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The long and the short of it: boredom after the end of the great boredom

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One of the first long-form works to deliberately evoke the experience of boredom, Erik Satie's *Vexations*, composed around 1893–4, was presented 70 years later in the episode of the US broadcaster CBS television's *I've Got a Secret* of 16 September 1963.¹ The beauty of this conjunction is that the game show is a good example of precisely the kind of distraction that in general the long-form work deliberately provoking boredom is trying to resist. The episode also brings together perhaps the earliest such work from the 1890s with a period, the 1960s, that marks a peak in the exploration of the temporality of boredom by artists, musicians and film-makers. This particular performance of *Vexations*, in which John Cale was one of the team of pianists and where Karl Schenzer was the only member of the audience to sit through it to the end, was organised by John Cage and is supposed to be the first time *Vexations* was played in its entirety. Members of the audience did indeed clock in and clock out, receiving a refund of a nickel for each 20 minutes attended. This draws attention to factory conditions of labour and the economising of time that the excess involved in the extremely long performance – the sheer waste of time – is supposed to militate against. On the top of the manuscript of Satie's *Vexations* are written words that might be considered instructions: 'To play this motif 840 times in a row, it will be well to prepare in advance, and in the greatest silence, by serious immobility.'²

A year after Cage organised the performance of *Vexations*, which in the end lasted over 18 hours, Andy Warhol showed his film *Empire* (1964), a film of the Empire State Building shot from a static

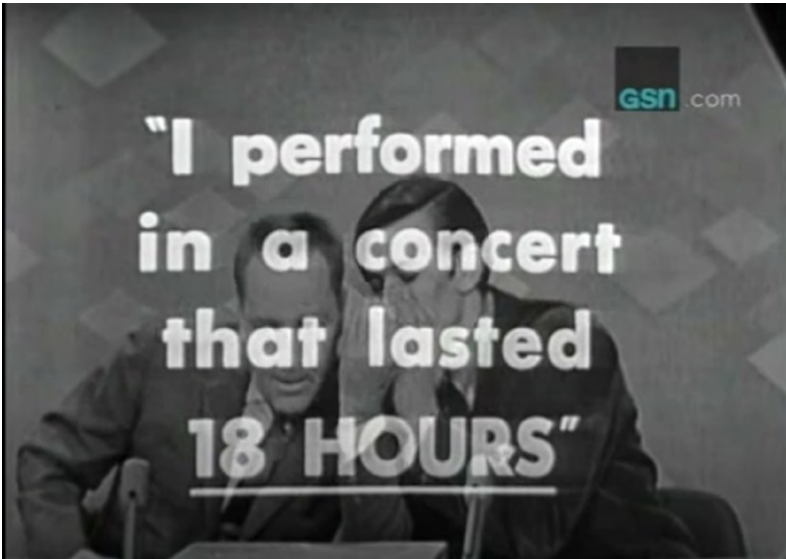


Figure 10.1 *I've Got a Secret*, featuring John Cale, 16 September 1963. Screenshot captured at 0:40. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mqO-xsRyTM>.



Figure 10.2 *I've Got a Secret*, featuring Karl Schenzer, 16 September 1963. Screenshot captured at 0:54. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mqO-xsRyTM>.

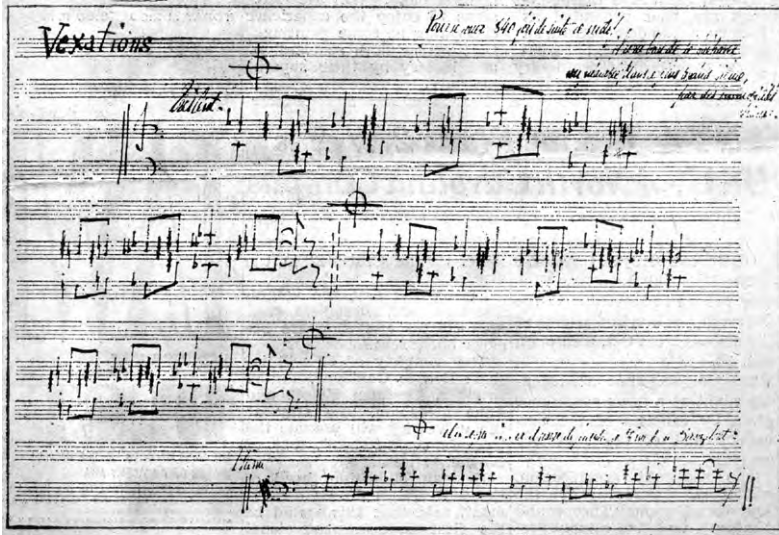


Figure 10.3 Score of *Vexations*, Eric Satie.

camera and played at a slowed-down rate of 16 frames per second, lasting for eight hours and five minutes.³ My hypothesis is that in the twenty-first century great boredom is a thing of the past, as great art was a thing of the past to Hegel in the nineteenth century.⁴

However, a difference in the relation to history of ‘great art’ and boredom is that boredom has an oblique relation to the dialectic. The whole point of boredom is that it cannot be integrated into a spiral of negation and production. Nonetheless it also occupies, parasites even, the Hegelian dialectic in that the ‘absolute knowing’ in which the *Phenomenology of Spirit* culminates would after all be a rather boring state to occupy.⁵ The *Bildungsroman* of *Geist*,⁶ with its actually quite surprising twists and turns (despite the fact that it has always already happened), culminates in a boring plateau or a plateau of boredom, as boring as heaven would be if there were such a place. The ‘end of history’ would needless to say be boring, but boredom is not the end of history. In Hegelian terms this is the moment at the end when the dialectic is no longer productive, no longer needs to be productive. If we knew what we desire to know we would be bored, clearly. As the writer knows, the problem is not to attain a state of knowledge but to try to restore your ignorance in order to have a motive to keep going.

So, if boredom is both inside and outside the dialectic, which boredom is it exactly that is a thing of the past? For, no doubt, there is more than one kind of boredom.

Arguably, the period of great boredom runs from the 1890s to the 1970s. Peaks would be the 1890s, the 1920s to 1930s, and the 1960s. All seem to coincide with mediatised jumps in the amount of distraction: newspapers and fashion in the 1890s, radio and cinema in the 1920s and 1930s, and TV and advertising in the 1960s. The paradox is that we are faced in the third decade of the twenty-first century with a mega-jump in the amount of distraction brought on by the confluence of the internet, smartphones and social media, but virtually no recourse to long-form ‘boring’ works of art, theatre, cinema or music. Why is *this* not a period of ‘great boredom’? Is it because distraction covers the entire social and existential field? Could we say that once distraction is totalised, boredom is entirely forgotten⁷ – that if these have been ‘20 years of boredom’, as per the title of the conference on which this book is based (quoting Leonard Cohen)⁸ it is not 20 years of *being* bored, but rather 20 years of the *forgetting* of boredom? By this I mean that distraction is no longer counterposed with boredom. We are no longer even aware that distraction is an escape from some kind of fundamental confrontation. Distraction rules by completely concealing boredom. It is no coincidence that distraction is now a fundamental way of conducting politics: it becomes a way of concealing the ‘political’, rendering us oblivious to it.⁹ Pessimistically, we could say ‘that’s it’, that’s the short of it. Or else we could go a bit mystical and say that ‘where the danger lies, there lies the saving power’.¹⁰ Will there be a flip out of boredom into another kind of relation with time and with the world? Could art, after all, have any role in this? How might art preserve itself from being absorbed into the culture of distraction?¹¹ Or could the turn happen through art being totally absorbed into distraction?

The point is, of course, that boredom, if it has any radical sense at all, must involve an outside, a non-relation that is not just an absence of relation. Just as the idea that ‘great art is a thing of the past’ was turned to their advantage by the thinkers who broke with Hegel – that art could stand for that which falls away from the dialectic, that which remains unassimilable, and so on, at least if thought about in ‘anti-aesthetic’ terms – so might be the case with boredom. But at the same time, that boredom today might be ‘a thing of the past’ raises the question of the *loss* of the outside in the context of the economisation of everything and the totalisation of distraction.

