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Between Memeability and Televisuality: The (Self-)Memefication of Television Series

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Abstract

This essay explores how seriality and televisuality inform and fuel meme culture. Television and streaming series not only provide material for internet memes, i.e., appropriable audio-visual extracts that circulate on social media and video-sharing platforms, but often already feature meme-like visuals themselves, e.g., visual or scenographic imitations of artwork, reenactments of movie scenes, or even entire iconographies of a media franchise. In a semi-historical approach, this essay explores these "memefications" as intertextual practices for recalling, recycling, and preserving cultural artifacts. Citing various cases in US series from an autobiographical collection of such revisualizations and elaborate referential networks in both legacy TV series and popular contemporary shows, this essay proposes a taxonomy of pre-internet memefication within and between series: intermedial, interserial, and intraserial memefications. I discuss them as aesthetic and praxeological precursors of current moving image memes such as TikToks, which similarly restage scenes, characteristics, or tropes from other shows, films, or media. As it is a key characteristic of televisuality to adopt and transform modes of representation from other media, I argue that television may have premeditated and mastered memefication before the conception of internet memes, which are now prevalent in everyday communication.

Keywords

internet memes; memefications; memeability; pre-internet memefication; seriality; televisuality

1. Introduction

In summer 2023, shortly after the second season premiered, Prime Video's series *Good Omens* (2019–present) produced a popular meme. The so-called "Apology Dance" from the first episode that the demon Crowley (David Tennant) performs to conclude a lost argument with his best friend and angel

Aziraphale (Michael Sheen), had numerous imitations on TikTok. Some creators even cosplayed the characters and edited their videos like the original scene (KaiKestis, 2023; Simple Cosplayer 🐶, 2023). In its essence, however, the meme boils down to a short sequence of movements containing the sing-songy words, "You were right, you were right, I was wrong, you were right" (Gaiman et al., 2019–present). Users tiptoe back and forth, flap their hands, spin around, and bow to an implied second party (Matcha, 2023; MYAAAAAAAA, 2023; Figure 1). While certainly not the only internet meme stemming from the beloved series, this segment stands out due to its perceived iconicity, congeniality, and fit with TikTok dance challenges—one of the platform's most popular genres. Thus, it encapsulates television's and particularly fictional series' proneness to memefication, i.e., their visuals, dialogues, or sound bites being seized and processed into various condensed imitative formats, including but not limited to image macros, photo fads, reaction memes, panel memes, GIFs, reels, and TikToks.

Audiovisual memes like this TikTok trend go beyond plain references to TV series, instead producing elaborate revisualizations of specific scenes, motifs, narratives, or tropes, e.g., typical character interactions. Certain elements of *Good Omens* seem to "naturally" lend themselves to imitation and transformative performance, e.g., a funny movement (such as this dance), an outlandish character appearance (Crowley's style and overall attitude), a dramatic close-up (his begrudging expression when apologizing), and a pleasing

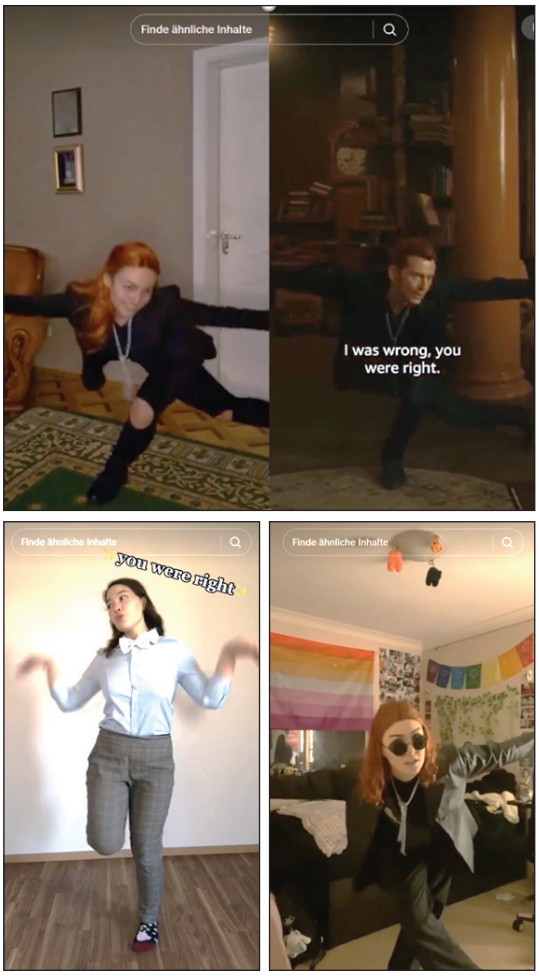

Figure 1. Reenactments of the "Apology Dance" from *Good Omens* on TikTok. Source: Simple Cosplayer 🐶 (2023; upper panel), Matcha (2023; lower left panel), and MYAAAAAAAA (2023, lower right panel).

visual (the setting of an antique bookshop), among others (Figure 1). Today, a series' popularity may partially rely on this memeability, i.e., intelligible, relatable, and appropriable audio-visual extracts that circulate on social media and video-sharing platforms. On the one hand, this is because of TV's ever-increasing presence online: "Like a rainstorm on a flooded plain, internet-distributed television then arrived to a television industry already beginning to drown in a surplus of content" (Lotz, 2018, p. 105). With this abundance of TV and streaming series in our digital media culture, online fan communities, exclusive platforms, and algorithmic recommendations largely shape the buzz surrounding a show's release (cf. Geraghty, 2015; Jenner, 2018; Pajkovic, 2022), providing content management strategies for viewers overwhelmed with choice fatigue and the fear of missing out (cf. Samuel, 2017). On the other hand, television competes and mixes with other audiovisual content; snippets and fragments of a series circulate through various platforms. Overall, the attention span of viewers for any individual one may be rather low. Due to their ubiquity on social media (image- and video-sharing platforms), memes may draw attention to individual scenes, episodes, or even seasons through the continuous use and reproduction of said snippets in diverse communicative contexts. This makes them a common currency for determining a show's success with web audiences.

In this changing media environment, many contemporary series may already anticipate their memefication in a production stage, deliberately providing sassy one-liners, snappy dialogue, strong facial expressions, kooky gestures, or flashy movements that viewers may find suitable for everyday digital communication. However, whether these memes *in potentialis* actually become fully-fledged internet memes is not a given, nor can it be predicted. In the case of *Good Omens*' "Apology Dance," TikTok users have applied it to various situations where someone wants to express accountability and humility in a playful manner or, in turn, when someone would expect an apology for any reason. Being "memeable" in that way may help a TV series gain wider recognition and reach a larger public beyond specialized fan groups and personalized streaming profiles. It intertwines with other appealing features of contemporary TV shows, such as narrative complexity or cinematic special effects, which add some surplus value to the viewing experience (Mittell, 2006, p. 35; cf. Mittell, 2015). Furthermore, memeability contributes to the increasing meta-textuality and overall self-awareness of a series, addressing well-versed and "responsive" viewers who actively engage with a show on social media (cf. Giannini, 2024). Consequently, these media-savvy audiences may act as multipliers or marketing agents, e.g., by creating and sharing memes out of these meta-textual instances that re- and de-construct a series' narrative and production.

