

Spring 2020

Dysphoric Visibility: Discontents of Queer Visibility in the Media

Sarah Batsheva Bonder
Bard College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2020

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Bonder, Sarah Batsheva, "Dysphoric Visibility: Discontents of Queer Visibility in the Media" (2020). *Senior Projects Spring 2020*. 235.

https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2020/235

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Dysphoric Visibility:
Discontents of Queer Visibility in the Media

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Sarah Batsheva Bonder

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2020

Acknowledgments

I would first like to give special thanks to Samantha Rose Hill who has inspired me to think critically, to never shy away from ideas no matter how hard they are, and to invest myself in the world of critical theory and writing. Words cannot express how powerful of an influence Sam Hill has been to me, and I will forever be thankful for her presence throughout my undergraduate career.

I would also like to give special thanks to Robert Hardwick Weston for always providing me with meaningful material, insights, and encouragement throughout this tough process. When I felt as though writing about popular media was an unimportant task, Robert was there to validate, and ensure, that my ideas were and are meaningful. Robert, thank you for your elegance and persistent passion to teach and learn.

In addition, I'd also like to thank those faculty members who have motivated and supported me throughout my undergraduate years at Bard College. These include Kevin Duong, Mal Ahern, Ann Lauterbach, Yuka Suzuki, Kwame Holmes, Miles Rodriguez, and Gabriel Perron.

Of course, I'd like to thank my loving parents who are solely responsible for the existence of me, and my educational experience.

Last but not least, I'd like to thank my friends and colleagues who have listened to me ramble, have rambled back, and have never fretted from engaging in a discussion. These include Lourdes Garcia, Will Hunt, Adi Martin-Reuben, Nico Reh, Deirdre Irvine, Charlotte Albert, Will Higgins, and Gracie Hadland.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
1. Sephora’s 2019 Pride Campaign, “We Belong to Something Beautiful”	4
Use of Language.....	6
Cultivating a Utopia through “Transformative” Consumption.....	11
The Contentious “We”: What is ‘The Queer Community’?.....	13
Sephora: a Business after all.....	17
2. HBO’s <i>Euphoria</i>.....	22
“It’s Not TV, It’s HBO”.....	28
The Appeal of Appearance in Commodities: Haug’s Critique.....	33
<i>Euphoria</i> ’s Jules: Queer Metronormativity.....	37
3. Amazon’s <i>Transparent</i>.....	43
Amazon Studios and Prime Video.....	43
Jill Soloway’s Press Coverage and the Political Potential of <i>Transparent</i>	47
The Subjects of <i>Transparent</i> and the ‘Representation’ Questions.....	51
(Upper)Class Awareness and Representational Nuance.....	55
Trans as Concept, not as Individual.....	60
Amazon, the US Urban City, and the Rhetorical Value of Inclusion.....	66
Symbols of Inclusion versus Physical Displacement.....	74
Conclusion.....	78
Bibliography.....	80

Introduction

After decades and decades of invisibility and harmful stereotypes, marginalized queers have finally made their way to the media scene, now represented more than ever. Although positive representation deserves recognition, the inclination to celebrate accentuates the urgency to question, and think critically about, what lies beneath this representational surface. Not only are assumptions still being made about queer people by representational media, thus creating new stereotypes and normalizing ‘new’ queer identities, queerness is now more profitable than ever due to its increased societal acceptability. While media representation *is* important for those who have been systematically erased from visual history, especially in the US where media plays an influential role in everyone’s lives, the cultural idea that civil rights changes can come from inclusion in the consumer sphere often leads to a belief that representational media, which essentially “chases after you to take your money,” is “a sign of progress.”¹ But ‘progress,’ a progress of visibility, is only taking place in the realm of capitalist media, thus, what I aim to make apparent is the unsettling relationship between positive media representations of queer and transgender people, and the capitalist predisposition to make a profit.

By infusing media with liberal values like inclusion, and queer or trans representation, media outlets promote a watered-down social politics that is silently removed from the urgent topic of economic inequality. The lack of attention to profit and economic disenfranchisement highlights how profitable progressive sentiments can be on their own, in a vacuum. What is at stake is consumers may believe that the vacuum of representation and liberally social sentiment

¹ Katherine Sender, *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 61.

is enough; that progress can occur without attention to the economic system which persists.

Media that represents queers is not exempt from the system that perpetuates economic inequalities throughout the US and the world, even if it promotes a socially liberal agenda; in fact, representational media successfully absorbs queerness into the capitalist system that many queers continue to be negatively affected by.

The general framework that has influenced my thinking is left-leaning neoliberal capitalism, where rhetorics of social politics are incorporated into business ventures. Central to my critique is the concept of virtue-signaling, which may fall under the more general category of positive representation, that describes how companies publicly express progressive sentiments in order to exhibit their moral or ethical character. Since Donald Trump has been elected as president, leftist concerns about the US capitalist system have become more widespread. I believe the attention that has been brought to the increasing wealth of the 1%, and of monopolistic businesses, has caused many companies to rebrand themselves as having, or caring about, socially liberal virtues. In this case, the question as to *how* queer and trans people are being appealed to and represented, namely what virtues, values, and aesthetics are being attached to queer bodies, is important to ask. What about queer and/or trans bodies causes them to act as attractive symbols of socially liberal progress? Queers have been commodified as progressive, political subjects, and used as tools for companies to position themselves on the ‘right side of history,’ the non-Trump side. Thus, what positive representation brings to the forefront, is the crucial importance of questioning the motives of businesses, and of people in general, when they appeal to marginalized groups of people.

Virtue-signaling relates to another central theme of my argument, namely, Jasbir K. Puar's concept of "pinkwashing," which describes how entities (countries, companies, people) use a measure of sexual modernity to make themselves appear on the 'right side' of history by characterizing themselves as 'gay-friendly,' or 'queer loving.' In effect, companies contribute to the notion that other businesses who do not represent queer or trans people, are conservative and homophobic. Through constructing a measure of 'queer representation' versus homophobia, 'queer-loving' companies mask the injustices that they continue to commit. I use the term "pinkwash" in the paper to describe this process of characterizing and masking.

In addition, I often use the word "queer" in the paper, not solely to denote queer sexuality (homo, pan, bi, etc.), instead I use "queer" to also signify that which is either on the genderqueer spectrum, or the transgender spectrum. While I sometimes specifically use the word "trans," I often use the word "queer" in order to apply my analysis to a range of sexual and gender identities.

Lastly, my aim is not to reveal that, at the end of the day, all media is 'bad' even if it appears to be socially progressive, rather I aim to unpack the underlying economic injustices that companies are involved in, despite them claiming to care about marginalized communities. I also aim to read class and/or economic status into the representations that I study, because I am urgently concerned with *what* and *who* is being left out, or washed over, as we consume liberal-oriented media. I believe that to be an agent of social progress in the US, one must not only concern themselves with cultural ideals of representation, one must pay close attention to the world of markets and economy.

Chapter 1: Sephora's 2019 Pride Campaign, "We Belong to Something Beautiful"

Unlike many companies, which are content with either creating a new product or putting a rainbow on an already-made product for 'Pride' month, Sephora upped the ante by creating a campaign titled "We Belong to Something Beautiful," the title of which is Sephora's new company manifesto. The campaign includes in-store initiatives such as anti-discrimination employee training, free classes for customers who are "facing major life transitions," and a contribution of "\$1 million to organizations fighting for equality and racial justice."² In comparison to other companies that primarily use Pride month as a chance to appeal to 'the LGBTQ community' without granting any monetary reparations, Sephora appears in an arguably positive light, seeing as they have implemented programs that, in their view, benefit marginalized groups of people. Based on the Sephora-owned website, www.sephorastands.com, one could make the argument that Sephora has, for some time, been a supporter of socially progressive values and practices. www.sephorastands.com serves as a kind of archive for all the social justice-related work Sephora has been involved in and/or produced since 2016, such as "Accelerate" for women entrepreneurs, "Classes for Confidence" to support local communities, and "Sephora Stands Together for Sephora employees."³

There is no doubt that the cosmetics industry has received critiques ever since its emergence, mostly concerning the status of women's place in society, as that to be looked at and objectified. In light of these classic critiques, it is understandable that Sephora's marketing

² "We Belong to Something Beautiful," Sephora, Accessed February 1, 2020, <https://www.sephora.com/beauty/belong>.

³ "Sephora Stands initiative expands after successful first year," News, LVMH, last modified January 30, 2017, <https://www.lvmh.com/news-documents/news/sephora-stands-initiative-expands-after-successful-first-year/>.

strategy would approach cosmetics from a different angle: one that is less concerned with *being* beautiful for an onlooker, and more concerned with a rhetoric of *feeling* beautiful and of belonging. This new approach is evident in the title of Sephora's 2019 campaign, "We Belong to Something Beautiful," which both reinforces the company's already-cultivated brand of inclusion and diversity, and brings something new to the table: the explicit representation of queer and transgender bodies, bodies which have historically, and still are, subjects of prejudice and oppressive violence.

In addition to Sephora's campaign initiatives, a number of digital commercials and physical advertisements had been circulating to display and promote Sephora's acceptance of the queer community. On the drive to my internship over the summer I'd see giant posters featuring portraits of conventionally beautiful queer people (many of them transgender and people of color) superimposed with a text that read "They She Ze He Xe We,"⁴ alluding to the popularized, contemporary act of pronouncing one's preferred pronouns out loud so as to gain gender recognition from the people around them. Similarly, one advertisement found online titled

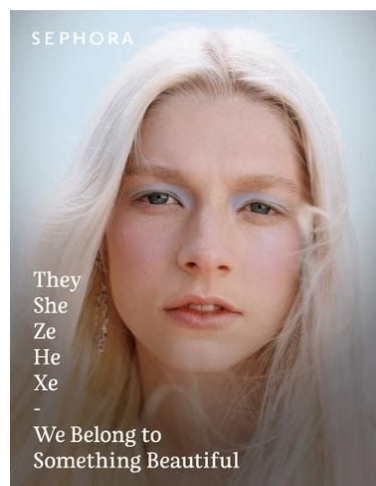


Fig. 1 & 2. Luke Gilford. *Sephora – We Belong to Something Beautiful*. 2019. Photograph. AND Production, <http://andproduction.com/project/sephorawebelongtosomethingbeautiful>.

⁴ Luke Gilford, *Sephora – We Belong to Something Beautiful*, AND Production, accessed April 8, 2019, <http://andproduction.com/project/sephorawebelongtosomethingbeautiful>.

“Identify as We: Beauty”⁵ is a video that features isolated shots of individuals who, evident from the title, are supposed to be representative of a queer community. The dominant theme of the commercial is empowerment, and about claiming, and being proud of, one’s chosen identity, all in connection to the presence of makeup in each of the individual’s lives.

The video begins with a shot of dry desert plants swaying in the wind with a superimposed white text that reads, “Does Makeup Make Us Beautiful?” The first person to appear on screen is Hunter Schafer (shown above in Fig. 2), a young, transgender model, who answers, “I wish the world would recognize beauty that doesn’t fit into binary ideals.” The next person is shown in a retro-inspired series of vignettes, and says, “Not only is my gender not in the binary, but I am wearing makeup and I’m totally comfortable.” The third person, shown with the same retro-inspired film filter, is sitting on a large rock directly in front of an ocean with a sheer white curtain wrapped around their clothes, and says, “Beauty is actually so much about creating space.” Two more people say something about how makeup allows them to feel confident when showing a “different part” of themselves to the world. There’s a shot of a neck tattoo that reads “BLISS.” Then another person, “Makeup is transformative, and in transforming, it grants you the permission to do what you want to do.” And lastly, “You’ve got your own beauty. Just be brave.”

Use of Language

While each person portrayed in the video somewhat goes against conventional ideals of ‘beauty,’ due to the majority of them not being cis-gendered, they are all still conventionally

⁵ Sephora, “Identify As We: Beauty | Sephora,” June 13, 2019, YouTube video, 1:26, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKogyef-gLw>.

attractive—it *is* an advertisement after all. Nevertheless, the video communicates that ‘beauty’ is not contingent on makeup, instead makeup is depicted as something that all of these people naturally enjoy wearing, as something that makes them *feel* good about themselves. By communicating that beauty is not contingent on makeup or one’s appearance, ‘beauty’ is positioned as a *way* of feeling or a way of acting in the world. Thus, beauty is given a new meaning, one that is more abstract in that it lacks a concrete and material definition.

While the video’s appeal is heavily influenced by its washed-out, dreamy, partly retro, aesthetic, what I find most interesting is the use of language that is supposed to appeal to a queer audience. It is obvious that Sephora’s PR team did their research on societal criticism from a queer perspective, due to the listing of pronouns in their posters and the employment of societally-conscious concepts like “the binary,” and “creating space,” to portray queer and trans people’s relationship to society’s dominating institutions of gender and sexuality. Not only does the advertisement visually represent queer and trans people by using real life queers, it also tries to conceptually or ideologically appeal to a queer-identifying audience by assuming that queer consumers know of, care about, and will relate to the portrayal of ideas like the ‘gender binary.’

Relatedly, in Alexandra Chasin’s book *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*, Chasin writes about how the dominant gay rights movement makes similar conclusions based on identity: “If identity politics promotes the assumption that predictable political positions adhere to identity, identity-based consumption does the same thing,” meaning, assumptions are made regarding queer-identifying people that ultimately promote the idea that all queer people will understand and care about similar political issues, and that all

queer-identifying people will buy the same stuff.⁶ By applying Chasin's reasoning, Sephora's "identity-based" advertising promotes the assumption that all queer people have confronted, or have *had* to confront, societal constructs like the gender binary and US society's ideal of beauty. In addition, Sephora's advertising promotes the assumption that all queers are inherently concerned with the political project of undoing gender, thus, leaving no space for conservative or heteronormative-leaning queers. In this instance, a certain 'nonconformity' and assumption of moral values are being displayed in the form of language to represent the whole queer community.

While the advertisement's language alludes to deep societal criticisms that have historically existed in socially-conscious queer circles, both casual and academic, it does not, in any way, embark on an educational enterprise of the concepts it presents. Instead, the idea of 'the binary' is left where it is: the *title* of a complex, societally-loaded concept with no elaboration. In this manner, the advertisement abstracts 'the binary' and uses that very language as a branding strategy, similar to the video's title, "Identify as We: Beauty": words void of any concrete material significance. Related to the marketing strategy of abstraction and of employing flowery, rhetorical language, in W.F. Haug's *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality, and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, Haug writes about the relationship between the poem and the slogan, specifically how poetic qualities have been appropriated by companies to characterize their products as genuine and honest.⁷ Haug writes, "the poem in commodity aesthetics [is] 'to be less blatant than a slogan; to be quieter, and calmer than the deceitful posing of the slogan, and

⁶ Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 243.

⁷ Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality, and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, trans. Robert Bock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 124.

for this reason to have the appeal of a new honesty',”⁸ meaning that the lyricism applied in advertisements today does not boldly jab at its audience, rather, the effectiveness of lyricism lies in its calm appeal to the audience’s senses and their perception of the product in question, in this case Sephora products.

Haug’s attention to the use of poetic language in contemporary advertising applies to Sephora’s advertisement in that the language of ‘the binary’ or “Identify as We” has a figurative quality to it—it refers or relates to something real, but the audience has no way to grip it. The viewer hears the title of a socially-critical concept, and a nod to pronoun culture, but does not gain the knowledge of how these concepts can meaningfully, materially, or politically apply in the world, especially the world of social politics. Because of its poetic, somewhat metaphoric, quality, the advertisement’s language, in itself, transcends the product, and becomes almost autonomous from the product. The language that is employed helps Sephora cultivate a distance from its makeup products, which then allows Sephora to appear as “honest,” to act as an ‘insider’ in terms of knowing about queer cultural concepts, while still, quietly, maintaining its place in the realm of commodity exchange. Thus, it is significant to note that Sephora’s advertisement is an example of commodifying ideas (specifically the gender binary) that are socially and culturally valuable, especially when aimed at ‘communities’ that are knowledgeable of them because of their own lived experience of existing against them.

It is not just objects that are involved in the circulation of commodity goods, the immateriality of words and concepts are just as profitable. In Rosemary Hennessy’s *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, Hennessy writes about how late capitalism’s need

⁸ Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, 124.

for new markets, in this case a queer market, has contributed to the “integration of art and life” whose consequence is in part “the aestheticization of daily life,” meaning, “the intensified integration of cultural and commodity production under late capitalism by way of the rapid flow of images and signs that saturate myriad everyday activities.”⁹ Sephora’s advertisement is a good example of how culturally queer ideas (represented by the video’s language) and capitalist products (makeup) are increasingly integrated, thus creating a relationship between specific groups of people and commodity products. Hennessy’s idea of “integration” certainly is a fruitful way of understanding how cultural knowledge (in this case, queerness and its relation to ‘the gender binary’) and movements, get co-opted by commodity-producers in order to create a holistic environment where capital and politics, consumer products and one’s position in society, appear as one in the same.

The loss of specificity, or material and historical grounding, for the progressive-oriented idea of the ‘gender binary,’ mirrors the idea that what is lost in this kind of queer representation is specificity of experience in the world: What does “creating space” look like? What is this “different part” of yourself? What are the consequences of, or conditions for, living outside ‘the gender binary’? The answers to these questions are certainly more pertinent to the project of queer liberation than how the advertisement is currently structured, as that which hints at societal struggle by only portraying the representative surface—titles of concepts with no body. Both linguistically and visually, Sephora’s portrayal of queer bodies, and their experiences, transcends concrete societal struggle that the people shown have experienced, experiences that are, nonetheless, hinted at.