The word for ‘boredom’ in German is *Langeweile*, which is a compound of the words for ‘long’ and ‘while’, the latter related etymologically to ‘rest’ or ‘pause’.¹² Heidegger, in his lectures on boredom of 1929–30, makes much of this stretching of time. We could contrast this

with the shortening or acceleration of time today. Heidegger adduces three forms of boredom: being bored of (doing) something – the example he gives is waiting for a train; being bored alongside something, for example at a social event, where we don't even know we are bored until afterwards, when we realise we have been wasting our time; and the state in which everything is boring. Heidegger's claim is ontological because it concerns the being of beings as a whole: boredom gives access to the ontological difference between being and beings, by rendering all beings as nothing, as withdrawn from possibility. To attribute boredom to boring things, or to consider it an inner psychological trait of the subject, is for Heidegger to avoid the fundamental relation of *Dasein* to the world and to beings as a whole, which profound boredom discloses.¹³ Unlike the more dramatic 'being towards death' of Heidegger's earlier *Being and Time*, boredom thus serves as a mediation between inauthenticity and authenticity, as a means to transit from one to the other, but with the implication, which is perhaps foreign to Heidegger's intention, that the authentic and the inauthentic can never be definitively separated, and that authenticity might become boring. In effect, Heidegger is making a distinction between 'little' ordinary boredoms and a 'great' boredom that involves the ontological disclosure of the burden or task of *Dasein*. As he leaves the discussion of boredom, he suggests that the 'problematic of metaphysics' may not 'for the whole of world history' be 'developed on the basis of the temporality of *Dasein*', and that there might be 'a different kind of necessary grounding for metaphysics'.¹⁴ On the one hand, he is implying the necessity to understand the *Stimmungen*, the attunements, including boredom, which is a fundamental one, a *Grundstimmung* in relation to a history of being as a history of the forgetting of the ontological difference of beings and being, just as the 'great' boredom is suppressed by the little boredoms and their distractions. But on the other hand Heidegger also makes the ominous demand, as if to answer to what being fully open to the 'great' boredom requires of his audience in the lecture hall, that 'We must first call for someone capable of instilling terror into our *Dasein* again.'¹⁵ Three years later, shortly after he had been elected Rector of the University of Freiburg, Heidegger joined the Nazi Party. Today, of course, fascism as an escape from white male boredom, now mediated through internet memes and streams, is once again a live topic.

What then is the relation, where boredom is concerned, between ontology and history? Why does boredom, as an ontological *Stimmung* or attunement, emerge under particular historical conditions? How is *Langeweile* related to the acceleration of time in modernity? What exactly

is forgotten or suppressed in and by that acceleration? In order to approach these questions, I now turn to the relation between boredom and technology.

I wonder whether one could say that the 'great' boredom is an analogue affect – that it has a relation to the record of time conceived as a continuum that is inscribed. Boredom would thus be a relation to time as continuum – it just goes on and on – combined with the withdrawal of investment in, or engagement with, objects and projects. Boredom, then, is non-relation with relation conceived in terms of continuity. Nonetheless, this kind of boredom is finite. The long work of art may therefore be an analogue phenomenon, because there has to be a limit for it to be perceived as long. This could be the material limit of the vehicle, such as the physical celluloid, or the scroll. Or the limit of exhaustion of the human body. We could contrast this with a digital video recording simply allowed to run on endlessly, as might be the case, for example, with surveillance videos. In that case the video is neither long nor short, since it has no determinate length. There would be no possibility to see it through to the end, however bored one might be. The works of art of the 'great boredom' offered the opportunity to undergo something difficult, and there would come a point when they would have been 'lived through'. The paradox was to offer the audience an achievement that was one of passivity. This would reveal something about an essential passivity, perhaps even a 'passivity more passive than the passivity of activity', as the philosopher Levinas put it.¹⁶ This passivity would not be a defective form of activity, with the latter given priority. It would have implications for the relation to oneself, to the world and to the other. Is it not this passivity that is occluded in the transition from the 'great boredom' to totalised distraction?

An example might be Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010). It is 24 hours long, and at one level functions literally as a clock. As with the relation of Jasper Johns's *Flag* (1954–5) to an American flag, which poses the question of whether it is a painting of a flag or a flag, *The Clock* is both a film of clocks and a clock. The time shown on the clocks in the sequences from films is coordinated with the time at which these are shown in the screening of *The Clock*. Despite its duration, *The Clock* is not a work of the 'great boredom', but rather discloses the temporality of distraction. This may have to do with the short segments, each arousing a kind of narrative spasm which only leads into the next, so that each segment of time gets nowhere, and the next begins again *in medias res*. In structuralist terms, the paradigmatic substitutions are determined but limited by the size of the archive and the syntax is paratactic, one



Figure 10.4 Douglas Gordon, *24 Hour Psycho*, 1993. Screenshot captured at 21:27.

moment beside the other. The attempt on the part of the viewer to create a sequence is endlessly frustrated. In a sense this is pure distraction, but at the same time repeating the frustration from which distraction is meant to distract. We could contrast this with Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), which we might see rather as a late work of the 'great boredom', remediating film through video to bring together two modes of the 1950s to 1960s, the psychological horror thriller and long-duration art. It does seem to press against the limits of endurance in a way made possible by contemporary technological changes.¹⁷

I have suggested that boredom, in its withdrawal of attachment or cathexis, is potentially a mode of access to the non-relational. Hence its role in the production of the new. Where the technologies of boredom are concerned, a question might arise as to what the non-relational is, or whether the non-relational is even possible with respect to the digital, given that the digital is all-encompassing, or omni-relational. Would digital non-relationality simply be a 'sleep mode'? The digital enables the seeping of distraction into every aspect of life. It contributes to the collapse of the distinctions of inner/outer and private/public. On public transport people are absorbed into the private worlds of their smartphones, which connect them to everything everywhere – or seem to. In the current media ecology, we risk losing all the spaces in which boredom might be experienced. The artist's studio was such a space that was culturally privileged and mythologised.



Figure 10.5 Warhol's *Empire* and Marclay's *Clock*. Screenshot captured at 13:46.

Early on in Alberto Moravia's novel *Boredom* (1960) there is a scene in which the protagonist, who is an artist, destroys the painting in his studio by cutting it into pieces. He later asserts the blank canvas as his work.¹⁸ Boredom becomes, as Adam Phillips puts it, 'the moment in which nothing is inviting'.¹⁹ In the novel, the artist's dissatisfaction, the failure of his desire, is connected to his cold mother or rather with a

non-coincidence of mutual expectations. Christopher Bollas, cited by Phillips, suggests that boredom is waiting for transformation, linked to the mother experienced not as an object but as a process of transformation, leading in adult life to the object being 'sought for its function as signifier of the process of the transformation of being'.²⁰ Moravia's novel also implicitly raises the question of the gendering of boredom and its relation to sexual obsession, and indeed harassment, as an act pursued, not out of desire, but rather out of the reaction to the failure of desire and the substitution of power.

In Moravia's novel, the studio is one of the sites – perhaps the most important – where boredom is played out. So far, we have at least three modalities of boredom: the boredom that is the topic of psychoanalysis; the boredom that is a factor of the shocks and distractions of modernity; and the boredom where withdrawal is connected to potential. The artist's studio may function as something of an intersection of the three.

