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Lost Without a Connection: Analyzing Netflix's *Maniac* in the Digital Streaming Age

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

With the emergence and rise in popularity of streaming services such as Netflix or Hulu, the way in which audiences view and interact with media, as well as each other, has changed drastically. The move to digital streaming impacts how audiences everywhere experience and expect immediacy in media, connecting deeper with what they watch. Along with this transition in spectatorship comes a shift in visual aesthetics, a trend that can be seen across various digitally-streamed series. This thesis serves to address what this transition is and how it affects the cultural landscape of the digital age, continuing the conversation of media theorists Marshall McLuhan and Steven Shaviro, who have written about the impacts of such technological changes.

As the prime example, this thesis will look at the Netflix limited series *Maniac*, due to its adherence to the visual trends of the medium, as well as the relevance of its themes to the modern digital age. Following two strangers as they connect through a clinical drug trial, the series establishes media intervention as a primary theme, especially in regards to the connection and alienation of society. Living in an age of technological innovation, the self-reflexive show serves as a way to understand how these changes impact everyday life. Putting McLuhan and Shaviro in conversation with each other, the statement on media intervention the series makes can be traced, as well as applied to the connection between everyone in the modern digital age.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

On September 21, 2018, all ten episodes of *Maniac* were released simultaneously on the streaming platform Netflix. Written by Patrick Somerville and directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga, the limited series follows two strangers, Annie and Owen, both alienated through society and mental illness, as they connect and grow close during an experimental drug trial coined the “ULP.” This drug trial, helmed by Dr. James Mantleray, serves the purpose of healing mental illnesses without the need for in-person therapy. The drugs, which are three pills taken in three separate “sessions,” are meant to highlight past traumas, break down mental defense mechanisms, and illuminate hidden character qualities and desires they may have repressed. These sessions result in dream-like hallucinations that the patients experience, all personalized to their own traumas and fears, which is all overseen by a supercomputer with a consciousness, named the GRTA, or “Gertie.” The ultimate goal is to have these patients confront their own traumas or inner demons, and embrace who they truly are and what they truly want.

Throughout the limited-run series multiple themes are touched on, specifically: 1) The conflict between alienation and connection in a highly digital and technologized world, especially in regards to a desire for what is “real;” and 2) The presence of media in everyday life, and its affect on mental and social health. The theme of alienation and connection is best explored through the arcs of the main characters Annie, Owen, and James and their anxieties

regarding the alienating technologies of their world; while its message on media and its mediating presence in everyday life is shown through the science-fiction services and technologies, and especially through Gertie, who mediates the entire trial, catering each session to each individual patient. Both of these themes are important to note, as they provide the groundwork for my analysis of the show in how it acknowledges and represents the changes in spectatorship that the digital age has brought to media technologies, as well as the changes in connections within society as a whole.

Tracing these messages further, I seek to associate them with the research and publications of media theorists Marshall McLuhan and Steven Shaviro. Drawing connections between the two, I argue that the cultural ramifications of technological change are shown through the emergence and popularity of internet streaming. In a time of great technological innovation, it is no coincidence that a show as self-reflexive as *Maniac* came out of the anxieties of this age. With this in mind, the themes that the series puts forth can be better visualized for the digital age, where media can be both connective and alienating.

However, these themes and the series' overall message on our relationship with media is one that is controversial at best, as shown through the mixed critical and commercial reception upon its release. While much praise was given to Emma Stone and Jonah Hill for their acting, as well as the visual style of Cary Joji Fukunaga's direction, a majority of the negative reviews found the series to be hard to follow and the message to be unclear. Focusing primarily on the experimental narrative structure of the show, many of the reviews criticized the implementation and purpose of the dream-like hallucinations of the drug trial sessions. What these critical reviews of the show fail to discuss, though, is how this show addresses the overarching themes

mentioned above, and how this experimental structure lends itself to emphasizing the role that streaming culture plays in the current digital age. Through an analysis of the characters in the series, as well as the technologies and services that surround them in their fictionalized world, the complicated themes and controversial message on media's role in society can be sorted out.

The message that *Maniac* brings forth is undoubtedly a complicated one, touching on both sides of varying thematic issues that deal with its own place among the digital streaming age. While at first presenting two characters lost in the anxieties of alienation in a highly technologized world, the series offers a glimmer of hope through the true connection they forge. It is not a connection forged outside of the media of their world, though, it is one forged *through* it, relating to the struggles of our modern age, especially in the face of such a giant shift in media consumption. With the rise of streaming platforms and binge-watching practices, it is crucial not to give in to the temptations of alienation and isolation, no matter the societal pressure and anxieties. Although the end message of the show is one of hope, it does not come without its own branches of darkness. There will always be ways to view these technological advancements as a double-edged sword, but it is our job to slash forward together, clearing the way for a more unified and connected world.

Anxieties of Alienation in *Maniac*

While the show presents many viewpoints and aspects that demand further analysis, I believe the best way to engage the show's conflict between alienation and connection is through an analysis of the anxieties brought upon the main characters through their technologically advanced world, as well as the changes they undergo throughout the course of the narrative.

Portrayed by actor Jonah Hill, Owen is one of the main characters of the series, whose family drama and schizophrenic tendencies form one of the central story arcs of the show. We are introduced to Owen in the first episode through his family and lawyers asking him questions that he could be asked during his brother's trial the following week. On trial for sexually assaulting a woman, Owen's brother Jed has called on Owen to testify in court that he was with his brother the night of the incident, thus giving his brother an alibi. Owen, however, realizes this would mean lying on the stand and has conflicting feelings about going through with it, despite the immense pressure from his family. Through this same opening scene, we learn that Owen has a history of schizophrenia, at times being unable to differentiate between what is real and what is a hallucination. This conflict of his own character between fantasy and reality is established as a defining characteristic of Owen's throughout the show, with much of his arc dedicated to sorting it out. This conflict influences his decisions throughout the show, specifically through his hesitation to lie in court and go through with the ULP drug trial. Over the course of the limited series, Owen's schizophrenia serves as an indication of the tensions and anxieties of his personality, specifically shown through his hallucinations during stressful situations and his obsession with Annie's appearance in the Daddy's Home advertisements. Due to this, his personality is one that desires an acknowledgment of what is real, despite living in a society that favors fantasy and simulations. In fact, this desire can even be seen through Owen's dismissal of his schizophrenia medication, opting to remain in control of his own life without a reliance on any kind of media intervention for his own salvation.

