

Joissance d'ennui

Dasein is simply an animal that has learned to become bored.

-- Giorgio Agamben¹

If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers

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-- John Cage²



My father passed away in the fall of 2006. He wanted to die at home surrounded by his family, and as I brought him home from the hospital, he said one sentence to me that set off a series of condensed thoughts. It was a chilling statement, and he never elaborated on what he meant precisely. On one level, it was disturbing that he was aware of what lay ahead. I ran the statement around in my head.



*“He names the works sent to him by his friends or acquaintances receivable because he does not know quite what to make of these texts, but he gladly receives them. He explains that this type of “unreadable text catches hold, the red-hot text, a product continuously outside of any likelihood and whose function visibly assumed by its scriptor would be to contest the mercantile constraint of what is written.”*³

Roland Barthes did not intend this definition to apply to jouissance d'ennui or the pleasures of the unreadable text.⁴ Nevertheless, he goes on to describe the receivable in terms of unproductive languish as abreaction. He explains that “this text, guided, armed by a notion of the unpublishable, would require the following response: I can neither read nor write what you produce, but I receive it, like a fire, a drug, an enigmatic disorganization.”⁵ Although a literary critic may dismiss the receivable work as “unreadable,” Barthes’s term (and his description of how he developed the term) alludes to a more intensely *intimate* relationship with the texts received. Barthes also explicitly notes that these texts have an inherently militant attitude toward mercantile constraints of publication and that the sender expresses this attitude

through a performance.



Guy Debord, in the 1950s and 60s, and Theodore Adorno, in the 1920s and 30s, theorized the ways that exciting and stimulating media and cultural spectacles actually interfered with awareness, understanding, and apprehension.⁶ They suggested ways to detour off from the hypnotic and passive routes of reception. Among the strategies that cultural analysis has found effective for learning, critical reflection, and application, boredom has provoked some of the most (paradoxically) fascinating films and art in the last century. Exciting and stimulating culture often finds itself condemned as amusing ourselves to death, as Neil Postman describes.⁷ Stimulations do not give cognitive space or time for thought and reflection. Adorno suggested not listening to popular music; Debord suggested detouring the intended messages. Adam Phillips has written about the capacity to be bored as an important developmental achievement. The routinized chores of the cubicle and the habituated responses to modernity's gridded and predictable space also have the promise of leisurely release in an entertainment industry's thrills. For Phillips, if we fail to give children the opportunity for boredom, then we also deny them the inventive possibilities of ennui, anticipation, restlessness, and incubation.⁸



One can talk about sexuality, politics, and relevant current events (even if this engenders unwanted attention and protests from reactionary cultural critics), but both the popular media and museums, schools, and arts venues forbid the boring. Why? The larger fight against boredom, new or otherwise, appears everywhere. Boredom, as a mythology, needs unpacking and perhaps needs a new, even an *artificial*, mythology better suited to its increasing importance in scholarship, pedagogy, poetry, and art.



The fight against boredom in finds its most eloquent advocate in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's argument, especially in his pop-psychology texts,⁹ that intense multi-sensory engagement with a task leads to what he calls "flow." He explicitly opposes flow to boredom and anxiety,

and discusses those people who have achieved what one might call situation-specific self-actualization. Alienation and boredom decrease in people who find flow in their work or play; they achieve more, and continue to learn more effectively.

Csikszentmihalyi's initial research, as early as 1975, and becoming more widely known since the early 1990s, has led to a flood of psychological and educational research on boredom. Some of the studies have concluded that boredom is an emotion, and other research has shown certain populations more prone to this emotion than others. Not surprisingly, adolescents find themselves experiencing this emotion more than other groups.