If the studio is a privileged site for a necessary boredom, a place where potential is gathered, what then of so-called 'post-studio' practice? I think we can locate an ambivalence, perhaps a contradiction, here. On the one hand, post-studio art can be seen as a resistance to the fetishisation of both the object and the artist as isolated genius, and an attempt to give art a socio-political role; on the other hand, of course, it is confluent with the post-object experience economy of platform capitalism, and therefore on the side of the totalisation of distraction, even if the 'distraction' in this case might be a worthwhile political project.²¹ In post-studio practice, art becomes a 'project' instead of an object.²² It could be that the very structure of the 'project' is as much a part of the problem as a critical response to it, in so far as it implies both an orientation to the future made possible by a relation to finitude and death that enables the grasping of possibilities,²³ and a temporal continuum where the future is supposed to be under the control of the present.

While art has become an important part of the distraction economy – biennales, blockbuster shows, publicity, lifestyle and so on – art is also offered as the escape from, or even cure for, our malaise. In the 'critical' period of boredom, in the 1920s and 1930s, that malaise would have derived from a combination of acceleration in technological and economic urban life with the sense of the eternal recurrence of the new in fashion and commodities. Everything rapidly changes but social relations remain the same, with inequality increasing as it does today. Boredom would have been a defence against this acceleration, and perhaps a way of accessing another temporality. Up to the 1960s,

art and the studio provided the locus for resistance, or escape, depending on how you look at it; perhaps even the promise of a transfigured relation to being. But somehow the art of the 'great boredom' seems to have disappeared.

Can we envisage a return of the 'great boredom', or are we involved in a new kind of relation? If a new kind of relation, then the non-relation that was once experienced as boredom will necessarily be different. Perhaps, if still to be found, it will no longer be experienced as boredom, but rather as some other affect. What may have changed is not the boredom as such, but the relation to it: to be more specific, the relation with non-relation, with both its possibility, and what it gives on to.

The necessity of wasting time has not changed. Indeed, it is even more urgent because of the total colonisation of time. Pretty much all our time has been rendered productive, although mostly not for us. This has been achieved through the monetisation of attention, made possible by the digital and the internet, social media and the development of smartphones, which lure attention during down moments, the times when in the past we might have been bored. Apparently, at one point, Candy Crush largely replaced the reading of novels on public transport.²⁴ Now, no doubt, some other game transports commuters elsewhere. This 'wasted time' has been rendered productive for the global corporate economy, so we have to look somewhere else to find a waste that cannot be economised, if such a thing is even possible, according to the paradox of the potlatch identified by Bataille, that of turning waste itself into an acquisition.²⁵

It is here that we might turn to the relation between boredom and bliss posited by Roland Barthes. We see this when, in the middle of an interminable meeting during the notorious trip to China by French intellectuals that led to the Maoist turn of the Parisian left, he is attracted by tea leaves unfolding in a cup.²⁶ This is not a great boredom, but a mundane boredom, and the bliss, which he describes as an excess of the signifier, is a small bliss, and not a great fusion: a tiny moment of ecstatic waste in the midst of an instrumentalised administered world.

The non-relation of boredom is a kind of out-of-work-ness, a *désœuvrement*.²⁷ This might be understood as a withdrawal (as in, say, Herman Melville's story 'Bartleby the Scrivener' [1853], with the scrivener's 'I would prefer not to' being neither negation nor affirmation but neutral), or even as something affirmative. For Barthes this is in a small way; for Georges Bataille it is in an ecstatic sense. We need to understand this *ecstasis* not as leisure – the time to recuperate in order to

work better – but rather as outside of the work–leisure duality (which is also where we might want to situate boredom).²⁸

Waste in Bataille's sense is potlatch and expenditure without return.²⁹ We tend to think of the period in which this thought was articulated in terms of things. But the relationship to time was already there through money. And the idea of a wasted time, time as a kind of waste or wasteland, is obviously in Samuel Beckett, in the idea of waiting, repetition or tedium.³⁰ This wasteland seems to have been entirely gentrified today, converted into value. Wasting time has been made productive, just, as I said, not for us. More and more of the day has become wasted time where our attention is harvested. It is another form of expropriation. The problem we face is how to claim back our wasted time without instrumentalising it, without turning it into labour. A task for education, perhaps, not providing 'job skills' and preparing for lucrative employment but teaching the art of wasting time.

The advent of the modern 'great boredom' is marked in the arts by a distinction between two different kinds of long form, and of the temporalities implied by them. Around the time of Satie's *Vexations*, the poet Stéphane Mallarmé was developing his ideas for the epochal book performance *Le Livre*, based on obsessive calculations and measurement, and both could be seen as a response to – indeed critique of – Wagnerism, manifested in excessively long operas and the mythic opera cycle *The Ring*. Note that already in Satie the 'ring' is replaced by what is in effect a 'loop': the long-form narrative work with its tendency towards ecstatic fusion is replaced by repetition, bourgeois religiosity with almost factory-style labour. One way of seeing the repetition of the short piece of music is as its looping, except that it does have an end after 840 repetitions, number being as much of an interest to Satie as it was to Mallarmé, and the actual performance of the whole thing introduces differences and contingencies into the repetitions.

What is the difference between the *Langeweile* and the loop that becomes possible with audiotape and film, and is carried over into a repeat function in contemporary art?³¹ Perhaps we could say that the *Langeweile* is an outside of the time of action, whereas the loop is a trap.³² We are trapped in the exact repetition of what we have seen and heard. However, while the loop of a temporal work of art remains the same, the visitor to the gallery does not: each repetition will be experienced differently, given its temporal non-identity in perception – the same happening, being perceived, at a different time. And of course we can always leave. So the alternatives set up by the loop are trap and expulsion. But the relation between them is not the same as that of boredom and

distraction: we are neither expelled into, or out from, the *Langeweile*. This poses the question of whether it is still possible to retrieve the *Langeweile*, the 'long of it': and the short of it is I'm not sure that it is.

We should now go on to consider why the 'great boredom' might be at an end. As is the case with art after great art in Hegel, that does not mean that there is boredom no longer. Quite possibly there is more boredom than ever before. But the character of the mood has changed, along with its technological conditions. Boredom is a historical mood, perhaps *the* mood of modernity. For Heidegger, as Miguel de Beistegui suggests, the thinking of boredom, as distinct from the 'universal' human finitude of being towards death, is a way of thinking the relation to time as epochal – that is historical – and as collective.³³ These 'epochs' were those in which being is forgotten in distinctive ways, and each ever more forgetful: as idea; as God; as the subject; in total oblivion in the epoch of the *Gestell* (usually translated as 'enframing', perhaps rather 'set-up') of technology. Whereas Heidegger thinks of modernity in ontological terms, such that boredom as a distinctively modern mood in its radical form involves a non-relation to being, as a moment in the 'history of being', Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin think of the modernity of boredom in terms of society, economy and media. The continuity lies in the relation of all these things to temporalisation. A question we need to pose is whether the transition from the 'great' boredom to what we could call 'minor' boredoms is related to a transformation in temporalisation, connected with new technologies, affecting the extent to which the substance of life may be mediated, rendered abstract and subject to the extraction of surplus value.