Broadly defined as "groups of content items" or "digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance" (Shifman, 2014, p. 41) that are deliberately generated and disseminated, internet memes have become an integral part of our shared "cultural lexicon" (Journell & Clark, 2019, p. 109). They are characterized by their aesthetic diversity, referential complexity, and chaotic use in media culture (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, pp. 483–484). Therefore, memes have become a collective term for the confusing image repertoire and the "diverse processes of appropriation and reinterpretation" (Gerling et al., 2018, p. 219) of digital media. If, according to Limor Shifman's (2014, p. 2) broadest definition, "any kind of information that can be copied by imitation" counts as a meme, the aesthetic and cultural repertoire expand considerably. Classic "meme genres" like image macros or Photoshop memes (Maeder & Wentz, 2014, p. 138) are then joined by all image formats that "perform" some kind of mimicry, e.g., GIFs, TikToks, or reels. Moreover, this is just the tip of the digital iceberg: Aside from internet memes, many a "unit of imitation" (Dawkins, 2016/1976, p. 249) emerges in popular media texts like TV series before or without online participation. TV and streaming series frequently feature what I call pre-internet memefications, i.e.,

revisualizations of iconic artwork, reenactments of famous movie scenes, or adopted iconographies from visual culture. In contrast to internet memes, which are user-generated, "bottom-up," "spreadable" image or video formats that easily circulate in our networked culture (Jenkins, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2013), pre-internet memefications are produced "top-down" by television creators and may not multiply across various media channels. Rather than a group of images with similar characteristics, they present as a single memetic iteration of a popular moving image. However, I consider them to be aesthetic and praxeological precursors of recent moving image memes such as the above-discussed TikTok, similarly performing motifs, characteristics, settings, or tropes from other media. Memefications activate our icono- and scenographic memory, grab the knowledgeable viewer's attention, and possibly motivate them to return for the next episode or rewatch the series. In a semi-historic approach, this essay explores "memefications" as intertextual practices for recalling, recycling, and preserving cultural artifacts. I aim to highlight television's ability to adapt and incorporate representational techniques from other media, thereby underscoring its role in the development of memes as we know them today. This essay argues that seriality and televisuality have always informed meme culture and continue to do so.

2. The Memeability of TV series

What makes TV series especially "memeable" on a structural level are the interrelations and parallels between television and memes.

Firstly, TV shows produce memeable content on a regular basis, i.e., through weekly broadcasts or full-season-drops. There is an "everyday-ness" to internet memes that mirrors television's role in commonplace media consumption. Like TV series, memes are "producerly texts," which John Fiske described as simultaneously popular, accessible, and easily understandable texts that are nonetheless open to interpretation and meaning-making (Fiske, 1986, 2011). Like TV episodes, memes often mix with everyday topics or special interests, i.e., they simultaneously process intersubjectively comprehensible situations or collective experiences *and* demonstrate "insider knowledge," respectively. This ambivalence is especially crucial to memes that emerge from television.

Secondly, memes are defined by "serial processuality" through "coupling, doubling, replication, repetition, imitation" (Maeder & Wentz, 2014, p. 130). Memeing means reiterating a basic pattern with just enough variation to appear fresh, yet familiar to spectators—as is the case with serial storytelling. Finding that sweet spot between redundancy and variation is an important trait of any successful TV show, most notably for classic episodic formats such as procedurals or sitcoms. The latter shares another formal characteristic with (most) internet memes—both often rely on the classic structure of a joke: set-up, punchline. Seriality and repeatability highlight television's popularity and mainstream nature, its ability to establish and nurture a common ground between many different viewers, establishing a shared language made of characters, settings, tropes, and references. These are constitutive for popular, producerly texts as well as memes to serve as "agents in the social circulation of meaning and pleasure" (Nešović, 2021, p. 290).

Thirdly, meme creation and distribution are ongoing series or serials of cultural reproduction—depending on the degree of variation and repetition between the iterations of the respective meme. Memefication is a continuous practice. TV memes like "Homer backs into bushes" from *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989–present, S5E16) are endlessly repeatable and variable, e.g., by merging with other TV memes. One amalgamation

replaces Homer Simpson with a comic version of Vanessa Vanjie Matteo, a drag queen who became a popular meme herself. During her elimination from the reality competition *RuPaul's Drag Race*, she said "Miss Vanjie" three times and walked backwards to the stage exit (Bailey et al., 2009–present, S10E01). Such intricate combinations of television references establish intertextual networks and, consequently, require extensive media literacy to be deciphered and fully appreciated.

Fourthly, meme culture reflects the dislocation of television content today. With marketing slogans like "TV Everywhere" highlighting the medium's mobility, TV series are perceived to be "everywhere" in digital media culture. Memes are similarly ubiquitous and always "on the move" through different platforms—as are TV audiences and fan groups in pursuit of new episodes and paratextual material, including memes, of their favorite shows.

Because of these relations between television and meme culture, any TV moment could become a meme as long as it involves a somewhat memorable quote, motif, or character expression. At the same time, the audio-visual item must be comprehensible and recognizable, "narratively" open enough to interpretation and thus appropriable to various situations. In this way, meme creation is comparable to other appropriating and interpreting practices of "forensic fandom" (Harriss, 2017; Mittell, 2013) surrounding TV series. Their memefication is a form of "textual poaching" because fans and other interest groups exploit media texts for various creative and communicative purposes (cf. Jenkins, 2013). The memefication of televisual material is an unruly practice in contemporary digital media culture.