Patricia Spacks wrote the best-known and most complete study of boredom as a theme in literature.¹⁰ She examined a wide array of literary figures from Samuel Johnson to Donald Barthelme, from Jane Austen to Anita Brookner. She eloquently captures how suffering from boredom becomes the general name given for all of our discontents, not one specific state of mind. Spacks outlines the twists and turns to show boredom's changing fate and its power to spur innovation, not just serve as a symptom of malaise. What once was considered a personal flaw to overcome (one suffered from being too easily bored) changed, in criticisms of modernity, to indicate the suffocating restrictions on social life; what some, like Baudelaire, considered as a profound resistance to society's speed and corruption, others later saw as a general quality of modern life.¹¹



Anyone who seeks to dismiss the boring, anyone who sees it as an aesthetic failure, and anyone who seeks to equate literary or artistic value as the elimination of boredom would do well to study Spacks's diachronic study of the trope of boredom. To understand it as a trope allows it to become new boredom even artificial boredom. Baudelaire appreciated his resistant and artificial boredom as a spur to cultural invention. Can one produce artificial boredom that fascinate and seduce into a bliss beyond polite literary or artistic pleasures? Who speaks for that vision? The paradox involved in expressing that vision remains daunting. How to eloquently convince and seduce readers and audiences that the remainder—that which does not move the story, poetics, argument, or music forward, and its corollary

in the audience's wandering attention—does not simply mark a failure, but also suggests an open possibility.



A group of media makers have sought to challenge the easy visual pleasures of watching Hollywood movies using explicit and strategic boredom. Andy Warhol's films come to mind, especially the eight hours of *Sleep*, and all the films of Straub and Huillet intentionally provoking Brechtian alienation. They sought to make boring films, but films that are paradoxically fascinating. Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielmann* makes even prostitution, desperation, and murder incredibly boring but also allows the spectator to appreciate the fascination of the mundane everyday chores usually effaced by all the cinematic action and excitement. One never sees any sex or violence, but one follows the woman's day including cleaning, making soup, doing dishes, and doing laundry. Describing it in this way does not capture the reflective and critical pleasures of the film.¹² Filmmakers Ernie Gehr, Michael Snow, or, in his earliest films, Peter Greenaway, made films that investigated cinematic issues that take time, repetition, and sameness to unfold by accretion. You cannot simply get to the point clearly and express it in a stimulating way. You need to add something to the films to understand them, and in that way, one can appreciate how the attunement to a disturbing and disorganizing boredom functions as a key function in all of modernist art and culture.



As Peter Schjeldahl explains, minimalism as “a type of art ... is boring on purpose.”¹³ By grounding minimalist artworks in the “self-emptying state of boredom,” the artists sought to encourage the “odd ecstasies of interest, as aspects of existence that [usually] elude the busy mind [now] emerge with jewel-edged sharpness ... occasioning, rather than communicating, bleak epiphanies.”¹⁴ Of course there is a vibrant argument about modernism and minimalism, but these debates or even the recognition of any cultural discourse about boredom finds itself ghettoized in studies of the avant-garde, and, then, the avant-garde becomes thematized as the search for excitement, a break with the past, and the shock of the new.

To remain open, waiting, quiet like the student in Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* who uses *sprezzatura*, the archer-like ability to wait for the right moment even in restless ennui, as an *inventio*. *Sprezzatura* becomes a way of using *mediocrità*, the disciplinary knowledge and practice one must also carry along, to learn, apply, and invent. In a letter to the editor, published in *The New Yorker*, I argued that *sprezzatura* is key for training many professions that combine improvisation and disciplinary knowledge from surgeons to hip-hop samplers.¹⁵



If boredom is a way of life and social systems, an *ars boretica* (the art or practice of boredom analogous to an *ars poetica*) then what does this practice achieve? What do we gain from the *jouissance d'ennui*? This para-progress, of course, would have to be heavily coded and obscured to protect itself from the urge to pull it into an efficient system of productivity and excitement. What would this mean for the mundane bureaucratic tasks distracting the artist, scholar, or writer? What does it mean for the classroom always struggling to capture wandering attentions, to lacerate the boring like a boil? What does it mean for life and death? Gertrude Stein's description of how she wrote applies equally well to the *jouissance d'ennui*: "as if the fact of writing something were continually becoming true and completing itself, not as if it were leading to something."¹⁶



That which provokes the *jouissance d'ennui* always remains not completely finished; it leaves a residue like a taste in your mouth, a scent, a reverie repeated. To try and clear away the interference would erase an inherent and crucial element of most aesthetic and literary demands: not directness, spontaneity, or rational clarity, but the imperfect, incomplete, and profound boredom. The practice that provokes the *jouissance d'ennui* includes a mechanical repetition. It does not offer a clean break from history, or an eruption into the here and now. It never rises above the absolutely particular, or beyond the wandering lapse in attention we pejoratively call boredom. We need a neologism or phrase, an ironically *new boredom*,¹⁷ that describes the unraveling bliss that looses the thread in a muddled fog, an *ars boretica*.