Boredom is 'the blasé attitude' according to Georg Simmel in 'The metropolis and mental life' (1903). It results from a combination of 'the intensification of nervous stimulation'³⁴ in the city with the money economy, which reduces all quality and individuality to quantity so that 'the meaning and differing values of things, and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial. They appear to the blasé person in an evenly flat and gray tone; no one object deserves preference over any other. This mood is the faithful subjective reflection of the completely internalized money economy.'³⁵ Thus, boredom is a response to the combination of the abstraction brought about by money as the universal medium with the acceleration of urban life under capitalism. For Siegfried Kracauer, boredom is the refusal of and even resistance to distractions such as advertising, a guarantee that one is present and still in control of one's existence: 'Eventually one becomes content to do nothing more than be with oneself, without knowing what one actually should be doing.'³⁶

Boredom is a mood or *Stimmung* in relation to what is present being either empty or withheld. This raises the question of whether it is directed towards something other than the present. Since boredom has to do with the suspension or withholding of possibilities, it involves an orientation towards the future, even if in the negative sense. This is announced by Benjamin in his notes on boredom made in 1928–9, the same period as Heidegger’s lecture course, when he writes, ‘Waiting is, in a sense, the lined interior of boredom. (Hebel: boredom waits for death).’³⁷ Waiting implies futurity. Boredom thus involves a non-relation to the present in the name of a future that remains undetermined. This is articulated in terms of both historicist time and eternal recurrence. Historicist time is a ‘progressive’ continuum where the future is essentially the same as the present even if it looks different, and exactly the same is true of the past. Both are in this sense continuous with the present. Eternal recurrence, Benjamin’s reinterpretation of Nietzsche’s *amor fati* via the *Eternity of the Stars* of the insurrectionist Louis Auguste Blanqui, figures the way in which the new ‘returns’ as the ever-same, and therefore blocks the possibility of the revolutionary new as event. Being bored would therefore be a refusal to be absorbed by the recurrent new, for the sake of that which is awaited on the basis of interruption rather than the continuum of historicism. Boredom is in this respect a ‘great boredom’ because it is tied to – is the very mood of – the standpoint of redemption. Boredom is ‘the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience’, writes Benjamin, and, he adds, ‘A rustling in the leaves drives him away.’³⁸

Benjamin and Heidegger’s accounts of boredom share a totalising operation, and it is arguably this that characterises the ‘great’ boredom. This is evident in the contrast of boredom and discontent. Discontent is discontent with something, whereas boredom involves a withdrawal from or of everything. Boredom is therefore opposed to any partial amelioration. The only way of transforming everything would be a transfigured relation to time as such, whether this is the time of being for Heidegger, or messianic redemption for Benjamin. Such is the project of the ‘great’ boredom. It is also the project of Capital: to turn *all* lived time into abstract labour. We would have to say, therefore, that a minor boredom could be taken as a refusal of a major boredom, maybe a being bored with the ‘great’ boredom, not only in the failure of redemption, but also in discerning that the redemptive expectation in the boredom of waiting may itself be part of the problem.

The boredom of the 1960s is not yet at this point. We could see it rather as the attempt to sustain the idea that the rejection of the

redemptive boredom might take the form of another 'great' boredom. We may find this in the conjunction, which is also a non-meeting, of John Cage and Andy Warhol. If boredom has to do with the withdrawal of possibilities whereby things come to appear empty or distracting, there is a reorientation in the 1960s of what those possibilities could be directed towards, a turn from action to consumption. This cuts across differences in the respective attitudes and approaches to art of Cage and Warhol. With Warhol, the relation of boredom to consumption is obvious: to do the same thing every day is to consume the same thing, including the same food. Warhol famously replied when asked why he started painting the Campbell's soup cans: 'Because I used to drink it. I used to have the same lunch every day, for twenty years, I guess, the same thing over and over again.'³⁹ Along with the abstraction produced by repetition goes affectlessness, or the reassuring feeling of being affectless: 'the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel'.⁴⁰ For Cage, by contrast, the implicit posture of the consumer would figure as the reception or openness to the audible in *4' 33''*, or being subjected to chance. The supposed conjunction of the two was that first performance of the greatest of boring works, Satie's *Vexations*, the one organised in New York at the Pocket Theatre in 1963 by John Cage with which we began. The claim has been made that Warhol attended the performance, a claim that was the basis of an event at Tate Modern on 27 May 2007, in which Satie's *Vexations* was played live to accompany a screening of Warhol's film *Sleep*, made in the same year as the Satie performance.⁴¹ The film of Warhol's lover John Giorno sleeping, shot in 16 mm, lasts 321 minutes.

What does this conjunction of Cage, Warhol and Satie mean for the relation between temporality and abstraction that is a condition for boredom? It is Warhol who provides the clue: between 1962 and 1984 he produced works in the Factory, as his successive studios are named, works that have to do with the registration of existing images, and with forms of advertising and consumption and films that tend to be single-shot and/or long-duration. This is the historical moment of the acceleration of consumption becoming itself a form of production. If the condition for this is the abstraction of consumption – it doesn't matter what is being consumed, what matters are the profits and the social relations that determine where they go – consumption becomes simultaneously interesting and boring, which is perfectly encapsulated in Warhol's pose. Consumption becomes interesting because it becomes conceptual, a universal term subsuming sensuous experiences, but the very condition that allows it to become conceptual, its abstraction as a

result of its being subsumed under the medium of exchange, also renders it boring, since the particular qualities of the sensuous experiences are replaced with symbolic ones (the current expansion of this process takes place through social media such as Instagram, where the signs of consumers' experiences are consumed). Thus a shift in the mode of boringness coincides with the emergence of what has been called 'semicapitalism'.⁴²

A change in the nature of boredom involves an alteration in the relation between the abstraction of time and the withdrawal of possibilities. The abstraction of labour in the factory left possibilities open outside and in the time after work. This surely is why one of the first documentary films, *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895), directed by Louis Lumière, is so affecting. The abstraction of labour has been understood as a totalisation through a form required by capitalism. So long as the matter or substance of life, or at least aspects of it, remain un-totalised, not abstracted for the extraction of value, boredom can lead somewhere that is not boring. Of course, it could be argued that neither *Vexations* nor *Sleep* is really boring, but rather that the repetitions and exclusion of any narrative focus attention on changes and differences. Brandon Joseph suggests that while for Warhol repetition means doing the same thing every day, for Cage it has to do with variety.⁴³ In other words, there is a way out within the experience of boredom itself.

By 1968 boredom was a talking point. The Fluxus artist Dick Higgins wrote in an article published in the *Something Else Newsletter* that 'Boredom was, until recently, one of the qualities an artist tried most to avoid. Yet today it appears that artists are deliberately trying to make their work boring.'⁴⁴ He suggests that 'in the context of work which attempts to involve the spectator, boredom often serves a useful function: as an opposite to excitement and as a means of bringing emphasis to what it interrupts, causing us to view both elements freshly'.⁴⁵ The successful, repetitive, long-form work of art depended on boredom not in the end being boring. The 'great' boredom combines totalisation with the expectation of an exit or total transformation, and the intimation of this within the experience of the work itself. The notion of boredom also suggests something shared, whether broadly in society, or by a select group. However, as art, its social character becomes channelled into aesthetic self-transformation. This is not necessarily a bad thing, since boredom is not the most promising motivation for a demand for social change.

The 'minor' boredoms that follow the 1960s take two forms: on the one hand a financialised boredom, and on the other a revival of *acedia*.

It is the book in which *acedia* is a central motif that shows us the connection between the two. Before his suicide in 2008, David Foster Wallace organised the typescripts and associated computer files for the novel he was working on, *The Pale King*, so that they would be found. The novel revolves around the changes to the US tax code in the 1980s, under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, and the formation of a tax examiner in the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) who worked during the time of those changes. The new tax code involves the shift from the idea of tax work as a civic duty for the benefit of society to the subordination of the IRS to corporate profitability. This is the bedrock of the seismic turn from the aftermath of the New Deal to the emergence of neoliberalism.

Boredom is both described and thematised in the novel, and arguably is also fundamental to its structure and the implied reader. The formation of the protagonist takes place during the 1970s, the last period of the 'great boredom'. Implied is a critique of the idea of the great boredom from a later perspective, combining the viewpoints of the protagonist in the 1980s and the author in the first decade of the twenty-first century. That critique involves making a distinction between 'aesthetic' boredom (already identified and criticised in the nineteenth century by Søren Kierkegaard),⁴⁶ and the boredom of certain kinds of necessary work. If boredom for Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin is a mood that takes on a particular character in modernity, it tends specifically to be a response to the life of the metropolis, and therefore already to imply a distinction between metropolitan boredom (as a defensive reaction to over-stimulation) and provincial boredom (of *Madame Bovary* for example – therefore also a question of gender). In Wallace, provincial boredom has become that of the suburbs, and he introduces a further distinction between that boredom and a boredom that is unavoidable and indeed necessary as a civic virtue. It is the value accorded to the latter type of boredom that is threatened by neoliberal capitalism from the 1980s.