⁹ Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 132.

Cultivating a Utopia through “Transformative” Consumption

The vagueness of speech in the video not only reveals the commodification and modification of important political concepts, it also hints at a utopia of communication; it displays the unreality that people may speak to one another vaguely, in concepts, in order to communicate, and understand, complex and specific experiences in the world. This idea of cultivating a type of utopia is also promoted by the advertisement’s visual landscape and atmosphere, one which is uncontroversially pleasurable and environmentally dreamy: the images are bright, wind is blowing, queers are at the beach with no other people around, etc.

This arguably positive representation of queerness differs greatly from a number of other Pride-related advertisements in that it truly stylizes an all-encompassing environment with a washed-out beachy appearance that visually mimics the vague language at play: it creates a whole separate world of being outside of everyday life, outside of the societal constraints of being queer and/or trans, and more specifically, of being a trans person of color. Although this kind of environmental utopianism, constructed through a beachy bohemian appearance and set, is not necessarily shocking for a ‘beauty’ brand to enact, it is worth critiquing Sephora on the grounds that the company is appealing to a ‘queer community’ by quietly and indirectly positioning makeup as that which can make one feel beautiful, as that which causes happiness, a utopian feeling, despite all the hardships that US society has to offer. In doing so, Sephora greatly taps into a capitalist concept of *lifestyle* which posits that one’s whole life, emotions and all, and the way they identify, is fashioned by the consumer choices they make, by what they purchase.¹⁰

¹⁰ Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, 132.

In *Profit and Pleasure*, Hennessy writes that the idea of ‘lifestyle’ obscures social hierarchies of gender and race “by promoting not only individuality and self-expression but also a more porous conception of the self as a ‘fashioned’ identity”¹¹: the idea is that if the self can in fact be ‘fashioned’ then social, economic, and political restraints lose their stronghold over how one experiences society. One individual in the Sephora advertisement says “Makeup is transformative,” alluding to the lifestyle idea that through purchasing and consuming products, in this case, makeup, one can in fact transform themselves, not just in terms of their feelings or their appearance, but also in terms of their position in society; through consuming makeup, one may free themselves of societal constraints that are placed on queer bodies. Although the individual was probably hinting at how, as a transgender person, makeup allows for them to feel more feminine, the video’s visual appearance, its focus on the broad concept of “Beauty,” and its utilization of vague and detached language, distracts from, or overpowers, any explicit comment about how gender dysphoria and real-world marginalization occurs for most transgender people. While makeup may, at least for a moment, transform one’s feelings about themselves, it can never transform discrimination, nor can it take one out of a discriminatory society.

In combination with the advertisement’s portrait-style mode of displaying people, the focus on ‘self-transformation’ alludes to an individualistic notion of oneself that is predicated on consuming products. In *Profit and Pleasure* Hennessy writes about the neoliberal political and economic policies of the 1970s that relegated many State enterprises to the private sector. Hennessy claims that these policies of privatization have permeated everyday life in the form of “knowledges” and “forms of consciousness” that promote neoliberalism by advocating for

¹¹ Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, 132.

entrepreneurialism and individualism.¹² The idea of self-transformation in Sephora's advertisement does exactly this: it presents the idea that to live 'the good life,' all one has to do is focus on themselves, thus ignoring how society and the external world affects and influences individuals. The advertisement purports that privatizing the self is *a* way to happiness, to feeling beautiful in one's own skin; it purports that the path towards feeling good in a discriminatory society is ultimately paved through consumption.

The Contentious "We": What is 'The Queer Community'?

Sephora's appeal to individualism is not, however, claiming that all queer people are different, a claim that would go against the totalizing effects of identity-based politics. The liberal ideal of individualism is co-opted by companies to create the idea that people are unique, which they are, but at the same time, representation, specifically Sephora's appeal to a "We," necessarily entails a flattening of what it means to be a person in the world. While the logic of a lot of marketing, especially to queer communities, is allied with the idea that people are different,¹³ Sephora's portrayal of individualism is connected to the idea that all queer individuals fall into the category of a 'queer community,' and thus, are concerned with similar issues such as 'the gender binary.' It is most apparent in the market that individuals are subjected to the dominant mainstream desires and experiences of the identity-group that they fall under.

While Sephora is concerned with promoting the possibility for transformation and difference through stylization, they are also concerned with aligning their sentiments with the

¹² Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, 78.

¹³ Suzanna Danuta Walters, *All The Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 239.

progressive ideal of a holistic community of people who share an identity. The title of the commercial, “Identify as We,” appropriates the language of pronouncing one’s preferred pronouns while also alluding to the belief that this “We,” can fully encompass and accurately represent all queers. In Katherine Sender’s *Business, Not Politics*, Sender writes, “the gay community, on a national scale at least, is not a preexisting entity that marketers simply need to appeal to, but is a construction, an imagined community formed not only through political activism but through an increasingly sophisticated, commercially supported, national media.”¹⁴ Sephora contributes to a construction of an “imagined” queer community by basing their campaign on an idea of “We” which glosses over the existing differences, not just in personality, but of real life experience in the world. Furthermore, “We” mimics the advertisement’s dreamy, utopian appearance by promoting the idea that there is a holistic community of queers with collective experiences, and, through uniting as a community, “We” can transcend experiences of struggle that all queers are assumed to experience in heteronormative society. Of course, this is not true, since not all queer people experience or think of the same things, and not all queer people even struggle.

Again, the idea that one may be able to transform themselves through consumption, in combination with the idea that a unified community exists, ignores the actual difference of lived experience in the world, namely, the experiential influence of economic class difference. The fact is that one’s economic position in society is an extreme determinant of whether an individual can transform themselves out of struggle, and whether an individual can identify with or relate to a mainstream queer community that is often white and middle class. For example, Sephora’s

¹⁴ Katherine Sender, *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 5.

advertisement exhibits many trans people of color, which are arguably the most vulnerable people in US society to violence and discrimination. But, it must be said, that capital often predetermines the violence one may be subjected to. In the same vein, Dean Spade writes, “While we all must contend with bathrooms or locker rooms that are gender segregated, those of us with homes and jobs may even be able to avoid those a good deal of the time, as opposed to homeless people.”¹⁵ Spade highlights how, if one can afford the things that would make them less visible, then they are less vulnerable to violence. Of course, money does not completely ensure safety, but considering the role of capital certainly disrupts identity-based ways of thinking that dominate much of queer politics and market-based politics. Hennessy writes,

‘lifestyle’ identities can seem to endorse the breakup of old hierarchies in favor of the rights of individuals... increasingly new urban lifestyles promise a decentering of identity by way of consumer practices which announce that styles of life that can be purchased in clothes, leisure activities, household items, and bodily dispositions all dissolve fixed status groups.¹⁶

The “decentering of identity” claims that one can cut the ropes of racial, citizenship, or class status and align themselves with the identity categories they desire.

While one may feel like they are able to buy themselves out of a social position (“status group”) that they have been societally subjected to, one must ask, who is Sephora’s campaign for, and who is the “We” that the company makes a claim to? Who of ‘the queer community’ has the funds to buy overpriced makeup from Sephora? As Hennessy writes, “[T]he answer to why everyone’s life couldn’t become a work of art could take us somewhere else, to another story,

¹⁵ Dean Spade, “Compliance is Gendered: Struggling for Gender Self-Determination in a Hostile Economy,” in *Transgender Rights*, ed. Paisley Currah, Richard M. Juang, and Shannon Price Minter (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 227.

¹⁶ Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, 133.

one that makes visible the contradictory social relations the aestheticization of social life conceals.”¹⁷ Not everyone has the means to fashion a life for themselves.

It might be obvious that the queer people who can get behind Sephora’s campaign have buying power, meaning they have the economic means to pay for overpriced makeup. But Hennessy writes that “queer spectacles often participate in a long history of class-regulated visibility,”¹⁸ meaning that the spectacle of queer bodies, which most people understand as a minority group, through representations in commercial media covers up the class divisions that exist *within* the ‘queer community,’ and the divisions that exist between economically-fortunate queers and working-class people. The spectacle does not just bring visibility to a group of people who have struggled against invisibility, it also silences the disparities that exist within the group.

Not only does this kind of appeal to queerness inevitably leave a vast array of queers out of the conversation, the company’s use of inclusionary, socially-conscious, liberal-minded ideas characterizes Sephora as being concerned about the queer community when, really, they are mostly concerned with using the current political climate of a white nationalist, homophobic regime, as an opportunity to make the most profit. Even if Sephora *is* concerned with ideas like the gender binary and acceptance in a struggle-laden society, it must be said that their end game is profit. Thus, Sephora engages in a process of commodifying queer sentiments, and transgender and non-binary bodies in order to sell their expensive makeup. What is a movement if political ideas are only *viewable* in the marketplace?

¹⁷ Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, 134.

¹⁸ Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, 138.

Sephora: a Business after all

Sephora is owned by LVMH (Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton), a multi-billion dollar luxury goods conglomerate owned by Bernard Arnault whose recorded net worth in 2020 is estimated to be \$101 billion.¹⁹ LVMH is composed of around seventy-five luxury brands that range across several markets from liquor to clothing, jewelry to makeup, and more. According to LVMH's financial documents, the conglomerate's profits have increased every year since 2016.²⁰ Sephora differs from most of the other LVMH brands since it is part of LVMH's 'selective retailing' branch which means that Sephora products are only sold at Sephora stores, thus contributing to an air of exclusivity and elitism.

In an interview with Deborah Yeh, Sephora's Senior Vice President of Marketing, Yeh says, "At Sephora, I think of my responsibility around diversity and inclusion as... my role as a marketer, and somebody who has to think about representation, and how do we ensure that when the consumer is looking at the faces in our stores, in our content, that they see people who tend to reflect and represent them."²¹ Yeh's statement points to the idea of representability and the importance of seeing people in the world who look like oneself. But what differs from Yeh's framing of representation and inclusion, in comparison to how Sephora frames it on their website, is that she identifies "diversity and inclusion" as one of her roles as a *marketer*, not as someone who is concerned with inclusion within society itself, thus it is even more obvious that representing people from underrepresented communities is a marketing technique more so than it

¹⁹ "Bernard Arnault & family," Forbes, accessed February 26, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/bernard-arnault/#6ebb62b266fa>.

²⁰ LVMH, 2019 Financial Documents, December 31, 2019, p. 2-3, from LVMH website, https://r.lvmh-static.com/uploads/2019/12/lvmh_documents-financiers_2019-va.pdf, accessed February 26, 2020.

²¹ "Sephora's Deborah Yeh: An 'Accidental Marketer' With A Big Vision For Beauty," Forbes, Jan 21, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/video/6125347913001/#7143bbe12a86>.

is a socially transformative strategy. Yeh's claim to representation being important for the Sephora brand speaks to the company's concern with how welcoming their image is to people of diverse backgrounds. While Sephora claims to value diversity in terms of race, gender, sex, etc., it must be said that, in doing so, Sephora excludes a plethora of people who cannot afford to spend their money on Sephora products. Most of these people who come from the 'diverse' communities that Sephora aims to attract are the people who have been systematically excluded from consuming luxury brands.

The "We Belong to Something Beautiful" campaign does not solely exist for the social benefits of "underrepresented communities" it claims to prioritize or be involved in.²² In fact, while LVMH's 2019 Financial Documents do not address any of the social/political dynamics of the campaign or Sephora's other charitable initiatives, the conglomerate *does* report, however, that "New marketing campaigns strengthened the Maison's brand image, in particular the 'We Belong To Something Beautiful' campaign in North America."²³ Out of all of Sephora's operations in 2019, this Pride-related campaign sticks out most notably to LVMH as a driver of capital both in terms of economic capital and in terms of socio-cultural capital alluded to in the words "brand image."

According to a 2015 Sephora marketing plan, Sephora's main consumer demographic typically makes over \$100,000, lives in "Urban High Society" or "suburbia," and holds an executive or administrative occupation.²⁴ This is Sephora's main target audience, an audience

²² "Inclusion," Sephora Stands, Sephora, accessed April 9, 2020, www.sephorastands.com/inclusion/.

²³ LVMH, 2019 Financial Documents, December 31, 2019, p. 18, from LVMH website, r.lvmh-static.com/uploads/2019/12/lvmh_documents-financiers_2019-va.pdf, accessed February 26, 2020.

²⁴ Elif Negiz, 2015, *Developing a Marketing Plan: Sephora*, Squarespace, 6, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/562661f7e4b078eb0eb8898c/t/56ca85d3746fb93e227cfd8a/1456113163208/DEVELOPING+a+MARKETING+PLAN-+SEPHORA.pdf>.

whose values and neoliberal approach to social politics align well with Sephora's marketing strategies. But this is not the audience that Sephora claims to care about in their Sephora Stands initiatives or in their "We Belong to Something Beautiful" campaign advertisements. On the Sephora Stands website, Sephora's "Manifesto" reads, "We will never stop building a community where diversity is expected, self-expression is honored, all are welcomed, and you are included."²⁵ Who is this you? What is diversity if it exists in a vacuum of social identities void of class status? Additionally, what is this imagined 'community' that Sephora continually references both on their general website and in the aforementioned Sephora advertisement? Of course the website does not go into depth, thus making it more obvious that Sephora's marketing strategy engages in 'virtue signaling,' the act of publicly expressing sentiments intended to demonstrate the company's moral correctness.

Another cynical aspect of Sephora's righteous-seeming campaign is that while the company claims to make a contribution of "\$1 million to organizations fighting for equality and racial justice,"²⁶ a 2013 Forbes piece states that the company generates revenues over \$4 billion a year,²⁷ and a 2015 marketing plan identifies that the company generated \$5.85 billion in revenue in 2013.²⁸ So while \$1 million may seem like a lot of money for most Americans, it is only about 0.017% to 0.025% of the company's yearly revenue. Although this campaign seems to be supporting marginalized communities, Sephora is in no way redistributing wealth, nor is it doing anything to combat existing economic disparities both within and outside of queer communities.

²⁵ "Sephora's Manifesto," Sephora Stands, Sephora, accessed April 9, 2020, www.sephorastands.com/.

²⁶ "Giving," Sephora Stands, Sephora, accessed April 9, 2020, www.sephorastands.com/giving/.

²⁷ Walter Loeb, "Sephora: Department Stores Cannot Stop Its Global Growth," Forbes, April 18, 2013, www.forbes.com/sites/walterloeb/2013/04/18/sephora-department-stores-cannot-stop-its-global-growth/#7afe52522e81.

²⁸ Elif Negiz, 2015, *Developing a Marketing Plan: Sephora*, Squarespace, 4.

Lastly, the company is not making its products more accessible to the people it claims to want to reach out to, to the people it professes to represent.

By putting transgender and non-binary individuals (the majority of which are people of color) in their advertisement, Sephora engages in representation through capitalist commercial media which inevitably benefits the image of Sephora and LVMH, and does not benefit the people it represents. Instead trans and non-binary bodies are used as a means to make Sephora more attractive to both queers with buying power and straight-identifying liberals. Transgender people, specifically people of color, are still at the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder in the US, despite the charitable donations or the utopian image of trans and queer existence that Sephora's advertisement contributes to. According to the 2015 US Transgender Survey 30% of respondents who had a job in the past year reported being fired, denied a promotion, or experienced some other form of mistreatment related to their gender identity or expression, and nearly 30% of respondents have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives.²⁹ Sephora's target consumer demographic does not at all reflect the realities of transgender experience in the US. Diversity, for Sephora, is a useful concept that realistically excludes those who are at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Queerness, in this context, serves as a symbol for social diversity; diversity, in this context, stands in as a symbol for social liberalism that does not acknowledge economic disparities.

In conclusion, Sephora's Pride campaign exemplifies how positive queer representation certainly covers up the commodification of queer identities. There are so many people being left

²⁹ S.E. James, J.L. Herman, S. Rankin, M. Keisling, L. Mottet, & M. Anafi, 2016, *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*, Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS%20Full%20Report%20-%20FINAL%201.6.17.pdf.

out of the conversation when these conversations occur in the marketplace, a space that is primarily for individuals with buying power and for those who are concerned with reaping the most profit for themselves. When Hennessy writes about the “aestheticization of daily life,” meaning “the intensified integration of cultural and commodity production under late capitalism by way of the rapid flow of images and signs that saturate myriad everyday activities,”³⁰ what is most pertinent in her description is not necessarily the degree of images, but, rather, the integration of cultural and commodity production, and the integration of art and life. Not only do we see Sephora’s artful advertisements everywhere as we walk around a city and use the internet, but the advertisement itself exhibits how queer identity is more importantly aesthetically pleasing, and marketably profitable, than historically, politically, and socially contested. In line with the claim of being outside of ‘the binary,’ it is almost expected that queer identity, in itself, is naturally subversive in relation to ‘the binary’ that “the world” is assumed to follow. Thus, I argue that Sephora’s advertising represents queer individuals as naturally fitting into a utopian aesthetic void of societal constraints; this representation is incredibly detached from the world of social relations and economic disparities.

³⁰ Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, 132.

