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Nietzsche taught us that 'against boredom even the gods themselves struggle in vain'.[1] Is boredom inevitable? A famous Chinese curse proclaims: 'May you live in interesting times'. Should boredom be inevitable? During the first pogroms, Joseph Goebbels, minister of propaganda in the NS-State, proudly declared that, at least, the Nazis were not boring.[2] So, maybe, one should be happy with boring times. However, what Goebbels did not mention was that boredom increasingly becomes a topic in times of war—as well as during what Benjamin called the moist boredom of post-war periods.[3]

Between 1914 and 1920, a check with the *Ngram*-viewer suggests that German speaking people became increasingly concerned with "Langeweile". The same goes for the period between 1938 and 1948—but, admittedly, it is not very challenging to falsify one of Goebbels's claims.

How can one explain this predominance of boredom in times of war? War is deeply characterised by waiting. One waits for the bombs, for a smoke, for food or for the battle; one waits for the end of war, one waits to see his loved ones again, one waits for the unit to move on, one waits for his death. Boredom is linked to the sentiments of being superfluous and powerless. Hence, boredom is a basic mood in a time in which others make history while you have to eat dust in the trench; it is also a basic mood in the time of *posthistoire* and mass consumption.

The emotional (non-)quality of boredom

Although superfluousness and powerlessness are sensations that also seize the depressed and fearful, these unfortunate emotions qualitatively differ from the vapidity of boredom. Clearly, one must distinguish boredom from melancholy: flicking through Robert Burtons's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, one will not find a description of the viscous, agonising sensation of boredom. Burtons simply mentions the term 'sloth' occasionally—without carrying out a closer inspection of it; drawing on Hippocrates, Burton states that the humours of the Sanguine are slothful, heavy and dull.[4] Burton links 'sloth' to nothingness: referring to Philolaches, he

[1] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, 'The Antichrist', in *Twilight of the Idles with the Antichrist and Ecce Homo*, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Edition Limited, 2007), p. 141.
[2] Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia, Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001), p. 459.
[3] Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften Band III*, (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 295.
[4] Cf. Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (Philadelphia: E. Claxton & Company, 1883), p. 83.

writes: 'on a sudden, by sloth and such bad ways, we come to nought.'[5] Of course this nothingness also must be related to sin: 'thine offence came, by error, sloth, obstinacy, ignorance'.[6] This prohibition of boredom is fascinating because it is built in front of doubt and refusal. Perhaps Burton was right to occupy himself with melancholy while mostly leaving aside what we today call boredom.

The melancholic is so immersed in her sorrow and her circles of thought that she is seldom bored. However, it is not easy to outline this strange phenomenon: indeed, boredom hardly can be described as an actual sentiment. Elizabeth Goodstein once called boredom an 'experience without qualities'.[7] If one seeks for a negative description, boredom could be described as a lack of emotions and impressions. If one seeks for a positive description, boredom does not seem to be an emotion that can be clearly separated from other sentiments. Rather, it seems to be a loose bundle of feelings like disgust, weariness, longing, restlessness, and futility. Boredom, thus, is something very variable: to contemplate over a collection of dead butterflies simply may lead one into an uncanny experience, but, for another person, this collection might just be boring. It is impossible to think about an object that is boring *per se*, regardless of the subjective idiosyncrasies of an observer.

The work of boredom

Nevertheless, boredom seems to hit some people more harshly than others: it is an experience that, above all, affects people who become victims of the circumstances. Those who ultimately cannot act are seized by boredom the most. For example, a soldier is a functional part of the war machine. In a strict sense, he does not act most of the time; rather, he is an object of war logistics. As an individual, he is insignificant; as a soldier, he is replaceable. Furthermore, the non-military 'industrial reserve army' Karl Marx spoke of—that is, the unemployed and precariously employed people—is a victim of boredom. However, boredom also haunts the ones who are usually referred to as 'productive' members of society. Consider, for instance, that today people are not just troubled by the burnout syndrome, but also by the *boreout* syndrome: a demoralising tedium at work. The boreout usually is described as a combination of boredom and a lack of challenge and interest.[8] As the originators of this term write: 'The boreout as the opposite of the burnout consists of the three elements: under-challenge, disinterest and boredom at the workplace.'[9] The victims of this syndrome feel forced to pretend steady activity. It is as if boredom, today as ever before, is still a sin.

