stage, the monitoring and extraction of *Euphoria*'s backchannel was conducted, encompassing all second-season episodes. The extraction of tweets was facilitated by Python, complemented by prompts from the Pandas, Tweepy, and NLTK packages and libraries. Given the substantial volume of tweets and the objective of acquiring a more pertinent sample for the discussions proposed in this paper, it was deemed necessary to clean up the data prior to its codification. The filtering process, guided by six categories pertaining to the level of tweet elaboration as structured in NLP, was undertaken with the aid of Python, in conjunction with prompts and libraries. Following the filtering of the 3,675,000 original tweets, the final sample comprised 508,000 tweets. In the third and final stage, the data was individually identified, described and categorised in the Atlas.ti software. Given the substantial volume and intricacy of the tweets, the codification process was meticulously structured into two stages: macro-codification and micro-codification. Initially, in macro-codification, a central theme was assigned to categorize the posts, and subsequently, in micro-codification, categorization was based on the specificity of each post (TAB. 1). Subsequently, conversational contexts⁵ were systematically delineated in mind maps.

5 Conversational context refers to the sets of tweets identified during the macro-coding and micro-coding stages. In general, the term is used to describe data sets that share the same theme, whether broad or specific.

Codification Table

S02E01 <i>Trying to Get to Heaven Before They Close the Door</i>	
Macro-codification	24 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	36 conversational contexts
S02E02 <i>Out of Touch</i>	
Macro-codification	27 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	32 conversational contexts
S02E03 <i>Ruminations: Big and Little Bullies</i>	
Macro-codification	24 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	40 conversational contexts
S02E04 <i>You Who Cannot See, Think of Those Who Can</i>	
Macro-codification	22 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	33 conversational contexts
S02E05 <i>Stand Still Like the Hummingbird</i>	
Macro-codification	26 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	37 conversational contexts
S02E06 <i>A Thousand Little Trees of Blood</i>	
Macro-codification	24 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	40 conversational contexts
S02E03 <i>The Theater and Its Double</i>	
Macro-codification	25 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	39 conversational contexts
S02E08 <i>All My Life, My Heart Has Yearned for a Thing I Cannot Name</i>	
Macro-codification	26 conversational contexts
Micro-codification	44 conversational contexts

TABLE 1 - CONVERSATIONAL CONTEXTS IDENTIFIED IN THE BACKCHANNEL (SOURCE: AUTHORS' ELABORATION, 2025).

The backchannel reading key comprises three dimensions: sociability, propagation and cognition. The dimension of sociability focuses on the television experience and refers to the ability of interacting viewers to express themselves and share their impressions simultaneously with the airing of a show. This dimension can be observed in the watching rituals of *Euphoria* interacting with viewers, as evidenced by their tweets sharing their expectations and preparation to follow the show. This phenomenon, which was evident in all eight episodes, manifested as a recurrent theme in the discourse, centring on the viewing ritual. This ritual involved the audience's routine, with the consumption of food while watching the show being a notable aspect. The use of multimodal resources, such as videos and images of snacks prepared for the occasion, further enriched the discourse. Some of these images even alluded to the show's visual identity, as depicted in Figure 8.

The performance aspect of social media and the need to participate in the momentary community formed around the watching ritual also generated a series of falsified content on the backchannel. Manipulated images published by interacting viewers presented elements inserted on editing software to mimic the shared experience. Thus, we could observe manipulated images, with the addition of a still from the show overlaid on a TV, and the silhouette of people watching the week's episode together, etc (FIG. 8).