The second central character in the show is Annie, portrayed by actress Emma Stone, who we are introduced to through her drug addiction in the second episode. Although she is not

schizophrenic in the same sense that Owen is, she is not without her own mental and social issues. An amalgam of borderline personality disorder and narcissism, Annie is first depicted as a drug addict abusing the first pill of the ULP drug trial without truly understanding its purpose. Remembering that the ULP consists of three pills to be taken in succession of each other, the first pill's purpose is to expose the patient's darkest moment or most traumatic memory. This is a feeling and sensation that Annie is addicted to, preventing her from continuing on in her life, and preventing her from making any true connections with those around her. The reason she constantly returns to her most traumatic memory is because she gets to see her little sister, whose death she blames herself for. However, I argue that the reason for her addiction to the drug lies in the anxieties she has regarding connection in this digital society. Annie uses media in the form of the "A" pill from the ULP in order to alienate herself from others, preventing her from hurting others she gets close to, yet also preventing her from connecting with people beyond surface level. This can be seen through the distance between her and her roommates, as well as the lack of communication between Annie and her father, with her pill addiction the A-Void Pod serving as media preventing these connections.

Despite Annie's addictions and Owen's schizophrenic hallucinations, the conflict within them stems from their desire for reality in such an alienating world that favors fantasy and simulation. The world of *Maniac* is presented as an alternate 1980's New York City, one filled with technologies and services that emphasize alienation over true connection. While it is never explicitly mentioned, it is implied that Owen's family received their wealth through the invention of a dog-poop sidewalk cleaner. While not necessarily alienating, this technology shows the society's reliance on such media innovations, emphasizing the role that media plays in everyday

life, especially in ways that promote ease and immediacy. One service that Owen encounters early into the series is one called “Daddy’s Home,” which provides lonely widows with fake husbands that they can order and rent. After he was let go from his job and unable to pay his rent, Owen considers signing up as a husband for the service in order to make ends meet, but ultimately decides against it. Daddy’s Home is a prime example of the kinds of services and technologies that cause a conflict of character within Owen, creating a simulation and preventing true connections from being made.

As with Owen, Annie’s own mental illness is not solely to blame for her actions, and again I believe that the technologies and services of this society are a main cause of anxiety and inner conflict among these characters, drugs included. During the second episode, Annie goes to a store that specializes in blackmail services. In this fictional world, a law called the “Banner Act” has legalized all forms of blackmail and digital espionage, adding to the social anxieties of the world. In a world where false fronts are exposed and anyone can discover information about anyone, it is not hard to assume there would be anxieties and tensions associated with forging real connections with other people. Annie goes to this store in order to discover information about an employee at Neberdine Pharmaceutical Biotech, the company funding the ULP, with hopes of blackmailing her way into the ULP drug trial. Here, she learns that this employee has a “FriendProxy” appointment for later that day, and decides this would be her best chance at forcing her way into the trial. In the fictional world of *Maniac*, FriendProxy exists as a service for people to rent fake friends for short periods of time, as opposed to the work and effort it takes in maintaining real friendships. Similar to Daddy’s Home, this service emphasizes what is fake solely for the sake of ease and convenience, all at the cost of social health and the ability to forge

real connections with other people. During this second episode, Annie infiltrates the employee's FriendProxy appointment, attempting to gain leverage and threaten her way into the ULP drug trial. Without much information or warning, we as viewers are thrown into this appointment, watching as the employee slowly and uncomfortably figures out that Annie is not her FriendProxy appointment. They slowly walk through a greenhouse, shot close together in frame, as Annie blunders her way through the pre-written backstory of their "friendship." As the employee catches on, they drift further apart in frame until they only converse through shot-reverse shot, emphasizing the fact that they truly are strangers, even if Annie was the real FriendProxy appointment. At this point, multiple quick cuts capture the reactions of the children around them in the greenhouse, who see the interaction between Annie and the employee as off-putting. Annie then chastises her for using a service that provides fake friends. "I have real friends," the employee says defensively, "this is just more convenient," showing the mentality behind those who use the service, as well as the many other technologies and services present in the show. This entire sequence builds uneasiness through its visual style and subject matter, all while adhering to the digital series aesthetic that I argue this show and many other digital series have.

In addition to these services, Annie's character also has experience dealing with the alienating technologies of her world as well, specifically through the interactions with her father and the technology he depends on throughout the show. We are first introduced to Annie's father when she visits him at his house. However, when she finds him, he is inside a cryogenic sleeping pod called the "A-Void Pod," where he can live safely away from the harm and sorrow of the outside, real world. In a similar way that Annie depends on the A pill to isolate herself from

society, her father depends on the A-Void pod to do the same. Despite media and technology's potential in bringing people together, they both fully rely on media and technology to either isolate or keep them in the past, both preventing true connections from being forged in the present.

In a similar way to how Annie's father isolates himself from reality with the A-Void Pod, Dr. James Mantleray, the creator of the ULP, utilizes media in a way that promotes alienation within the world of the series. We are first introduced to James when he is rehired by Neberdine Pharmaceutical Biotech to run the ULP drug trial. He had previously been fired due to his eccentric personality, which had alienated him from society and forced him to give in to his problematic paraphilia. James's character arc represents a potential extreme of media's role in alienation - to the point of true replacement of reality by what fantasy. The introduction to James's character comes during the third episode when one of the leading scientists behind the ULP, Dr. Azumi, discovers James in the third episode pleasuring himself in his apartment while wearing a virtual reality headset. This virtual reality media is meant to not only alienate himself, but actually replace real human connection in favor of a deep reliance on media technology. This replacement of reality with fantasy is exemplified by his creation of the ULP. Serving as a passion project for James after the death of his father, he wished to find a way of dealing with his trauma without the need for in-person therapy, and especially not from his overbearing, therapist mother. If Owen represents a full avoidance of media, and Annie represents the use of media for alienation, then James represents the use of media as a replacement for genuine human interaction, which is the furthest form of alienation that media can take.

Tracing the cultural ramifications of alienating media further, the character of Owen makes more sense as the “split” man between the technologies of the new and his desire for what is real. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan states how “schizophrenia may be a necessary consequence of literacy,” in which “the literate man is a split man, a schizophrenic,” making a statement on how the rise of literacy and knowledge put social anxieties on the people like never before (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 26). The very access to sheer amounts of information and technologies in a technologically advanced society creates this “split” between alienation and connection, which I argue Owen’s character represents. In fact, it is this post-literate nature of his being that changes his very thought patterns, in the same way that access to information in the digital age has affected how we perceive reality. As an emphasis on the conflict between what is a fantasy and what is real in this world, Owen’s schizophrenia visually expresses this inner turmoil, yet is not the only character to do so. Annie’s father in his A-Void pod, or James’s virtual reality pornography are also prime examples of this tension, however their “addictions” are about control rather than about the split tensions. Instead of being split and navigating between what is real and what is fake, Annie’s father and James regain control of their lives through what is fake, through alienation. Instead of searching for real connections, they try to at least gain control over what is not, which is helped through the mediation of media.