But of course, cases of boreout reveal an unpleasant truth about modern society. The wageworker does not just sell her labour; she sells her lifetime and spatial control over her body. As an interview partner of the sociologist Elisabeth Prammer explains: 'Most of the

[5] Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 154.
[6] ibid. p. 650.
[7] Elizabeth S. Goodstein, 'Langeweile und die Demokratisierung der Skepsis in der Moderne', in *Skepsis und literarische Imagination*, ed. by Bernd Hüppauf, Klaus Vieweg (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2003), p. 123. [my tanslation].
[8] Cf. Elisabeth Prammer, *Boreout – Biografien der Unterforderung und Langeweile, Eine soziologische Analyse* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2013), p. 13.
[9] Philippe Rothlin, Peter R. Werder, *Diagnose Boreout, Warum Unterforderung im Job krank macht*, (Heidelberg: Redline, 2007), p. 13. [my translation].

time I think I could do things that are a thousand times better than what I am doing here in the company. Actually, I rather would like to be elsewhere.'[10] Hence, it is a distortion of perspective to claim that the problem of people who struggle with boreout is simply that they do not have enough work. More often, their problem is that they are not free to leave their workplace as soon as their daily tasks are finished.

But the boreout is not just a phenomenon of professional life. We all are bored to death even in our leisure time, because we know very well that almost nothing of what we do makes a difference at all and most of it is based on schemes and clear scripts. As in work-life, we also sell our lifetime in our leisure activities, foremost of which are, of course, activities of standardised consumption. It is this flavourless predictability and excessive safety that, to an extent, seems to let life itself take a step back, as if one were simply a spectator of oneself. This even concerns sexuality, or, more precisely, a certain sexual *tristesse*, allegedly constituted by the boredom of standardised sexual scripts and monogamy, as well as by the exclusion of any risks. As the sociologist Iris Osswald-Rinner notes:

> The feminisation of sexuality led to a situation in which, gradually, all sexual practices which were attributed to be lustful for men happened to be interpreted as inferior and, hereinafter, meaningless. Moreover, all sexual methods that imply the exchange of bodily fluids—in the wake of AIDS—were heavily pushed in the background.[11]

Moreover, Rinner claims: 'The sexual intercourse is dead, long live masturbation and self-development.'[12] Needless to say that, historically, masturbation itself always was a common tactic against boredom—in particular contexts that were connoted as boring, as, for example, with the military, where self-satisfaction invariably played a vital role. The triumph of an autistic, masturbatory sexuality over sexual intercourse with a person, therefore, is a clear indicator for the triumph of boredom over sexuality itself.

However, all this—sexual fatigue, the tedium at work, the paleness of consumption—of course does not suggest that there would be a form of existence without boredom: it is not persuasive to conclude that boredom is just an effect of the late modern consumer society, because this, in effect, would lead to the misconception that there really is something like an authentic desire that is solely alienated and consumed by the spectacle of consumer society, as Guy Debord famously thought:

> The spectator's alienation from and submission to the contemplated object (which is the outcome of his unthinking activity) works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires.[13]

However, the problem concerning boredom rather seems to be that modern subjects are very well aware that there simply is no authentic desire and nothing beyond alienation. It is this reflective mode of thinking that seems to incite boredom. As Niklas Luhmann suggests, the semantics of the subject were developed in the same time as the semantics of *ennui*: in the

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[10] Prammer, *Boreout*, p. 119. [my translation].
[11] Iris Osswald-Rinner, *Oversexed and underfucked, Über die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Lust* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011), p. 251. [my translation].
[12] ibid.
[13] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), p. 23.