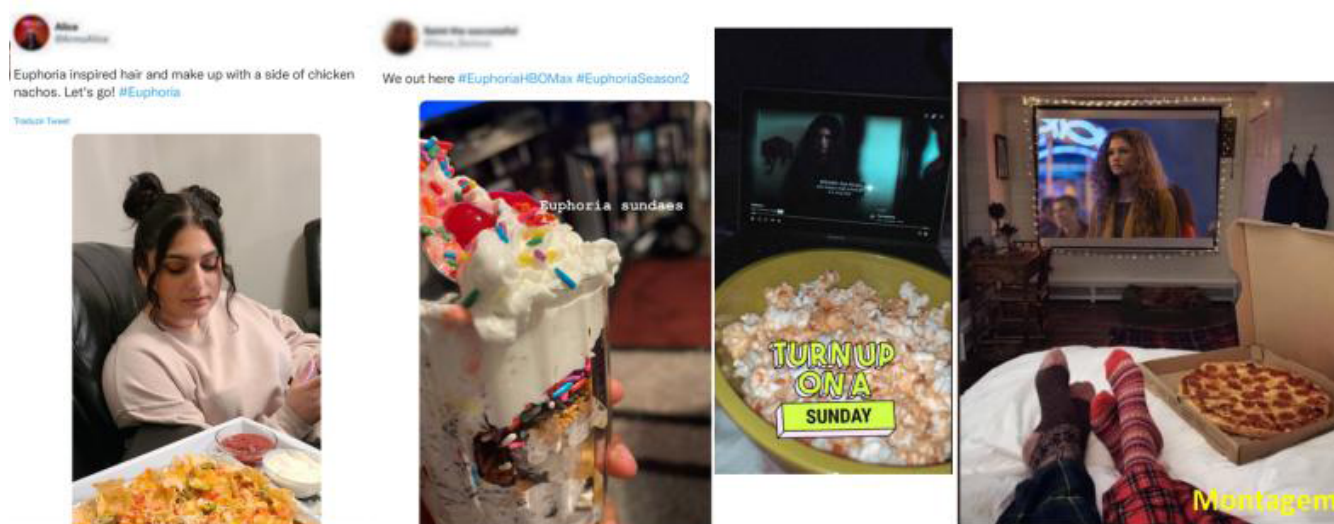


FIGURE 8 – IN THE FIRST THREE IMAGES, THE TWEETS EXPLORE THE ATTENDANCE PROTOCOL BY SHARING THE PREPARATIONS SURROUNDING APPOINTMENT TELEVISION. IN THE FOURTH TWEET, THE INTERACTING VIEWER POSTS A MONTAGE MIMICKING ELEMENTS CHARACTERISTIC OF THE ATTENDANCE RITUAL (SOURCE: X, 2022).