The Promise of Connection in *Maniac*

Although the show makes a compelling case against a reliance on media, as well as its role in the alienation of societies, it complicates this stance through the progression of its narrative, showing the ability of media to bring people together and mediate their connection.

This is primarily expressed through the presence of Gertie throughout the trials, and the powers of mediation she holds in watching over the patients. Despite the scientists attempting to isolate the patients throughout the sessions, Gertie connects Annie and Owen - mechanically through the soldering and welding together of their equipment, as well as “cosmically,” as Annie describes in episode five, in the sense that their memories and desires were fused together. It is this very connection that Gertie provides them that I argue leads to the seemingly successful results in both characters. Owen comes to terms with his own sickness, acknowledging and accepting the people he had hurt in his past instead of trying to forget it; while Annie learns to accept the death of her sister and move on in her life, no longer lingering in the past and alienating herself from society.

In the case of Owen, he discovers a way to connect with those around him through media, instead of avoiding the alienating media technologies present in the world or using them for isolation. If it were not for Gertie’s intervention in the drug trials, Owen would have never learned to embrace the dominating role that media has in society. He would also never learn how to connect with those around him in this hypothetical digital age, which serves as a representation of the current digital age we find ourselves in today - one that is culturally shaped by technological innovation. Ultimately, Owen’s character is split between the technologies of the new, such as Daddy’s Home or his schizophrenia medication, and the desires for connection of the past. The technologies of the new being His character arc sends a message on how to connect with others in a highly technologized society. The same goes for Annie as well, since through Gertie’s intervention she is able to deeply connect with Owen, forging her first true

connection in this highly technologized world since the death of her sister, as well as reconnecting with her father

Ultimately, the show has a “happy ending,” with Annie and Owen seemingly resolving their problems, or at least learning to live with them through the help of genuine connections with others. While it is only implied that Gertie played a part in this self-healing, I argue that it is precisely her intervention that set them on a path toward connection. Again, this message is controversial in light of our reliance on digital technologies in the current age, and the show conveys this message through an experimental and non-conventional narrative. A relatively positive review from James Poniewozik of *The New York Times* sums up expression of the message through unconventional means, stating, “*Maniac* is about an experimental psychoactive drug. Also, it sort of *is* an experimental psychoactive drug.” Touching on the experimental nature of the series, he explains how it may be “rough at first glance,” and not necessarily a show for everyone (Poniewozik 2). This experimental aspect is also brought up in Jen Chaney’s *Vulture* review, specifically using terms such as “unconventional” and “a lot to process” to describe the narrative approach of the series (Chaney 1). Relating the show to a drug of its own shows that the reviewer acknowledges the series’ association between drugs and media, even if they don’t explicitly say so. However, this approach that the show takes is one that emphasizes our own anxieties over media’s complicated role in everyday life, shown through complex allegories to our own digital age in the form of science-fiction services and drug-induced hallucinations.

So much of our everyday lives rely on or are mediated by media, which is a term that basically refers to any kind of technology, physical or digital, that serves a human purpose. In this sense, the “media” that mediates our digital streaming trends would be Netflix, the streaming

platform that produced and distributed *Maniac*. Due to this, the statements made by the show are easily applicable to the role that Netflix plays in contemporary spectatorship. Mediated by a supercomputer, the patients live out dream-like hallucinations that span across multiple genres of media storytelling, such as fantasy, crime, science fiction, and film noir. This, I argue, is representative of Netflix's capabilities of providing various genres for the spectator to "hop" through. Even on the homepage of the streaming platform, a subscriber can change genres with the simple click of a button, providing a catered experience for each individual spectator much like the individualized experiences of the ULP patients. This aspect of the show is briefly touched on in multiple online reviews as well. *Vulture's* Jen Chaney described it as "an exercise in switcheroos of form and tone," while *The New York Times's* James Poniewozik wrote, "their computer-engineered phantasms are less like chaotic actual dreams and more like a sampler of the Netflix recommendations menu." However, this aspect of the series drew criticism from many reviewers as well, especially Brian Raftery's *Wired* review in which he negatively spoke of the series being "the most Netflix-y Netflix show" in regards to this experimental creativity taking precedence over functionality (Raftery 1). While this review paints the series negatively, it does provide some great thoughts on how the genre-hopping nature of the show reflects Netflix as a streaming platform.

This self-reflexive nature of the show referenced by these reviews, promoting the idea that Netflix, like Gertie in the show, might also alienate and connect. Beyond having the aesthetic appeal of a digital limited series that samples from multiple genres, the show's themes on connection and mediation seem to solidify Netflix's position as the leading digital streaming platform, as well as solidify digital streaming as the dominant mode of spectatorship in the

digital age. Through this self-reflexiveness, Making a statement on how people within a digital and technologically advanced society should interact with media, the very act of watching the show and getting others to do the same represents this message on connecting through media. While the series undoubtedly shows the negative sides of media's role in society, such as utilizing media for alienation or replacement, the end message is one of hope for the future, where people can connect deeper through the mediation of media itself.

CHAPTER TWO:
BINGE-WATCHING AND THE DIGITAL SERIES AESTHETIC

Prior to 2013, the focus of the streaming platform Netflix was split between mail-order DVD rentals, similar to the business model of Blockbuster, and acquiring and streaming older, third-party properties, such as the hit comedy *The Office*. However, on February 1, 2013, this focus shifted upon the release of all thirteen episodes of the first season of *House of Cards*. As the first Netflix original series, it received critical acclaim and garnered a massive following, in addition to laying the groundwork for the production and distribution of digital series to come. In the years since, Netflix has deemphasized the DVD rentals that were representative of their early years, and has fully embraced digital streaming as the primary business and mode of spectatorship among its monthly subscribers. Since Netflix's shift to digital streaming, other platforms have emerged with many others in the works as well, all following a similar business model - one that endorses on-demand viewing and "binge-watching," which is the practice of consuming large amounts of media within a short amount of time, such as watching entire seasons of a show within a single day. While not all streaming platforms directly adhere to Netflix's model of distributing entire seasons at once, they all allow for the practice of binge-watching to flourish given the very nature of platform.