According to the first distinction Wallace is making, aesthetic boredom has become the boredom of kids from the Midwestern suburbs, who are of college age. The privilege here is being supported by parents (of the New Deal generation), who have to do boring jobs to provide that support. This suburban kids' boredom becomes the Warhol version of aesthetic boredom. The bored college kid, after his father's traumatic death in an accident, goes into a boring job of his own, with the IRS. This boring job becomes located on an inflection point of social values. So repetitive boring labour, which is negatively coded, here becomes

positively coded. In a way the structure is both similar to and different from Heidegger's opposition of profound boredom and its evasion by little boredoms, or Benjamin's of waiting and distraction. On one level the IRS job is stupid and repetitive, but on another it has a crucial social value. Indeed, it is at this level of detail that history is really made, beneath the distracting political spectacle. What is needed to discern it is a practice of boredom in order to achieve attention.⁴⁷ There is a connection here with the very origin of boredom in the *acedia* of the Church Fathers,⁴⁸ which is suggested in the conversion narrative of the protagonist of *The Pale King* when he accidentally sits in on a university accountancy class given by a substitute tutor who happens to be a Jesuit.

In the course of the novel, attention-in-boredom is needed to perform as an IRS examiner, but also to discern what is happening, to perform a critical reading of the tax code itself and of the changes that it is undergoing. This provides an analogy for the reading of the very long novel with its own boring passages dealing with the minutiae of working for the IRS. It is no longer a matter of heroically undergoing an immensely long, repetitive, boring artwork (witness Karl Schenzer as the heroic audience member at *Vexations*), or passing through boredom to live in the affirmative differentiations of the moment, both of which uncover some fundamental relation to time and human possibility, but rather of paying attention through boredom in order to grasp why things are the way they are, and indeed in order to act in the public sphere, which is not so much a matter of time as such, but rather of history. It is perhaps through a necessary minor boredom that a relation between time and history is reinstated, like the role *acedia* plays in the Christian redemptive story, but in a new way and in a lower key.

The underlying bureaucratic key is the ability to deal with boredom. To function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human. To breathe, so to speak, without air ... It is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish.⁴⁹

It is indeed this 'minor' boredom that is presented as 'heroic' by the Jesuit substitute tutor, in a way that is satirised by the author to imply that it is anything but:

He said, 'To retain care and scrupulosity about each detail from within the teeming wormball of data and rule and exception and contingency which constitutes real-world accounting – this is

heroism. To attend fully to the interests of the client and to balance those interests against the high ethical standards of FASB and extant law – yea, to serve those who care not for service but only for results – this is heroism. This may be the first time you’ve heard the truth put plainly, starkly. Effacement. Sacrifice. Service. To give oneself to the care of others’ money – this is effacement, perdurance, sacrifice, honor, doughtiness, valor. Hear this or not, as you will. Learn it now, or later – the world has time. Routine, repetition, tedium, monotony, ephemeracy, inconsequence, abstraction, disorder, boredom, angst, ennui – these are the true hero’s enemies, and make no mistake, they are fearsome indeed. For they are real.⁵⁰

The relation to history is a matter of reading, with the implication that we will never be able to understand history without being able to continue to read through boredom.⁵¹ This implies a critique of the historical genres of the novel and film that would seek to avoid boring the reader or viewer. The implication of *The Pale King* is that the examination of tax returns provides the model for the reading of the book itself, and since the book deals through its minutiae with a turning point in history, for the reading of history itself.

Wallace is attempting to fuse the ‘minor’ boredom from the 1980s with the ‘great’ boredom of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, while at the same time drawing attention to the distinction:

Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (tax returns, televised golf), and, in waves, a boredom like you’ve never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it’s like stepping from black and white into colour. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom.⁵²

The boredom that comes with the monotonous attention to tedious detail, necessary for civil society, for an understanding of history and for close reading, is combined with a Christian tradition from the desert fathers to Kierkegaard, of thinking of boredom as a path to salvation. In a monologue by a ghost – referring to the ‘noonday demon’ seen by a devout ‘wiggler’ (a trade term for a tax examiner) – we find the following reference to *acedia*: ‘No word for the Latin *acedia* made so much of by monks under Benedict. For the Greek ἀκηδία. Also the hermits of third-century Egypt, the so-called *daemon meridianus*, when their prayers were stultified by pointlessness and tedium and a longing for a violent death.’⁵³ Perhaps in this respect *The Pale King* is the last statement and

exemplar in its own longueurs of the 'great boredom' while at the same time seeking to encompass the 'minor' boredoms that anticipate its undoing. However, it is also clear that boredom is a form of resistance to depression, or an attempt to turn depression into resistance as a relation to possibilities denied or withheld.⁵⁴

In the twenty-first century, the conditions for boredom have changed once again. The possibilities for a virtuous, civic boredom posited by Wallace in *The Pale King* have been reduced by algorithms based on machine learning. The targeting of information and communications, and the demand for instant response, have reduced the toleration for the stretched-out time of boredom. Media have at once produced and exploited shortened attention spans. Of course this has produced reactions, such as the movement of 'slow radio' and 'slow television', but these are marginal, and do not touch the profound changes that media have produced in the experience of temporality. It is no coincidence that the new phase of the suppression of boredom, which is approaching totality through the multiplication and penetration to every level of life by distraction, goes together with the attempt to financialise all forms of attention. This tendency has reached its apogee during the years following David Foster Wallace's death. The problem remains what it already was in the first decades of the twentieth century, the relation of boredom to distraction, the attracting away of attention, while the new situation is the corporate colonisation of attention at every level.

With the emergence of 'semiocapitalism' during the 1980s in what has become the 'global North' we see a shift from a 'Fordist' boredom, linked to repetitive and tedious labour and statist and corporate bureaucracy, to a new kind of all-pervasive boredom involving a general exhaustion and emptying out of significance.⁵⁵ Punk boredom acts as a hinge between the two: on the one hand a continuation of working-class male boredom celebrated with an energy that is associated with the idea that there is a sphere of freedom outside that of work; on the other hand, a devaluation of all values and refusal to see the point in anything. The phase after this is described by Mark Fisher as 'anhedonic boredom' and he gives the example of Kurt Cobain and Nirvana: 'In his dreadful lassitude and objectless rage, Cobain seemed to give wearied voice to the despondency of the generation that had come after history, whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought and sold before it had even happened.'⁵⁶

If boredom is still a matter of time, as it is in the classic accounts, and also concerns a relation to abstraction,⁵⁷ then we would expect this

new condition of boredom to involve changes in the relation between temporality and abstraction. When it is possible to maintain the distinction between the abstraction of time and the labour process and non-abstract aspects of life (friendship, love, self-realisation), boredom has a telos and an end. The expansion of abstraction and commodification into leisure and home life began to happen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, picked up after the depression in the 1930s and accelerated during the post-war period, increasingly from the 1960s with the development of the advertising industry which – from at least the 1890s – lay behind this penetration of capital into consumption and the colonisation of private life. Distraction offers itself as the solution to boredom, inevitably becoming boring itself. This is the logic behind Benjamin's critique of fashion according to the eternal return. The cycle of distraction and boredom preempts the redemptive dimension of waiting of the 'great' boredom. Minor boredom takes over where 'great' boredom might lead. The condition for this is that life 'beyond' boredom becomes itself subject to abstraction.

