k80 ambrose

Professor Watson

SOSC 12600

06.02.2022

**Euphoria Twitter: Collectively Effervescing Criticism**

Last winter, millions of young people gathered on a weekly basis. Impossible otherwise, this gathering did not abide by the laws of physics or social distancing mandates or maritime law. Instead, this gathering took place in another realm: digital space. Here, folks met on common ground because of common captivation with a piece of media, art, and product.

*Euphoria* first premiered in summer of 2019 and was an instant hit. The characters were compelling, the shots were pretty, and it presented a new image of American high school that depicted and appealed to a new generation and their relationships to substances and each other. High school dramas are the instantiation of the American dream, offering a moment to internalize and position yourself in relation to the values of the dominant culture.

Euphoria Twitter is where watchers of the show go to circulate memes, talk about the shows plot and production. The show’s avid twitter base is simultaneously separate from and an extension of the show itself. Twitter provided an experiential critical space out of the control of the creators. Of course, there are many people who watch *Euphoria* without engaging with it on Twitter. It’s kind of like taking the PSAT without looking at the memes about the test afterwards on Reddit. In both cases, the media serves as an inside joke that everybody’s in on. If not caught up on the series, watchers of *Euphoria* avoid twitter because it would inevitably contain spoilers.

There is an argument to be made (and has been made, many times) about Euphoria’s characterization of the youth as dangerous and deviant, but that’s not what I’ll be doing here. To see Rue, a black, queer, and neurodivergent protagonist, deal with experiences that can be further affected by her marginalization (yet not elaborated on in the show) while knowing these stories are coming from the solitary perspective of Sam Levinson, some white cis dude, does not sit well. This goes for other characters and their specific marginalization as well. That’s also not what I’ll be doing here.

The aim of this paper is to situate Euphoria Twitter in the context of Durkheim’s concept of collective effervescence and Latour’s discussion of Things and objects. I think Latour and Durkheim gave us two allegories to understand the times we live in and how we interface with technology and each other. With the advent of Twitter, anyone and everyone can be a critic. Moreover, criticism happens in real time and is collective. Euphoria’s criticism sparked conversations, genuine interest, investment, and concern that all further popularized the show and grew the community surrounding it. The collective effervescence generated by the show’s audience on social platforms is what transformed Euphoria from televised object to hypermediated Thing. The creators of the show were aware of this feedback loop tried to use this to their advantage, extracting more digital labor from a Euphoric workforce.

**Sunday Service**

Repetitive, ceremonial, and sacrosanct in American media culture, there is something undeniably ritualistic about the television release format. To a certain extent, whenever we watch television or a movie, we believe in it; the fictional characters we form attachments to, and the entirely made-up universe presented to us through a script and a screen. In order to engage meaningfully with television, we suspend our disbelief. In the last decade we’ve seen the ascension of streaming platforms as the dominant mode of consuming movies and shows. Television on streaming platforms used to be released a season at a time, but recently we’ve witnessed a return to the tried-and-true weekly episode. This format elongates disbelief from the short time it would take to binge an entire season to months of anticipation.

Collective effervescence is the idea that when humans gather in groups to perform rituals, a vibe is created––a special energy that transcends any individual and is unique to the presence of everyone. It is *effervescent* in that it fizzles, fickles and fades when the group doesn’t convene. It’s fleeting, but that’s what makes it special. In Durkheim’s own words, “it is through common action that society becomes conscious of and affirms itself; society is above all an active cooperation” (Durkheim). The pandemic necessitated seeking out new avenues for finding, feeling, and experiencing collective effervescence. Remember that highschoolers were watching this show depicting high school while they themselves were missing out.

We were so taken with *Euphoria* because other people were too. “40% of the reason this show is as interesting as it is, is not even because the actual plot is like this work of art but because of our collective obsession with trying to pick it apart and find a deeper meaning” (Tee Noir). Walter Benjamin argues that the technology of reproduction “may leave the artwork's other properties untouched, but they certainly devalue the *here and now* of the artwork” (Benjamin). However, experiencing a work of art inside the arena replicates the here and now in reproducibility itself. It replicates the here and now through the circulation of images and tweets and the instantaneity.