However, memefication did not originate on the internet. As Limor Shifman points out: "The meme is a natural for studying Internet and digital culture. Memetic behavior is not novel, but its scale, scope, and global visibility in contemporary digital environments are unprecedented" (Shifman, 2013, p. 373). Memes in the original cultural-evolutionary sense, coined by Dawkins (2016/1976, p. 249), are understood as "unit[s] of transmission," i.e., ideas or concepts that are passed on, reproduced, and transformed by media. Before the current "hyper-memetic era" and "the coupling of the meme concept and digital communication" (Shifman, 2013, p. 373), other visual media produced composite images with culturally encoded messages that resonated with audiences, e.g., caricatures or comics (Milner, 2018, pp. 50–53). These revisualizations did not yet involve active participation and circulation on the part of the viewers. Television, for instance, has always reused other media and art forms, adopting, collaging, and transforming their modes of representation (Bleicher, 2011). Many TV scholars, including John Caldwell (1995) in his book *Televisuality*, have pointed out television's ability to imitate the aesthetics and cultural forms of other media or adapt to new artistic and technological standards of image production (Adelmann, 2015; Bleicher et al., 2010; Jacobs & Peacock, 2013; O'Regan, 2012). As a "reproduction and exploitation machine for all kinds of visualizations" (Adelmann, 2015, p. 99), television participates in processes of remediation. On the one hand, remediation means the adaptation of "representational practices" from other media as part of television's ongoing repurposing and restoration (Bolter, 2007, p. 25), making TV formats a mosaic of multiple media aesthetics. One facet of remediation is especially relevant here: hypermediacy, i.e., the co-presence of different media techniques, text types, and forms of representation in one medium (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 6). As Bolter and Grusin state, television has always been hypermedia, as it "seems willing to entertain a wider range of visual and cultural styles and to remediate other media more vigorously and more frankly than popular film" (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, pp. 185, 188). On the other hand, remediation involves recurring representations of the same historic events across various media (Erll, 2008, p. 392). This extends to the representation, or

more specifically, re-enactment of specific media events, imageries, and texts: "Remediation is not restricted to icons and narratives, but can even choose actual media products and media technologies as its objects" (Erll, 2008, p. 394).

Through remediation, television continually builds a "catalogue" of media constructions, narratives, and iconographies. Similarly, through imitation, memes build volatile and dynamic repositories of (moving) images. Both TV series and internet memes are exemplary of these recurring processes of remembering media through other media. As a meta-medium, television has already mastered memefication like hardly any other medium. As such, the memefication in and of TV series both precedes and exceeds internet memes. Television "memefied" other cultural texts as well as its own well before the rise of social media, even before the World Wide Web—making *meme-ability* a prerequisite of televisuality. This is of course most notable in explicit parodies of movies in sketch shows like *Saturday Night Live* (Michaels et al., 1975–present). However, pre-internet memefication is also prominent in fictional series, which I will explore in the next section. As a televisual practice rather than a fixed image or video format, memefication is not only a signifier of the medium's legacy, but a process of cultural preservation, shaped by (tele-)seriality.

3. Pre-Internet Memefication

Pre-internet memefication includes remediations and reenactments from other audiovisual artifacts in originally broadcast series (even if they can be streamed now), as well as the reproduction of a series' visual features within other media before the internet existed or before the show incited online participation. To discuss the categories of pre-internet memefications, I am going back to the televisual material itself because it allows me to examine the medium's strategies of "recalling" other cultural texts. Because this essay explores pre-internet memefication exclusively through the lens of fictional TV series, the herein proposed taxonomy (Figures 2 and 7) provides an overview of this media-cultural phenomenon and, ideally, a useful tool for further investigation into television's memetic practices. It does not make any claim to completeness, nor does it serve as a comprehensive method for analyzing a series' manifold intertextualities. Intertextuality, though a key factor in their appeal and success with audiences (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, pp. 213–215), is not unique to internet memes—or television for that matter. Culture as a whole is a network of intertextualities that transcend genres and media (Fiske, 2013, p. 65). The first level in the taxonomy below reflects this, signifying that all memefication is intertextual. Pre-internet memefication is but one of many intertextual operations within TV series, albeit a specific one. It involves "performative citations" of other media texts, characterized by some degree of creative transformation and visual deconstruction (Taylor, 2022, p. 109)—which is not an exclusive televisual but rather a universal practice in and among semiotic systems to circulate meaning (cf. Chambat-Houillon & Wall, 2004). However, I am suggesting memefication as an additional lens to look at visual citations and allusions to other media texts, specifically in TV shows, to highlight their serial, gestural, iconographic, and scenographic aspects. Looking at pre-internet memefications may then offer new insights into moving image meme formats such as GIFs, mashups, or TikToks, where these aspects now make them appealing for online communication and distribution, or in short, spreadable.

Plain quotes or spoken references like characters retelling what happened in a movie, TV show, or play, as well as sonic recalls, e.g., reusing the soundtrack of a movie, do not qualify as pre-internet memefications. Neither do playbacks of an original scene, e.g., a film or program on TV in the background. The taxonomy

and subsequent analyses focus specifically on the audiovisual imitations and subsequent transformations of other media texts throughout scenes, scenography, image composition, and performances in a series. These instances of revisualization and remediation usually carry out narratological and discursive operations, generating visual spectacle as well as narrative special effects for additional viewing pleasure (cf. Mittell, 2006). Memefications can be intermedial, when television "borrows" from other media, e.g., film, and intramedial, whenever television remediates its own formats. In relation to TV series, I differentiate intramedial memefication into interserial memefication, where "series A" revisualizes elements from "series B," and intraserial memefication, in which a series restages occurrences from previous episodes in a later episode. Most instances of intermedial and interserial memefication cited here are pastiche, i.e., visual homages and citations of style for additional narrative or discursive layers. However, depending on how the corresponding scene embeds and functionalizes the memefication, some cases lean towards parody, i.e., the exaggerated and mocking use of formal and stylistic devices for pop-cultural reflection and critique. With intraserial memefications, TV shows commit to parody, using this opportunity to demonstrate self-awareness and ironize their own narrative. Concerning online memefication, I have already touched on the potentially imitable or reproducible materials provided by series with the introductory example from *Good Omens*. I will revisit this sub-category of intermedial memefication in Section 4 after discussing its aesthetic and praxeological precursors on television. Therefore, the next subsections introduce intermedial, interserial, and intraserial memefication using examples from popular US series from the 1980s to the 2010s. It is a subjective sample shaped by the accessibility of the series in Germany, technological obstacles to securing the material, platform affordances, autobiographical research, and personal memory. The examples do not present as extraordinary, particularly sophisticated cases but rather as common instances of televisual remediation and cultural reproduction. Therefore, the selection may not feature the most significant or canonic memefications from TV history. I invite readers of this article to compare the presented cases to examples from their own media memory to assess the suggested taxonomy.

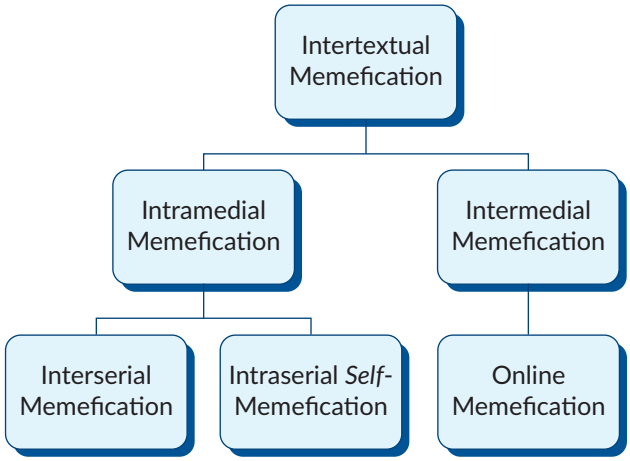

Figure 2. Taxonomy of memefication in TV series.