18th century, the mind discovers itself as a subject *and* as being bored—and since that time, society is needed for entertainment.[14] As Luhmann also notes, *ennui* is a term originally reserved for the upper classes, whereas the lower class was hit by something usually described as *alienation*.[15] Indeed, there is a strong kinship between the experience of ennui and alienation. The society of the spectacle became necessary when people became subjects that reflect themselves and their life. The society of the spectacle is thus definitively not the origin of alienation but a makeshift solution for the problem of subjectivity and its secret twin, ennui. As people and society in general became more reflective, the feeling that there is no natural order or a place for the individual increased. The modern reflective subject perceives more clearly than his predecessors that his own intentions and his own will are not his own. Again, it is this momentum that leads to boredom.

Nevertheless, there also are less abstract reasons for the rise of boredom. Increasingly, people spend their life in forced inactivity, which, in its collective form, is represented by the waiting line: in this queue we await jobs, transportation, connections, documents and spectacles. Moreover, the idea of queuing implicitly also guides political processes, ones which follow the logic of *katechon*: the policy of the Christian Empire in the Middle Ages that was shaped by the idea to restrain 'the appearance of the Antichrist and the end of the present eon'.[16] Carl Schmitt famously claimed: 'The empire of the Christian Middle Ages lasted only as long as the idea of the *katechon* was alive'.[17] It is not a very farfetched idea to see a reflection of this preserving policy of waiting in the secular present as well. And who knows, if one just waits, maybe everything will pass by, effortless and lightweight.

Maurice Blanchot writes that boredom has to do with vigilance: if you wait, you wait for a possibility to approach the unrealised.[18] Blanchot's charming thoughts on waiting almost sound messianic; they can, therefore, seem to be the complementary other side of Schmitt's thoughts on the *katechon*: both thinkers stick to teleological beliefs. Siegfried Kracauer takes a different stance, although, as for Blanchot, for him too the one who waits is open in a hesitant way.[19] However, the waiting individuals do not fall victim to any metaphysical or religious needs, they do not wait for the unthinkable or the unspeakable beginning of anything: unlike Blanchot, Kracauer emphasizes that those who wait just accept a radical, almost nihilistic absence.[20] As Kracauer states: 'At the core, they are suffering from their exile from the religious sphere.'[21] Those who wait are, in effect, beyond teleological reasoning. Boredom can occur when one waits for something in particular, but the most exhausting boredom is a form of waiting that lacks an object; a crescendo of self-referential boredom, which, in the end, exhausts itself, just to begin again.

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[14] Niklas Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung 6, Die Soziologie und der Mensch* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1995), p. 57.
[15] Luhmann, *Die Soziologie und der Mensch*, p. 154.
[16] Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, trans. by G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, Ltd., 2006), p. 60.
[17] ibid.
[18] Maurice Blanchot, *Warten Vergessen* (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1964), p. 36.
[19] Siegfried Kracauer, 'Die Wartenden', in *Das Ornament der Masse*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 116.
[20] Kracauer, 'Die Wartenden', p. 117.
[21] Siegfried Kracauer, 'Those who wait', in *The Mass Ornament* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 130.

In the realm of consumption, a clear curve of excitement can be observed: first, the objects of our desire arouse us, then we get used to them, and, later, we get bored and weary of them. Maybe this weariness with the things we can buy has its roots in the function of money itself: for Georg Simmel, money is the cynical medium par excellence, because it is through money that the highest and lowest values are brought to a common denominator.[22] Money is a medium of total indifference: it does not take in account the variety and concreteness of things; everything, regardless of its qualities, becomes through money a mere variable for the function of exchange.[23] Thus, Simmel states, the nihilism of money marks the end of desire, because all the objects are deprived of any appeal. Everything that can be bought with money quickly becomes boring, simply because it is exchangeable and therefore not unique ('*Die entscheidende Nuance ist hier also nicht die Entwertung der Dinge überhaupt, sondern die Indifferenz gegen ihre spezifischen Unterschiede, da aus diesen gerade die ganze Lebhaftigkeit des Fühlens und Wollens quillt*').[24] However, for Simmel, there are two approaches to deal with this reduction of things to their exchange value: either cynicism or the blasé attitude ('*So sind Zynismus und Blasiertheit nur die Antworten zweier verschiedener, manchmal auch gradweise gemischter Naturelle auf die gleiche Tatsache*').[25] The cynic, at least, can gain a sensation of lust through the knowledge that everything has its price and therefore can be consumed.[26] The ones with a blasé attitude, on the other hand, are less fortunate: they experience the universal exchangeability of everything in all its listlessness as pure functionality.[27] To those unfortunate ones, literally everything is doomed to end in an all-consuming tedium.