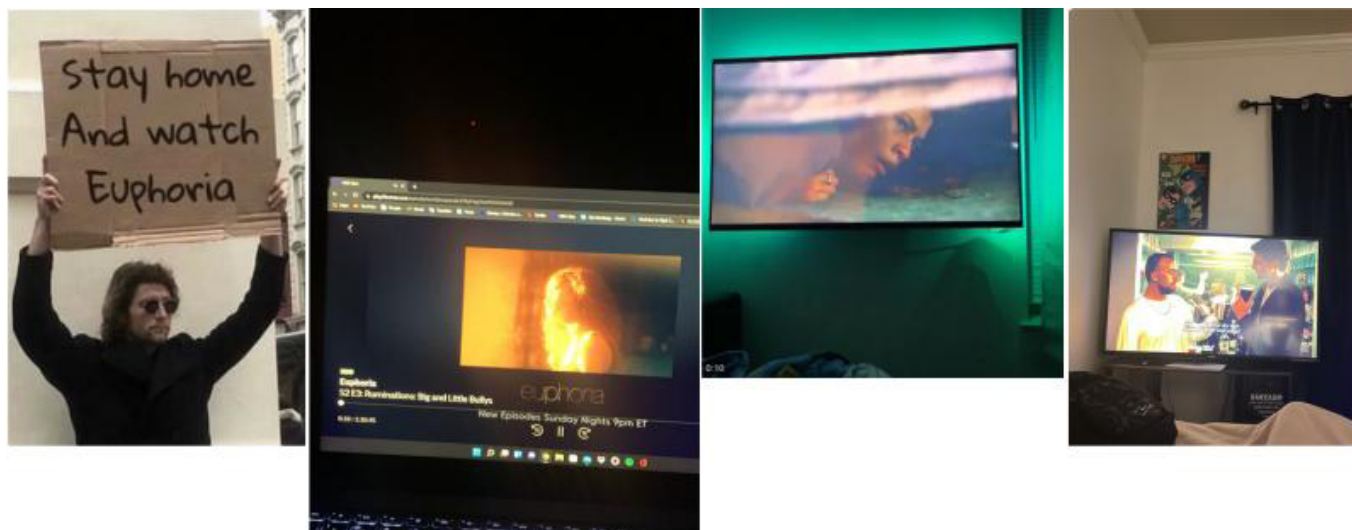


FIGURE 9 – TO SHARE #EUPHORIADAY, THE AUDIENCE PUBLISHED EDITED IMAGES. WE ALSO IDENTIFIED IMAGES OF TELEVISION SCREENS AND MOBILE DEVICES SHOWING THE TV SERIES (SOURCE: X, 2022).

During the broadcast of these episodes, some interactive viewers adopted the hashtag #EuphoriaDay, thereby reinforcing the social bond that had been established in the backchannel. The specific hashtag aimed to encourage viewers to watch the show from the comfort of their own homes on Sunday evenings. In addition, viewers created images featuring the #EuphoriaDay slogan to promote the campaign on X. Furthermore, within referent conversational contexts, the audience exhibited a desire to legitimize appointment television by sharing images that demonstrated their engagement with the show at the specific time it was being broadcast. Posts highlighted the interface of TV screens and mobile devices exhibiting the initial sequences of the day's episode (FIG. 9).

Given that the content is distributed by subscription, whether to the cable channel or the streaming service, the concept of appointment television was initially a means of distinguishing interacting viewers. However, the anxiety surrounding the show ultimately led to an internal dispute among subscribers, pitting interacting viewers who accessed the show through cable TV against those watching on streaming (HBO Max). In this context, the access and availability of the day's episode became a point of contention between the audience. HBO Max's technical difficulties, for example, were ridiculed by cable subscribers, and the speed with which the episode was made available on streaming, a few seconds before it started on television, was extolled by interacting viewers who subscribed to the platform.

The propagation dimension refers to the ability to engage aspects of X's informational architecture to widen the reach of the backchannel publications, including resources such as hashtags, multimodal resources, threads, and collaborative networks based on asymmetrical connections. General indexes used by interacting viewers were derived from engagement actions created by HBO to market the second season. In the context of social TV, the resource helps identify relevant tweets in the timeline's uninterrupted flow and to group information together. Adopting the hashtags proposed by HBO thus contributed to propagating the publication on the backchannel, as well as to facilitating the formation of collaborative networks. By including #Euphoria and/or #EuphoriaHBO in their tweets, the audience indicated the discussion's theme, allowing the content to spread through symmetric and asymmetrical connections.

While specific indexes directed at characters, narrative arcs and episode titles were not part of HBO's engagement strategy, interacting viewers adopted the resource occasionally. Specific hashtags such as #Zendaya and #Rules were used in most codified conversational contexts to segment the audience's creative output, such as memes and edits. These hashtags served to direct the content, thereby creating a form of informational hierarchy that covered both the overarching theme (#Euphoria) and the specific aspect of that theme that was being explored in each tweet (#Zendaya, #Rules, etc.).



FIGURE 10 – IMAGES ARE USED TO ANALYZE *EUPHORIA*'S FICTIONAL UNIVERSE⁶ (SOURCE: X, 2022).

Collaborative networks originate in the backchannel with a singular tweet and evolve in accordance with the mentions appended by other interacting viewers to the initial post. In the context of narrative complexity, networks are formed around the show-typical analysis of narrative, aesthetic and stylistic elements, such as an absence of flashing arrows, intertextuality and character tridimensionality. While these networks emerge spontaneously in the timeline through symmetric and asymmetric connections, it is evident that the audience employs certain strategies to accentuate and systematise their impressions of the episode. To this end, interacting viewers establish threads to encourage the formation of collaborative networks, which, in addition to comprising a variety of tweets and the general *Euphoria* index, typically feature a cover image. The initial post in this thread typically included the episode's number and some of its promotional images, providing contextual information about the thematic bias of the thread and facilitating its swift identification within the backchannel. The second-season backchannel featured a variety of multimodal resources, encompassing different conversational contexts and languages. Among the most frequently explored formats by interacting viewers were images, videos, and GIFs. Pictures were observed in the production of memes and in the discussion of narrative, aesthetic, and stylistic aspects. Memes employed the use of *Euphoria* screen grabs to subvert conventional story arcs, thereby introducing hitherto unexplored layers of interpretation to the paratext and popular images in the digital cultural milieu. The creation of memes through the utilisation of frames from the HBO