In addition to the aspects of distribution that promote binge-watching, there is a distinct visual style of these streaming-first series, one that promotes immediacy within the media, which

I will refer to as the digital series aesthetic. This aesthetic is defined by: 1) the use of big-name actors and well-established cinematic directors; 2) a high production value and budget, with an emphasis on computer-generated imagery (CGI); and 3) a smooth and polished feel to the camera movements, granting it a level of omniscience. Taking these three elements into account, they are best exemplified through the use of long shots or the “one-shot,” which are entire scenes capture in one take or edited seamlessly to appear so. All of these characteristics feed into the ability of the series to be binge-watched, providing a sense of immediacy to media, which I argue is simply an aesthetic of connection. However, like my analysis of *Maniac*, these shifts in viewing and production trends are not without conflict, with many seeing the rise of digital streaming as a turn towards isolation within media consumption. With *Maniac* serving as the prime example of these trends, the series self-reflexively deals with its own production, as well as providing a complicated viewpoint on the effects that its platform may have on media spectatorship.

Binge-Watching as Immediacy

The first way in which I would like to explore binge-watching is through its capabilities to present immediacy, in a different way than broadcast television. This can be seen through the notion of simultaneity in the medium. In broadcast television, viewers all watched simultaneously, while in digital streaming only the media is released simultaneously, adding self-choice to the immediacy of being able to spectate on the viewers’ terms. As stated before, immediacy is simply the visual aesthetic of connection. This can be seen through the visual style of the series, with each scene playing into the next and ending episodes on cliffhangers.

However, this immediacy within these digitally streamed series can be seen and felt through the streaming platform itself, where the next episode automatically plays without any effort on the viewer's part. In fact, the platform presents only a brief window to let the viewer decline watching another episode, skipping the end credits once the window ends. With the rise of streaming platforms comes the rise of this sense of immediacy, so much that the ability to choose what one watches and when one watches it has become an expectation of the platform. This is the case for most media in the digital age, with music changing from physical formats like vinyl records, cassettes, and compact discs to free digital streaming services like Spotify, Apple Music, and Pandora. In this sense, television shifted from weekly programming to continuous and immediate access of television through the introduction of Digital Video Recorders (DVRs) and streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime. This shift in media is what scholar Ryan Stoldt deems a "mediamorphosis," which describes "the transformation of communication media, usually brought about by the complex interplay of perceived needs, competitive and political pressures, and social and technological innovations," (Stoldt 2). In this section, I argue the technology that brought upon this mediamorphosis is the same technology that allows for a deeper connection with the media through the immersion of the platform and the practice of binge-watching.

Taking this immediacy further, though, and the rise in popularity of binge-watching becomes more apparent and understandable. In his thesis written on the transition from television to streaming, Ryan Stoldt traces the history of the term and practice of binge-watching. Most notably, he discusses how "back-to-back" marathons would air on broadcast television channels, playing many episodes of the same show in succession. This, however, he describes as "media

marathoning,” which is not binge-watching by definition. That being the case, how does one define “binge-watching?” A Netflix study conducted in 2014 found that “73% of respondents defined binge-watching as watching 2-6 episodes of the same television show in one sitting,” although because of this mediamorphosis, the lines are blurred between what constitutes as television (Stoldt 6). While similar to media marathoning, binge-watching involves practices beyond simple marathons - it incorporates choice and immediacy. This being the case, home video DVDs and season collections are more in line with modern day binge-watching due to its on-demand nature, which is an element of streaming platforms that led to their popularity and success.

Beyond the immediacy of the streaming platforms, the series that are produced for and premiere on these platforms adhere to specific visual and aesthetic trends that emphasize their own immediacy. This can be traced back to the first season of *House of Cards* in 2013, which was released all at once, becoming the norm for Netflix. “The show is clearly and cleverly structured for binge-consumption,” Stoldt writes, “each episode is labeled as a ‘chapter.’ There are no introductory flashbacks, common in traditional series that trickle out over time. And at the end of nearly every episode, the cliffhanger is so unsettling and juicy that the temptation to witness some sort of resolution only leads to further decay” (Stoldt 12). On top of the platform and narrative aspects that endorse binge-watching, there is also an aesthetic aspect as well. It is important to note that the series was produced by established director David Fincher, who also directed many of the episodes in the first season. Fincher, known for his embrace of digital filming technologies, has an auteur-like aesthetic, comprised of cool-temperature hues and smooth, omniscient camera movements, all of which are well-suited for how digital cameras

record in high-definition and higher frame rates. This is undoubtedly a creative decision made during the production of the show that has since become a staple of these digital series, alongside the other elements of the aesthetic I noted earlier.

In addition to the cool, blue hues and polished, omniscient camera movements, the other features of the digital series aesthetic dealt with high-profile Hollywood involvements and large production values, which I argue all culminates in the “one-shot” sequences present throughout many of these series. This notion is even touched on by Shaviro in a published article for *Film Criticism*, where he explains that these types of sequences create a “time-volume” from otherwise undifferentiated space. “Within this time-volume,” Shaviro writes, “events and processes that actually occurred at different moments in different locations are all given to us simultaneously. The time the camera takes to explore the volume is different from the times of the happenings depicted” (“Audiovisual Futures” 1). Essentially, the one-shot style of presentation emphasizes this sense of simultaneity, thus increasing the immediacy of the media. Turning to *Maniac* as the prime example, so many of the camera movements smoothly follow the characters from room to room, lit by vibrant and eye-catching colors. The scenes throughout the testing facility, and especially when the patients are shown attached to the testing equipment, exemplify this aesthetic. An omniscient camera such as this one gives the feeling of all-encompassing immediacy, in which the viewers are shown a room or a set and are given time to take it all in as the camera slowly moves about. Next, there is the apparent high-profile of those involved in the production of the show. Both Jonah Hill and Emma Stone are well-known actors in recent years, as well as Justin Theroux and Sally Field. Beyond the actors, the director of the series, Cary Joji Fukunaga, has also made a name for himself in recent years, helming the first

season of HBO's *True Detective*, another series that strongly adheres to this aesthetic. These three components are heavily emphasized through the use of both long takes and one-shots, or entire sequences that are filmed to appear as one very long take. Both *Maniac* and the first season of *True Detective* contain one-shots, both appearing in pivotal moments in the narrative. The elevator shootout scene in episode nine of *Maniac*, as well as the house raid scene in episode four of *True Detective* greatly showcase the potential of the format to bring cinematic flair and production value to at-home television. In a sense, the digital series aesthetic serves the purpose of emulating cinema, bringing the spectacle and creativity to the medium. In the same way that viewers go to a theater and watch a film uninterrupted, filmmakers of these digital series are attempting to emulate that feeling - a sense that if you look away, you could miss something important. Scenes blend from one to the next, and even from one episode to another if the Netflix auto-play is turned on, all of which keeps the attention of the viewers, and all of which lends itself to the practice of binge-watching.

