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Excessive Stimulation, Loss of Meaning, and Boredom in Sam Levinson's Euphoria

Boredom, as we understand it today, emerged together with modernity, and the boring and the interesting soon became central ideas in the human experience (cf. Svendsen, Goodstein, Gardiner). Whereas early modernity perceived boredom as related to emptiness, today it is more often than not linked to overstimulation. Many cultural products try so hard to be interesting that they epileptically overwhelm us with hyperstimulating images, evoking the boredom of satiety. As J. M. Barbalet argues, “excessive stimulation through which social meanings are undermined” leads to boredom, experienced as the loss of purpose, involvement, and meaningfulness (634).

In this paper, we will analyze two episodes from the HBO series *Euphoria* (2019) to argue how it both reproduces and comments on the boredom of satiety. Directed by Sam Levinson, the show has received mostly positive reviews. Interestingly, different critics have used almost the same phrases to pinpoint its appeal. Thus, *Euphoria* has been repeatedly praised for its “visually striking,” “dizzying,” and “intoxicating” aesthetic. The form and pace of the show with numerous montage scenes mimic the process of Instagram scrolling – the ultimate meaningless, mindless, uninvolved experience of today’s Internet user. It perfectly illustrates the “anomic search for novelty,” identified by Barbalet as one of the instances when “excessive stimuli lead to boredom” (634). The swirling kaleidoscope of today’s mediated experiences – sexting, scrolling, pornography, or webcam sex, to name just a few examples – is the key to both the form and the content of Levinson’s show. We will demonstrate how *Euphoria*’s pilot

mimics the contemporary immersion in social media and digital representations such as pornography or music videos.

Barbalet argues that boredom – because it entails “dissatisfaction with the lack of involvement or meaning” – may lead to a change and initiate a search for meaningfulness (641, 638). Such a change can be observed when the pilot of *Euphoria* is juxtaposed with its special episode. In contrast to the dizzying pace of the pilot – whose 53 minutes represent a history of the protagonist’s mental illness and addiction, her experiences of overdosing and rehab, as well as many intense scenes involving other characters, including several graphic sex acts and a knife fight – the special episode depicts just one conversation between the protagonist, Rue, and her Addicts Anonymous sponsor, Ali. Visually, the episode is the very opposite of the fast-paced pilot and on its own may seem boring. Yet, when read against the excessive stimulation of *Euphoria*’s regular episodes and the experience of endless scrolling through our social media, its freedom from dizzying aesthetics and its focus on an in-person encounter are a refreshing break from the boredom of satiety.