Chapter 2: HBO's *Euphoria*

HBO's relatively new show *Euphoria* has been lauded all over the internet for its portrayal of high school life for a generation whose first memory is being pulled out of school after news of the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001. While 9/11 is only briefly mentioned in the first episode of the show, viewers can gather that the event, and its subsequent political policies such as the Patriot Act, set the stage for a whole generation to be riddled with anxiety, depression, hopelessness, and apathy. Although the edgy, raw, hard-to-watch, high school perspective is what mainly defines the series, many reviewers also praise the television show for its nonchalant portrayal of queerness, specifically with regards to a character named Jules who is a transgender woman.

When I first began to consider *Euphoria* as a possible case study for this project, I could not remember if the show ever mentions that Jules is transgender. And this is what I truly respect about HBO's *Euphoria*: unlike other contemporary, virtue-signaling, liberal media that portrays and targets a US population born immediately prior to September 11, 2001, i.e. *Booksmart*, or the 2019 revamping of *The L Word*, *Euphoria* does not necessarily center 'wokeness' or queer identity to the extent that it resists the urge to label and name what it shows, that is, Jules being transgender. In this sense, I *do* agree with numerous reviews of the show which claim that subjects like gender, race, sexuality, are all presented as fluid, complex, and unstable.

Accordingly, the show resists the type of identity politics that a mainstream liberal audience often perceives as righteous and democratic; an identity politics often void of nuance. In Alexandra Chasin's book *Selling Out*, Chasin critiques the mainstream lesbian and gay movement for upholding queer identity as a means to unite people over other identificatory

categories such as race or class. Chasin writes, “liberal-based social movements who fight the good and necessary fight for rights need to strengthen their coalitional activity, working more closely with other identity-based movements,” thus arguing that the missing link in the mainstream LGBTQ rights movement is coalitions that unify *across* identity lines.³¹ Although Chasin notes that identity politics has been a means for groups of people to gain legal rights by appealing to liberal human rights rhetoric (equal protection under the law), she also argues that “identity-based movement[s]... ultimately promote sameness,” signaling a concern that people’s psychic and material differences will not be taken into account in identity-based organizing.³²

In an interview with Scott Turner, *Euphoria*’s “trans consultant,” the interviewer asks what sets Jules’s narrative apart from other trans narratives we see on TV, to which Turner responds, “What we see on TV right now is very much where our mainstream culture is. It’s every cisgender person dealing with the ‘Trans Person Being Trans,’ and the trans person’s only narrative is transition.”³³ Turner points out that in most transgender representations in the media, the narrative of transition, a narrative that oftentimes entails struggle and societal oppression, is centered, thus, trans characters in movies, television, and advertisements, are often prevented from being shown as nuanced. While transgender narratives are more visible than ever in media, the transness that is produced is a woefully narrow one stripped of its identificatory complexities.

34

³¹ Chasin, *Selling Out*, 243.

³² Chasin, *Selling Out*, 244.

³³ Scott Turner Schofield, “Euphoria’s trans consultant on why the series tells authentic trans stories,” interview by Palmer Haasch, *Polygon*, August 10, 2019, <https://www.polygon.com/interviews/2019/8/10/20792118/euphoria-hbo-trans-actors-jules-scott-turner-schofield-hunter-schafer>.

³⁴ Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 23.

There is no doubt that what Scott Turner expressed in the aforementioned interview was a disapproval of “sameness” with regards to the popular trans narratives of struggle, and how those narratives have been tacked onto transgender identity in all other spheres of life. ‘Sameness’ produces stereotypes even if they are not necessarily negative: the trans person struggling with their gender identity is not inherently negative or untrue, but gender struggle is not *the only* experience that a trans individual encounters. What Turner, and *Euphoria* in general, are pushing towards is a positive, more nuanced, representation of transness that doesn’t focus on the transition story or one’s queer/trans identity. By breaking with the gender struggle stereotype, *Euphoria* certainly parts from the main bulk of queer and trans representations in the media.

The claim that Jules “doesn’t utter the words ‘I’m trans’ until three episodes into show,”³⁵ is widely held as a sign of progress in many of the popular reviews I’ve read regarding the television show. As opposed to the mainstream liberal media’s obsession with, and tokenization of, historically marginalized identities, the show’s representation of queerness, and transness in particular, is highly respectable because queer and trans identity is certainly not named or highlighted often, and being queer and trans is not what Jules’s character is all about. In terms of representation, Jules’s character is arguably positive because *Euphoria* presents her in a not-so-stereotypical way, a way that resists tokenizing hypervisualization by parting from the categorizing action of naming.

In addition to the representation of Jules, the show also facilitates the belief that ‘Generation Z,’ the generation born in the few years prior to and following September 11, 2001,

³⁵ Samantha Allen, “How ‘Euphoria’ and Model Hunter Schafer Created the Most Interesting Trans Character On TV,” *Daily Beast*, July 7, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-hbos-euphoria-and-hunter-schafer-created-the-most-interesting-trans-character-on-tv>.

is disenchanted with gender. One article in particular, titled “What Euphoria Gets Right About Gen Z’s Queerness,” claims, “there is one fluid thread that anyone who’s queer will notice. With the exception of the closeted characters, almost all the characters in the show simply don’t give a shit about the queer status of the others.”³⁶ With the exception of Nate’s father, who is secretly trans-amorous, and Nate, who both hates and lusts for Jules, it is true that most characters on the show do not acknowledge or “give a shit” about Jules’s transness, exhibited by the fact that they do not speak about it. Although I respect that the show doesn’t name or focus excessive attention to gender expressions, I want to understand *what* about Jules makes her transness so acceptable in the show’s suburban sprawl environment, and *what* about her character makes her so desirable to *Euphoria*’s audience.

Another aspect that sets Jules apart from other mainstream trans representations is that Jules enters the show as arguably already passing as a cisgender woman. In contrast to Jeffrey Tambor playing a transwoman on *Transparent*, Jules is played by Hunter Schafer, a transwoman, who appears on the show as a conventionally beautiful cis white woman who does not, as one article states, “grapple... with gender identity.”³⁷ In this sense, her ability to ‘pass’ definitely reflects the show’s efforts to repel attention from Jules’s gender narrative, which begs questioning whether the quietness, regarding Jules’s gender, is only so quiet because Jules passes as a cisgender woman. Her appearance, as conventionally beautiful and ‘passing,’ is arguably why she is so desirable both to the characters on the show and to the show’s audience. Jules, while representative to many reviewers as a sign of progress, is only progressive in a world that

³⁶ Dakota Smith, “What ‘Euphoria’ Gets Right About Gen Z’s Queerness,” *Wussy Mag*, August 2, 2019, www.wussymag.com/all/2019/8/2/what-euphoria-gets-right-about-gen-zs-queerness.

³⁷ Daniel D’Addario, “Trans Superstar Hunter Schafer on Her Moment of ‘Euphoria’,” *Variety*, June 21, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/tv/features/hunter-schafer-hbo-euphoria-1203248330/>.

favors a ‘passing’ appearance, or perceives a ‘passing’ appearance as the end goal of gender transition. Yet, only those who have the socio-economic means to receive hormone treatment at an early enough age are often the only ones who have the chance to achieve a ‘passing’ appearance, and thus, avoid being questioned about their gender identity.

Another popular sentiment afforded to Jules is her style of clothing and makeup. If Jules’s transgender identity doesn’t matter much to the show, the way she dresses and does her makeup certainly does, since Jules’s appearance is what sets her apart from all the other characters. As opposed to Rue, who is most likely to be seen wearing big t-shirts or gray sweatshirts, all of Jules’s clothing, and makeup, is eccentrically colorful and high-end.

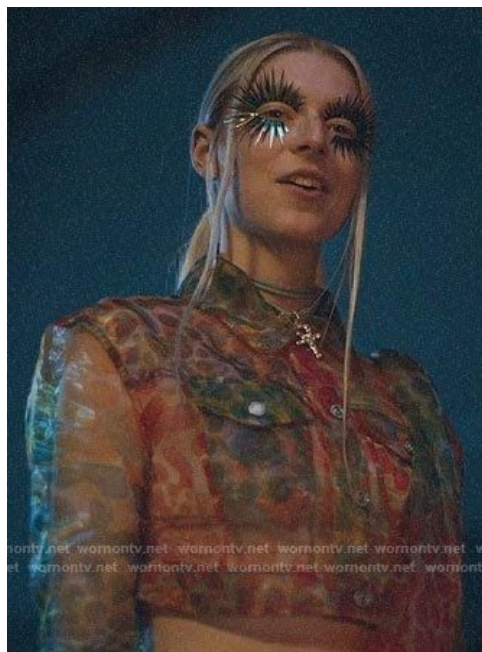
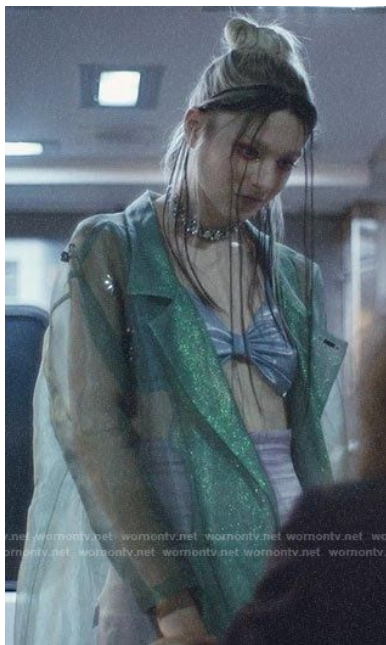


Fig. 1 & 2. Digital Image. Available from: Worn on TV, <https://wornontv.net/euphoria/> (accessed April 16, 2020).

Of course it is typical of television shows to dress their actors in expensive clothing, but the type of clothing that Jules wears is not noticeably expensive: there are no diamonds, no gowns, no clothing that is typically deemed high-class. But Jules’s clothing *is* expensive, and because of her

stylistic eccentricity, she embodies a high fashion ‘alternative’ style that has been the subject of commodification by high fashion brands for decades.

While the makers of *Euphoria* have in part resisted a stereotypical trans narrative of gender dysphoria and struggle, what they have pinkwashed over with their radical resistance to labeling is the role of class status, and the late capitalist bourgeois integration of life and art that, in this case, aestheticizes and commodifies the queer/trans body as alternative to mainstream popular culture. While Jules’s transgender identity is very discreet, I believe that *Euphoria*’s depiction of Jules commodifies queerness, specifically transness, as avant-garde³⁸ and, in that sense, resistant to conformity. By tying her appearance to her gender identity, Jules represents how queerness is often equated to a non-normative, high fashionability which ultimately belongs to an elite class of metropolitan people.

If *Euphoria*’s depiction of Jules is a sign of progress, how is the audience understanding progress? If *Euphoria* depicts less normative images of queerness (normative image meaning indecipherable from a respectable white middle class person), does this mean anything in the context of a company whose primary goal is profit? Although her appearance certainly parts from stereotypical media representations of trans people (i.e. the cross-dresser, the man in women’s clothing, the she-male), I believe that equating her presence, which cannot be detached from her appearance, to ‘progress’ should be critiqued. Before diving into *Euphoria* any further, I want to briefly discuss the HBO company in order to find parallels between *Euphoria*’s depiction of Jules and HBO’s brand image.

³⁸ I use “avant-garde” to describe the alternative, experimental, and innovative notion or style that is often indicated or symbolized by queer and trans bodies. In this case, an avant-garde style is indicated by Jules’s appearance.

“It’s Not TV, It’s HBO”

HBO (Home Box Office) was officially founded in 1972 by Time Inc., and was the first American network to deliver its programs by satellite, thus becoming the first national cable channel.³⁹ From the start HBO has set itself apart from major broadcast networks by employing a subscriber-based business model instead of an advertiser-supported model, meaning that people who want to access HBO’s content, and commercial-free watching experience, have to pay for it separately. In order for HBO to compete with its rival advertiser-supported broadcast networks, HBO has had to focus its entrepreneurial energy towards satisfying its subscribers. To secure the company’s status of being economically worth the cost of subscription, HBO cultivated, and has maintained, “a unique cultural value among television networks,” thus they satisfy their subscribers by upholding their brand as a pinnacle of cultural importance.⁴⁰

When I think of HBO today, I think about their content being something that audiences would not usually see on regular broadcast networks (i.e. nudity and violence, or generally marginalized narratives). This is in part due to the legal restrictions that regulate what may be viewed on public broadcast networks. But it is also due to the fact that HBO’s brand and cultural presence thrives on this difference: the difference between ‘ordinary’ television and HBO. In Christopher Anderson’s essay, *Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television*, Anderson describes how in order for HBO to acquire the status of being culturally valuable and ahead of the times, there had to exist the belief that other image-mediums, or other cultural

³⁹ Erik Gregersen, “HBO: American Company,” Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., last modified March 19, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/HBO>.

⁴⁰ Christopher Anderson, “Overview: Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television,” in *The Essential HBO Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 30.

producers, “are nothing more than noisy diversions clattering along the conveyor belt of commercial culture.”⁴¹ Anderson’s metaphorical use of the conveyor belt to characterize mainstream commercial culture exemplifies how a hierarchy of taste had to exist in order for HBO to set itself apart from the mass crowd of popular televisual culture. It’s not that HBO *created* an aristocracy of culture, rather, HBO capitalized off of an established bourgeois-working class aesthetic distinction in order to present its content as uniquely artistic, and anti-mass market, and thus, worth a paid subscription.

The contrast between lowbrow popular culture, which is often said to appeal to a majority of Americans who are of the working and lower middle class, and anti-mainstream culture, which appeals to *both* countercultures and a bourgeois elite, creates the ability for HBO to identify its content with that which is outside a ‘rigid’ box of normative media culture. HBO’s 1975 slogan was “Different and First,”⁴² signaling the desire of HBO to define itself both in terms of difference (something you won’t get anywhere else, and thus valuable, like a rare gem) and originality, not only to signal their subscription-based business model, but also to claim some type of authentic origin of culture and innovation that positions them above other TV-watching networks. Contributing to the character of difference was the business decision to produce original series in 1983,⁴³ and establish a paywall to combat piracy in 1985 which solidified its position as an exclusive cultural and economic domain.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Anderson, “Overview: Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television,” 29.

⁴² “HBO Slogans,” QM Corporation Channel, accessed April 10, 2020, https://qm-coorpration-channel.fandom.com/wiki/HBO_Slogans.

⁴³ Gary R. Edgerton, “Introduction: A Brief History of HBO,” in *The Essential HBO Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 6.

⁴⁴ Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, “HBO and the Aristocracy of Contemporary TV Culture: affiliations and legitimatising television culture, post-2007,” *Mise Au Point*, 10 (January 2018): 3, <https://doi.org/10.4000/map.2472>.

In the collection of essays titled *Commodify Your Dissent* published by *The Baffler*, Thomas Frank writes, “Today that beautiful countercultural idea, endorsed now by everyone... is more the official doctrine of corporate America than it is a program of resistance. What we understand as ‘dissent’ does not subvert, does not challenge, does not even question the cultural faiths of Western business.”⁴⁵ Frank claims that anti-establishment rhetoric cannot be truly socially or politically subversive if it is practiced in the context of the market. In fact, “today,” anti-establishment sentiments are actually *profitable* for, and made mainstream *by*, corporations. In terms of the widespread notion of HBO as a provider of content that diverges from the material one may see on ‘normal TV,’ HBO’s content, and claims of producing ‘quality’ television, does not exist in a stylistic vacuum outside of the market economy; profit is and has always been the goal of the company. In this context, *Euphoria*’s praise for its non-normative representation of unlabeled transness, and its stylistic depiction of Jules, also exists within a profitable, anti-mainstream sentiment that HBO’s brand has cultivated.

While *Euphoria* is claimed to be subversive in terms of its trans narrative, I would argue that it is actually not as subversive as one may think, at least not politically or economically, since what is anti-establishment or anti-mainstream culture, is extremely profitable, especially in the context of niche-marketing, a kind of marketing that identifies and exploits difference amongst groups of consumers. In Thomas Frank’s essay *Alternative to What?* Frank writes, “The culture industry is drawn to ‘alternative’ [‘alternative’ not just in the sense of a style or a genre of music, but ‘alternative’ meaning subcultural] by the more general promise of finding the eternal

⁴⁵ Thomas Frank, “Why Johnny Can’t Dissent,” in *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler*, ed. Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1997), 44.

new, of tapping the very source of the fuel that powers the great machine.”⁴⁶ Frank highlights how cultural producers are finding anti-mainstream rhetoric, styles, or modes of being, in niche subcultures that have had to cultivate alternative ways of living to combat existing systems of power. Thus, when companies commodify that which is non-normative, they tend to commodify subcultures by subsuming them into the market economy (by fueling “the great machine”), and strip them bare of their subversive potential.

In the 1970s, when HBO arguably began creating its distinctive brand of cultural prominence, the business model of niche-marketing was booming due to the increasing awareness that groups of people (often perceived in the context of countercultural and civil rights movements) that differed from the traditional normative target of mass-marketing (i.e. the heteronormative white people), indeed had either economic, social, or cultural capital and different tastes or ways of living that had not yet been appealed to in the market.⁴⁷ But niche-marketing didn’t just involve the targeting of previously untapped demographic groups, it also involved a strategy of marketing through standards of ‘taste.’ HBO’s longest standing slogan, “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO,” epitomizes the desire to cultivate and identify with an audience that is believed to have a discriminating taste, unlike those who watch ‘normal’ TV. By positioning itself against popular culture, HBO identifies its brand with an air of the avant-garde, whose artistic tastes are equated with what is innovative, radical, and unorthodox. This taste-based marketing strategy may appeal to people across identification lines of race, gender, etc., but it often does not appeal to people across lines of class or economic status.