**#Euphoria: A Story Told Through Twitter Analytics**

Euphoria’s success is found in and due to its popularity online. This season, everyone from Drake to your mutuals from middle school has tweeted about the show. “According to Twitter, there have been 34 million tweets since Euphoria returned in January, marking a 51% increase in activity since the first season premiered in 2019” (Bergeson). Celebrities and influencers embracing the show only made it even more popular. There’s over 300k tweets just about Sam Levinson (Shanspeare). The night of the Superbowl, *Euphoria* still managed to draw 5.1 million viewers (Maas). The season finale drew 6.6 million viewers (Bergeson). In the U.S. *Euphoria* was the most tweeted about show in the past decade (Spangler).

This rapid circulation of content related to the show on Twitter began in the weeks leading up to the premiere of the new season and didn’t even finish after the finale. Even when the show was over, the hype wasn’t over. Today is Thursday, June 2nd at 02:36 AM CST and there were 420 tweets containing the word Euphoria within the last hour. Zendaya is trending. *Teen Vouge* said her birthday message for Tom Holland is “Instant Serotonin.”

The existence of a live forum in which the public can react to and criticize a TV show is something relatively new that fundamentally alters the media’s topological map. Twitter has been around for a while and since its inception, it has been used as a forum for sharing criticism. “The technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence” (Benjamin). If the technology of reproduction detaches the artwork from the sphere of tradition, can social mechanisms of reproduction once again tether the object to a story or sense of community?

What does it mean to make a piece of art for a highly online audience? Quoting Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, Latour states that “the new spirit of capitalism has put to good use the artistic critique that was supposed to destroy it” (Latour). *Euphoria*, riding the line between arthouse television and commercial product, embodies this new spirit of capitalism. Unafraid of criticism or bad press, *Euphoria* knows any, and everything said about it will only make people want to watch it more. *Euphoria* knows our contemporary media landscape.

Because the latest season was soo chock full of viral moments, memetic vignettes, and eye candy that served no narrative purpose, I think the creators of the show are aware of Euphoria’s virality and have tried to leverage the instantaneous feedback loop between the show and its audience. In the first season, Euphoria’s beautiful cinematography served a narrative purpose. Each episode had a clear focus: it gave the backstory of one of the characters. Part of the appeal of memes is their seeming arbitrariness but were they arbitrary?

Levinson and Barbie Fierra, the actress who plays Kat, had a spat about Kat’s character arc in season two. As a result, Levinson basically wrote her off and Kat barely got any screen time. It should come as no surprise that this beef was itself a large portion of the discourse surrounding “Euphoria.” Criticism of the show is as commonplace as praise. As Tee Noir prefaces her video, “I not necessarily proudly but definitely truthfully admit that this show is a

deeply problematic, wildly inappropriate mess that I and millions of others still willingly choose to tune into every Sunday night.”(Tee Noir) It was strange to watch something so live. The show also deals with extremely heavy topics—addiction, sexual assault, death of loved ones—in a way that was once deep cut and intimate but now in the last season the way Euphoria has dealt with these themes has been irresponsible.

**Thinging *Euphoria***

How did *Euphoria* manage to transcend television and become a cultural fixation? Collective effervescence is what Thinged *Euphoria*; it’s the buzz of the community. There have been dozens of teen dramas that each try to depict addiction, abuse, mental illness, relationships, and coming of age stories, in their own way. Why has *Euphoria* stuck?

Why is it such a Thing? In Latour’s essay, he spends a while expanding on Heidegger’s distinction between object and Thing in the realm of criticism. “The handmade jug can be a thing, while the industrially made can of Coke remains an object” (Latour). A thing is imbued with social value, an object is not. Latour’s point is that “things have become Things again, objects have reentered the arena, the Thing, in which they have to be gathered first in order to exist later as what stands apart” (Latour). While reading that sentence did give me an aneurism, I think what he’s saying is that objects that once existed only as objects, now exist as Things. We think about Things, deconstruct, and analyze them. Objects do not take up as much of our attention. We use objects, we don’t study them.

So then, how does one explain Euphoria’s metamorphosis from televised object into cultural Thing? Was it Zendaya’s extraordinary performance or the star power of Alexa Demi and Hunter Schafer? I don’t think so. I don’t anyone who made Euphoria is responsible for its status as a Thing. They made the show. Their performances made it outstanding. The editors gave it aesthetic appeal and rhythm. There are dozens of people behind the scenes of *Euphoria* that made it great, but plenty of decent shows are not Things. Plenty of exceptional works of television don’t shape culture like *Euphoria* did.