show exhibited two notable characteristics. Firstly, the publication of images occurred without the intervention of editing software. Secondly, the manipulation of images resulted in a reinterpretation of the scene's original signification.

The use of images was also observed in adopting the multimodal resource in discussing narrative, aesthetic and stylistic aspects. Interacting viewers explored the show's images to highlight elements of narrative complexity, such as narrative multiplicity, when publishing stills from various plots, indicating their correlation; image composition, analysing scene granularity to identify intertextual references; and changes in fictional universe rules, contrasting frames from the first and second seasons (FIG. 10). When unable to capture and publish high-quality images of the scenes, the audience also took pictures of TV and mobile device screens to share their theories and projections. In addition to contributing to interacting viewers' analysis and arguments on X, the multimodal resource functioned as a narrative guide, indicating to the audience important aspects in reading and comprehending *Euphoria*.

The third dimension refers to the discussion of complex narratives, which demand cognitive strategies from interacting viewers. These strategies are aimed at attention manage-

6 Translation – first tweet: first fezco fucking nate up and then ashtray fucking cal jacobson up, luckily I chose to love the right drug dealers. #EuphoriaHBOMax #Euphoria. Second tweet: Derek liked Cal back, an example of that is that when Cal says he liked Marsha, he looks at her with pure HATE, and when Cal kisses him in the bar, he giggles and kisses him back. He didn't want to fuck Marsha, but Cal! #Euphoria #EuphoriaHBO.

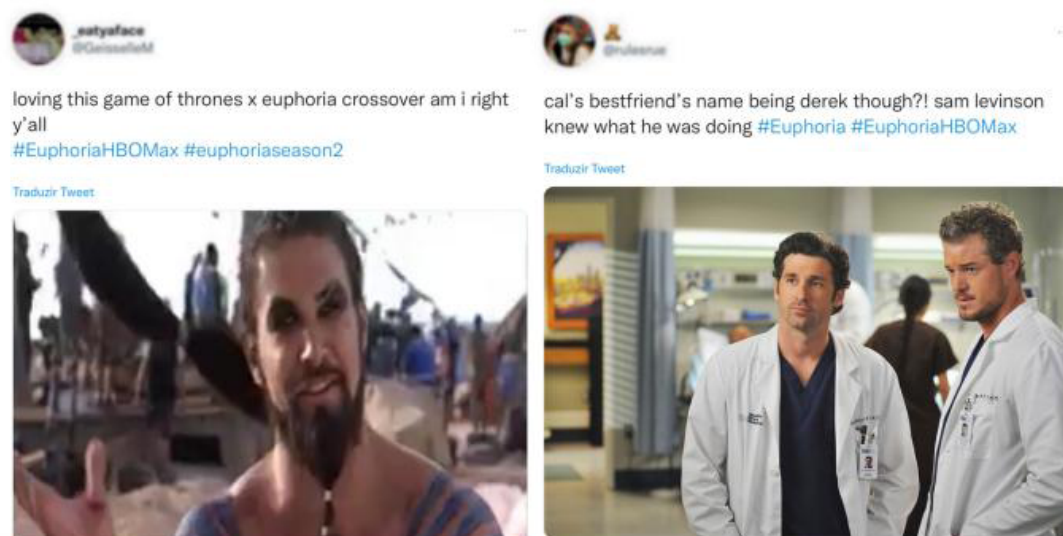


FIGURE 11 – INTERTEXTUALITY INSERTED IN *EUPHORIA* IS SHARED BY THE AUDIENCE (SOURCE: X, 2022).

ment, polysemic reading, long-term memory and parasocial relationships with the characters. However, it is important to note that these cognitive processes are not exclusive; i.e. what defines backchannel identification are its more latent characterisation.