⁴⁶ Thomas Frank, “Alternative to What?,” in *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler*, ed. Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1997), 151.

⁴⁷ Edgerton, “Introduction: A Brief History of HBO,” 6.

Returning to *Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television*, Anderson opens the essay with an epigraph by French intellectual Pierre Bourdieu: “What makes a urinal or a wine rack that is exhibited in a museum a work of art? Is it the fact that they are signed by Duchamp (recognized first and foremost as an artist) and not by a wine merchant or a plumber?”⁴⁸ Anderson begins his essay with this quote by Bourdieu to highlight that, one, HBO has successfully cultivated the perception that it produces art, not ordinary television, and that, two, there is a pre-existing class-based perceptive difference which allows for HBO’s series to be seen as art, in contrast to the ‘lowbrow’ content that exists in mass-market commercial spheres. Bourdieu uses Duchamp as a stand-in for pre-existing structures of dominance and power which predetermine whether a product is of high or low cultural importance. By claiming that one’s occupation, their economic status in society, will either qualify or disqualify them from producing art, and from interpreting an object *as* a work of art, Bourdieu signals that content does not just exist in a vacuum. Content, instead, is given a certain character and level of prestige that is dependent on the socio-economic context that it arises in.

While Bourdieu places more weight on socio-cultural context rather than economic context, I believe that to apply Bourdieu’s theory to HBO, one must include the context of economic status due to the fact that, in order to watch HBO, one must pay for it, and in order for HBO to produce a series like *Euphoria*, they must have a high budget. What is publicly considered to be art, cannot be detached from its economic influences, especially since HBO is an elite, prestigious company. Although HBO advertises itself along lines of taste, and holds the category of taste over identification categories like race or gender, by privileging ‘discriminating

⁴⁸ Anderson, “Overview: Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television,” 23.

taste' HBO washes over how differences of experience, due to one's economic class, can determine what one enjoys watching.

As I've written, there is a popular argument that what sets HBO apart from other networks is its content's artistic quality and vision. A claim to quality generates a claim of there being an ideal, pure artistic taste that is inherently and independently ideal. To claim quality and tastefulness as existing in themselves creates the idea that quality, and what is considered artistic or tasteful, can be autonomous from economic capital. The falsehood of 'taste' being autonomous from capital is evident in the fact that an HBO subscription costs about \$15 a month plus taxes,⁴⁹ that in 2017 HBO accrued \$5.535 billion in subscription revenue,⁵⁰ that in the same year HBO recorded an operating income of \$2.152 billion,⁵¹ and that *Euphoria* notably cost around \$11 million per episode.⁵² HBO's claim of artistry and subversiveness cannot be detached from its exclusive economic standing, and the economic means of its subscribers.

The Appeal of Appearance in Commodities: Haug's Critique

Since what is so unique about *Euphoria* is its visual appeal, both in terms of its digital production techniques and the way many characters (specifically Jules) are dressed, it will be useful to theorize the importance of appearance in terms of how commodity-products function socially and economically. In W.F. Haug's *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance*,

⁴⁹ "Help Center," HBO NOW, HBO, accessed April 11, 2020, <https://help.hbonow.com/Answer/Detail/13>.

⁵⁰ Time Warner Inc., 2017 Annual Report, December 31, 2017, p. 66, from Annual Reports website, www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1105705/000119312518053619/d504160d10k.htm, accessed April 11, 2020.

⁵¹ Time Warner Inc., 2017 Annual Report, December 31, 2017, p. 53.

⁵² Michael Schneider, "'It's an Explosion': Inside the Rising Costs of Making a Scripted TV Series," *Variety*, October 23, 2019, variety.com/2019/tv/features/cost-of-tv-scripted-series-rises-1203378894/.

Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society Haug roots his understanding of the commodity in Marxist terms by considering how a commodity's value does not stem from its physical matter, but, rather, lies in the commodity's socio-historical relations of human labor production. Haug's focus on the appearance of commodities, and how appearances both present an illusory use-value and an appeal to human sensuality, comes from Marx's belief that "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing."⁵³ "Strange" in the sense that socio-historical complexities are buried beneath the veil of material appearance: not only the labor necessary for producing commodities, but also the aims of the company that produced the product.

Towards the beginning of *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, Haug writes,

The aesthetics of the commodity in its widest meaning—the sensual appearance and the conception of its use-value—become detached from the object itself. Appearance becomes just as important—and practically more so—than the commodity's being itself... Sensuality in this context becomes the vehicle of an economic function, the subject and object of an economically functional fascination.⁵⁴

While the concept of use-value has traditionally been used to describe a commodity's practical usefulness in satisfying a person's essential needs (i.e. food, water, sleep, etc.), the addition of appearance (which Haug credits to packaging) gives use-value another function: appearance determines the product's *perceived* use-value, and in effect, its marketability, by appealing to the viewer's fascination, senses and societal desires. By stressing appearance more so than practical usefulness, commodity-products become closely associated with a person's sensuality.

⁵³ Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, 128.

⁵⁴ Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, 16-17.

Applying Haug’s concept to *Euphoria* reveals how the show’s profitability is inextricably tied to its appearance. When describing the corporate use of art, Haug writes, “the determining aim in the enterprise—profit—is hidden beneath the glamour of art.”⁵⁵



Fig. 3. *Euphoria*, Season 1, Episode 2, “Stuntin’ Like My Daddy,” written by Sam Levinson. Available from: HBO, <https://play.hbogo.com/episode/urn:hbo:episode:GXNGrcQjxSMLDwgEAAAFw> (accessed April 16, 2020).

The distraction-potential of “the glamour of art” is arguably more apparent in *Euphoria* than in any other TV show that represents queerness and transness, since *Euphoria*’s production team consists of ‘creatives,’ like Drake and his manager/music producer, who’ve influenced the glittery, color-oozing appearance of the series. Haug’s description of commercial ventures incorporating art as distractions provides a critical framework for how to judge HBO’s marketing history of conditioning audiences to uphold HBO original productions as ‘art’ in comparison to mass-broadcast TV. By investing in how ‘artful’ commodity-products are, or how ‘artful’ they’re deemed to be, HBO distracts from the fact that products are inherently capitalist. Of course, one doesn’t expect the holders of profit to admit that profit is their aim, but it must be said, especially when the majority of press coverage focuses their attention on how *Euphoria* is an artful, watershed creation, and HBO is an arbiter of taste and provider of societally meaningful content.

⁵⁵ Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, 129.

What arises is a question that asks, to what degree can commercial media, in this case media that represents queer transgender identity, influence or affect the dominating transphobic sentiments of a society? Applying Haug's concept of appearance-centric use-value to HBO productions exhibits how HBO's claim to producing unique content is *also* a claim of its content's socio-political use. Claiming that Jules's transgender narrative provides an untold, socially useful story is true. It *is* a useful story to the extent that a transgender narrative like hers is certainly a watershed moment for transgender representation in media. But what Haug directs our attention to is the "appearance of use-value" which is also a "promise of use-value" that is never fulfilled.⁵⁶ It is unlikely that anything will change in the realm of politics, firstly because Jules's story is fictional and exists in entertainment media, and secondly because HBO mostly has an elite, exclusive audience. Haug highlights that "They [works of art] are deployed as one of many techniques of creating an illusory solution to the contradiction between capitalist private interest and the vital concerns of society as a whole."⁵⁷ Audiences know that what appears on the television is not politics, but, by presenting an arguably subversive narrative in an artful way, the narrative may be classified as art, rather than as a market product, thus it may be seen as a "solution" rather than as a cunning complication.

Through HBO's history of positioning itself in contrast to mass-broadcast media, of producing artful quality content, and of claiming to tell authentic stories, HBO may be regarded as a "solution" to the problematic domination of corporate capital in society. But a solution to the problem of a dominating capitalist model, or of, as Haug puts it, "the contradiction between

⁵⁶ Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, 17.

⁵⁷ Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, 129.

capitalist private interest and the vital concerns of society as a whole,” cannot exist within that very capitalist structure, no matter how ‘artsy’ it is.

Euphoria’s Jules: Queer Metronormativity

As I briefly mentioned earlier, what is most striking about *Euphoria* is its dreamlike production techniques. HBO’s *Euphoria* often looks similar to a long music video, many scenes simply being montages that seamlessly flow from one shot to another, embellished with a two-hued filter, with the main character, Rue’s, narration. Not only does the show’s appearance mirror what most popular music videos look like today, Jules’s character also appears surreal in the sense that her makeup and clothing is, to most audiences, only seen in visual media such as Instagram or on high fashion runways.

While *Euphoria*’s use of contemporary artfulness creates a stylistic environment for the characters to live in, the show’s attention to ‘the visual’ melts into the way that Jules is portrayed, namely as an arbiter of style.⁵⁸ In this sense, Jules is representative of the tasteful anti-mainstream ‘art’ that HBO concerns itself with. Other contemporary television shows with queer representation, such as *The L Word: Generation Q*, do not usually portray queer characters with the same artistic investment as *Euphoria*. Instead, most characters on *The L Word: Generation Q*, as exhibited below, are shown in conventional, business-casual, H&M-esque clothing.

⁵⁸ Walters, *All The Rage*, 237.



Fig. 4. 2019, Digital Image. Available from: IndieWire, <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/10/the-l-word-generation-q-trailer-1202184624/> (accessed April 16, 2020).

It is not that other networks, in this case Showtime, don't have enough money to acquire the technical equipment or the artsy designer clothes to produce something like *Euphoria*, it is because most other networks do not have a brand of alternative, anti-popular culture and bourgeois taste that HBO upholds.

In the first few scenes where Jules is introduced, she does not say a word, instead, she is mostly shown looking at her phone while the audience views her: her high-waisted plaid skirt, her red furry backpack, her platinum blonde hair with pink highlights. Rue's drug dealer even compares Jules's appearance to Sailor Moon, another fact that highlights how Jules's magnetism is driven by her obscure eclectic style. The show's investment in showcasing Jules is evident in her first appearance, where Rue is in the car with her mom and sister, and spots Jules biking on the side of the street in slow motion. After showing Jules, the camera pans back to Rue and her sister in the car, both of them staring at her.



Fig. 5. *Euphoria*, Season 1, Episode 1, “Pilot,” written by Sam Levinson. Available from: HBO, <https://www.hbo.com/euphoria/season-1/1-pilot> (accessed April 16, 2020).

Although Jules doesn’t verbally say that she’s trans until the third episode, in the first episode she is shown standing in a mirror, injecting her thigh, evidently, with estrogen hormones while a hip-hop song plays loudly over the scene. During the shot of her in the mirror, the audience also gets a glimpse at her light pink silk underwear and her slim naked body. Afterwards, we see her getting dressed up in tights, a patterned mesh top, and eventually a short purple dress with overall straps.



Fig. 6. *Euphoria*, Season 1, Episode 1, “Pilot,” written by Sam Levinson. Available from: HBO, <https://www.hbo.com/euphoria/season-1/1-pilot> (accessed April 16, 2020).

Although Jules’s trans narrative is widely praised for not being at the forefront of her character, what *is* at the forefront of her character is her eccentric taste in apparel. Jules’s

narrative may resist the identity-based assumptions that transgender or queer people inherently have different needs or concerns than straight-identifying cisgender people, but, at the same time, Jules is an embodiment of the widespread assumption that queer and trans people are inherently different in terms of their discriminating style. Jules's intrinsic difference is evident in that she is mainly perceived by the other characters, and by various reviews of the show, as an "arbiter of style."⁵⁹ In this sense, Jules reinforces both assumptions that queerness or transness is, most importantly, stylistic, and that queerness can in fact be seen.

In the first episode, Rue reveals that Jules recently moved to the suburbs from the city due to her parents' divorce. Jules's city origins are not stressed in the show, but it is interesting that the writers of *Euphoria* decided to include that reliable 'city to suburb' narrative to explain why Jules is the way she is, namely, why she wears the clothes she wears and why she is comfortable with her queer, transgender identity. In assuming that it wouldn't make sense for her to come from anywhere else, the writers have assumed that Jules's acceptance of and comfort with her transgender identity, and her trendy alternative style, are due to the fact that she is from an urban city, a place stereotypically characterized as being open to queer 'difference,' and being a hub of 'tasteful' fashion.

The assumption that queer people can only be their true selves in an urban environment is a stereotypical and normative narrative. In Scott Herring's book *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*, Herring writes about "metronormativity," a term borrowed from queer theorist Jack Halberstam who uses the term to reference a dominant narrative of queer migration from the stereotypically 'conservative' country to the 'inclusive' city. Although Jules's migration

⁵⁹ Walters, *All The Rage*, 237.

narrative is the opposite (city to suburb), the idea that the city conditioned her style and level of comfort with her identity, reinforces the same idea that the city has a specific, and ‘natural,’ relationship to queerness. Branching off of Halberstam, Herring applies “metronormativity” to six methods of analysis, one of which being “Aesthetic,” writing,

the aesthetic variables of metronormativity—the subcultural styles of cosmopolitanism, sophistication, affectation, knowingness, urbanity, fashion, mannerisms and other displays—often function as an aristocratic guidebook both to what counts for and as queer taste and often to queer group identity at any given historical moment. Independent of any actualized flight to the city, these stylistics frequently naturalize the ‘urban’ not only as an identifiable geographic entity but also as a desired typology and as a commodified fetish, a ‘city group’ thought to be ‘distinctive of all homosexual persons.’ Such urbanities tend to coalesce around seemingly supra-historicist matters of ‘style.’⁶⁰

Herring identifies that the aesthetic variables of metronormativity are evident in styles of dress, speech, and appearance in general, and that these variables are not only conditioned by living in a specific geographic region, but, more importantly, work to define and aristocratically maintain what “queer taste” is. By attaching appearance and taste to queer identity, Herring highlights how queerness is often stereotypically tied to a normalized metropolitan style. This style isn’t inherent to all queer individuals, it comes from a “knowingness that polices and validates what counts for any queer cultural production,”⁶¹ thus anyone who departs from this “style,” is either deemed to be the wrong kind of queer, or is perceived as having not fully embraced their queer identity. Because Jules’s eccentric style differs from the styles that other characters embody, Jules exhibits an urban knowingness of discriminating taste and high-fashion style that trumps the suburban pressures to conform to mainstream styles.

⁶⁰ Scott Herring, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*, (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 18.

⁶¹ Herring, *Another Country*, 18.

Herring continues by citing Pierre Bourdieu who writes, “a social class establishes hegemony when its stylistics... substantiate themselves as natural, ‘legitimate,’ supra-historical, and superior.”⁶² Thus, *Euphoria*’s depiction of Jules as representative of queerness and transness is also a portrayal of a dominant queer urban social class that is often perceived as naturally superior to, for example, countrified queers, because of its style, appearance, etc. There is a reason why *Euphoria* cast Hunter Schafer, a designer fashion model, to play Jules, and there is a reason why *Euphoria* dresses Jules the way they do. It is not only to appeal to HBO’s discriminating audience, who are most likely aware of the newest trends in fashion, it is also to follow the path of the most lauded, most ‘legitimate,’ most *profitable* queers in the US: the wealthy urban ones with a knowing style.

Much queer media, including *Euphoria*, contributes to an ideological representation of the ‘urban’ as a homogenized space of leisure, wealth, and consumption, which works to replace the notion of the US city as a place of racially and socioeconomically diverse queers, as well as the urban as a performative space of political contestation, uprising, and revolution.⁶³ In *Euphoria*, queerness and transness are more related to style and appearance, and are void of activist or subversive potential. Still, *Euphoria* is praised for its alternative trans narrative. Jules’s narrative *is* subversive in relation to other media representations of trans people, most notably the narrative of gender dysphoria and transition, but the subversiveness of storytelling must not be equated to the show’s potential subversiveness of social politics due to the fact that Jules’s character mirrors and appeals to an unnamed upper/upper-middle class urban style.

⁶² Herring, *Another Country*, 20.

⁶³ Herring, *Another Country*, 78.

Chapter 3: Amazon's *Transparent*

Amazon Studios and Prime Video

As opposed to HBO's long history of network existence, Amazon Studios was created only in 2010, originally for the purpose to sell and distribute movies and television series that were made and released by other companies. While HBO has long been in the business of producing its own content and creating a brand of quality, innovation, and nonconformity, Amazon Studios has not cultivated a unique brand due to its parent company being the great and powerful Amazon—a company that is involved in the mass-market commercial world.