Charting the practice of binge-watching further, clinical and psychological studies have begun to emerge focusing on the short term and long term ramifications of binge-watching. "The Cognitive Psychological Effects of Binge-Watching," an article written by Zachary Snider in *The Netflix Effect* provides the most detailed account of the true effects that binge-watching has on the viewer. In this article, Snider discusses the notion of "narrative transportation" associated with binge-watching, which "refers to viewers' emotional self-immersion in a story and the ways that viewers' attitudes, beliefs, and opinions about their own social relationships change because of the stories they experience" (Snider 117). Understanding the effect that narrative transportation can have on a viewer, it is easy to see how it can now be sped up by binge-

watching, due to the sheer variety and access that streaming services such as Netflix provide. This ultimately allows for a deeper and more emotional connection through media consumption, and allows for a wider variety of binge-watching practices to appear.

In a study conducted by scholar Emil Steiner on the “rituals” associated with binge-watching among everyday spectators, a huge disparity was found between those who self-identify as binge-watchers. While most that were interviewed agreed that the time spent watching episodes in succession and the number of episodes watched were primary to the definition of the term, many stated that “consistency and completion of a season or series was more important” (Steiner 149). To me, this is reminiscent of reading a book, multiple chapters at a time until completion, yet whether this should be noted as “binge-watching” has yet to be fully determined. What has been determined through these studies is the varying ways in which viewers practice binge-watching, most notably whether they are alone or in a communal setting while doing so. An overwhelming majority of those interviewed confessed they practice binge-watching almost exclusively while alone, yet not necessarily as a form of isolation (Steiner 150). With the emergence of the internet, people from around the world are more interconnected than ever before, allowing even those who binge-watch alone to connect with others who do the same. Through online chatrooms and social networks, the communal aspect of media consumption still thrives, and can have a much farther reach than those physically around you. While binge-watching may not inherently be a harmful practice, there is always a chance for abuse, especially when using media as a form of isolation.

Binge-Watching as Isolation

Later in Snider's article, he directly addresses the potential issues that binge-watching may bring to spectators. Discussing his claim of narrative transportation further, he brings up the negative effect that accelerated viewing may have on some viewers. "When viewers process these narratives too quickly," Snider states, "it creates confusion and hinders viewers' real-world judgements and interpersonal relationships" (Snider 117). In fact, if someone was easily susceptible and affected by what they watch, binge-watching could have a detrimental effect on their social lives, complicating how they feel they should think or behave in a real-world situation occurring in real time. As a result, they are more likely to retreat back into isolation, which I argue is the spectatorial version of alienation - utilizing media as a form of escape from reality. To support this, Snider presents the findings of a study from the University of Texas, which "found that people who struggle with loneliness and depression are more likely to binge-watch more television than their peers, because this activity provides an escape from their unpleasant feelings" (Snider 119). Relating back to *Maniac*, this is reminiscent of Annie's father confining and isolating himself in the A-Void Pod in the backyard, despite Annie's pleading for him to get out and embrace the real world. Like through self-isolating binge-watching, Annie's father wished to escape the unpleasant reality of losing both his wife and daughter, and finds that the only way to deal with these anxieties in this highly technologized world is to cryogenically put himself to sleep for weeks or months on end. He finds safety and comfort through isolation, the same way those who practice isolated binge-watching feel safety and comfort through the media they quickly consume. Here I believe it is important to note the negative connotation that accompanies the word, "binge," which as a verb is "still commonly associated with binge

drinking and binge eating - psychological symptoms associated with a pathological loss of control” (Steiner 147). In addition to safety and comfort through binge-watching, those who abuse the practice gain a sense of control through it, aided by the endless options on the streaming platforms that are only a single click of a mouse away.

Returning to Stoldt’s thesis on mediamorphosis, his discussion of “cultivation theory” is highly relevant in this analysis of binge-watching as a form of isolation. Stoldt states, “media effects theories like cultivation theory suggest people that consume more television view the world as a darker, more violent place,” and I add that since binge-watching has increased the amount of television consumed, the cultivation effects on consumers could drastically change as well, altering the individuals’ world views (Stoldt 14). Related to the notion of narrative transportation proposed by Snider, this theory takes a darker, more cynical approach to the same conclusion - “the more media a person consumes, the more the individual will view the world through the lens of the medium” (Stoldt 20). However, I argue that both narrative transportation and cultivation theory can be a major force for both negative *and* positive change, which ultimately suggests a need for a further understanding of binge-watching.

The same study presented in Snider’s article also found that people with low levels of self control were more likely to binge-watch, and thus binge-watching should no longer be seen as a harmless addiction. Thinking back on the depression-riddled Owen and drug-addict Annie we are introduced to in the beginning episodes of *Maniac*, these characters represent the target demographic for compulsive and harmful binge-watching. However, it is through the intervention of media that they are able to connect with each other. In a sense, the hallucinations they experienced together during the B-pill trials exemplify binge-watching, and their connection

through Gertie represents a shared and communal spectatorship. According to Emil Steiner, though, “due to conflicting schedules, tastes, and energy levels, collaborative binges are typically shorter than solitary binges, and binge-watching groups greater than two are irregular and far less common” (Steiner 150). Although collaborative binge-watching may be more difficult to coordinate, it is this connection through media that brings the social aspect back to media consumption.

In the article “From Primetime to Anytime,” Justin Grandinetti proposes the adoption of user commentary in public and communal forums, “the most encompassing of which is the Internet” (Grandinetti 12). Throughout this article, Grandinetti acknowledges that binge-watching is fundamentally a solitary practice, yet is not one without community. Seeing streaming platforms as an evolution of broadcast television that regulated audience and temporal engagement through strict release schedules, he sees the Internet as an evolution of communal interactions. “With the advent of the Internet as a space for communal discussion,” Grandinetti states, “this audience regulation was reinforced, as audience members were able to take part in regularly scheduled discussions with more users than ever before” (Grandinetti 26). It is through this temporal displacement of spectatorship that Netflix showcases its appeal, as well as allow for temporal displacement and unconventional storytelling to occur within the narratives of its series, such as *Maniac*. Though possibly displaced through time and space, those who watch the same shows are connected through the media itself, it simply takes an acknowledgement of this connection in order for one to no longer feel isolated.