It was the people, the discourse surrounding *Euphoria*, the gathering of folks over this shared interest, that made it a thing. According to Durkheim, moments of collective effervescence are what legitimize and coagulate into religion. Euphoria’s zealous audience, ritualistic releasing, gospel music, and psychedelic visual devices give the entire production a religious feel. “Religious forces are in fact, only transfigured collective forces, that is, moral force; they are made of facts and feelings that the spectacle of society awakens us to” (Durkheim).

**A Euphoric Laborsource**

When we talk about something online, our ideas don’t exist inside a vacuum, they reverberate off arena walls. Euphoria Twitter was not just a bunch of teens logging on to do a little discourse; it was millions clocking in to perform digital labor that benefitted the Euphoria brand, HBO and Twitter itself. Though, if you asked participants if they thought of their digital actions as work, most would hesitate to call their retweets labor since this was something they did for fun. Regardless of how much dopamine was generated in the process, “all products of digital labor (comments, texts, books, images, videos) are being harvested by content platforms and a multitude of different capture agents. Each web page or other piece of content that is being captured ‘in the wild’ is rendered and analyzed” (Joler). Maybe that’s what’s so genius about Euphoria Twitter. When live-tweeting an episode, users feel as though we are a part of something bigger than themselves. And we are. But during the action, we’re so in the moment, so invested with what’s happening on screen, that we’re blind to the fact that something is actually being extracted from us. How can fun and seemingly benign engagement in socialization be extractive?

In the gig economy, the line between leisure and labor is perhaps the thinnest it has ever been. “Collected content and extracted data become a permanent corporate resource for creating multidimensional, dynamic, complex topologies in which every piece of data becomes an object that is contextually linked to other objects” (Joler). It’s impossible to ignore the fact that some people profited from Euphoria Twitter and it’s not the users who generated discourse.

**On Fostering and Manufactured Hype**

Imagine you are a television distribution company. How amazing would it be your show had an enthusiastic online fanbase? What if they were constantly hyping your show up for free? Moreover, this engagement is genuine. People are actually excited to watch and talk about your show. Moreover, this hype is dynamic, influenced by each new episode. HBO advertised *Euphoria*, but they really didn’t have to. Its fanbase was doing that work for them.

I think future television shows will try to replicate Euphoria’s omnipresence by manufacturing hype and hoping that it takes in the digital commons. However, true sensations are organic and the genuine enthusiasm people had for *Euphoria* cannot be as easily mimicked as its PR. Because the show’s hand in shaping the digital discourse surrounding itself, I think *Euphoria* is truly a masterpiece in and of the age of technological reproductivity. So, what?

Examining Euphoria Twitter gives us a glimpse into the dynamics companies and consumers co-create, compelling more users to consume and advertise their media. Sam Levinson and the creators of Euphoria did not just make a TV show, they created a cult following; just like HBO doesn’t merely release episodes of the show, they feed rations to the awaiting hive mind.

Bibliography

Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media.” *Belknap Press of Harvard University Press*, 2008.

Bergeson, Samantha. “‘Euphoria’ Makes History at HBO Max, Takes over Twitter with Record-Breaking Numbers.” *IndieWire*, 1 Mar. 2022, https://www.indiewire.com/2022/03/euphoria-hbo-max-record-breaking-twitter-1234703320/.

Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, a Study in Religious Sociology*. 1915.

Joler, Vladan. *New Extractivism*. 2020, https://extractivism.online/.

Latour, Bruno. “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, no. 2, Jan. 2004, pp. 225–48. *journals.uchicago.edu*, https://doi.org/10.1086/421123.

Maas, Jennifer. “‘Euphoria’ Hits Another Series High With 5.1 Million Viewers Despite Super Bowl LVI Competition.” *Variety*, 15 Feb. 2022, https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/euphoria-ratings-super-bowl-series-high-1235182710/.

Shanspeare. *EUPHORIA: Sam Levinson’s Unfulfilled Fantasy - YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52f71gwV7HY. Accessed 30 May 2022.

Spangler, Todd. “‘Euphoria’ Is the Most-Tweeted TV Show of the Decade (So Far), Twitter Says.” *Variety*, 25 Feb. 2022, https://variety.com/2022/digital/news/euphoria-most-tweeted-tv-show-1235190599/.

Tee Noir. *Euphoria: The Curated Collection of Clichés - YouTube*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwtueIlcWR0. Accessed 2 June 2022.