My father said to me, “This is 100 percent different than anything I have experienced up to this point.” It reminded me of the search in the arts and culture for the 100-percent-different experience: the groundbreaking, the novel, the original, the new, the exciting, and everything but the boring. I don’t know if dying is boring or exciting, if it promises an excruciating thrill or a terminal expectation. Who knows if life offers the promise of Being-as-bored or if death’s essence is some kind of Beckettian interminable boredom?



At the margins of life (the boundaries of *Dasein* in philosophical terms), do we experience the absolutely different, the new, the un-boring? As Agamben suggests in the epigraph to this essay, the bored animal – *Homo boriens* perhaps – may have as its essence precisely the sameness and heightened attention, appreciation, and attunement to being bored that we also, by definition, paradoxically seek to escape. The paradoxical embrace of the boring suggests a quietness that lets go of the death drive’s thrill for the different.



Read that over again: a quietness that lets go of the death drive’s thrill for the different.

NOTES

- 1 Giogio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 70.
- 2 John Cage, *Silence*, (Wesleyan: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 70.
- 3 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 119.
- 4 See Roland Barthes, *Plaisir du Texte* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973).
- 5 Barthes, *Barthes*, 118.
- 6 See Theodore W. Adorno, “Looking Back on Surrealism,” *Notes to Literature*, (New York: University of Columbia P), 1991; *Philosophy of Modern Music*, (New York, London: Continuum), 2003. See also Guy E. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).
- 7 See Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1986).
- 8 See Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays of the Unexamined Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- 9 See the following by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975); *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Invention*, (New York: Harper Collins Inc, 1996); “Society, Culture, and Person: a Systems View of Creativity,” *The Nature of Creativity: Contemporary Psychological Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- 10 See Patricia Spacks, *Boredom: the Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

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- 11 See Orrin E. Klapp, *Overload and Boredom: Essays on the Quality of Life in the Information Age* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).
- 12 See *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. Dir. Chantal Akerman. 5 Minutes to Live, 2000; *Sleep*. Dir. Andy Warhol, 1963. [BW/Silent/5 Hrs 21 Mins at 16fps/4 hrs 45 mins at 18fps]; *La RéGion Centrale*. Dir. Michael Snow. Joyce Wieland & Michael Snow Ltd, 1971; *The Passion of Joan of Ark*. Dir. Carl Theodore Dryer. Videocassette. (Société GéNéRale Des Films), 1928.
- 13 Peter Schjeldahl, “Bare Minimal,” *The New Yorker* (3 May 2004): 108-109.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 109.
- 15 See Craig Saper, “Letters to the Editor,” *The New Yorker* (23 Aug. 1999): 8.
- 16 Gertrude Stein as quoted in John Brockman, “HE CONFUSES LAND 2 THE 200 I.Q: Mr. Byars By Mr. Brockman” [7.17.97], *Edge* 19 — May 30, 1997, <http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/byars/byars_pl.html>(accessed March 20, 2008).
- 17 See David Scott Kasten, *Shakespeare After Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999). David Kasten refers to how he and Peter Stallybrass describe their project “gleefully” as “The New Boredom” to match the New Historicism; this new boredom is closely associated with Kasten’s archival research that “delights in particularity” and the magic of facts (18). Dominick La Capra’s recent work has challenged the move in historical studies to consider the archive as some kind of unsullied pure place untainted by intellectually promiscuous theories. Holding up the banner of materialist studies of archival materials simply effaces an implicit theory, and makes the consideration of historiography and cultural theories all the more important. These scholars’ self-mocking embrace of the boring receives less attention. They describe their work as boring in jest to poke fun at the supposedly exciting, cutting-edge, and engaging literary theories that challenge the empiricist model of archival research. For the purposes here, Kasten uses the trope of the boring because he knows that championing the boring, *even in jest*, will get a rise out of his academic audience. What if we took Kasten’s claim seriously? What if we argued for a return to the boring in scholarship to match the movements in art, music, and literature?