Attention management is a key concept in analysing the discussions surrounding *Euphoria*'s image composition. The granularity of the image was echoed by the audience based on two recurrences. The first of these relates to visual elements that have a narrative function, the identification of which contributes to understanding the fictional universe. This point can be observed in a variety of conversational contexts, ranging from clear changes in the imagery composition, such as the alteration of Jules' photograph and visual identity, to the detailing of the minimum unit, which demands a more refined analysis from the audience, such as the use of burgundy to represent Rue's father. The second recurrence is guided by the artistic function of facultative perception, which exerts no direct influence on the progression of the story. Despite not interfering in the understanding of the plot, the participation of the artist Labrinth, for example, engendered new interpretative layers in the backchannel, reinforcing the importance that the singer has for the series' metatext.

Polysemic reading is a term used to describe the process of identifying intertextual resources, whether intentionally or not, that are inserted into the fictional universe and the correlation between episodes airing (mothership) and its associated content in transmedia actions. In the context of *Euphoria*, external elements that are purposefully introduced

in the plot are immediately recognised by interacting viewers. The utilisation of multimodal resources, notably X's GIF repository, enabled the audience to identify the intertextual elements within the present scene, highlighting figures such as the activist Malcolm X and the singer Rihanna.

Within the context of serialised fiction, two characters garnered significant attention from the backchannel's interactive audience: Khal Drogo, from *Game of Thrones*, and Derek, from *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–present, ABC) (FIG. 11). The scene referencing the Dothraki leader was guided by flashing arrows, making explicit the allusion to George R. R. Martin's fictional universe through characterisation and mise en scène. The *Grey's Anatomy*'s intertextual reference, on the other hand, was presented between the lines. Derek is the name of the best friend for whom Callie fell in love as a teenager. Nate's father is portrayed by Eric Dane, whose most famous role was as Dr. Mark Sloan in Shonda Rhimes's show. In *Grey's Anatomy*, Sloan's best friend is also called Derek. Therefore, through the homonym, the audience correlated both fictional universes, pointing out their intertextuality.

This cognitive process was also activated in the interrelationship between the mothership and the transmedia actions created by HBO throughout the second season. The content disseminated on social networks, particularly on the broadcaster's YouTube channel, was adopted by interacting viewers on the backchannel to reinforce theories and interpretations concerning the narrative, in addition to contributing to the projection of future plotlines.



FIGURE 12 – INTERACTING VIEWERS REFLECT ON ADDICTION (SOURCE: X, 2022).

As explored in the episodes of *Euphoria* | Enter *Euphoria*, the testimonials by actress Hunter Schafer, showrunner Sam Levinson, and costume designer Heidi Bivens, for instance, serve as the basis for discourses surrounding Jules's progression in the second season. These tweets detailed aspects such as the character's new colour palette, her infidelity with Elliot, her decision to inform Leslie Bennett that her daughter was using drugs, and the character's distancing from gender-normative roles. These tweets served as a curation of actions, connecting audience comments about the scene on air with excerpts from *euphoria* | enter *euphoria*.

The long-term memory cognitive process can be observed in conversational contexts connected to narrative multiplicity, where, using multimodal resources, the audience interconnected narrative arcs from different episodes. As previously analyzed, Rue and Ali's fight, in *Ruminations: Big and*

Little Bullies, and Rue and Jules's fight, in *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird*, for example, demanded a cognitive effort to recall and connect plots from episodes featured in the first season and the specials produced during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, these scenes do not present flashing arrows indicating how past events interfere with present attitudes and arguments. Interacting viewers not only recognized their connection but also recalled relevant scenes in the image and video, indicating the point of contact between different episodes. Tweets functioned as a form of narrative guidance, addressing the informational lacunae inherent in the screenwriters' work. While the show did not explicitly instruct the audience on the interconnection between the arcs, the audience itself forged these connections in the backchannel.