Amazon was founded in 1995 by Jeff Bezos in the state of Washington as an online bookstore, but, in the matter of three years, the company began absorbing other online marketplaces in order to sell products other than books. Amazon's place in the market as a hub of culturally-relevant content arguably did not arise until it started producing its own entertainment content, namely, films and television. Viewers can either purchase series and films that Amazon provides, or get access to Amazon Studios' original content by becoming an Amazon Prime member for \$119 a year, or \$12.99 a month.⁶⁴

Like all digital bearers of televisual content, Amazon costs money. Yet it differs from other digital television mediums like Netflix, Hulu, and HBO, since Amazon subscribers do not just subscribe to a televisual medium; a Prime subscription grants subscribers additional benefits, for example, the ability to get 2-day free shipping on any Amazon product. When a subscriber opts into Amazon Prime, they are not just getting access to Amazon's digital content, they are

⁶⁴ "Amazon Prime Price Change," Help & Customer Service, Amazon, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.amazon.com/gp/help/customer/display.html?nodeId=202213110>.

also granted privileged access to the rest of what Amazon has to offer. In effect, this business model has the ability to convert online viewers into ordinary shoppers.⁶⁵ In a 2016 industry seminar, Jeff Bezos says, “When we win a Golden Globe, it helps us sell more shoes... once they [Amazon Prime members] pay their annual fee, they’re looking around to see, ‘How can I get more value out of the program?’ And so they look across more categories—they shop more.”⁶⁶ This brings attention to the fact that Amazon’s decision to branch out into the entertainment sector is not just a desire to create cultural content, it is also a marketing strategy to produce more ordinary mass-market shoppers who will search for products that Amazon certainly provides. Additionally, Amazon is concerned with creating as much business action as possible, so it only makes sense that they would branch out into the entertainment sector of television by not just providing access to already existing shows and movies, but by producing their own content. While Amazon Studios is not a principal part of the Amazon business at large, in the sense that it does not generate the most profit, it does *something else* for the Amazon brand: it characterizes the brand as socially aware of its audiences desire for meaningful content, and helps cultivate a culturally-conscious image of the brand which is impossible to construct through their online store’s mass-market character.

As opposed to HBO’s brand, alluded to with their popular slogan “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO,” as one that characterizes itself as ‘high elite art’ by denoting ‘normal’ TV to “the conveyor belt of commercial culture,”⁶⁷ Amazon apparently can do both. The Amazon Studios

⁶⁵ Justin Wyatt, “The Life Cycle of *Transparent*: Envisioning Queer Space, Time and Business Practice,” *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 16 (Winter 2018): 87, <http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue16/ArticleWyatt.pdf>.

⁶⁶ Wyatt, “The Life Cycle of *Transparent*,” 87.

⁶⁷ Anderson, “Overview: Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television,” 29.

website describes, “Amazon Studios brings bold and innovative series and films from top tier and up-and-coming creators to customers in over 200 countries and territories,” and “Prime Video offers thousands of movies and TV shows, including popular licensed and self-published content plus critically-acclaimed and award-winning Prime Originals like,” and then lists a number of series that make up a whole paragraph.⁶⁸ While HBO’s website and branding history makes it apparent that HBO is solely concerned with quality, nonconformity, and its original status-position in American culture, Amazon’s brand mostly characterizes itself with large-scale influence through claiming scope and numbers, boasting that Amazon reaches “over 200 countries and territories” and that “Prime Video offers thousands of movies and TV shows.” But, in addition, Amazon also appeals to the kind of quality content that HBO is in the business of, by advertising its content as “innovative,” “top tier,” and “critically-acclaimed.”

Aside from this, Amazon, along with its founder and CEO Jeff Bezos, has been criticized time and again over the past few years for the enormous amount of money Amazon generates and keeps in the hands of higher-ups. In 2019 Amazon made a net income of about \$11.59 billion⁶⁹ and a revenue of \$280.5 billion,⁷⁰ and as of early April 2020, Bezos had a net worth, according to Forbes, of \$123 billion.⁷¹ On top of this, Amazon has been the object of criticism due to an outcry of upsetting worker testimonials regarding the painful hours and unsafe working conditions in Amazon warehouses in conjunction with a barely livable wage. Furthermore,

⁶⁸ “About Amazon Studios,” Amazon Studios, Amazon, <https://studios.amazon.com>.

⁶⁹ Amazon.com, Inc., Form 10-K for the Fiscal Year Ended December 31, 2019 (filed January 31, 2020, p. 39, <http://d18rn0p25nwr6d.cloudfront.net/CIK-0001018724/4d39f579-19d8-4119-b087-ee618abf82d6.pdf>, accessed April 17, 2020).

⁷⁰ Amazon.com, Inc., Form 10-K for the Fiscal Year Ended December 31, 2019, 67.

⁷¹ “#1 Jeff Bezos,” Profile, Forbes, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/jeff-bezos/#190221c11b23>.

during this most recent election cycle, Bernie Sanders has been very open about criticizing Amazon's lack of income taxes in comparison to their giant amount of profit. After about two years of paying roughly \$0 in US federal tax income, Amazon owed about \$162 million in taxes in 2019.⁷² Still, \$162 million is still just a fraction of the pre-tax income Amazon reported for 2019—roughly 1.39%.

While progressive leftist critiques of neoliberal capitalism provide the framework for the critiques of Bezos and Amazon in general, Amazon Studios deflects criticism by producing Amazon's award-winning series, *Transparent*. By producing *Transparent*, the company has, no matter how superficially, aligned itself with traditionally democratic moral values such as representation and diversity, two values that are specifically apparent in *Transparent*. In this framing, *Transparent* is not just a culturally relevant and socially conscious product, it is also a *tool* that helps deflect criticism by producing liberal-minded, socially-aware optics for Amazon. It is beneficial to think of Jasbir K. Puar's concept of 'pinkwashing' in this context, because by producing something so influential and culturally successful in the realm of representational media, Amazon washes over its unjust labor practices, and its cultural and material domination in society.⁷³ By associating Amazon with *Transparent*, the company engages in a type of pinkwashing that, in effect, makes Amazon and Bezos appear more engaged with progressive politics than they really are.

⁷² Tom Huddleston Jr., "Amazon had to pay federal income taxes for the first time since 2016 — here's how much," *CNBC*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/04/amazon-had-to-pay-federal-income-taxes-for-the-first-time-since-2016.html>.

⁷³ Jasbir K. Puar, "Citation and Censure: Pinkwashing and the Sexual Politics of Talking about Israel," in *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, ed. Chatterjee Piya and Maira Sunaina (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 289.

Jill Soloway's Press Coverage and the Political Potential of "Transparent"

In addition to Amazon, Jill Soloway (they/them), the writer and creator of *Transparent*, also contributes to Amazon Studios' inclusive progressive image through a kind of pinkwashing by claiming that injustices exist in society amongst minority groups, but, by creating content like *Transparent*, these injustices can be abolished; they claim that progress can in fact occur through representational media.

What is so intriguing about the majority of *Transparent*'s press is that it is dominated by Jill Soloway, as if no coverage of the show can exist without some mention of the creator behind the series. One reason why Soloway's presence dominates *Transparent*'s press coverage is because the series is actually based on Jill Soloway's life as a Jewish, suburban, queer person with a transgender parent. In several interviews Soloway confidently admits, "My parent came out as trans... and pretty shortly afterwards, it was pretty clear to me that I was going to be writing a television show out of it."⁷⁴ This points to the theme that a lot of other representations of queer people in the media has raised, namely, as queer and trans people turn into, or appear as, consumers, their "coming-out stories now appear as plots."⁷⁵ Although Soloway is pulling material from their intimate family life, they still engage in queer commodification by turning, or treating, their and their parent's experience into, and as, a work of commercial 'art.'

Another reason why Soloway's media presence overpowers most reviews and press coverage of *Transparent* is that Soloway's artistic vision is accredited to Amazon Studios' grant of creative agency. In a 2014 interview Soloway says, "[the show] doesn't need to be mediated

⁷⁴ Prime Video DE, "Interview Jill Soloway | Transparent | Prime Video DE," May 5, 2015, *YouTube* video, 1:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_te_4F7_zn0.

⁷⁵ Chasin, *Selling Out*, 238.

through three or four other corporations before it's approved... and they [Amazon] understand that giving artists a lot of creative freedom is the easiest way to create content that will stand out... We were so thrilled to have so much creative freedom from Amazon."⁷⁶ Again in a 2017 interview, Soloway says that, unlike other networks that they've worked with, Amazon is different because "They have a very different style than most networks... because they're using these kind of disruptive technologies, they don't really have the same tradition,"⁷⁷ alluding to the traditions of Hollywood bureaucracy that most other networks have. Not only do Soloway's statements, in essence, communicate, 'if it weren't for Amazon, this underrepresented story would not be told,' their characterization of Amazon as an arbiter of artistic freedom and creativity appeals to an audience concerned with quality and 'good' taste, values that *should* be read in relation to an audience's socioeconomic position. This characterization that Soloway contributes to mimics HBO's branding of its original series as art.

In *HBO and the Aristocracy of Contemporary TV Culture: affiliations and legitimatising television culture, post-2007*, Kim Akass and Janet McCabe write about the concept of 'authorship' by highlighting how television shows that are made by "an individual motivated by artistic intent and given a relatively generous degree of autonomy" effectively sets HBO apart from other networks that use "writer's rooms, a traditional US TV practice where large teams prepare scripts subject to network oversight, FCC regulation and the demands of sponsors."⁷⁸

Although Akass and McCabe are writing about HBO, their analysis can be applied to Soloway's

⁷⁶ Jill Soloway, "Jill Soloway on *Transparent* and How Lena Dunham's Success Convinced Her to Stop Pretending," interview by John Horn, *Vulture*, September 26, 2014, <https://www.vulture.com/2014/09/jill-soloway-interview-transparent-amazon-lena-dunham-girls-louie.html>.

⁷⁷ Recode, "Jill Soloway, creator of Amazon's Emmy-winning 'Transparent' series | Full interview | Code 2017," June 2, 2017, *YouTube* video, 30:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GfCkPwNTzM>.

⁷⁸ Akass and McCabe, "HBO and the Aristocracy of Contemporary TV Culture," 6.

characterization of themselves as a creative free agent, and to Amazon Studios, as a media platform that believes in, and respects, the idea of the solo artist. This positioning is both beneficial to Soloway, as someone who gains popular recognition for their authorship of a successful television series, and to Amazon Studios, by cultivating a brand of being ‘in the business’ of artistic freedom and expression, thus setting itself apart from other TV networks.

Soloway does not just see themselves as an artist, they also see themselves, and *Transparent*, as a significant part of a larger intersectional political movement. In one interview Soloway says, “We consider it an incredible honor that we get money from Amazon to make this thing called the television show that, to us, is actually art and a political movement.”⁷⁹ To give credit to *Transparent*, it really is a groundbreaking series in that it has given voices and opportunities to trans people both behind and on the screen—people who have been historically left out of political conversations and marketplace opportunities. It has also disrupted a stereotypical mainstream narrative of being transgender: that which is a specific life experience clouded by struggle and violence, and completely isolated from other life experiences. But, on the other hand, Soloway’s continual praising of Amazon as a source of capital and creative freedom is questionable, because this characterization deflects leftist critiques of Amazon that should not be separated from the ‘intersectional political movement’ that Soloway continually references in relation to the show.

⁷⁹ BUILD Series, “Jill Soloway, Judith Light, Amy Landecker, Jay Duplass, Gaby Hoffman & Rob Heubel On Season 4 Of Ama,” September 13, 2017, *YouTube* video, 42:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I27JVCi0fnE>.

In an interview from June 2017 the interviewer asks Soloway, “So do you spend a lot of time with Jeff Bezos?” and after jokingly responding with “We live together, we sleep together,” Soloway says,

No he’s great. I always love hanging out with him... One of the questions I’ve asked him is, you know, ‘I’m obsessed with... an intersectional power movement, I think about revolution all the time, how do I square that with my TV and film-making ambitions?’ And he said, ‘They’re the same thing. The way a story can make change is so much faster than how politics can make change’ ... That was exciting to hear from him.⁸⁰

Both Bezos and Soloway approach political change through the neoliberal realm of subscription-based media. By claiming that a product, which inherently commodifies trans and queer existence, can produce political change highlights the marketing strategy of drawing in viewers through liberal virtue-signaling, namely, by claiming that the trans and queer-phobic world is going to change through *Transparent*’s positive representation.

Because Soloway’s creative and niche storytelling is easily commodified by the market, it does not easily escape the realm of exclusive media. Additionally, the people who watch *Transparent* mostly likely are already supporters of transgender liberation, since one must *choose* to watch *Transparent* because it doesn’t air on public networks, and it costs money. This raises questions pertaining to queer representation in general, namely: does representations of queer and trans people in the media significantly influence queer politics? Does portraying arguably positive images of transgender people influence the prejudices of the people watching? It is quite possible, but *Transparent*, by itself, will never amount to the political change that trans people urgently need.

⁸⁰ Recode, “Jill Soloway, creator of Amazon’s Emmy-winning ‘Transparent’ series | Full interview | Code 2017.”

Although Soloway may be “obsessed” with “an intersectional power movement,” both Bezos and Soloway envision this movement as outside of where they work, specifically in the world outside of Amazon Studios, thus they indirectly maintain that Amazon is not *also* committing injustices that Soloway *should* be obsessed with if they are truly concerned with intersectionality. By claiming that injustices exist in society, and that Amazon’s *Transparent* combats those injustices, Soloway pinkwashes over the fact that injustices exist right there in Amazon warehouses.

The Subjects of “Transparent” and the ‘Representation’ Questions

The Amazon Studios original series *Transparent*, written and created by Jill Soloway, is arguably Amazon Studios’ most critically acclaimed series. Although *Transparent*’s audience size fails to lead amongst other Amazon Prime offerings, the series has received ample public recognition evidenced by its numerous awards such as the Peabody, GLAAD, Emmy, and Golden Globe.⁸¹ And this is no surprise, since *Transparent* is one of the most innovative contemporary series available with regards to its complicated representation of queerness and transness.

The series centers on a Jewish family, the Pfeffermans, who are from the Pacific Palisades, a coastal suburb in the city of Los Angeles which is, for the most part, made up of a heteronormative, economically well-off, white population. The Pfefferman family includes Maura, the trans-parent, Shelly, the neurotic Jewish mother, and three children, Sarah, the responsible yet unhappy stay-at-home mom, Josh, the successful music producer, and Ali, the

⁸¹ Wyatt, “The Life Cycle of *Transparent*,” 87.

jobless restless youngest child. All of the Pfefferman children are adults when the series starts, and continue to live their lives in the enormous city of Los Angeles. Although Maura is the only transgender family member, all Pfeffermans grapple with identity, gender, sex, trauma, relationships, etc.

Aside from the Pfeffermans, there are a number of queer and trans cast members, such as Carrie Brownstein (who plays Ali's best friend and partner in the first season), Alexandra Billings (a trans actress who plays Davina, Maura's best friend), Cherry Jones (a lesbian actress who plays a renowned poet), Hari Nef (a trans actress and model who plays a Pfefferman relative from Weimar Germany), Ian Harvie (a trans-man who has a fling with Ali), Trace Lysette (a trans-woman who plays Shea, Maura's younger friend), and the list goes on. In addition, Soloway also employed a number of queer and trans crew members, and made all bathrooms on set "gender neutral" as part of their "transfirmative action program."⁸² In a 2014 *New York Times* article titled "Can Jill Soloway Do Justice to the Trans Movement?" the author writes that "favoring the hiring of transgender candidates over nontransgender ones... wasn't just a corrective to the trans community's high rates of unemployment. Soloway wanted to create a set on which inclusivity was more than a buzzword," implying that Soloway's actions of creating a comfortable set for trans and queer people is a material manifestation of inclusivity. In this sense, the set of *Transparent* acted as a corrective to the isolated rhetoric of an intersectional movement that Soloway has often employed. I certainly applaud Soloway for doing the behind-the-scenes

⁸² Taffy Brodesser-Akner, "Can Jill Soloway Do Justice to the Trans Movement," *The New York Times Magazine*, August 29, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/magazine/can-jill-soloway-do-justice-to-the-trans-movement.html>.

work of hiring trans and queer people in an industry traditionally dominated by cisgender heterosexual men.

Interesting, then, why Soloway chose Jeffrey Tambor, a straight cisgender man, to play the show's main character, Maura, a transgender woman. In a 2018 *NPR* interview, a question arose regarding Soloway's choice to cast Jeffrey Tambor as Maura, to which Soloway responds, "I was really ignorant about trans politics... I always want to say that Jeffrey Tambor's portrayal of Maura was absolutely astonishing and beautiful, and Jeffrey's a fantastic actor. But also I was making a huge mistake around trans politics by having a cis man play a trans woman."⁸³ While Soloway seems to regret their casting choice from a political perspective, acknowledging that to cast a cisgender man to play a transgender woman may be 'politically incorrect,' Soloway still honors Tambor's ability to portray Maura. Critics have critiqued the show for casting Tambor, but it is important to note that Tambor's performance is in no way a stereotypical portrayal of transgender women. I'd argue that, since Maura's character and narrative is so much more complicated than her trans identity, there is no reason why Tambor should not have played Maura. What *is* stereotypical is the casting decision of employing a cis person to play a trans person.

This raises more questions about representation in Soloway's work. In numerous interviews, as I've previously noted, Soloway expresses their interest and commitment to an "intersectional power movement." At the Chicago Humanities Festival in 2017 an interviewer asks Soloway, "Where is the revolution taking you next?" and they respond with,

⁸³ Jill Soloway, "In 'She Wants It,' Jill Soloway Gets Transparent About Their Life And Work," interview by Lulu Garcia-Navarro, *NPR*, October 21, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/21/658995191/in-she-wants-it-jill-soloway-gets-transparent-about-their-life-and-work>.

Yeah, I'm just talking about the revolution constantly... I try to run off these phrases all the time. I try to say 'women, people of color, queer people.' I try to say those three all together... I think some sort of alignment of people who feel otherized, and their allies, will create a new protagonism that can take down the patriarchy.⁸⁴

Although Soloway is “talking” about an intersectional revolution “constantly,” one may not glean that from watching *Transparent*, not just because the show exists in the isolated realm of elite media, but also because, as Amy Villarejo puts it, “almost everyone in *Transparent* is white. For all of the series’ reliance upon the topography and specificity of its Los Angeles setting, the viewer could be watching something set in the suburbs of Scandinavia.”⁸⁵ The few characters of color that the show portrays are minor characters, except for Davina (Maura’s best friend), who plays a relatively major role on the show.