However, this is not restricted to money. Shopping malls and similar places might look boring on purpose; they are 'non-places' in the sense that they serve as passages that do not contain symbolic relations with the visitors, 'spaces which are not themselves anthropological places.'[28] In the case of shopping malls, one must desperately try to drive away the tedium by consuming. Hence, they literally are architectures of boredom. Everything must be designed in a way that people are forced to distract themselves, where one is stimulated to create meaning out of those empty spaces through the act of consumption. The void has to be filled. Consuming, in this sense, is not a form of appropriation but of creating meaning out of nothing: a *creatio ex nihilo*. The social network platforms with their timelines feature something quite similar: continually, an enduring stream of follow-ups nullifies every single message; there also is no meaning per se in the connections between the users. These connections just uncover a blank structure that has to be complemented retroactively to become more bearable. Boredom and the *prosumers*' drive to overthrow it by adding content are part of the design concepts of these pages. It is a digital wasteland that craves to be cultivated. In such cases, the concept of boredom clearly serves as productive capacity.

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[22] Cf. Georg Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes* (Köln: Anaconda, 2009), p. 383.
[23] Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes*, p. 384.
[24] ibid.
[25] ibid., p. 385.
[26] ibid., p. 386.
[27] ibid.
[28] Marc Augé, *Non-Places, Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (London, New York: Verso, 1995), p. 78.

Needless to say that there has long been a strong aversion against the demon of boredom. For Blaise Pascal, boredom was simply senseless, a sensation so deeply interwoven with human nature that it does not depend on a reason to occur: 'Human beings are so unhappy that they would be bored even if they had no reason for boredom, simply because of their nature'.[29] One can flee this boredom with distraction by play: 'Without entertainment there is no joy'.[30] Pascal continues: 'Nothing is so intolerable for man as to be in a state of complete tranquillity, without passions, without business, without diversion, without effort. Then he feels his nothingness, his abandonment, his inadequacy, his dependence, his helplessness, his emptiness.'[31] Hence, in Pascal's thought, boredom is at the root of all evil. It seems to be the complementary emotion to nothingness and therefore it fuels the *horror vacui*. Nevertheless, confronted with boredom people not always are absorbed by this abyss. They do not always seem to react to this threat by getting addicted to play, either. Boredom can go deeper than to motivate people to distract themselves: it can lead to irreversible changes in the way people perceive their lives and how they relate to the forces around them. For example, boredom also marks the transition from fiction to reality: Madame Bovary was annoyed and bored by her life: 'boredom, like a silent spider, was weaving its web in every shadowy recess of her heart.'[32] Thus she acted out the romantic lives described in the novels in real life.[33] Arthur Rimbaud, another bored self-destructive child of the 19th century, was right: *life is elsewhere*; however, this kind of life—life as a fulfilling adventure deprived of boredom—is not necessarily to be found in life itself but in literature; and obviously it is not always an advisable idea to think these spheres are smoothly interchangeable.

The attempt to get rid of boredom by turning fiction into reality often ends in tragedy. In *The Man Without Qualities*, Robert Musil describes the pre-war Viennese society of the year 1913 as utterly bored. Everyone seems to wait for something big to happen and, paradigmatically, it is Moosbrugger, a psychopathic murderer, who incorporates this boredom most: 'Moosbrugger smiled at all this. He smiled from boredom. Boredom rocked his mind like a cradle. Ordinarily boredom blots out the mind, but his was rocked by it, this time anyway.'[34] Shortly before he becomes active again, he lays beside his 'destroyed' girlfriend, feeling nothing but boredom ('*Moosbrugger empfand nichts als Langweile, während Rachel vernichtet auf dem Bett lag*').[35] Ulrich, the hero of *The Man without Qualities,* mentions '*gliederlose Langeweile*', 'limbless boredom' that results from the absence of unambiguous and clear meanings ('*Wenn du das Eindeutige aus unserem Leben fortnimmst, so bleibt ein*