3.1. Intermedial Memefication

Pre-internet memefication on television is a form of remediation. This is most evident in intermedial memefication, where TV series reimagine icons and imagery from different media formats, e.g., feature films. Some of television's approaches to film aesthetics are known as "cinematic TV." This term describes

strategies for emulating creative standards from cinema into TV shows (Mills, 2013, p. 58). For example, the so-called "quality series" of the 2000s adopted production practices and modes of representation from *auteur cinema* (cf. Blanchet, 2010) and Hollywood blockbusters (cf. Eichner, 2013). The term "cinematic TV" has been criticized for upholding cultural hierarchies between film and television and ultimately dismissing televisual style (Jaramillo, 2013). Still, viewers can observe how television communicates and consolidates "cinematic knowledge" (Braidt, 2011) through intermedial memefication. As a result, some prestige series stand out due to their distinctive visual style, which sometimes correspond to popular cinematography or genre traditions. However, pre-internet memefication produces more explicit representations of cinematic works than simply alluding to the artistic style of an auteur, a genre, or a cinematic "look."

Among television's manifold displays of visual style and masquerade (Caldwell, 2002, pp. 166, 200) are pre-internet memefications built on the iconicity of particular shots or scenes, characters or actor personae, and costumes or settings from films, comics, or video games (Figure 3). For example, TV series have characters appear in masks or costumes of famous movie characters (Figure 3, no. 15) in Halloween episodes or at other costume parties. Recent examples include the children from *Stranger Things* dressing up as the *Ghostbusters* (1984; Duffer & Duffer, 2016–present, S2E2; Figure 3, no. 13) and the teenagers from *Euphoria* masquerading as Marlene Dietrich, Juliet in an angel costume from Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo+Juliet* (1996; Figure 3, nr. 12), and the child prostitute Iris from *Taxi Driver* (1976; Levinson, 2018–present, S1E6). On the one hand, these are one-off appearances of "character memes" limited to one episode. On the other hand, because many network or cable shows cover Halloween every year, such pre-internet memefication is a fixed pillar of televisual remediation. For many shows, memefication is central to their aesthetics, principal photography, and narrative fabric. Pop-culturally perceptive shows frequently adapt iconic movie scenes (Figure 3). *Euphoria* had main actors Zendaya and Hunter Schaefer reenact a scene from *Titanic* (1997; Levinson–present, 2018, S2E4; Figure 3, nr. 5). *The O.C.* is famous for its homage to the upside-down kiss from *Spiderman* (2002), which served as the climax of the evolution of a romantic relationship (Schwartz, DeLaurentis, et al., 2003–2006, S2E14; Figure 3, no. 3). *Gossip Girl* emphasized the contrast between the main characters, frenemies Serena and Blair, through reenactments of Marilyn Monroe's and Audrey Hepburn's most iconic movie appearances (Schwartz, Savage, et al., 2007–2012, S1E4+14, S2E16, S5E13; Figure 3, nos. 1 and 11). In its musical episodes, *Riverdale* featured appearances of *Carrie* (1976) and the *Heathers* (1989 film and 2018 musical; Figure 3, nos. 6 and 7). *Pretty Little Liars* recreated either shots or entire scenes from various Alfred Hitchcock movies or classic film noir. Examples include:

- A shot-by-shot replication of the infamous shower scene in *Psycho* (1960; King, 2010–2017, S2E25; Figure 3, nos. 10 and 14), though the series inverts the shot composition, thus transforming the visual citation according to memetic creativity (cf. Taylor, 2022);
- A reenactment of the climactic scene in *Dial M for Murder* (1954) in which a character fights off an attacker (King, 2010–2017, S5E6; Figure 3, no. 8);
- A variety of (single) shots throughout the series that recall iconic movie shots from *Rebecca* (1940; King, 2010–2017, S3E24; Figure 3, no. 9), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Laura* (1944), or *The Big Combo* (1955; King, 2010–2017, S4E19; Figure 3, no. 2).

Understanding and appreciating intermedial memefications requires a wide range of pop cultural knowledge. Because they speak to our iconographic memory, they educate and cultivate an audience of media-savvy viewers who focus on spotting and analyzing references as part of forensic fandom (cf. Mittell, 2013).