One could make the argument that a television series which allegedly cares about, and is fighting for, intersectional politics and representation in a cis-male-dominated industry should have more fully fleshed characters of color. On the other hand, one could make the argument that Soloway has presented their audience with a realistic representation of the Pfefferman family and their acquaintances. Villarejo’s imagined Los Angeles setting is one that is racially diverse, which Los Angeles certainly is, but because the Pfeffermans live in the Pacific Palisades, a white suburb surrounded by other predominantly white suburban neighborhoods, it is understandable that the Pfefferman family would mostly come into contact with white people. Of course, the decision to exhibit a mostly white cast is problematic in relation to how most queer and trans representation has operated throughout US media history: by exhibiting only white people,

⁸⁴ Chicago Humanities Festival, “Jill Soloway: *Transparent*,” December 12, 2017, YouTube video, 57:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPY1RjPgnj0>.

⁸⁵ Amy Villarejo, “Jewish, Queer-ish, Trans, And Completely Revolutionary: Jill Soloway’s *Transparent* and the New Television,” *Film Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (2016): 12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26413709>.

Transparent follows a representational media trend of producing a normative queer identity—the wealthy white gay man.⁸⁶ Now, in 2020, it is no secret that queer people exist in every shape and form, but it is still true that the stereotypical queer individual is white, due to advertising images and media representations which presume that audiences with buying power are white. Although *Transparent*'s lack of diversity deserves critique, I respect that the show doesn't forge a diverse community in terms of identificatory categories.

(Upper)Class Awareness and Representational Nuance

If race isn't a necessary component to Soloway's imagined intersectional power movement, then class-status certainly is. *Transparent* often exhibits one's socioeconomic class-status as being a defining factor for how one walks through the world. By focusing on the category of class, *Transparent* resists boxing people into labels based on their racial, gender, or sexual identity. Instead, by focusing on class-status and economic privilege, *Transparent* exhibits how analyses of race or gender cannot be done legitimately if they are negligent of class analysis. Through examining the show, one sees that Soloway is certainly aware of privilege and class, and how these two factors complicate stereotypical perceptions of queer identity as that which is solely marginalized and discriminated against.

For example, in the first episode of the third season, Maura volunteers for the Los Angeles LGBT Center's crisis hotline. Maura receives a distressing call from a young transgender woman named Elizah who explains to Maura that she woke up at 5 AM to go to the clinic only to be rejected by the doctors who claim that Elizah needs her foster parents to come

⁸⁶ Walters, *All The Rage*, 286.

and give permission for Elizah to receive treatment. After hesitating, and asking a few awkward questions, Elizah finally says, “This is my fourth foster family. I bet you wouldn’t even know what it’s like. Have you ever been to South LA? Probably not, so you wouldn’t even fucking get it.”⁸⁷ Once Maura finally convinces Elizah to walk to a safe space outside of the clinic, Elizah starts to cry and then hangs up. Maura then takes matters into her own hands, and tries to go find Elizah. After walking through a downtown swap meet, Maura finds a group of Latinx trans women, and asks them if they might have seen a girl named Elizah “on the streets,” to which one of the women accusingly asks, “What streets?”, highlighting Maura’s offensive stereotyping.

From this series of interactions, the audience, and Maura, realizes that while Maura may be able to identify with the people she interacts with, and accrue some solidarity in terms of them all being trans women, Maura has experienced a world completely outside of theirs due to her economic privilege that cannot be detached from her white identity, and locational experience of living in a coastal suburb of Los Angeles. At this point it doesn’t matter that the people Maura has interacted with in the episode are also transgender women, what matters is the immense void of life experience, due to economic status, that divides Maura and the other transwomen. Despite Maura’s generally marginalized transgender identity, she still holds and perpetuates beliefs that come from a place of socio-economic privilege.

In comparison to other media representations of transness, I believe *Transparent* does it best in the sense that it truly takes into account the influential role that class and economic position plays in one’s everyday experience, regardless of their gender identity. Just because

⁸⁷ *Transparent*, season 3, episode 1, “Elizah,” directed by Jill Soloway, aired September 23, 2016, on Amazon Prime Video, https://www.amazon.com/Elizah/dp/B01J4STMP2/ref=sr_1_3?dchild=1&keywords=transparent&qid=1587323724&sr=8-3.

Maura is transgender doesn't mean that she can necessarily relate to other transwomen, specifically the working-class trans women of color that she comes into contact with.

Transparent may not have a cast as racially diverse as HBO's *Euphoria*, but it does heavily focus on socio-economic privilege, a fact of life that is generally absent in *Euphoria*. Although Soloway is evidently engaged in an identity-based politics that is not specifically concerned with economic class, the show speaks for itself by heavily engaging with class-based identity politics more than not. The class it focuses on, though, is a white economically-privileged class, but, *Transparent* makes up for this privileged representation by portraying its main characters, the Pfeffermans, as unlikeable. The Pfefferman's unlikeability stems from their relatively consistent unawareness of their own privileged socio-economic status, thus *Transparent* resists praising its main trans and queer characters by virtue of them being trans and queer.

Not only do the Pfeffermans receive a nuanced portrayal, so do all the trans and queer characters on the show. *Transparent* resists an essentialist point of view in the sense that the queer and trans characters do not have predictable personalities, values or politics that adhere to their gender or sexuality. In Danae Clark's essay *Commodity Lesbianism*, Clark analyzes the various strategies that companies practice in order to appeal to gays and lesbians in the market. Clark writes, "Mainstream media texts employ representational strategies that generally refer to gays and lesbians in anti-essentialist terms... The result is a liberal gay discourse that embraces humanism while rejecting any notion of a separate and authentic lesbian/gay subject."⁸⁸ Clark identifies a humanist approach to marketing that appeals to lesbians and gays through coded advertisements which don't explicitly say 'This is for gays and lesbians.' By simply "referring"

⁸⁸ Danae Clark, "Commodity Lesbianism," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 195.

to gay identity (through language, signs, appearances, etc.), companies resist an essentialist point of view, but, the *intent* behind the humanist approach is to attract the largest possible audience. In terms of *Transparent*, the show rejects a notion of there being a distinct or authentic queer subject by focusing on other identity-influences like Judaism or economic status. The intent behind portraying nuanced queer characters may in fact be to gain a straight or cis audience by appealing to liberal humanism. Even so, I would argue that *Transparent*'s portrayal *does* do justice to trans and queer representation because the show contains a diverse array of representational possibilities that would be impossible to include in singular advertisements.

Unlike HBO's *Euphoria*, or queer-baiting advertisements, *Transparent* depicts various trans and queer characters which help to provide the audience with a nuanced representation of transness and queerness. Davina is a great example of the nuance that *Transparent* captures. In the second season, Maura casts judgment on Davina's boyfriend, Sal, by saying to her, "Isn't it odd that you haven't met his family?... Does he talk to you about your body? Because he talks to me about my body," referring to a previous conversation in the episode where Sal interrogates Maura about her plans to physically transition.⁸⁹ Sal had asked Maura, "What are you thinking about, you know, facial feminization-wise? ... I'm thinking lower that hairline, maybe some cheek implants... If I might, 500cc's in the titty area. Nothing too big." While Sal did not have bad or malicious intentions, Maura reasonably felt uncomfortable, and believed the conversation was inappropriate. After her exchange with Sal, Maura says to Davina, "You can do better than that," referring to Sal, to which Davina replies, "Who do you think you're talking to? I'm gonna tell you one thing: mind your own goddamn business. You have no right. We don't all have your

⁸⁹ *Transparent*, season 2, episode 7, "The Book of Life," directed by Jill Soloway, aired December 11, 2015, on Amazon Prime Video, <https://www.amazon.com/Transparent-Season-2/dp/B017I3KTV6>.

family, we don't all have your money. I'm a fifty-three-year-old, ex-prostitute, HIV-positive woman with a dick. And I know what I want, and I know what I need.”

Although Maura had been subjected to Sal's unchecked, intrusive, trans-ideations, Davina excuses his actions, not because she doesn't care for Maura, but because she desires what Sal provides for her. For Davina, Sal is enough because, as she says, “We don't all have your family, we don't all have your money,” highlighting how Davina doesn't have the familial or economic support system that Maura has. In an earlier episode Davina says to Maura that, when she began to transition, her friend told her, “In five years, you're going to look up, and not one of your family members is still going to be there,”⁹⁰ alluding to the fact that many transgender people are in dangerous and unfortunate societal positions due to them being ex-communicated from the biological-family institution that so many people rely on for support, such as Maura. Maura's impulse to judge Sal is certainly well-intentioned in the sense that she recognizes the nonchalant transphobia that Sal engages in, and that many people engage in every day. But her judgment of Sal, and of Davina for staying with him, is a relatively blind one, because Maura's life experience is completely insulated from the realities and societal status that Davina has experienced.

While Maura's inappropriate interaction with Sal motivates her to call out Sal's transphobic disrespect, Davina's basic desires to love and be loved outweigh any impulse to identify and combat day-to-day transphobia, despite the fact that Davina is trans. The nuance that is derived here comes from the tension between identifying as a transgender person, while also

⁹⁰ *Transparent*, season 1, episode 2, “The Letting Go,” directed by Jill Soloway, aired September 26, 2014, on Amazon Prime Video, https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B017I3KTV6/ref=atv_dp_season_select_s2.

accepting, or letting go of, discrimination or fetishization. Additionally, Davina's nuance comes through as a kind of not-PC (not 'politically correct') realism that is absent in many representations of queer and trans people today. For example, in Sephora's "We Belong to Something Beautiful" advertisement (evaluated in Chapter 1), queer and trans people are represented as having an awareness of "the gender binary" and pronoun culture, thus, the advertisement assumes that people who are part of 'the queer community' all hold 'politically correct' social and political opinions because of their sexual and/or gender identity.⁹¹ Similarly, Maura assumes that Davina will hold the same moral opinion as her regarding Sal since Maura and Davina are both transwomen. But Davina combats this assumption by claiming that she doesn't care that Sal wasn't being mindful in relation to Maura's gender transition. Davina knows what she wants, and her ability to settle on, and desire, Sal should not be read apart from her socio-economic status, and the challenges that she has faced because of it.

Trans as Concept, not as Individual

While both *Euphoria* and *Transparent* represent trans and queer people, the two shows differ in that *Euphoria* is not so much about transness as it is about drug-addled teenage life in a post-9/11 suburban sprawl environment. *Transparent*, on the other hand, uses transness and queerness as conceptual lenses to represent a family and all their social complexities. Although *Euphoria* has trans and queer characters, like Rue and Jules, queerness is just one isolated component of the show. While, for *Transparent*, one could make the argument that transness and queerness, as concepts, permeate every aspect of the show.

⁹¹ Chasin, *Selling Out*, 243.

Euphoria and *Transparent* are similar in that they both decenter the traditional and stereotypical trans narrative of struggle. As I cited earlier, Scott Turner, *Euphoria*'s trans-consultant, said "What we see on TV right now is... the 'Trans Person Being Trans,' and the trans person's only narrative is transition."⁹² While Jules arrives in *Euphoria* post-transition, and arguably passes as a cis woman, Maura's narrative includes her coming-out story, and the processes she must go through to transition. But Maura's transition narrative resists stereotype since it is complicated by the fact that she is an economically well-off woman with familial support whose transition isn't as visually physical as it is emotional and social: her narrative is enveloped by a feeling of reinvention, a feeling that all other characters on the show experience. Although Maura struggles a lot, so does everyone else, thus the trans narrative that *Transparent* portrays is much more focused on the effect that transness, as reinvention and as gender transition, has on one's social networks than on the individual going through transition.

From the title, one might assume that the 'trans parent' is the only thing the series is interested in portraying, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. What is most prominent in the series is its focus on relationships, family, identity, desire, how the past and present complicate each other, and how all these things are messily wrapped up with one another. This mesh of identity, relationships, and growth (both regarding the passing of time and personal growth) is represented in the opening credits—a nostalgic home video montage that combines scenes of a bar mitzvah (mostly shots of young boys) with shots of adult drag queens who appear to be participating in a pageant. These two seemingly different realities, one having to do with the Jewish tradition of becoming an adult and one having to do with performing a different gender

⁹² Scott Turner Schofield, "Euphoria's trans consultant on why the series tells authentic trans stories," interview by Palmer Haasch, *Polygon*, August 10, 2019.

identity, are brought together to exhibit the show's primary identity categories in question:

Jewish and transgender. By conjoining these two different realities in a nostalgic flashback-esque manner, the opening credits don't just represent transgender identity or Jewish identity, rather the opening credits connect the two identity-rooted traditions to more generally refer to a process of growing up, of coming into oneself, of learning, of a neverending *transition* which is life itself.

The opening credits also serve as a mini-narrative for Maura: when she had her bat mitzvah she 'became a man,' and later when she transitions she 'becomes a woman.'⁹³ Thus, it begs one to ask, is 'transition' really just relegated to the realm of one's individual gender transformation, or can it exist in other areas of life too? Maura is the main character who comes out as transgender, but throughout the series many other characters go through types of transitions themselves, not just in terms of gender and sexuality, but also in terms of how they are constantly learning and being influenced by others.

Aside from transness, contemporary Jewish identity is also being reckoned with in relation to queerness. By including footage from a bar mitzvah in the opening credits, and by focusing so much of the show on contemporary Judaism in the US, *Transparent* seems to suggest that there is something inherently queer about Jewish identity. This is evident in the second season's frequent flashbacks to early 1930s Weimar Germany. About halfway through the first episode, during Sarah's wedding party, there is a flashback to a big room filled with trans and queer people dancing together.⁹⁴ Then, in the fourth episode, while Ali is doing research about

⁹³ Stephen Vider, "Why Is an Obscure 1968 Documentary in the Opening Credits of *Transparent*?" *Slate*, October 23, 2014, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/10/transparents-opening-credits-are-a-lesson-in-the-history-of-gender.html>.

⁹⁴ *Transparent*, season 2, episode 1, "Kina Hora," directed by Jill Soloway, aired November 30, 2015, on Amazon Prime Video, https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B017I3KTV6/ref=atv_dp_season_select_s2.

her family's Jewish history pre-Nazi Germany, there is a flashback that begins with a building entrance which reads, "The Institut Für Sexual Wissenschaft, Magnus Hirschfeld 1919," followed by a shot of a young woman, Rose (Maura's mother), with a superimposed caption that reads Berlin 1933.⁹⁵ Rose walks in the building and falls upon a tour, in which the tour guide describes the Institute as "a safe haven for those of us who are neither male nor female." Then we meet Rose's sibling, Gershon, who she calls Gittel, alluding to her sister's transgender identity. In episode eight, the audience learns that Gittel has a "transvestite pass," which she describes as an identification card that allows her to cross-dress publicly without fear of being arrested by the police.⁹⁶ By the end of episode nine, squads of Nazi members raid the Institute, marking the end of the utopic societal dream that the Weimar Republic had cultivated.⁹⁷ These flashbacks to Weimar Germany teach the audience a relatively-unknown, less-mainstream, queer history which is also a specific history of the Pfefferman's family lineage.

By mixing nudity, dancing, and an acceptance of queerness and transness in the first couple flashbacks, the audience is positioned to perceive the Weimar Republic as a utopian community-oriented place. The perception of Weimar Germany as utopian is further emphasized by juxtaposing the flashbacks with the contemporary Pfeffermans who struggle to understand their own various gender and sexuality preferences. In Amy Villarejo's essay, *Jewish, Queer-ish, Trans, And Completely Revolutionary*, Villarejo writes, "Within this stew of Jewish/trans/queer history, Soloway locates the visual and familial roots of the Pfeffermans, vaguely implying that

⁹⁵ *Transparent*, season 2, episode 4, "Cherry Blossoms," directed by Jill Soloway, aired December 11, 2015.

⁹⁶ *Transparent*, season 2, episode 8, "Oscillate," directed by Jill Soloway, aired December 11, 2015.

⁹⁷ *Transparent*, season 2, episode 9, "Man on the Land," directed by Jill Soloway, aired December 11, 2015.

Gittel's trans blood seeps down to Maura, vaguely suggesting that these Berlin Jews supply some religious and cultural foundations for their twentyfirst-century ancestors."⁹⁸ The series of flashbacks to the Weimar Republic are filled with unnamed suggestions of generational lineage in terms of culture and queer identity. Although it is an interesting move for Soloway to historically contextualize the Pfefferman's queer and Jewish identities, it seems more opportunistic than realistic. Villarejo writes, "Even stylistically, the flashbacks don't obey any single logic that would distinguish between realism and fantasy."⁹⁹ While Soloway does touch on some key facts about Weimar Germany (Magnus Hirschfeld, transvestite passes, and Nazi persecution of specifically queer and trans people), Soloway also presents an ideal and remote queer community void of societal constraints, thus presenting a fantastical representation of pre-Nazi Weimar Germany and Hirschfeld's Institute.