Roberto Finelli explains this extension of abstraction in terms of the distinction in Marx between formal and real subsumption. The totalisation of capital has to arise not from particular contents but from a determination of its form, since the addition of particulars could continue indefinitely without resulting in a totality.⁵⁸ Formal determination concerns the penetration of the social relations of production into the labour process when an existing labour process is taken over by capital. With real subsumption capital penetrates the whole process of production such that living labour counts only as a supply of working time.⁵⁹ Abstract labour arises when different performances with their sensuous particularities all count as 'universal' labour. The abstracting involves the emptying out of different labours with their particular character for an interchangeable labour-in-general. An additional factor is the expansion of what counts as labour: as the nature of work changes, cognitive labour comes under the relations of production; and as media technologies are transformed, affective and intimate life itself becomes labour. In the course of this, writes Finelli, abstraction

invades the concrete, filling it according to the exigencies of its expansive-reproductive logic. At the same time, however, it leaves it a semblance, an exterior surface of concreteness ... It posits the abstract and the concrete in connection not through contradiction but through abstraction – emptying-out ... I believe that postmodern

society should be interpreted, not as rupture and discontinuity, but, rather, as the deepening and the more complete realisation of modern society. It is completed by means of the extension and the unfolding on the part of the subject constituted by impersonal and abstract wealth into all of the collective and private environments of life: a colonisation which is dissimulated and negated through an hysterical over-determination of the surface.⁶⁰

This occurs in cognitive and affective capitalism,

in which, given that it is essentially information which is worked on, the active and creative participation of subjectivity is valorised and emphasised to the maximum, with all of the individuality of its psychic resources; while the elaboration of information refers in reality to the function of choosing between alternatives already preconstituted and predetermined, obeying programmes and work plans already conceived and signified by others, and placed in that great artificial brain external to our mind that is the informational machine. Expressed in other terms, this is the way real abstraction presents itself, as mental labour that is merely discursive-calculative and devoid of intentionality or personal appropriation, appearing as dissimulated in its superficial appearance, turned upside down into its opposite of creative and personalised labour.⁶¹

When the work/personal life distinction is collapsed, assisted by smartphones, email and so on, and the dimension of love and relationships becomes labour, 'The sphere of consumption, of that zone which once was still defined as private, thus experiences ever more the decline of feeling, of taste, of sensual emotion, giving way to boredom, to insignificance and quantitative indifference.'⁶² Under such circumstances, can boredom still be a form of refusal or withdrawal? Or a way of waiting to find desire, as the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips puts it?⁶³ What happens when desiring itself becomes a form of abstract labour? And what kind of temporality would make this possible?

The relation to the future presupposed in the classic accounts of boredom has undergone a change as a result of the mediations made possible by new technologies. Twenty-first-century media have affected the temporality of sensibility in a 'feed-forward mechanism', so that behaviour no longer becomes a question of intentionality or perception.⁶⁴ In the example of the bored adolescent girls addressed by YouTube discussed by Tina Kendall, the solution to the problem of boredom is

pre-programmed even prior to the awareness of it.⁶⁵ This is the condition for the financialisation of boredom typically addressed to adolescent girls through YouTube videos that purport to provide solutions. The technical condition for the transformation of temporality that facilitates this is that of the computation-based media which have made surveillance capitalism possible. Hansen argues that the micro-temporalities of computation applied to tracking and sensing contribute to a general sensibility that works below the level of perception as a condition for consciousness and predetermining its intentionality. What the 'feed-forward' creates is a continuum effect whereby the future is predicted and therefore within an order of probability pre-empted from a present in a way that is imperceptible to consciousness but available as probabilistically processed data which can be used to inform or to advertise towards future outcomes. It is not only that the possibilities are controlled for actualisation in certain directions, for example the financialised solutions to feeling bored, but that the future is to be constituted solely in the modality of possibility. This is the determination of futurity which enables its real subsumption – its abstraction and financialisation in advance as labour for capital – to be always already anticipated.

A new temporal dimension is added to the continuing saturation of boredom.⁶⁶ Instead of a temporality of slowness and distention – *Langeweile* – as a withdrawal from the speed of modern time (as in Kracauer, Simmel, Benjamin and Heidegger), boredom becomes itself incorporated into sensibility subject to the micro-temporalities of computation. While Fordist boredom was something to be endured and could be relieved in social life outside the factory, there is no outside according to the topology of semio- and surveillance-capitalist boredom. If 'profound boredom' had to do with a withdrawal to potential, the aim of semio- and surveillance capitalism is to make sure all potential is reduced to possibilities that can be financialised, and therefore are abstracted and rendered interchangeable by means of big data and machine learning.

In such a situation, passing through boredom doesn't lead anywhere else. In effect, boredom ceases to become a way of holding off depression, and becomes indistinguishable from it. The end is not transfiguration or redemption but exhaustion and collapse. That is one reason why we can no longer talk of a 'great' boredom. But that does not mean that boredom may not be directed at abstraction as such and its data-sanctioned possibilities, seemingly unlimited but beneath their apparent differences all the same, as in Benjamin's version of the eternal return of the new. Perhaps to consider this a 'great' boredom would

be an evasion or a nostalgia, as if in such circumstances some kind of transfiguration could still be possible. Such an aspiration would be irresponsible given the injustices and ecological threats that exist today. In retrospect, it is possible to see the 'great boredom' as the last avatar of the sublime, but in the modality that Sianne Ngai calls 'stuplimity', where 'the initial experience of being aesthetically overwhelmed involves not terror or pain (eventually superseded by tranquility), but *something much closer to an ordinary fatigue* – and one that cannot be neutralized, like the sublime's terror, by a competing affect'.⁶⁷ If for Edmund Burke the aim of the sublime was to shake the subject up through a combination of pleasure and pain, or for Immanuel Kant to overwhelm the imagination for the sake of the transcendence of reason, boredom is more like a dulling, clogging inertia or the tedium of one thing after another.⁶⁸ The failure is not so much a failure of the imagination to totalise as a diminishing of the energy to enumerate. While eschewing transcendence, the 'great boredom' served as a last hope that the experience of art can change us, if only through exhaustion. In the materialist comedy of its repetitions and falls, Ngai's 'stuplimity' may provide what, quoting Gertrude Stein, she calls 'a little resistance'.⁶⁹ Even that expectation directed towards boredom now seems vain. Mark Fisher writes that:

It is certainly true that one could feel almost nostalgic for Boredom 1.0. The dreary void of Sundays, the night hours after television stopped broadcasting, even the endless dragging minutes waiting in queues or for public transport: for anyone who has a smartphone, this empty time has now been effectively eliminated. In the intensive, 24/7 environment of capitalist cyberspace, the brain is no longer allowed any time to idle; instead, it is inundated with a seamless flow of low-level stimulus.⁷⁰

The process of formal abstraction and real subsumption is continuous from the nineteenth-century factory system, but undergoes a series of ever more rapid quantum leaps with semiocapitalism in the 1980s and 1990s, cognitive capitalism arising from the 1990s to the early 2000s, and surveillance capitalism from 2008, aiming to transform all of life to a source of surplus value.⁷¹ The increasing breadth and depth of abstraction lead from sign production and exchange to post-Fordist forms of work leading to precarity and the gig economy, and to the subsumption as labour of sociality, love and what would previously have been private life through forms of tracking via search, social media and sensing devices.