CHAPTER THREE:
MCLUHAN AND SHAVIRO ON MEDIA THEORY

Ten years ago, streaming platforms such as Netflix and Hulu were only beginning their ventures into the world of digital streaming. The rising general access speed of the Internet allowed these companies to push digital streaming further into the mainstream. YouTube had existed for a few years by this point, so “streaming” in that sense was not a new phenomenon. However, these websites took from decades of network series and films and gave them a platform to be readily available upon a click of the consumer’s remote or mouse. Jumping forward to the present day, streaming platforms now exist as the dominant mode of spectatorship around the world, with new content added daily. In addition to millions of hours of network-aired television shows and theatrically released films, these streaming platforms are able to produce and distribute their own original programming free from the rigid structuring of conventional television. Smaller, independent production studios are now able to create series or movies that achieve a global reach, creating an influx of original content for these platforms. On top of this, the algorithms that monitor these streaming websites take in data pertaining to your viewing patterns and tastes, recommending new series or movies and creating a more individualistic and personalized experience for the everyday spectator. Due to such a change in distribution and exhibition over the past decade, it is not hard to believe that the viewing trends of recent result in social ramifications that alter how or what we want from the medium itself. Media theorists

Marshall McLuhan and Steven Shaviro, despite writing during vastly different decades, offer social critiques of such technological advancements and state the larger consequences of the shifts I have been describing, which are as relevant as ever through the rise of the digital streaming culture.

Marshall McLuhan focused his work on the media technologies that were seeming to connect all people in ways unlike ever before. Writing in the decades around the rise of home television, McLuhan witnessed firsthand this transition and evolution of media technologies, along with the social transformations it caused. No longer did people need to drive to a theater in order to be entertained; from within their own home they were able to “plug in” to these massively popular cultural broadcasts, ones that seemed to connect and unify families across the country and globe. This is where his notion of the medium as the “message” first appeared - describing the media itself as the connecting message between people and culture, not necessarily the content of the media. Then, from here, McLuhan turns to his controversial and hypothetical notion of the “global village” - a level of global interconnectivity and union brought upon by advancing media technologies. When viewing the rise of digital streaming through this lens, the platform itself becomes the “message,” and the unifying aspect of its global reach lends itself to McLuhan’s proposed global village.

Similar to McLuhan, Shaviro discusses the changes in society brought upon by technological advancement, and an overarching thematic issue he groups many of his texts under is the “network society” we find ourselves in today. This society, according to Shaviro, is defined through its technological innovation, and is a society that supports alienation and fragmentation, yet also provides the landscape for radical social upheaval. One of the largest comparisons he

draws in his book *Connected, or What It Means to Live in the Network Society* is between the science fiction and the current digital age, going so far as to call the two “indistinguishable.” This book is a collection of short passages on a range of topics, all relating back to this interconnectivity of the network society, with a specific emphasis on the technologies that accompany it. Referencing him throughout the passages, Shaviro continues the conversation McLuhan started decades prior and adapts it for the contemporary world. With the rise in recent years of digital streaming platforms such as Netflix as the dominant mode of spectatorship, the works of media theorists Marshall McLuhan and Steven Shaviro have grown in relevance. By putting the two in dialogue with each other, the positive and negative social effects of the digital age can be emphasized, with Netflix and the digital streaming culture serving as a prime example of this newfound level of alienation and interconnectivity.

Through this composite lens of McLuhan and Shaviro, I argue that *Maniac* represents the these theorists’ concerns over how media transforms social life. Over the course of the series, Annie and Owen prove to be a challenge to the trial due to Owen’s schizophrenia and Annie’s borderline personality disorder, as well as the anxieties and pressure their society places on them. These anxieties, when observed through this lens, seem to stem from the alienating technologies present in their world. The series ends with a happy ending, one of two friends truly connecting, but can such a neat bow be put the digital age we find ourselves in today? Through an analysis of the theorists and their many works, the role that media plays in everyday life can be seen both positively and negatively. Positively, media is seen as an extension of our own bodies, expanding or enhancing our capabilities or needs; while negatively, media is seen as an addictive and mind-altering “drug” that consumes lives. By looking at how media can be grouped into these two

categories, the true social ramifications of the streaming culture can be traced, which *Maniac* addresses through its own science-fiction world.

Media as an Extension

McLuhan wrote predominantly in the 1960s, witnessing firsthand the rise in popularity of the home television and video broadcast services. With these changes in technologies and spectatorial practices, McLuhan charted the way in which these changes would influence changes in everyday society as well. This would, by his definition, create an equilibrium of new inventions and innovations shaping society, then society shaping the needs for more technologies. In his book *The Medium is the Massage*, McLuhan writes that “all media are extensions of some human faculty - psychic or physical,” representing this point of view of media as a form of filling human needs (*The Medium is the Massage* 26). It is through these new technologies that the human race expands and enhances themselves.

To illuminate the way in which new inventions and technologies may impact society at large, McLuhan presents a metaphor based in feedback loops that he describes as the “tetrad.” Essentially, the tetrad is a visual manner in which one could see how all aspects of a new innovation are intertwined, and how the ramifications of such an innovation can be predicted. The tetradic metaphor is comprised of four questions one must ask of the innovation that emphasizes its effects:

- “1. What does any artifact enlarge or enhance?
2. What does it erode or obsolesce?
3. What does it retrieve that had been earlier obsolesced?

4. What does it reverse or flip into when pushed to the limits of its potential?”

(*The Global Village* 9).

McLuhan believed that when put under the scrutiny of the tetrad, the true affective nature of an innovation can be seen. In his book *The Global Village*, McLuhan puts forth the example of the radio as an affective innovation. Answering the first question, McLuhan states that the radio enhances news and music via sound, but that in the process it reduces the prominence of print and the visual, answering the second question (*The Global Village* 10). Regarding retrieval in this example, McLuhan mentions how the radio returns the spoken word to the forefront, referring to a time before print. Lastly, he argues that the acoustic radio flips into an audio-visual TV when pushed to the limits of its potential (*The Global Village* 11). I believe that this model can be utilized to accurately analyze the effects that the innovation of digital streaming can have on the industry and society as a whole.