Finally, the parasocial relationship with characters manifested in conversational contexts concerning discussions

on anti-heroes and the societal issues explored in the programme. As highlighted in the analysis of the fictional universe reading key, *Euphoria*'s characters exhibit moral ambiguity, creating a sense of disconnection among viewers who may not align their interpretation with a simplistic good-versus-evil perspective. This phenomenon can be observed, for instance, in tweets concerning Rue's narrative arc. As the plot progressed and the protagonist's story became increasingly complex and contradictory, the audience's understanding expanded and deepened. Consequently, the audience was prompted to interpret Rue's narrative through nuance and complexity, as opposed to a simplistic moral framework. Consequently, tweets during her scenes highlighted the challenges associated with addiction and adolescence, rather than offering a simplistic, dichotomous interpretation of the protagonist's actions. The para-social relationship cognitive demand was also observed in the identification and empathy evoked by Rue's narrative arc. In the conversational contexts codified in the backchannel, the audience shared personal and family stories about addiction (FIG. 12). Even those who did not have a personal connection to the issue found themselves affected by the experiences of Rue, and reflected on the risks associated with opioid consumption and the perceived inadequacy of the health system.

The social themes addressed in *Euphoria*, such as teenage pregnancy, drug addiction, bullying, psychological disorders, abusive relationships and prejudice, promote the spontaneous pedagogy of fiction. In other words, the dramatisations of these social issues lead to the formation of momentary communities around the discussions and reflections fostered by the series, broadening the way in which interacting viewers perceive and understand the society in which they are inserted. Furthermore, spontaneous pedagogy of fiction promoted through para-social relationships also includes analyses of how minority groups are represented in the fictional universe. For instance, the narrative arc of Jules was a subject of discussion in various conversational contexts, codified in the backchannel. In this sense, the discourse in the backchannel highlighted the significance of the character's complexity, beyond the confines of her gender identity and presentation, as exemplified in the opening sequence of the episode *You Who Cannot See, Think of Those Who Can*. Interacting viewers underscored the pivotal role of the HBO show in consistently associating Jules's figure with women's roles, thereby challenging stereotypes surrounding the sexualization and marginalization of trans individuals in serialized fiction.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The application of the theoretical-methodological approach reveals how the second season of the series fosters the development of media literacy and how these skills are at play in the backchannel, thus encompassing both production and consumption. By presenting characteristics of narrative complexity, as proposed by Mittell (2015), which encourage a close and polysemic reading by the audience, media literacy is at play in both the episodes and the transmedia strategies of *Euphoria*'s second season. In terms of consumption, media literacy can be observed in the audience's understanding of the informational architecture of X, as they explore its affordances, enabling the circulation and sharing of content, as well as the networked conversation generated on the platform, which reinforces, expands, and re-signifies *Euphoria*'s fictional universe.

The analysis of the fictional universe reading key demonstrates how *Euphoria*'s second season fosters the development of abilities related to media literacy. On the basis of the dimensions of assimilation, application and re-signification, we have observed the way in which the characteristic elements of narrative complexity are introduced, developed and re-signified in the fictional universe. The story first presents the audience with the rules of the plot, then explores these narrative, aesthetic and stylistic recurrences in different episodes, and finally alters, breaks and/or subverts these points. As a result, interacting viewers can employ this key to reading the fictional universe developed since the pilot in other contexts of the series.

On the other hand, the analysis of the backchannel reading keys refers to the dimensions of sociability, propagation and cognition, which encompasses the development of media literacy from understanding the Twitter informational architecture to the cognitive demands stimulated by narrative complexity. Interacting viewers' critical and creative abilities are at play in different cognitive strategies, fostering not only the spontaneous pedagogy of fiction, but also informal learning in the collaborative networks of the backchannel.

In further developments of this research, the aim is to refine this theoretical-methodological framework to understand other complex narratives. The analyses of these series will be included in the repository of the Audiovisual Quality Observatory, which is a pedagogical platform for discussion and training on media literacy in Brazil.

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TV Series

Game of Thrones (2011–2019)
Hill Street Blues (1981–1987)
Dallas (1978–1991)
Euphoria (2019–present)
Twin Peaks (1990–1991; 2017)
Grey's Anatomy (2005–present)