These technologies produce data that is aggregated and subject to machine-learning algorithms, and they generate value through the application of a probability calculation to possibilities whereby the subject's behaviour, including consumer choices, may be predicted. This enforces the idea of a person as a bundle of possibilities which may, given the appropriate data and analytical tools, be subject to calculation and prediction. The extension of the category of possibility as that which is predictable is therefore a condition for abstraction in the economic sense. The possibilities may even be considered to be infinite, as in the ideology that 'you can be anything you want to be'. The category of possibility as it is used in this way needs to be distinguished from that of potentiality, a condition of being which, according to Giorgio Agamben's reading of Aristotle and application of this to sovereignty, must involve the potentiality not to be, in other words contingency.⁷² There is no necessity, even to a degree, that a potential should be or occur, hence it is in principle not calculable. What if that which is boring results precisely from the reduction of potentiality to possibility? Boredom would then be the attempt to withdraw or regress from the possible in order to restore potentiality, through the potentiality not-to. If the distinction of potential from possibility is that potential always involves contingency, that is the potential to just as well not be, does the end of the 'great boredom' also mark the closure of the 'profound' boredom that is distinguished by a withdrawal to the potential not-to? Is it possible that after the end of the 'great boredom', this relation to contingency might rather come to inhabit the 'minor' boredoms? Perhaps a 'profound' boredom can after all only be a 'minor' boredom, since it must also involve a non-relation with what makes it 'profound', that is, the relation to potential not-to, given that a simple relation would turn the very withdrawal in potential into a possibility that may be cashed out.

There is a danger, however, if potential is set in opposition to possibility, which is that the implied reserve becomes a matter of 'clean hands', of a potentiality that remains 'pure' and 'full' only by being insulated from actualisation. The possibilities are infinite only so long as they are withheld in potential which, as potential not-to, remains immeasurable, that is, prior to and beyond any calculus of probabilities. Thus the status of boredom oscillates between withdrawal into potential and hesitation before possibilities that will become determinate by being actualised. Chance is held up as a way of maintaining contingency in actualisation, as an alternative solution to the loss of potential in the predictability of possibilities.⁷³ Boredom, as withdrawal from decision since all the possibilities are indifferent, is the obverse of undecidability.

Nineteenth-century ennui, associated with the dandy, involved an intense desire for sensations combined with a state of indifference marked by superiority over all the possibilities, none of which can be sufficiently beautiful or transformative.⁷⁴ The hyper-discrimination between sensations of the bored aesthete is both a reflex against the subsumption of experience under abstraction, and a defence against being overwhelmed. What is desired, sensation, becomes a threat to the integrity and distance of the transcendental subject of perception and judgement. Boredom as a defence against the overwhelming could also, of course, be understood in terms of social relations.

If there is to be actual change, a limited possibility will have to be chosen and realised, including a possibility that may seem to be blocked and therefore 'impossible'.⁷⁵ In a fragment of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* we read that 'Boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream. But the sleeper looks bored and gray within his sheath.'⁷⁶ The potential that seems to inhere in the lining becomes boredom in actuality, and conversely the experience of boredom speaks

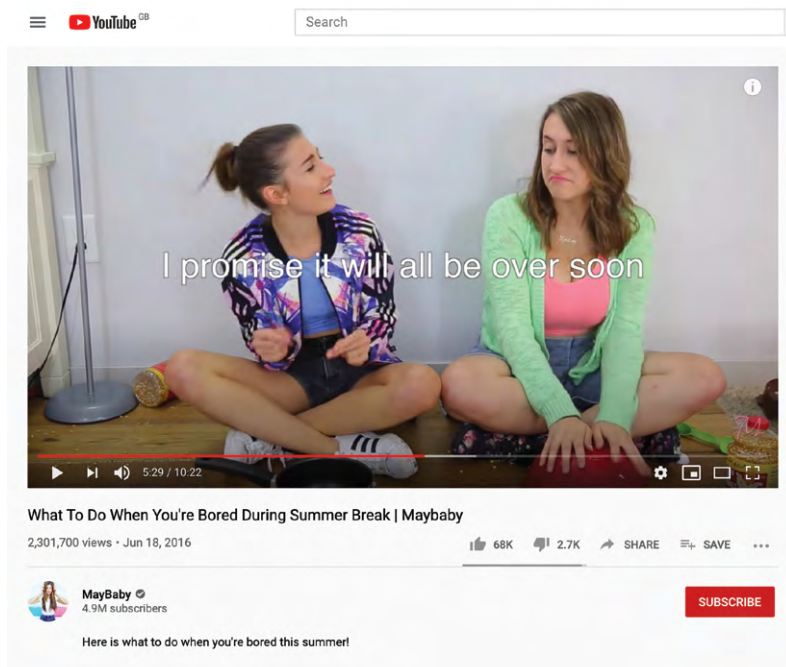


Figure 10.6 Maybaby, *What to Do when You're Bored during Summer Break*. Screenshot captured at 05:26. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHt-jEZfVX8>.

of the lining in potentiality. But for change to occur, this potentiality would need to be limited to become a possibility, in which case the colourful silk would revert to prosaic grey, which is precisely the necessary condition of boring service of which David Foster Wallace writes in *The Pale King*. However, the process of the abstraction of experience as it is turned into data for the possibility of its appropriation as surplus value and corporate profit becomes a pre-empting of the conversion of potential – the lustrous lining of boredom – into the counter-possibility of a transformation that would interrupt this machine. We appear to be in a moment when the abstract (as formal relations of capitalist value extraction) has been allowed, as Finelli puts it, ‘to invade the concrete’⁷⁷ with the result that everything becomes simultaneously attention-grabbing and boring, not in the ‘great’ sense of a duration endured for some kind of illumination, but with an endless, indefinite, low-level hum. Boredom, which could once have been a form of resistance, is returned into the cycle of repetition. As in all exploitation, what is appropriated, in the end, is time. However, the limits to and disastrous consequences of this expansion of the abstraction of labour and expropriation of experience are becoming increasingly clear. As the boredom of precarious labour that leads nowhere becomes more pervasive, boredom as an aesthetic stance comes to seem self-indulgent. What is in question is not stretching my time, but freeing the time of others, and that there be time at all.

Coda

If boredom is an affect that is epochal and in that respect an ‘attunement’, it will have been transformed under the impact of a genuine event. The Covid-19 pandemic, affecting all of mankind, is clearly such an event. To date boredom has been understood in psychological, existential and historical terms which are all human-centred. However, the pandemic both connects and displaces the human with respect to micro and macro temporalities, from the cellular and viral to the climatic and the anthropocene. What place can boredom have at these scales?

The long stretches of lockdown have created new occasions for boredom, and also made explicit that the different kinds of boredom reflect social inequality, as they have done in the past, when the ennui of the monied is not the same as boredom with repetitive work. Generative boredom, if such can still occur, is the privilege of those who have the time and space for it.

By forcing people into isolation, or into tight ‘bubbles’, the circumstances of the pandemic bring to the fore that boredom, unlike for example shame, is not a social affect. What is shared, rather, is what alleviates it: banter, humour, gossip and storytelling. This alleviation is not the same as distraction because it has to do with the connection with others. If the ‘great boredom’ was supposed to be an orientation towards everything in the mode of negation or withdrawal, including from distraction, then the pandemic, socially divisive as it may be, changes both the relation to the whole and the experience of isolation.

Boredom has always involved a problem with desire and the future. Today it encounters the way surveillance capitalism monetises anticipated behaviours and decisions, thereby pre-empting potentiality, including that held in reserve in supposed boredom. If, under the pandemic, languor, sadness or the daily struggle alternate with sheer panic, what then? Would boredom finally be revealed as the hither side of a different kind of connectedness?