For one, digital streaming enhances immediate media, meaning the amount of media a consumer has at their fingertips, and the ease at which they can access this media. This has become an expectation of streaming platforms, where users are able to watch what they want when they want, increasing the immediacy of their participation with the media. This stronger desire for immediacy, which is best shown through the practice of binge-watching, is aided by the seamless Netflix algorithms and the visual aesthetics these digital series such as *Maniac* employ. It is this sense of immediacy that engages the spectator on a vastly different level than conventional theater spectatorship, leading to McLuhan’s notion of “hot” and “cold” media. Hot media, he argues, is film, which sets out to shock and stupefy. While, on the other hand, cold media would be television, where such an importance isn’t placed on shocking, but rather on

spectator participation. McLuhan always stated that television was “colder” than film, yet I argue that internet and digital streaming is even a step colder than television. The immersive aesthetic and interface strategies of the streaming platforms attempt to overcome this coldness, but the media system itself is cold and that is where the potential for connection is. Discussed by Steven Shaviro in his book *Connected*, he says that cold media “invites our participation... it allures us, willy-nilly, into getting connected” (*Connected* 6). In this sense, it is the immediacy of plugging in and binge-watching that connects us to the media, and by an extension, connects us to each other.

Despite this rise in immediacy, digital streaming reduces the prominence of network broadcasts and theater premieres, both of which this change obsolesces. In this sense, the expansive libraries these streaming services provide, as well as the freedom of choice they give the consumers, make the streaming services more appealing, as opposed to limiting options networks or theaters provide. In addition to this, the lack of scheduling and commercial interruptions add to the immediacy of the platform, making streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu more desirable to the consumers of the digital age. As for the third question of the tetrad, I say that digital streaming returns media to an individualistic practice, like picking out a book at a library. In his book *On Demand Culture*, media theorist Chuck Tryon defines the individualized consumer as, “one who is ostensibly capable of controlling his or her viewing experience, whether that entails starting a movie on one platform and finishing it on another, watching a movie on a mobile device, or accessing digital libraries through various streaming platforms and digital downloads from anywhere an internet connection is available” (Tryon 4). Simply put, the digital streaming platform brings a variety individualized practices to home

media consumption, which had diminished due to broadcast television. Before broadcast networks and movie theaters, the media that we consumed was open to our own selection, and digital streaming returns us to this level of freedom and individuality. Both this freedom and individuality have a hand in the adoption of binge-watching as well, shown through how society is in equilibrium with its own innovations. McLuhan puts forth the example of the moveable type in his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, where he uses it to explain how reading practices changed upon its implementation. Discussing this, he states, “this very natural inclination towards accessibility and portability went hand in hand with greatly increased reading speeds which were possible with uniform and repeatable type, but not at all with manuscript” (*The Gutenberg Galaxy* 235-236). In short, because the consumers had more access to printed texts, as well as a wider variety of choice, reading speeds increased and overall literacy rates skyrocketed. Ultimately, “the same drive towards accessibility and portability created ever larger publics and markets,” showing how these changes altered the media industry itself. I argue that the same sense of equilibrium is at work today with how digital streaming has altered our spectatorial practices and our expectations of digitally streamed media. Digital streaming is now the dominant mode of viewership, showing its grasp on the industry itself, and binge-watching represents a result of this feedback loop equilibrium.

Lastly, the fourth question of the tetrad is the aspect that allows us to see the potential for any sort of innovation, positive or negative. I believe that with this rise of immediacy and individualism, when digital streaming is pushed to the limits of its potential, it becomes virtual reality, or rather just very individualized practices unique to every consumer. While this is not an inherently good extension, since it allows for a furthering of alienation in the digital age, it is

also not inherently bad. If the world exists in this harmonious equilibrium, then society balances in accordance to new innovations. These feedback loops are touched on by Shaviro to show how a network society responds to such innovations, and how society keeps these innovations in control. “As it seems to us now, a network is a self-self-generating, self-organizing, self-sustaining system,” Shaviro states, “it works through multiple feedback loops. These loops allow the system to monitor and modulate its own performance continually and thereby maintain a state of homeostatic equilibrium” (*Connected* 10). By analyzing the rise of digital streaming through this lens, all ramifications of the innovation can be seen and predicted, given that the innovation itself is an extension of some human faculty. However, *Maniac* does not just simply show the positive, extending nature of media throughout the series. Every service or technological innovation at first shows this society’s advancement and digital connection. However, upon further observation the negative, alienating nature of these innovations are revealed, and the same can be said of digital streaming as a societal practice.

Media as a Drug

If one way of viewing media is that of an extension of some human faculty, then what would be the negative way of viewing the same kind of technological innovation? I argue that a negative exploration of media would incorporate its addictive and alienating aspects, emphasizing the parasitic and intrusive ways it can take control over consumers’ lives. While an extension or enhancement can be seen as positive, then this negative point of view categorizes media as drugs under the notion that they are harmful, individualizing, and addictive. In fact, drugs are discussed extensively by Shaviro, who traces this metaphor of media as opposed to the

extension metaphor put forward by McLuhan. “Drugs are a kind of technology, just like clothing, or the wheel, or telephones, or computers, or indoor plumbing,” Shaviro writes, “they are *media*, in McLuhan’s sense of the term... Whenever we worry about drugs altering our bodies and minds, we should remember that cars and television do this too” (*Connected* 185). Here, Shaviro draws a connection to McLuhan’s notion of media as an extension, yet focuses more on the negative underside of a technological innovation. In this sense, Shaviro powers the word “alter” with a negative connotation to show the true affective extent that media has, and the change it can incite whether it be for the good or bad of humankind. Viewing media as a drug implies that taking drugs is a kind of biological engineering, where the element being worked on is the consumer’s own mind and ability to conduct social relations with those around them. Drugs hinder this ability, alienating the users and limiting them to their own individualistic and subjective experiences. However, beyond this alienating feature of media as a drug, the dangerously addictive component truly takes this point of view into the negative, showing the control media can have over our lives. Further into his book, Shaviro writes, “The scandal of drug use comes largely from the fact that, in contrast to a DJ or a research scientist, one is experimenting primarily upon oneself. It is often objected that drugs are not safe, but isn’t that precisely the reason for taking them?” (*Connected* 186). Ultimately, this danger is what keeps consumers coming back, and the same can be said for the immediacy of digital streaming media in the digital age. The danger represented here would be one that uses media as an individualistic escape from reality and its problems, which is alluded to through the technologies and themes of *Maniac*.

In the series, the U.L.P. drug trial consists ingesting three pills at three different sessions, all of which have a type of hallucinatory effect on the patients. These sessions are then mediated by a supercomputer who oversees the success of the trial as well as the safety of each patient. I believe that this blending of hallucinatory drugs and technological innovation is not a coincidence when analyzed through the lens of Shaviro and his notion on media as a drug. In addition to ingesting actual drugs, the GRTA's role in the drug trials represents that of media's role in the digital age - one of mediation and reliance. The patients are relying on the GRTA to safely guide them through their subjective experiences in the same way we emotionally connect with what we watch through the act of binge-watching. In *Connected*, Shaviro draws a connection between psychedelic drugs and technology in a way that illuminates the similar effects they can have on consumers. He writes, "psychedelic drugs and electronic technologies affect the sensorium in strikingly similar ways," going so far to relate the discovery and dissemination of LSD in the 1950s and 1960s to the development of the digital computer (*Connected* 188). Across both, subjectivity is de-centered and the consciousness is intensified and scattered across space, much like the hallucinations that the U.L.P. patients experience in each session. In a technologically advanced and digital age, society can be overwhelming, which is where media steps in to be a guiding and mediating force. However, too much of a reliance can result in a dependency, and then addiction, much like an over reliance on any kind of drug.