As I mentioned, the flashbacks don't exist in a vacuum, they are juxtaposed by present-day Pfefferman concerns, all having to do with family, unavoidable social connectedness, and identity. The first flashback of a social gathering at the Institute is followed by Ali finding Sarah crying in the bathroom at her own wedding. The flashback of the Institute's Nazi raid is followed by Maura aggressively destroying tents at the Michigan Womyn's Festival (a trans-exclusionary lesbian separatist annual festival) trying to find her daughters. While evoking a connectedness of historical and present events, Soloway doesn't just focus on complex familial relationships, or the seemingly utopian Weimar society, they also tap into a social politics that is concerned with community and exclusion, highlighting how these two things often

⁹⁸ Villarejo, "Jewish, Queer-ish, Trans, And Completely Revolutionary," 17.

⁹⁹ Villarejo, "Jewish, Queer-ish, Trans, And Completely Revolutionary," 17.

depend on each other. By doing so, Soloway complicates the understanding of a holistic community that has been so apparent in mainstream queer politics.

What is so brilliant about *Transparent* is that Soloway takes the idea of transition and applies it to all characters, not only to simply claim that “When one person in a family transitions, everyone transitions,” as Shelly professes in the first episode of season three, but also to signify destabilization and personal growth that occurs amongst every individual in the show. Transness *is* represented as a concrete narrative, but the idea of transition—of a ‘boundary being crossed’—is prevalent in each character’s own story, as they navigate the world through decision-making that blurs “the line between self-actualization and mere selfishness.”¹⁰⁰ *Transparent* portrays a family where transness is not just understood in terms of identity, but as a metaphor for all types of transition, gender-based and not. Once Maura announces to her family that she is transgender, every other Pfefferman family member starts to question their own lives, their habits, the cycle that they have become accustomed to. In this regard, the audience is *not* provoked to see ‘transness’ as something outside of themselves, instead, the audience is invited to view transness as something that they can relate to; we all experience ‘transitions’ that alter our lives or our way of interacting with the world.

I believe that the common thread throughout *Transparent* is instability because all the characters in the show are constantly going through processes, of experiencing good and then bad over and over again, while all existing, and adjusting, together. It is not incorrect to claim that *Transparent* is about one family member’s gender transition, but the show deals with so

¹⁰⁰ Spencer Kornhaber, “The Brilliant Challenge of *Transparent*: When your own happiness hurts others, what do you do?” *The Atlantic*, December 14, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/12/transparent-season-two-review/419943/>.

many different, yet related, themes that blend into one another and complicate any narrow perception of what gender, sexuality, and identity mean. As opposed to HBO's *Euphoria*, *Transparent*'s representation of queerness is more aligned with a queer theory approach. Kadji Amin, a queer studies scholar, describes the term "queer... as that which flies wherever the demands of political urgency might call it."¹⁰¹ Amin describes how queerness is that which is unstable, constantly moving, and that which cannot be tied down by political definitions or demands of identity. *Transparent* does a great job of portraying queerness and transness in a more abstract way that allows for the show to encompass various life events without straying from the main idea that transness and queerness don't exist in vacuums of identity categories, nor are these identities a place for unchanging pride and self-acceptance, rather, they are "simply part of the larger fabric of human nature, nothing more."¹⁰²

Amazon, the US Urban City, and the Rhetorical Value of Inclusion

Although *Transparent* is an important moment for transgender and queer representation in the media, the show's ties to its producer and source of money, Amazon, must be an object of critique. Earlier in the chapter I claimed that *Transparent*'s popularity in the media, and Jill Soloway's cultural prominence, serves to enhance the liberal-cultural value of Amazon Studios, and, in effect, Amazon. Jill Soloway's insistence that *Transparent* can help harness the cultural means for socio-political change helps to position *Transparent* as being a part of an "intersectional power movement," instead of existing in a separate liberal media realm. When the

¹⁰¹ Kadji Amin, "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 3/4 (2016): 175, www.jstor.org/stable/44474068.

¹⁰² Wyatt, "The Life Cycle of *Transparent*," 89.

political value and activist potential of the show is insisted upon, Amazon is characterized as an agent for the manifestation of meaningful political change, rather than an entity that bars political change from occurring.

Earlier in the chapter I also glossed over progressive critiques of Amazon as a hoarder of immense capital, influence, and power, within the economy and labor force. Companies like Amazon who present themselves, through the media, as having liberal values, typically engage in classist politics that materially disvalue working class people at the same time that they rhetorically value people who represent marginal identity categories, such as queer or trans. By checking the box of representation for trans and queer people, Amazon glosses over and ignores the people who are arguably most marginalized, in this context, namely, Amazon workers. If the company truly wanted to engage in progressive political change, they would address the injustices that are occurring throughout the corporation instead of creating new culturally capitalist products which Bezos claims can more efficiently address societal injustices.

Some of the major critiques of Amazon is that it has settled its offices and warehouses in or near urban areas that, in turn, cause housing prices, rent, and other living-related costs to skyrocket due to the capital that the corporation brings with them. Gigantic tech conglomerates, namely Google, Amazon, Apple, engage in a type of class warfare by driving residents out of their homes in urban neighborhoods, and by creating new cultural, neoliberal hubs of technology and business. What is so dystopian about this gentrifying process is the way in which most contemporary tech companies claim to value diversity and inclusion, while also bearing immense economic capital which, in turn, negatively affects the cultures and communities of marginalized people.

It is no secret that tech companies like Amazon have contributed to gentrification in inner city neighborhoods that are now marked by their liberal hipness and commercial value. The historically marginalized communities that Amazon is driving out of cities are replaced by Amazon's purported commitment to diversity, inclusion, and representation.¹⁰³ This strategy of substitution—of replacing real communities of people with a rhetoric of liberal values like inclusion or diversity—whether intentional or not, works to characterize Amazon as socially progressive while the company continues to wage class warfare on those who have the least socio-economic capital in US society. In this sense, liberal values like creativity and diversity, that are business principles for companies like Amazon, stand as distractions from, or as obstructions to, real class politics that cities have historically been involved in.

Similarly, Jeff Bezos' statement that, "The way a story can make change is so much faster than how politics can make change,"¹⁰⁴ is evidence of the substitutive strategies that Amazon employs in order to engage (no matter how superficially) in social and political conversations without truly engaging in real policy-related politics. Not only are people of societally oppressed groups (queers, POC, working-class folk, etc.) being physically displaced and replaced by ideological company mantras of inclusivity and diversity, but politics are being covered up by media which claims that it can, and will, affect politics and cause progressive change. Important socio-political sentiments are being absorbed by companies and institutions who are simultaneously engaging in class warfare by dominating the market and hoarding the wealth.

¹⁰³ "Diversity and Inclusion," About Amazon, Amazon, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.aboutamazon.com/working-at-amazon/diversity-and-inclusion>.

¹⁰⁴ Recode, "Jill Soloway, creator of Amazon's Emmy-winning 'Transparent' series | Full interview | Code 2017."

This move away from an engagement with policy change, whether it exists at the government level or at the company level, is but one effect of neoliberalism, a term referring to economic and political policies that seek to free up the operations of the capitalist market from state controls, while also “extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player.”¹⁰⁵ While the market is ever-present, it simultaneously hides through its normalization in US society, especially when companies take the role of engaging in and representing progressive ideologies. In this sense, companies like Amazon incorporate liberal social politics into the market as sources of capital, both cultural and economic. Neoliberalism, thus, is not just a set of economic policies that privatize state enterprises, it also fosters a neoliberal culture that has disseminated throughout the US, specifically the most wealthy hubs, and works to channel the liberal sentiments that marginalized groups abstractly represent, to the market. The historical struggles and realities of these marginalized groups are muted and watered down into abstract, ever-present, symbols/values that ‘progressive,’ neoliberal American society supports and perceives as signs of progress.

One example of this process is evident in Roderick Ferguson’s *One-Dimensional Queer* where Ferguson unpacks the way in which queer politics was incorporated into US state discourse and American capitalism through a “single-issue” articulation of queer politics, thus covering up the ways in which a ‘gay rights movement’ began in numerous and complex ways.

¹⁰⁶ One reason why the gay rights movement is principally thought of as being concerned with a

¹⁰⁵ Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 39.

¹⁰⁶ Roderick Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019), 2.

single issue, like marriage equality, is partly due to the role of consumption and normalization: state powers and policy-makers turned queer politics into something consumable for a straight heteronormative audience by assimilating it into already-known discourses of American rights (i.e. marriage). Ferguson partly defines “one-dimensionality as the conflation of state and capital’s needs with personal needs,”¹⁰⁷ meaning that state and economic institutions both benefit from appealing to an individual’s desires, while also supplanting an individual’s complex desires for recognition with state and commercial-mandated processes of assimilation that turn queerness not only into something understandable (putting it in terms that heteronormative society can understand), but also into something consumable, and thus, commodifiable. This is how queer subjectivities become valuable to companies such as Amazon, that engage in representational strategies and liberal virtue-signaling.

Ferguson continues to describe how the US urban city’s redevelopment plans, in a post-Stonewall era, were not solely acted out in terms of urban planning and economic renewal. Urban redevelopment plans were also involved in creating a one-dimensional concept of queerness as principally white and creative, thus these plans sought to erase the various complex queer identities that existed across lines of race, class, sexuality, etc. Ferguson focuses much of his analysis on New York City as an example of an urban locale that has gone through major rebranding in the latter half of the twentieth century: going from a crossroads of diverse realities to an ideological and economic enterprise. While Ferguson cites how queers have been valorized by city planners and businesses as symbols of diversity and creativity, queerness did not become valuable without a process of one-dimensionalization, of detaching queerness from less attractive

¹⁰⁷ Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer*, 3.

and less valuable social identities: impoverished queers, queers of color, and radicality in general.

Ferguson focuses much of his urban analysis on Richard Florida's 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class* to show one way "that city leaders managed to banish marginalized communities in general, and racially and economically disenfranchised queer communities in particular" through efforts to produce an elite creative class that is most often associated with booming tech-related industries.¹⁰⁸ As opposed to the direct violence against marginalized groups of people, which often includes police brutality and violent policing, producing a creative class is a capitalist project that implicitly displaces marginalized communities that the city deems undesirable. Concerned with how to attract creative class people to cities and companies, civic planners act more like CEOs than political leaders. In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida outlines the correlation between queerness and a city's economic prospects through "The Gay Index," a linkage between a "vibrant gay community" and an economically successful city, or business.¹⁰⁹ Ferguson rightly points out that while Florida conceives of a "Gay Index" as a quantitative measure of diversity (diversity being a value that many creative class people hold), "The Gay Index" necessarily promotes "an undifferentiated gay,"¹¹⁰ a 'gay' individual who is emptied of their class or racial status, thus contributing to the idea that gayness is necessarily separate from the societal influences of race and class.

Furthermore, Florida's connection between queerness and its economic potential for the creative class assumes that queers possess a natural creativity that, in turn, is economically

¹⁰⁸ Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer*, 46.

¹⁰⁹ Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer*, 47.

¹¹⁰ Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer*, 47.

beneficial for the market. In another essay by Florida titled *There goes the metro: how and why bohemians, artists and gays affect regional housing values*, Florida introduces a new index—the Bohemian-Gay Index—to argue that bohemians (those employed in arts, design, entertainment and media occupations) and gays have similar positive affects on housing values in metropolitan areas.¹¹¹ Florida combines the two groups to show that they are similarly attractive due to their tolerant culture and their sensibility to amenities and aesthetics, thus signaling that queers and bohemians similarly possess a creative artistry. Florida’s belief that queers and creatives are one in the same comes from queer subcultures that “claimed urban space in the seventies and eighties as a way to produce multidimensional conceptions of queer sexuality, conceptions that promoted overlaps between sexual, racial, gender, and class identities.”¹¹² The “multidimensional conceptions of queer sexuality” that were produced signify a creativity that Florida claims is good for attracting and fostering capital.

Ferguson gives an example of queer ‘creativity’ by citing the ‘houses,’ exhibited in the film *Paris is Burning*, as creative “locations for producing alternative domestic and familial arrangements.”¹¹³ In contrast to the societal hand-me-down of the patriarchal family unit, queers in urban spaces literally *created* new modes of living that often consisted of numerous, multidimensional, people coming together with a common experience of marginalization and oppression in society. Of course these ‘houses’ were creative modes of living, but they were, more importantly, necessary *survival* techniques for disenfranchised queers to live more happily in increasingly policed cities such as New York. Florida’s indexes effectively coopt and

¹¹¹ Richard Florida and Charlotta Mellander, “There Goes the Metro: How and Why Bohemians, Artists and Gays Affect Regional Housing Values,” in *Journal of Economic Geography* 10, no. 2 (2010), 167.

¹¹² Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer*, 44.

¹¹³ Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer*, 41.

commodify urban queer creativity, which originally had a goal of survival in mind, and produces a “selective notion of creativity,” thus, “If creativity... among marginalized queer communities and subjects meant the creation of alternative forms of family, intimacy, and domesticity, then Florida’s plan was designed to channel creativity for the good of economic life rather than the multidimensional good of queers.”¹¹⁴

Prior to gentrification, the urban city has historically been a near-perfect place for the invention of new types of communities to form since it acts as a centerpiece for encounters between diverse groups of people, especially groups of people who have been historically funneled into cities through migration, work opportunities, etc. Creativity was naturally attuned to major urban cities, and its societally oppressed groups, before commercialization, but, by portraying queer communities as possessing a natural creativity and tolerance, the historical struggles of queer communities in cities are successfully muted.

Florida’s creative city plan mirrors urban redevelopment efforts to turn queerness into an appealing quality to a heteronormative, mainly white, economically-well-off, and economically-oriented audience. To create a queerness that is void of its complex realities of being influenced and attached to categories of class and race, sexuality was divorced from these other categories, and abstracted into a symbol of tolerance and creativity. Creativity has been detached from urban queer politics and, thus, is thoroughly depoliticized; it is no longer seen as resistant to mainstream politics, it is, now, turned into a positive or attractive characteristic that ‘the queer community’ is supposed to inherently represent. Efforts to make queerness, and other oppressed characteristics, consumable to a larger public has resulted in a liberal impulse to value

¹¹⁴ Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer*, 49.

queer bodies no matter the context that they are represented in. Thus, companies like Amazon, who engage in a rhetoric of inclusion, diversity, and representation, simultaneously engage in a process of one-dimensionalizing queerness, claiming that queer bodies are productive in themselves since they symbolize neoliberal values.

Symbols of Inclusion versus Physical Displacement

Amazon's virtue-signaling, both through productions like *Transparent*, and through other inclusion rhetoric found on their website, is an example of how 'diversity' is no longer just a fact of life, rather, it is an abstract value that many creative-class companies claim to incorporate. While Amazon engages in a progressive rhetoric, it also has relegated marginalized communities ('diverse' communities) to factory-like work, and has displaced 'diverse' communities from their urban neighborhoods that they, in turn, economically support through their menial warehouse labor. Similar to suppressing urban queer struggles in urban areas, Amazon covers up its gentrifying actions by claiming to value the inclusion of marginalized groups of people.

Ferguson writes,

Discussing how prospective employees use diversity as a measure of meritocratic cultures within a company, [Florida] states, 'A number of creative class people have told me that they always ask if a company offers same-sex partner benefits when they are interviewing for a job, even if they are not gay themselves. What they're seeking is an environment that is open to differences' ... In this context, queerness in the form of same-sex partner benefits becomes a proxy for a company's respect for diversity... [and] a sign of that company's moral virtue.¹¹⁵

A few things are going on here: first, the idea that liberal-identifying people who may be part of this 'creative class' have values such as diversity, even if they themselves are cis, white, and

¹¹⁵ Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer*, 47.

straight. Secondly, creative class people use the mainstream gay rights issue of marriage equality to measure a company's openness, thus to ensure that a company has similar values as themselves.

If we are to relate this to Amazon's decision to produce *Transparent*, one might argue that *Transparent* similarly imbues Amazon with the moral virtue that a company's same-sex partner benefits would afford. Expressions of diversity *are* valuable, even if the diversity is as narrow as the upper-middle class portrayal of queerness and transness that *Transparent* exhibits. Media companies necessarily gain value and merit from a liberal constituency in the market due to their decisions to represent oppressed narratives and to appeal to marginalized groups of people. Even if Amazon values 'diversity,' in its abstract positioning, that doesn't mean that it values the lives of those at the bottom of the economic ladder, no matter how queer they are.

While Amazon represents marginalized narratives in media, it also has relegated marginalized communities to warehouse work, and has displaced communities from their neighborhoods. Ferguson writes, "gentrifying practices in metropolitan areas is an instance in which queerness helps to define hipness, a hipness that is established by spatially dislocating working-class communities and people of color."¹¹⁶ While it has long been a trend that "gayness has been heralded by the media as the very sign of hipness,"¹¹⁷ it is important to relate this general calculation of 'gayness equals hipness' to companies that use queerness, as a marker of diversity, and hipness, as a marker of creativity, to appeal to a liberal audience. Even though *Transparent* has not attracted much profit in comparison to Amazon's other business undertakings, *Transparent* has positioned Amazon as a bearer of progressive values that distracts

¹¹⁶ Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer*, 6.

¹¹⁷ Walters, *All The Rage*, 244.

from, or detaches, Amazon from its unceasing economic ventures—ventures which play a significant role in raising housing and rent prices, thus dislocating mostly working-class people of color from their urban homes.