Notes

- 1 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mqO-xsRyTM>.
- 2 ‘Pour se jouer 840 fois de suite ce motif, il sera bon de se préparer au préalable, et dans le plus grand silence, par des immobilités sérieuses’ (quoted at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vexations>). See also Potter, *Erik Satie*, 139–44. Potter describes *Vexations* as a ‘a deformed chorale, a broken-down hymn tune’ (141) and she goes on to discuss the effect of stasis and the use of extreme repetition by Satie to empty expressive content.
- 3 The work is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. See their notes at <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/303039#:~:text=Empire%20is%20an%20epic%20black,Life%20Building%20in%20midtown%20Manhattan>.
- 4 ‘Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past [*ein Vergangenes*]. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our ideas instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place.’ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 11. The lectures were delivered by Hegel in Heidelberg and Berlin between 1818 and 1829.
- 5 ‘Absolute Knowing’ is the final stage in the journey of *Geist* or ‘Spirit’ in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. ‘The goal, Absolute Knowing, or Spirit that knows itself as Spirit, has for its path the recollection of the Spirits as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their realm.’ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 493.
- 6 ‘Well, the *Phenomenology* may be viewed, then, as the biography of world-spirit’ Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism*, 150.
- 7 See Heidegger, ‘The question concerning technology’, in *Basic Writings*, 311–41. ‘The essential unfolding of technology threatens revealing, threatens it with the possibility that all revealing will be consumed in ordering and that everything will present itself only in the unconcealment of standing-reserve. Human activity can never directly counter this danger’ (339).
- 8 From ‘First We Take Manhattan’ on the album *I’m Your Man* (1988): ‘They sentenced me to 20 years of boredom / For tryin’ to change the system from within.’ The conference at which the first part of this essay was originally delivered was ‘20 Years of Boredom’, 16 December 2017, Institute of Advanced Studies, UCL.
- 9 For a prescient study of the use of distraction in politics, see Jamieson, *Dirty Politics*. For a genealogy of distraction, see North, *The Problem of Distraction*. On the digitisation of distraction see Pettman, *Infinite Distraction*.

- 10 Heidegger, 'The question concerning technology', 340, quoting from Friedrich Hölderlin's poem 'Patmos' (1802).
- 11 Given the pressures of funding combined with the justification through exhibition attendance numbers in public institutions.
- 12 *Die Langeweile*, which translates as 'boredom', is a compound of *lange* and *Weile*, 'long while', related to *weilen*, 'to stay', and *verweilen*, 'to tarry' or 'to linger': see Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 78. Karl Schenzer certainly tarried in the performance of *Vexations*.
- 13 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 164–7.
- 14 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 171.
- 15 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 172. For an excellent discussion of these matters, see de Beistegui, *Thinking with Heidegger*, 61–80.
- 16 For this formulation, see Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 50, 74, 153.
- 17 See Hatton, 'Looping the loop'; Mulvey, *Death 24 × a Second*, 8, 101.
- 18 Moravia, *Boredom*.
- 19 Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, 80.
- 20 Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, 77.
- 21 See Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*.
- 22 For the shift from studio to project-based approaches to art production, see Lauwaert, 'Changing artist's practices'.
- 23 See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 184–88, 304–11.
- 24 See Day, 'Candy Crush Saga'.
- 25 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, 25–6 and 72–7.
- 26 Barthes, *Travels in China*, 27. See Badmington, 'Bored with Barthes', 317: 'Tea breaks up the boredom, offers an alternative to ennui, by offering something "indirect" in the midst of the doxa, which is both direct and correct (in that it repeatedly confirms its own authorised account of life under Mao).'
- 27 For a discussion of *désœuvrement* in Blanchot and others, see Iyer, 'The workless community'.
- 28 See Bataille, 'Letter to X', on 'unemployed negativity'.
- 29 See Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, 27–77.
- 30 See the discussion of Beckett, together with Gertrude Stein and Kenneth Goldsmith, in the chapter on 'stuplimity' in Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 248–97.
- 31 See Hatton, 'Looping the loop'.
- 32 Susan Morris spoke, in the conference on which this book is based, of the loop as 'time on hold'.
- 33 de Beistegui, *Thinking with Heidegger*, 77.
- 34 Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 410.
- 35 Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 411.
- 36 Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 304.
- 37 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 118, quoting Hebel, *Werke*, 393.
- 38 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 149.
- 39 Quoted in Swenson, 'What is pop art?', 26. For Warhol and boredom, see Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, 100–6; also Josh Cohen's essay in this volume.
- 40 Andy Warhol quoted in Joseph, 'The play of repetition', 32.
- 41 Joseph, 'The play of repetition', claims that Warhol did attend the performance of *Vexations* organised by Cage, and that this affected the structure of repetition of *Sleep*. Comenas, 'Notes on John Cage', argues convincingly that Warhol is very unlikely to have attended the performance. However, he knew about it, and probably thought that he should have been there, so whether he actually attended or not does not affect Joseph's argument for a relation between *Vexations* and *Sleep*.
- 42 For semiocapitalism, see Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*; Berardi, 'Cognitarian subjectivation'; and Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody*.
- 43 Joseph, 'The play of repetition', 38–41, has a detailed discussion of Cage's disagreement with La Monte Young about repetition and boredom.
- 44 Higgins, 'Boredom and danger', 1.
- 45 Higgins, 'Boredom and danger', 2. Marcel Duchamp associated the artistic production of boredom with Happenings: 'Happenings have introduced into art an element no one had put there: boredom. To do a thing in order to bore people is something I never imagined! And that's too bad, because it's a beautiful idea.' Cited in Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 99.

- 46 For boredom in Kierkegaard, see McDonald, 'Kierkegaard's demonic boredom'.
- 47 Wallace, *The Pale King*, 177: 'I know that I wouldn't understand this prior to entering the Service and seeing the bearing of some of the older examiners who spend all day for years at a desk or Tingle table, leaning forward to examine tax returns, primarily to identify those that should be audited. In other words, it's the posture of someone whose daily work means sitting very still at a desk and working on something in a concentrated way for years on end.'
- 48 See Clare, 'The politics of boredom'.
- 49 Wallace, *The Pale King*, 440.
- 50 Wallace, *The Pale King*, 233.
- 51 The distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical, and the focus on authorship and reading, of course suggests that the closest preceding account of boredom to Wallace's is that of Kierkegaard.
- 52 Wallace, *The Pale King*, 548.
- 53 Wallace, *The Pale King*, 385. The novel is discussed in relation to *acedia* in Clare, 'The politics of boredom', and in Michael, 'Pale king or noonday demon?'
- 54 For depression and *The Pale King* see Cohen, *Not Working* (a book in which Cohen advocates for the benefits of idleness), 194–217.
- 55 See Crary, 24/7.
- 56 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 9; see also Fisher's discussion of boredom in *K-Punk*, 57–61 and 549–50, where he argues that the boredom of Fordist factory labour is associated by neoliberals with the 'tedium' of social democracy and stability, to be replaced by the anxiety correlating with precariousness, an anxiety that should be politicised rather than medicalised.
- 57 See Osborne, 'The dreambird of experience'.
- 58 Finelli, 'Abstraction versus contradiction', 63.
- 59 Finelli, 'Abstraction versus contradiction', 64. Arguably both are present in all stages of capitalism, but that does not mean that they are not present in different relations and ratios.
- 60 Finelli, 'Abstraction versus contradiction', 66.
- 61 Finelli, 'Abstraction versus contradiction', 67.
- 62 Finelli, 'Abstraction versus contradiction', 68.
- 63 Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, 72.
- 64 Hansen, *Feed-Forward*, 34–81.
- 65 Kendall, '#boredwithmeg'.
- 66 Gardiner, 'The multitude strikes back?'. This kind of boredom is anticipated in the boredom of saturation described in Klapp, *Overload and Boredom*.
- 67 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 270.
- 68 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 30–6; Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 134.
- 69 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 294.
- 70 Fisher, *K-Punk*, 549–50.
- 71 Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 93–6.
- 72 For potential, see Agamben, *Potentialities*, 177–84, and on the relation of potential to boredom, Agamben, *The Open*, 63–70.
- 73 This would enable us to understand better the transition from nineteenth-century ennui, for example in Baudelaire, via the indecision to cast the dice in Mallarmé's *Igitur*, which references *Hamlet*, to the casting of 'A throw of the dice will never abolish chance', which expresses the desire to maintain potential despite the actualisation of the possibility in the number produced by the thrown dice. For a discussion of this see Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren*.
- 74 The supreme exemplification of this would be Huysmans, *Against Nature*.
- 75 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 17: 'Emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a "natural order", must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable.'
- 76 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 105.
- 77 Finelli, 'Abstraction versus contradiction', 66.

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