Present throughout *Maniac* are science-fiction technologies that blur the line between alienation and connection. As mentioned before, there are services such as: Daddy's Home, where widows can order fake replacement husbands; A-Void pods that allow the user to cryogenically sleep and protect themselves from the dangers of the outside world; and there are

public blackmail services that the fictional “Banner Act” makes legal. These technologies, while advanced, reveal fundamental social issues upon further analysis, especially when viewed under the scrutiny of Marshall McLuhan. “In an electrically figured society,” he writes, “all the critical information necessary to manufacture and distribution, from automobiles to computers, would be available to everyone at the same time. Espionage becomes an art form” (*The Global Village* 92). I feel that this excerpt from McLuhan’s book is representative of *Maniac*’s world, where Annie is able to simply go to a store and uncover hidden aspects about another woman, as well as the split nature of Owen’s personality. Beyond being an art form, espionage in this sense is a business, one that can only thrive in an electrically figured society such as the one shown in the series. From this, McLuhan traces the social effect that such a high degree of information, and the ease at which it can be accessed, has on the society as a whole. Regarding this, McLuhan states, “The bad news is that all persons, whether or not they understand the processes of computerized high-speed data transmission, will lose their old private identities. What knowledge there is will be available to all. So, in that sense, everybody will be nobody” (*The Global Village* 129). Despite the individualism that streaming platforms like Netflix bring, it is one characterized through loss of private identities shown by Netflix advertising their own shows through a “featured” page, diminishing the self-choice of the platform. In addition to this, Tryon states, “even while we are granted the experience of free-flowing individualism, our behaviors and movements are constrained by the networks and channels available to us at any given time,” emphasizing the limit and control the media has over our perceived private identities (Tryon 12). This loss of private identities is crucial in understanding how media technologies become more individualized and subjective, yet ultimately further the alienation of the society. This analysis

holds true for the characters in the show, such as James who lost his position at the helm of the U.L.P. trials, so he gives in to his paraphilia through the use of alienating virtual reality pornography technologies. This analysis also holds true for the current digital age, but more so as a warning against the individualizing technologies that bridge the gap between reality and science fiction.

Much like the split man in McLuhan's writings, *Maniac* presents the conflict of alienation and connection through the point of view of media as both an extension and a drug. Though the technologies in this world serve as extensions of the needs of the society, they do not come without the negative, alienating underside. After the second session of the U.L.P. drug trial, Annie calls her and Owen's shared experience "cosmic," and labels it as "brain-magic," which is not unlike a description of a hallucinatory drug. However, while a drug of such matter typically is individualizing, the show presents two main character connecting through it. "Yet despite the isolation and fragmentation, everything seems to be mysteriously connected," Shaviro writes, concluding his section on drugs (*Connected* 188). The show reveals that the reason for their connection is actually the GRTA, though, emphasizing the role media plays in forging these connections. In what is meant to be an individual and subjective experience, Annie and Owen experience it together, through the mediation of media itself. While the show presents an alternate semi-futuristic society, the technologies shown throughout serve as extensions of present technologies in our own societies. For example, while artificial intelligence like Gertie does not exist in our world, the way in which Netflix's algorithms cater individualistic experiences with the platform to the subscribers is similar to the role she plays in the series. Simply, all of the technologies and services in the show serve to alienate society in some way,

which in itself becomes an extension of our own fears and tensions about the technological advancement of the digital age. However, I argue that although these technologies may be present and evolving towards an uncertain future, *Maniac* presents a situation in which these technologies are not used to alienate, but are used to connect the characters from within.

Over the course of the drug trial, the patients have their own senses and perceptions of self reorganized in order to better embrace who they are. Although alienating due to the individualistic procedure, the process ultimately allows the patients to connect on a deeper level than before, in part through the shared experiences and the intervention of media itself. Not only an extension and not only a drug, media plays a role in forging real connections in the digital age. It is not about using media to isolate or replace, but about connecting *through* media itself. While ultimately *Maniac* presents both the positive and negative of media's role in a technologically advanced society, the true message it ends with is an amalgam of the two - finding what is real through the mediation of media, and forging true connections with others, which I believe is a timely statement on the power and role an innovation such as digital streaming has within our current society. In the same vein as how Shaviro describes television media as a "drug," *Maniac* acknowledges the impact that streaming has over current societies, emphasizing how we can better utilize this form of media to connect with each other on a global scale, aided by the technologies of the digital age.

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that this trend is ongoing and presently evolving, as digital streaming has only been given the spotlight in recent years. Each year, new digital series are released that adhere to the aesthetic I have laid out, as well as make statements on the present society. Since beginning this thesis, I have charted these trends into many other shows across various streaming platforms and genres, with a couple having been released just a few months prior to this project's completion. One such show that I feel demands mentioning is Netflix's digital series *Living with Yourself*, which follows a depressed man who visits a mysterious spa in hopes of curing his depression, but inadvertently clones himself. Relating to *Maniac*, this series also emphasizes the intervention of media and its effect on connection and alienation in society, while also adhering to the aspects of the digital series aesthetic I mentioned before. In addition to multiple series continuing these trends, more streaming services are created each year, promising a more immediate consumption of large varieties of media. Through attention and analysis, these aesthetic and thematic trends can be charted, showing its relation to the present-day digital age.

In regards to how this argument falls in line with modern day society, I believe it is also important to note the conditions in which this thesis was completed. During the spring months of 2020, COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted the day-to-day operations of everyone, especially that of businesses and schools. During this pandemic, most businesses and schools transitioned to operating entirely online, relying on internet and media services to communicate and work. I

argue that this shows the power media has in everyday life, since this transition could not have occurred in decades prior. By not simply isolating ourselves away from our everyday lives, but rather utilizing media as a means for communication, we are able to connect *through* media in a similar way that Annie and Owen do. Despite the alienating forces of the world, media provides connection to those alienated and estranged. By acknowledging this connection through media, especially in the time of a worldwide pandemic, McLuhan's notion of the "global village" can be understood, and media's role in it can be realized.

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