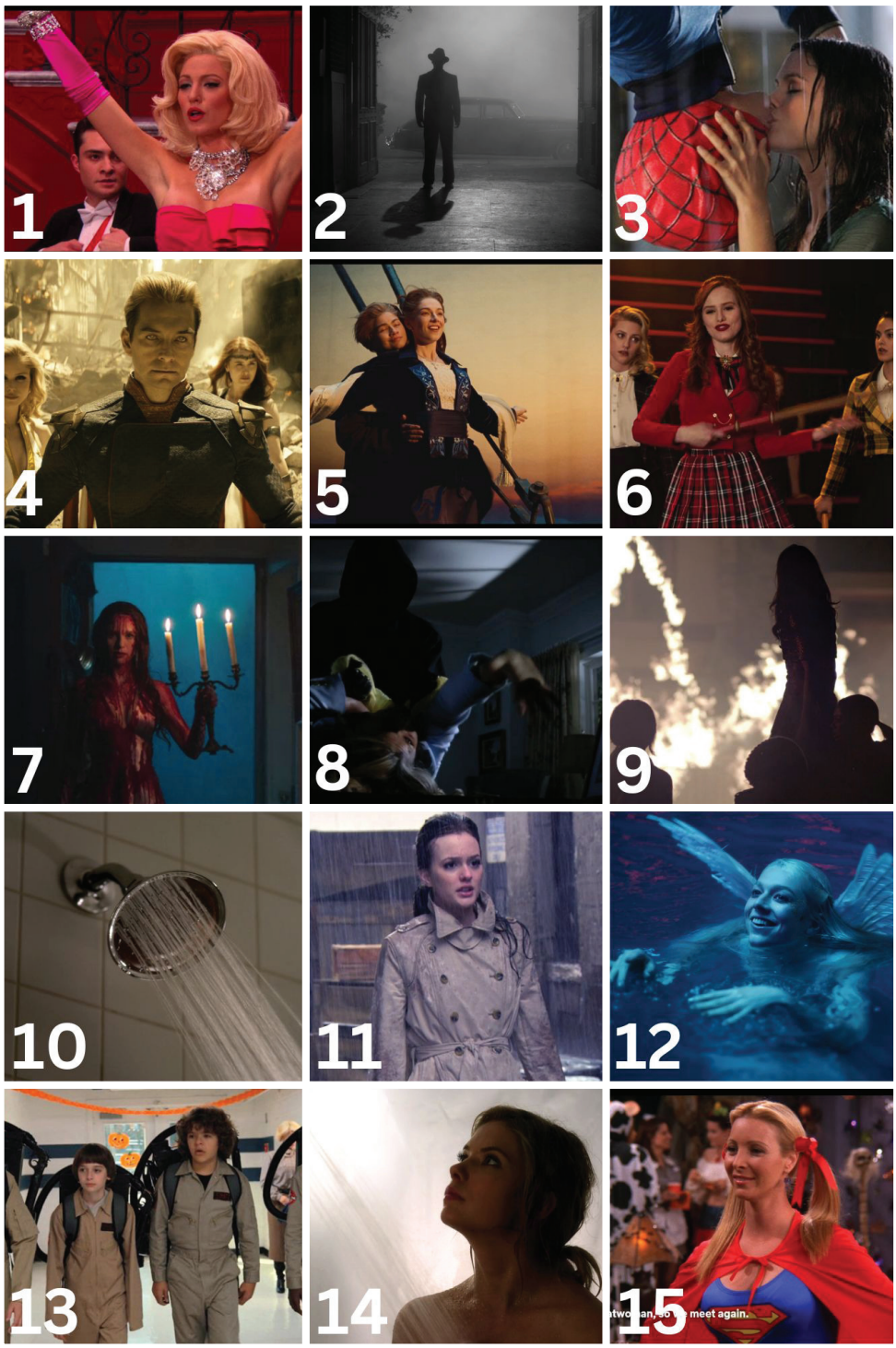

Figure 3. Intermedial memefications of movie iconographies in *Euphoria* (nos. 5, 12), *Friends* (no. 15), *Gossip Girl* (nos. 1, 11), *Pretty Little Liars* (nos. 2, 8–10, 14), *Riverdale* (nos. 6–7), *Stranger Things* (no. 13), *The Boys* (no. 4), and *The O.C.* (no. 3).

Simultaneously, the televisual "repackaging" conveys filmic or cinematic knowledge to new audiences. As part of cultural reproduction mechanisms, intermedial memefications are "performances of adaptation" (Gratch & Gratch, 2021, pp. 143–145) that extend a text's or a group of texts' cultural impact. The most

systematic realization of such intermedial memefication occurs in shows like Prime Video's superhero satire *The Boys* (Kripke, 2019–present), which copy and satirize the entire iconography of a movie franchise, in this case the Marvel and DC Cinematic Universes (Figure 3, no. 4). The creative memetic transformation in this particular series is most significant on the level of *stance*, i.e., the tone and style of the meme and its communicative functions (Shifman, 2013, pp. 40–41). The satirist use of superhero imagery, on the one hand, emphasizes Marvel and DC's dominance in Western popular culture. On the other hand, the familiar icons and motifs serve as vessels for the pointed critique of celebrity culture and media conglomerates. This "reframing" is common in pre-internet memefication, because TV series must tailor the referenced text elements to their characters and narratives. Gratch and Gratch (2021, p. 146) explain that

> Reframing alters the incorporated source(s) to fit the needs, desires, or beliefs of the adapter. Such adaptations may even attempt to reclaim or otherwise control the narrative of the source media, shifting the discursive fields in which all adaptations of the meme are involved.

Thus, the conveyed filmic and pop cultural knowledge is not indisputable, but always the result of an ongoing intermedial debate that "memetic television" makes visible.

Intermedial memefication is not limited to film references. Television culture is "part of a global media culture that is increasingly characterized by intervisual forms of design that blur the boundaries between the visual worlds of art, cinema, television and the internet" (Bleicher, 2011, p. 303). Consequently, through "intervisuality," memefications also recreate famous works of art, like Edward Hopper's painting *Nighthawks* in *That '70s Show* (Turner et al., 1998–2006, S1E8), *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989–present, S8E18), or *Dead Like Me* (Fuller et al., 2003–2004, S1E12). One opening sequence of *Euphoria* recreates historically significant paintings and photographs, e.g., *The Birth of Venus* (Botticelli), *The Lovers II* (René Magritte), *Rolling Stones*' cover of John Lennon and Yoko Ono (Annie Leibovitz), and Frida Kahlo's *Self Portrait as a Tehuana* (Levinson, 2018–present, S2E4). Alternatively, the series visualizes a cultural theme such as the Japanese pictorial maxim of the "Three Monkeys." Its visual or narrative adaptations have been frequent, highlighting the teleserial nature of remediation (Figure 4). For example, the sitcoms *Golden Girls* (Harris et al., 1985–1992, S1E21) and *Friends* (Bright et al., 1994–2004, S1E21) each recall the motif with a comical shot in which three characters are posed as the iconic monkeys covering their eyes, ears, and mouth ("see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil"). The fantasy drama *Charmed* dedicates an entire episode to the proverbial principle, with the three main characters losing their senses of sight, hearing, and speaking, respectively (Burge et al., 1998–2006, S5E20). Memetic recurrences of artwork(s) from any media in television "test" if these cultural icons are appropriable to new contexts and narratives and, consequently, remain meaningful to contemporary audiences (Taylor, 2022, pp. 109–110). In an intertextual web where televisual and other images constantly reference each other, "each media commodity becomes, at the instant of its release, an archive to be plundered, an original to be memorized, copied, and manipulated" (De Kosnik, 2016, p. 4). In turn, television acts as a "media archive" that "integrates previous cultural forms of expression into its offering" (Bleicher, 2011, p. 289). Its "visual opulence" (Bleicher, 2011, p. 302) and "performance of style" (Caldwell, 2002, p. 166) train viewers in media literacy, i.e., the ability to understand and negotiate meanings in an audiovisual culture, as well as to evaluate media contents and create communications from it (Koltay, 2011, pp. 212–213). This includes the reuse of aesthetics or visual representations from new formats and other texts.

Figure 4. Serial remediation of the "Three Monkeys" meme in *Golden Girls* (S1E21, left), *Friends* (S1E21, middle), and *Charmed* (S5E20, right).

Television's pre-internet memefications appeal to both individual and collective image memory, for which they continuously provide updates. This reproduction of the same or similar images is a core characteristic of teleseriality, but on a broader scale, it also mirrors pop culture's constant state of recalling and recycling its imagery and audiovisualities. Pastiche series such as *Gossip Girl*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *Riverdale*, and *Euphoria* push pop culture's self-referentiality as far as possible. Drawing on the visual registers of prior media texts constitutes the appropriation and appreciation of cultural history. This process contributes to canon formation and consolidation because these pre-internet memefications tell us which artworks are relevant for participating in cultural conversations. Every TV series operates within a specific cultural framework, which is reflected through these revisualizations. They ensure the preservation and reproduction of cultural heritage, usually dominated by US and Western products. TV shows have rehashed and popularized historic cultural items for contemporary audiences. Popular culture is an autopoietic system, producing and maintaining itself through the currency of intertextual references and memes. Hyper-referential shows like the previously mentioned illustrate that memefication has only grown in recent TV and web series as they circulate across various channels and find new audiences online, possibly through internet memes. Conversely, teleserial memefications increasingly revolve around themselves, addressing dedicated and adept fans in the process.