For example, Seattle, where Amazon originated, has experienced a remarkable degree of gentrification due to Amazon’s presence in historically black, working-class neighborhoods such as South Lake Union. While Amazon’s presence is praised by some as bringing new life to the city in the form of jobs, many critique it on the grounds that affordable housing is decreasing, thus many people who have lived in the district for years are being displaced. One article notes that since Amazon moved into South Lake Union, the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment rose 67 percent.¹¹⁸ While it may be hard to imagine what a 67 percent increase in rent looks like, the “most visible social impact has been the increase in homelessness... Over the past five years, Seattle has ranked third in the nation in the widening of the income gap between the richest 20 percent of households and the poorest 20 percent.”¹¹⁹ While Amazon’s “About” subsite dedicates a whole section to “Diversity and Inclusion” in terms of serving and employing people “from every background,”¹²⁰ its economic concerns as a tech company trump its concerns of ‘diverse,’ low-income communities that are consistently being negatively affected by Amazon.

In this chapter I’ve noted the conversation between Soloway and Bezos where Bezos says, “The way a story can make change is so much faster than how politics can make change,” claiming that story-telling through the medium of media is an efficient way of creating political

¹¹⁸ Robert McCartney, “Amazon in Seattle: Economic godsend or self-centered behemoth?” *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/amazon-in-seattle-economic-godsend-or-self-centered-behemoth/2019/04/08/7d29999a-4ce3-11e9-93d0-64dbcf38ba41_story.html.

¹¹⁹ McCartney, “Amazon in Seattle: Economic godsend or self-centered behemoth?”

¹²⁰ “Diversity and Inclusion,” About, Amazon, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.aboutamazon.com/working-at-amazon/diversity-and-inclusion>.

change. Bezos's claim, and Soloway's unquestioning belief in the power and political potential of media, is in line with how Amazon effectively detaches itself from class-concerned politics despite leftist critiques. In the article I cited above, the vice president of global real estate for Amazon says, "I don't think it was ever anyone's intention . . . to displace anyone... We don't have enough supply for the demand of housing... It's up to them [the city council] to be building those units. . . . We're not in the business to build housing."¹²¹ While Amazon seemingly is in the business of changing politics through story-telling in the realm of media, it remains hands-off in terms of taking responsibility for the displacement of marginalized groups of people.

Amazon may claim to value diversity and inclusion, but a real marker of openness to diversity would be if the company didn't gentrify low-income neighborhoods, if Amazon created low-income housing, if Amazon respected its warehouse workers, if Amazon funneled money into the marginalized communities it continuously claims to care about. By solely focusing on one-dimensional notions of diversity in terms of racial, sexual, or gender identity, Amazon effectively removes class-based politics from the liberal conversation it engages in.

¹²¹ McCartney, "Amazon in Seattle: Economic godsend or self-centered behemoth?"

Conclusion

As queer and trans people have finally become visible to the American public, and have achieved positive representations, capitalist systems of commodification have worked to make queer and trans bodies economically valuable by turning them into symbols of progressive values. While media visibility may prove to be beneficial to those who yearn to see themselves mirrored on screen, companies who engage in representation are often not fighting for queer or trans liberation on the political level; rather, they engage in a capitalist system that has systematically excluded marginalized groups of people. Additionally, while the companies that I've analyzed purport to value 'diversity,' 'inclusion,' and 'representation,' they simultaneously disvalue and exclude those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder (no matter how queer they are) due to their economic inability to contribute to the company's end goal: profit.

In light of queer commodification, many representations of queer individuals in the media reinforce the assumption that queers look and act a certain way, that they embody subversiveness, and that queers all share a knowingness, with regards to style, taste, culturally 'queer' concepts, etc.

Sephora's "Identify as We: Beauty" advertisement is an example of how Sephora represents queer and trans people as inherently knowing about, or confronting, queer concepts such as "the gender binary," a concept that describes how traditional conceptions of legitimate gender are legible only if one follows the male/man–female/woman binary. Sephora also assumes that, aside from *knowing* about "the binary," queer and trans people inherently *exist* between or outside of this binary due to their gender and/or sexuality, thus excluding

homonormative queers and people who identify with and follow the rules of conventional gender.

HBO's *Euphoria* contributes to the representation of queer and trans people as inherently eccentric, anti-mainstream, or stylistic. The idea of the queer person having an inherent stylistic taste and profitable style is a historic stereotype that, for all of *Euphoria*'s efforts to resist a stereotypical queer or trans narrative, is reinforced in *Euphoria* through Jules, the show's eccentrically styled trans woman. In this sense, Jules is a characterization of metronormativity, a kind of homonormativity that describes how metropolitan queers, with all their cultural knowledge and tasteful styles, are often the embodiments of a queer norm that excludes those who do not conform to the styles or modes of being, due to their location or socioeconomic status.

Transparent is an example of how queer and trans visibility in the media is often practiced by companies who engage in economic and cultural class warfare beneath the guise of progressive rhetoric and queer/trans representation. Amazon, *Transparent*'s funder and platform, despite its employed rhetoric of 'diversity' and 'inclusion,' has continuously devalued its warehouse workers and has displaced marginalized communities in the urban areas where its warehouses and offices are built.

While all of my examples have worked to represent queers and trans people in ways that resist classic stereotypes, they have also reinforced newer stereotypes. Additionally, they have, through their progressive media claims, washed over the urgent need for real political and social change that cannot be acted out in a capitalist realm where the primary end goal is profit.

Bibliography

- Akass, Kim and McCabe, Janet. "HBO and the Aristocracy of Contemporary TV Culture: affiliations and legitimatising television culture, post-2007." *Mise Au Point*, 10 (January 2018). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/map.2472>.
- Allen, Samantha. "How 'Euphoria' and Model Hunter Schafer Created the Most Interesting Trans Character On TV." *Daily Beast*, July 7, 2019.
<https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-hbos-euphoria-and-hunter-schafer-created-the-most-interesting-trans-character-on-tv>.
- Amazon. "Amazon Prime Price Change." Help & Customer Service. Accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.amazon.com/gp/help/customer/display.html?nodeId=202213110>.
- Amazon. "Diversity and Inclusion." About Amazon. Accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.aboutamazon.com/working-at-amazon/diversity-and-inclusion>.
- Amazon.com, Inc. Form 10-K for the Fiscal Year Ended December 31, 2018. Filed January 31, 2019.
<https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1018724/000101872419000004/amzn-20181231x10k.htm#sB4CED683083F59A8917E158CFF7A442F>.
- Amazon.com, Inc. Form 10-K for the Fiscal Year Ended December 31, 2019. Filed January 31, 2020.
<http://d18rn0p25nwr6d.cloudfront.net/CIK-0001018724/4d39f579-19d8-4119-b087-ee618abf82d6.pdf>.
- Amin, Kadji. "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 3/4 (2016): 173-89. www.jstor.org/stable/44474068.
- Anderson, Christopher. "Overview: Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television." In *The Essential HBO Reader*, edited by Edgerton Gary R. and Jones Jeffrey., 23-41. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2008.
doi:10.2307/j.ctt2jesz2.5.
- Brodesser-Akner, Taffy. "Can Jill Soloway Do Justice to the Trans Movement." *The New York Times Magazine*, August 29, 2014.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/magazine/can-jill-soloway-do-justice-to-the-trans-movement.html>.

- Brown, Wendy. "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy." In *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*, 37-59. PRINCETON; OXFORD: Princeton University Press, 2005. doi:10.2307/j.ctt7rw47.6.
- BUILD Series. "Jill Soloway, Judith Light, Amy Landecker, Jay Duplass, Gaby Hoffman & Rob Heubel On Season 4 Of Ama." September 13, 2017. YouTube video, 42:39. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I27JVCi0fnE>.
- Chasin, Alexandra. *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to the Market*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.
- Chicago Humanities Festival. "Jill Soloway: Transparent." December 12, 2017. YouTube video, 57:07. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPY1RjPgjn0>.
- Clark, Danae. "Commodity Lesbianism." In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Ablove Henry, Barale Michèle Aina, and Halperin David M., 186-201. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- D'Addario, Daniel. "Trans Superstar Hunter Schafer on Her Moment of 'Euphoria'." *Variety*, June 21, 2019. <https://variety.com/2019/tv/features/hunter-schafer-hbo-euphoria-1203248330/>.
- Edgerton, Gary R. "Introduction: A Brief History of HBO." In *The Essential HBO Reader*, edited by Edgerton Gary R. and Jones Jeffrey., 1-20. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2008. doi:10.2307/j.ctt2jcsz2.4.
- Ferguson, Roderick. *One-Dimensional Queer*. Medford, MA: Polity, 2019.
- Florida, Richard, and Charlotta Mellander. "There Goes the Metro: How and Why Bohemians, Artists and Gays Affect Regional Housing Values." *Journal of Economic Geography* 10, no. 2 (2010): 167-88. www.jstor.org/stable/26161394.
- Forbes. "Bernard Arnault & family." Profile. Accessed February 26, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/profile/bernard-arnault/#6ebb62b266fa>.
- Forbes. "Sephora's Deborah Yeh: An 'Accidental Marketer' With A Big Vision For Beauty." January 21, 2020. Video, 4:54. <https://www.forbes.com/video/6125347913001/#7143bbe12a86>.
- Forbes. "#1 Jeff Bezos." Profile. Accessed April 7, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/profile/jeff-bezos/#190221c11b23>.
- Frank, Thomas. "Alternative to What?" In *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler*, edited by Frank, Thomas and Matt Weiland. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1997.

- Frank, Thomas. "Why Johnny Can't Dissent." In *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler*, edited by Frank, Thomas and Matt Weiland. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1997.
- Gilford, Luke. *Sephora – We Belong to Something Beautiful*. AND Production. Accessed April 8, 2019. <http://andproduction.com/project/sephorawebelongtosomethingbeautiful>.
- Gregersen, Erik. "HBO: American Company." Britannica. Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., last modified March 19, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/HBO>.
- Haug, Wolfgang Fritz. *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality, and Advertising in Capitalist Society*. Translated by Robert Bock. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- HBO. "Help Center." HBO NOW. Accessed April 11, 2020. <https://help.hbonow.com/Answer/Detail/13>.
- Hennessy, Rosemary. *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Herring, Scott. *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*. New York: NYU Press, 2010.
- Huddleston Jr., Tom. "Amazon had to pay federal income taxes for the first time since 2016 — here's how much." *CNBC*, February 4, 2020. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/04/amazon-had-to-pay-federal-income-taxes-for-the-first-time-since-2016.html>.
- James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality. <https://www.transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS%20Full%20Report%20-%20FINAL%201.6.17.pdf>.
- Kornhaber, Spencer. "The Brilliant Challenge of *Transparent*: When your own happiness hurts others, what do you do?" *The Atlantic*, December 14, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/12/transparent-season-two-review/419943/>.
- Levinson, Sam. "Why *Euphoria* Feels So Real, Even When It Isn't Realistic." Interview by Matt Zoller Seitz. *Vulture*, August 14, 2019. <https://www.vulture.com/2019/08/euphoria-sam-levinson-filmmaking-influences.html>.

Loeb, Walter. "Sephora: Department Stores Cannot Stop Its Global Growth." *Forbes*, April 18, 2013.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/walterloeb/2013/04/18/sephora-department-stores-cannot-stop-its-global-growth/#7afe52522e81>.

LVMH. 2019 Financial Documents. December 31, 2019.
https://r.lvmh-static.com/uploads/2019/12/lvmh_documents-financiers_2019-va.pdf,
accessed February 26, 2020.

McCartney, Robert. "Amazon in Seattle: Economic godsend or self-centered behemoth?" *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2019.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/amazon-in-seattle-economic-godsend-or-self-centered-behemoth/2019/04/08/7d29999a-4ce3-11e9-93d0-64dbcf38ba41_story.html.

Negiz, Elif. 2015. *Developing a Marketing Plan: Sephora*. Squarespace.
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/562661f7e4b078eb0eb8898c/t/56ca85d3746fb93e227cfd8a/1456113163208/DEVELOPING+a+MARKETING+PLAN-+SEPHORA.pdf>.

Prime Video DE. "Interview Jill Soloway | Transparent | Prime Video DE." May 5, 2015.
YouTube video, 1:14. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_te_4F7_wn0.

Puar, Jasbir. "Citation and Censure: Pinkwashing and the Sexual Politics of Talking about Israel." In *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, edited by Chatterjee Piya and Maira Sunaina, 281-98. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt6wr7wn.14.

QM Corporation Channel. "HBO Slogans." Accessed April 10, 2020.
https://qm-coorpration-channel.fandom.com/wiki/HBO_Slogans.

Recode. "Jill Soloway, creator of Amazon's Emmy-winning 'Transparent' series | Full interview | Code 2017." June 2, 2017. YouTube video, 30:04.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GfCkPwNTzM>.

Schneider, Michael. "'It's an Explosion': Inside the Rising Costs of Making a Scripted TV Series." *Variety*, October 23, 2019.
<https://variety.com/2019/tv/features/cost-of-tv-scripted-series-rises-1203378894/>.

Schofield, Scott Turner. "Euphoria's trans consultant on why the series tells authentic trans stories." Interview by Palmer Haasch. *Polygon*, August 10, 2019.
www.polygon.com/interviews/2019/8/10/20792118/euphoria-hbo-trans-actors-jules-scott-turner-schofield-hunter-schafer.

Sender, Katherine. *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Sephora. "About Us." Accessed April 4, 2020. <https://www.sephora.com/beauty/about-us>.

Sephora. "Giving." Sephora Stands. Accessed April 9, 2020. <https://www.sephorastands.com/giving/>.

Sephora. "Identify As We: Beauty | Sephora." June 13, 2019. YouTube video, 1:26. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKogyef-gLw>.

Sephora. "Inclusion." Sephora Stands. Accessed April 9, 2020. <https://www.sephorastands.com/inclusion/>.

Sephora. "Sephora's Manifesto." Sephora Stands. Accessed April 9, 2020. <https://www.sephorastands.com/>.

Sephora. "We Belong to Something Beautiful." Accessed February 1, 2020. <https://www.sephora.com/beauty/belong>.

Smith, Dakota. "What 'Euphoria' Gets Right About Gen Z's Queerness." *Wussy Mag*, August 2, 2019. <https://www.wussymag.com/all/2019/8/2/what-euphoria-gets-right-about-gen-zs-queerness>.

Soloway, Jill. "In 'She Wants It,' Jill Soloway Gets Transparent About Their Life And Work." Interview by Lulu Garcia-Navarro. *NPR*, October 21, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/21/658995191/in-she-wants-it-jill-soloway-gets-transparent-about-their-life-and-work>.

Soloway, Jill. "Jill Soloway on *Transparent* and How Lena Dunham's Success Convinced Her to Stop Pretending." Interview by John Horn. *Vulture*, September 26, 2014. <https://www.vulture.com/2014/09/jill-soloway-interview-transparent-amazon-lena-dunham-girls-louie.html>.

Spade, Dean. "Compliance is Gendered: Struggling for Gender Self-Determination in a Hostile Economy." In *Transgender Rights*, edited by Currah, Paisley, Juang, Richard M. and Shannon Price Minter, 217-233. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Time Warner Inc. 2017 Annual Report. December 31, 2017. <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1105705/000119312518053619/d504160d10k>.

h
tm.

Transparent. Season 1, episode 2, "The Letting Go." Directed by Jill Soloway. Aired September 26, 2014, on Amazon Prime Video.

https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B017I3KTV6/ref=atv_dp_season_select_s2.

Transparent. Season 2, episode 1, "Kina Hora." Directed by Jill Soloway. Aired November 30, 2015, on Amazon Prime Video.

https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B017I3KTV6/ref=atv_dp_season_select_s2.

Transparent. Season 2, episode 4, "Cherry Blossoms." Directed by Jill Soloway. Aired December 11, 2015, on Amazon Prime Video.

https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B017I3KTV6/ref=atv_dp_season_select_s2.

Transparent. Season 2, episode 7, "The Book of Life." Directed by Jill Soloway. Aired December 11, 2015, on Amazon Prime Video.

<https://www.amazon.com/Transparent-Season-2/dp/B017I3KTV6>.

Transparent. Season 2, episode 8, "Oscillate." Directed by Jill Soloway. Aired December 11, 2015, on Amazon Prime Video.

<https://www.amazon.com/Transparent-Season-2/dp/B017I3KTV6>.

Transparent. Season 2, episode 9, "Man on the Land." Directed by Jill Soloway. Aired December

11, 2015, on Amazon Prime Video.

<https://www.amazon.com/Transparent-Season-2/dp/B017I3KTV6>.

Transparent. Season 3, episode 1, "Elizah." Directed by Jill Soloway. Aired September 23, 2016, on Amazon Prime Video.

https://www.amazon.com/Elizah/dp/B01J4STMP2/ref=sr_1_3?dchild=1&keywords=transparent&qid=1587323724&sr=8-3.

Vider, Stephen. "Why Is an Obscure 1968 Documentary in the Opening Credits of *Transparent*?"

Slate, October 23, 2014.

<https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/10/transparents-opening-credits-are-a-lesson-in-the-history-of-gender.html>.

Villarejo, Amy. "Jewish, Queer-ish, Trans, And Completely Revolutionary: Jill Soloway's *Transparent* and the New Television." *Film Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (2016): 10-22,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26413709>.

Walters, Suzanna Danuta. *All The Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Wyatt, Justin. "The Life Cycle of *Transparent*: Envisioning Queer Space, Time and Business Practice." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 16 (Winter 2018): 80-96.

<http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue16/ArticleWyatt.pdf>.