3.2. Interserial Memefication

The next subsections explore how pre-internet memefication on television shifts from imitating features from other media to revisualizing and commenting on itself. I am now looking at cases where series mimic *each other* for dramatic, comedic, or satiric purposes. Interserial memefications display specific intertextual networks that intertwine with a series' overall narrative, themes, or character perspectives, adding not only aesthetic surplus value, but also additional layers of interpretation and signification beyond the story at hand. More than characters simply wearing costumes from a different series, these are performances of another show's trademarks, e.g., its visual style, scenography or settings, character gestures, and countenances. They either restage a specific scene from another show or, alternatively, reinvent a typical scene that reflects the other series' characterizations, narratives, and eccentricities. Examples are countless, occurring in any TV decade and serial genre. A dream sequence in *The Nanny* (Jacobson et al., 1993–1999, S4E14) spoofed characters from the prime-time soap opera *Dynasty*. Netflix' *Dear White People* (Simien et al., 2017–2021) created various fictitious "shows within a show" that parodied popular prestige series, including *Scandal* (named "Defamation" in the series, S1), *Empire* ("Prince O'Palities," S2), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (S3). *Riverdale*'s pilot alludes to the scenery and "mood" of *Twin Peaks* (Aguirre-Sacasa et al., 2017–2023). In the

Supernatural episode "Changing Channels" (Kripke, 2005–2020, S5E8), the series' leads are forced to act as the main characters in parodies of *CSI: Crime Investigation*, *Grey's Anatomy* (named "Dr. Sexy, M.D."), *Knight Rider*, and *Two and a Half Man*. These memefications include mannerisms from the referenced shows or what Bollywood choreographers call "signature movements" (Basu, 2021). For instance, the *Supernatural* episode mocks the habit of CSI investigators of dramatically taking off or putting on their sunglasses when arriving and leaving a crime scene, respectively. In *The Nanny*'s *Dynasty* spoof, the titular character exaggeratedly purses her lips, recalling Joan Collins' acting (Figure 5). Most often, imitations like these are loving homages to the "original" texts, reflecting back on the characters that enact them. However, some intradiegetic shows highlight narrative flaws, thematic ironies, or even controversies of the referenced series. *Dear White People*'s version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, criticizes the latter's focus on white female characters as victims of oppression and exploitation—as opposed to women of color, who have endured similar or worse injustice, but were not represented on television. In a dialogue from the parody, the main white character laments the enslavement of women for reproductive purposes, which is a direct reference to the Gilead regime in the actual series: "Can you believe this is happening? I mean, this used to be America" (Figure 5). A Black character sarcastically responds: "Injustice in America. Who could've guessed?" (Simien et al., 2017–2021).

Interserial memefications display "interserial coherence," i.e., intertextual constellations that create links between knowledge systems and communities of two or more series (Weber & Junklewitz, 2016, p. 10). As creatively modified citations, they treat one show as a "fictional artifact" in the second to argue for a shared media reality with viewers (Weber & Junklewitz, 2016, pp. 10–13). This has significant consequences for the reception: audiences produce and compare "cognitive maps" of various TV series and their shared information units or points of friction (Mittell, 2015, p. 166). Through interserial memefication, television reflects on itself, training viewers to recognize and appreciate its "legacy shows" and even critically reflect on them. After all, we experience and remember media (history) mostly through other media. Moreover,

Figure 5. Interserial memefication in *Dear White People* (S3E1, upper left), *Riverdale* (S1E1, upper right), *The Nanny* (S4E14, bottom left), and *Supernatural* (S5E8, bottom right).

television is notorious for inserting itself into its historicization, i.e., for producing its past through its own devices and formats, including but not limited to historical documentaries (Engell, 2005). Interserial memefications act as television's meta-memory because they remind audiences of the medium's historical and cultural impact. A recent example is Marvel's miniseries *WandaVision* (Feige et al., 2021), which tackled the evolution of sitcoms, representing one decade of television comedy in each episode. This included the memefication of sitcom classics through character archetypes and tropes, era-specific plotlines and jokes, costumes and décor, and narrative and visual style. *WandaVision* mimicked the stylistic "formation of epochs and phases" that is characteristic of televisual depictions of history (Engell, 2005, p. 73). Here, TV refers to its "internal horizon," thus interweaving historiography and autobiography (Engell, 2005, p. 61). With interserial memefication, the medium reassures itself of its legacy and solidifies its visual repertoire, i.e., its *televisuality*. TV series continuously build a collective frame of reference for the audience, especially loyal viewers and fans. This way, television becomes its own echo chamber as it recalls and resells its products to the point of self-memefication within a single series.

3.3. Intraserial Self-Memefication

For intraserial memefication, TV shows do not have to look past their own narrative and visual realms. These memes are reperforming and mimicking a series' very own trademarks. For example, characters can imitate each other, both physically and through costume. In a Halloween episode of *Friends* (Bright et al., 1994–2004, S8E6), Joey arrives in Chandler's clothes and exaggerates the latter's mannerisms, thereby trolling his friend and entertaining the rest of the group. Similarly, *The Big Bang Theory*'s Sheldon and Amy dress up as their peers Howard and Bernadette, respectively, to highlight their flaws. Amy imitates Bernadette's high-pitched voice, mockingly exclaiming "I'm being unnecessarily hurtful but with a sweet voice" (Lorre & Prady, 2007–2019, S12E6). Even more significant than these brief "character enactments" are "shows within a show" that mirror the series' premise, setting, characters, and events. *The Nanny* showed a scene snippet from "Royal Flush," a fabricated show that featured the same archetypes, e.g., the nosy butler and the street-smart "maid," and served as a pun on the rival show *Full House* (Jacobson et al., 1993–1999, S2E12). A main character in *Community*, the pop culture obsessed Abed, wrote and directed the campus show "The Community College Chronicles," basing all of its characters on his study group. The web show predicts, or rather "pre-enacts," future events in the series (Harmon, 2009–2014; S1E9). Self-memefication strengthens the "intraserial coherence" of TV shows, i.e., their inner narrative nexuses (Weber & Junklewitz, 2016). This strategy also intersects with other teleserial devices such as recapping or diegetic retelling (cf. Mittell, 2015; Newman, 2006). Furthermore, it adapts the "replay" and "rewind" functions that audiences have become accustomed to through video and DVD players and streaming services. Some memes replay key scenes from a show's history: In the intradiegetic theatrical play "The Bloody Hand," *Games of Thrones* put on spoofy reenactments of main character deaths from seasons one and four that were significant turning points in the overall story (Benioff & Weiss, 2011–2019, S6E5–6). The *Euphoria* episode "The Theater and Its Double" recreated scenes from season 1 in a school play written by a supporting character to present her perspective on past events (Levinson, 2018–present, S2E7; Figure 6). In general, self-repetition is a text mediation strategy that compensates for different levels of knowledge and attention spans among viewers (Mittell, 2015, p. 181). However, intraserial memefications, as previously described, do not simply repeat past events but put a comedic, satiric, or otherwise re-interpretative "spin" on them. In contrast to classic recaps, flashbacks, or diegetic retellings, these self-reflexive performances address regular viewers and fans rather than distracted or casual audiences.

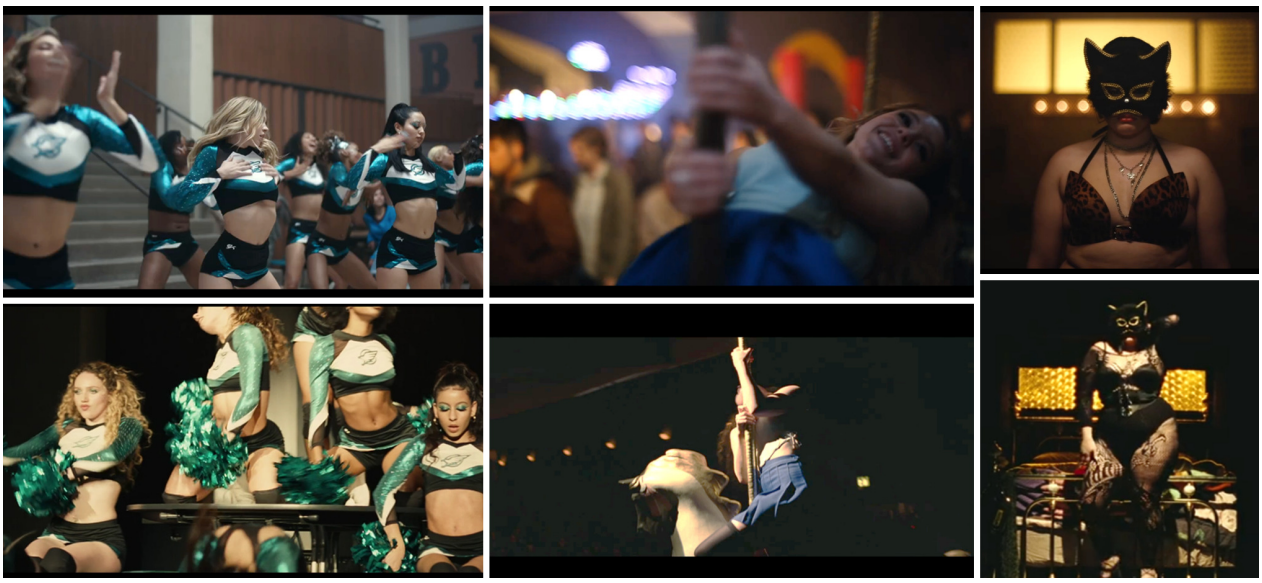

Figure 6. Self-memefication in *Euphoria*: Original scenes (top row, various episodes of S1) and their theatrical reenactments (bottom row, S2E7).

A TV series imitates itself to maintain the sovereignty of interpretation over its history and to advocate for its cultural significance. Therefore, intraserial memefications represent a self-preserving micro-strategy of television, following up and doubling down on interserial memefication. Self-memefication can even merge with intermedial or interserial imitations, creating a network of intertextual and multimedia references. Some of *The Nanny*'s intraserial memefications, for instance, restage the show's signature conflicts and character relations through the performance and visual style of other series, films, or plays. In addition to the *Dynasty* spoof, the show retold its central "will-they-won't-they" plot involving the titular nanny and her boss through a fantasy sequence in film noir style (Jacobson et al., 1993–1999, S4E18) and a parody of *The Dick van Dyke Show* (S4E4). These elaborate multi-layered memefications demonstrate that TV series are simultaneously mashups and archives of themselves, of television, and of media culture as a whole. Thus, they function as a medium of commemorative culture: television producers use them to remind viewers of creative achievements and (former) aesthetic standards of audiovisual media. At the same time, TV audiences may perceive (and subsequently use) television as a mediator of personal or collective cultural memory (Erll, 2005, p. 135). As TV became increasingly self-aware, televisuality grew denser with these self-reflexive and self-historizing moments. Intraserial memefication demonstrates how television, as a major producer of pop culture, anticipates its exploitation and transformation through other media. TV series in particular are "agents" of fundamental change in media culture (Beil et al., 2016, p. 10). On the one hand, they are exposed to aesthetic, technological, and institutional shifts in media systems, which they reflect in their narratives and modes of representation. On the other, they promote these very changes through "transmediatization," meaning the expansion or migration of their stories, characters, settings, and other serial elements across different media, thereby ensuring television's "survival in a different form" (Beil et al., 2016, p. 10). In contemporary media culture, a series' transmediatization includes internet memes. Contemporary, self-reflexive shows are particularly responsive to appropriative practices in digital culture. Consequently, these shows often pre-manufacture their memefication on the social web, thus premeditating "new" meme formats such as TikToks, which revolve around reenactments and parodies.

4. Online Memefication

Returning to the premise of this article—that TV series frequently produce "memeable" content—it is worth pointing out some memes in *potentialis*. As mentioned in the introduction, they are easily imitable or reproducible elements designed to become internet memes, such as:

- Over-the-top or comic relief characters who regularly utter pointed "one-liners" and present strong facial expressions or outlandish behavior are popular material for reaction memes or GIFs;
- Ambiguous or suggestive motifs can be worked into thumbnails, mashups, or fan collages;
- A series' general showmanship and visual spectacle were put forward for reenactments in Instagram reels or TikToks.

Consequently, TV series provide us with a plethora of "memes in waiting" that aim at their eventual "transmediatization" (Beil et al., 2016, p. 10) and circulation beyond the series, as snippets, stills, soundbites, or other fragments on the web. When exposed to internet meme culture, they migrate through social media and video-sharing platforms, making their way into everyday communications. The cross-platform production of memes has great practical value for maintaining and expanding fan culture: Through memes (and other social media affordances), fans share a series' universe and potentially create new semantic connections to other media formats (Presswood & Granelli, 2015, p. 214). Similar to user-generated "paratexts and interconnected ephemera" such as fan fiction, internet memes add to the narrative world and "make meaning out of established media texts" (Geraghty, 2015, p. 1). Additionally, they proliferate the experience of and engagement with a series. Because of their "rich intertextuality" and "anomalous juxtaposition" of images, events, and topics, which contribute to their online success (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, pp. 213–216), memes put televisual content in conversation with other media, cultural phenomena, or societal issues and discourses.

The previously introduced taxonomy and subsequent discussion of examples from various shows (Figure 7) have revealed the progression of teleserial memefication: from a pre-internet (or even pre-digital) and intramedial process of revisualization to all-around transmedial practices of imitation, reenactment, and recreation. This ultimately raises questions about the sustainability of television and popular culture. Pre-internet and online memefications address recipients with a certain level of media and cultural-historical pre-knowledge that is a prerequisite for decoding these layered references. They also cultivate insider engagement with series and a shared understanding of certain cultural hallmarks and artistic milestones. TV revisualizations are an integral part of media circulation processes through which audiences gain aesthetic experience and stylistic competence (Adelmann, 2015, p. 105). Thus, televisuality becomes an ever-expanding database for remediation and memefication in personal, institutional, or commercial contexts. In addition to public posts on social media platforms like X, Instagram, or TikTok, TV memes reappear in private conversations among friends and family, serving as insider jokes or love languages in bilateral or closed group chats on messenger apps. WhatsApp, Signal, and Telegram facilitate "memetic communication" through the integration of Giphy, a database of GIFs, as well as "stickers," meaning small cutouts of media figures, e.g., TV characters. With these shortcuts to animated meme material, teleserial elements smoothly insert themselves into everyday conversations. Subsequently, users may perceive the represented series as both "must-see-TV" and "must-tweet-TV" (Gormász, 2012), or in more general terms, "must-share-TV," which means that their reception extends beyond the silver screen to mobile and second

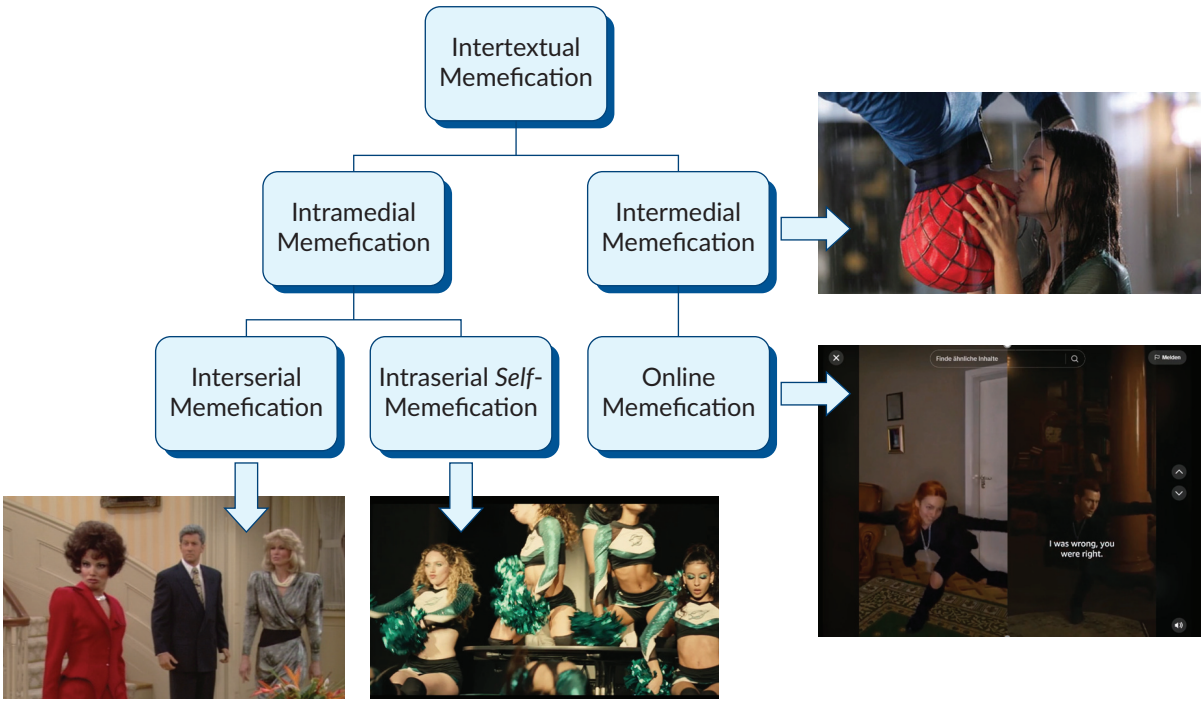

Figure 7. Taxonomy of memefication with examples from *Euphoria*, *Good Omens*, *The Nanny*, and *The O.C.*

screens. Through the interleaving of pre-internet and internet memefication, TV series, in their entirety, now occupy our leisure time and everyday media culture more holistically. Some may regain recognition and resonance with new audiences beyond fan groups and filter bubbles through incessant online memefication or viral spread. In any case, memefication lends new purpose to TV series. This purpose lies in the initiation of appropriation, remembrance, and reinterpretation processes, which ultimately continue the conversation around and consumption of media content.

5. Conclusion

Pre-internet memefication demonstrates televisuality's "natural" ability of meme production and distribution. In the digital media environment, internet memes from and of TV series contribute to the preservation of popular culture. As dynamic repositories of moving images, they result from the infrastructural and logistic transformation of cultural memory regarding storage, temporality, and networking (Thylstrup, 2018, p. 185). Digitization destabilizes the indexical connection between institutions of cultural memory, e.g., archives or museums, and their contents. In contemporary media ecosystems, these institutions are no longer central but only one of many nodes of cultural remembrance (Thylstrup, 2018, pp. 185, 190). Television is arguably one of these nodes, too, because it has consolidated itself over decades as "a central place where what becomes visible in our culture and how it becomes visible is defined" (Adelmann, 2015, p. 102). Its "devices" for recalling media imagery and narratives are televisuality and seriality. Through the "recycling" of visual motifs and styles, television stores memories of media products, aesthetics, and technologies, albeit temporarily and fleetingly. Consequently, the medium is a precursor to online platforms, and its programs, especially TV series, are models for digital reproductive formats like internet memes. Meanwhile, memes continuously develop new audiovisual forms, both offline and online, through which we collect, retrieve, and transform cultural memories. Thus, the intersection of teleserial revisualization and memefication, as

discussed in this article, provides a useful lens for (further) research into the remembrance and inheritance of cultural artifacts and audiovisual modes of representation. Through intermedial, interserial, and intraserial memefication, we can observe the self-sustaining processes of television in particular and popular culture in general.

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Conflict of Interests

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