[29] Blaise Pascal, 'Pensées', *Pensées and other Writings*, trans. by Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999), pp. 1-182, p. 47.
[30] Pascal, 'Pensées', p. 48.
[31] ibid., p. 123.
[32] Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, *Provincial Manners,* trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004), p. 41.
[33] 'These novels were solely concerned with love affairs, lovers and their beloveds, damsels in distress swooning in secluded summerhouses, postilions slain at every posting-house, horses ridden to death on every page, gloomy forests, wounded hearts, vows, sobs, tears, and kisses, gondolas by moonlight, nightingales in woods, and 'gentlemen' brave as lions, meek as lambs, unbelievably virtuous, always immaculately turned out, who weep buckets of tears'. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, p. 34.
[34] Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, trans. by Sophie Wilkins, (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), p. 427.
[35] Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1952), p. 1483.

Karpfenteich ohne Hecht').[36] A strange longing for such a 'true' and clear meaning develops, phantasms are stirred up to the surface, and it all ends in war. Boredom seems to inherently incorporate a power mighty enough to overthrow the principle of reality. Ulrich, a reflective observer of the mood around him, grasps this earlier than his companions:

> I give you my solemn word," Ulrich said gravely, "that neither I nor anyone else knows what 'the true' anything is, but I can assure you that it is on the point of realization.[37]

If what has been said in the beginning of this paper is right, that war leads to boredom, now it seems that the opposite can also be applied: boredom leads to war. Does that mean that the old solution Pascal suggested—distraction—along with the modern solution to boredom—consumption—is the lesser evil? Does one have to reject boredom by embracing gambling and entertainment? Is it inevitable to cultivate the art of distraction? On the other side, is it not the case that boredom also can lead to greater reflection? Also, boredom is not always under threat of being dissolved; rather, it can serve as a permanent disruptive element in communication.

Negative and affirmative aspects of boredom

So there might even be something like a hidden agenda of resistance in boredom. Decades ago, Jean Baudrillard claimed that the passivity of fatigue is

> the only form of activity which can, in certain conditions, be set against the constraint of general passivity which applies in current social relations. The tired pupil is the one who passively goes along with what the teacher says. The tired worker or bureaucrat is the one who has had all responsibility taken from him in his work.[38]

For Baudrillard, the real passivity is to be found in the 'joyful conformity to the system of the "dynamic" young manager.'[39] On the other hand, he makes clear that the bored ones can be seen as performing a kind of 'passive resistance; they are "ingrowing" the way one speaks of an "ingrowing toenail", turning back in towards the flesh, towards the inside'.[40] Boredom relates to implicit social methods that structure affects: thus, boredom can serve as a "search engine" for further affirmative activity, as much as it can serve as a generator of passive resistance, which, paradoxically, is one of the few forms of active resistance in this society. Boredom, it seems, is not boring at all: it is resistant, hazardous, and nihilistic. The bored ones are doing work to rule. They make use of boredom as an artifice that enables an inner exodus. This trickery is not only part of the production sphere; it is also used in the sphere of consumption and culture. It appears as a quiet and unspectacular retreat from the offered products, stimuli and ideas; a retreat, that is also completely different to the loud virtuous resistance which all too often just fades away or turns into its opposite. It might even lead to a

[36] Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, p. 770.
[37] Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, p. 141.
[38] Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Sage, 1998) p. 183.
[39] ibid.
[40] ibid.

kind of free-floating experience, to an opening up for impressions that one is not meant to notice. The drifter in the museum might observe the habitus of the persons around her, or she might simply regard the floor or the lights and listen to the sounds from outside.

Kracauer says that boredom serves as a warranty that one is still here: if one would not be bored, Kracauer asserts, one would not even really exist. Rather, one would 'be merely one more object of boredom'.[41] According to Kracauer, it is because we exist that we are bored by the abstract world around us, a world that does not really tolerate concrete existence.[42] However, it seems as if Kracauer thinks that there might be a true, un-alienated ground of the subject that could be found through 'radical boredom'.[43] Of course, this is just a phantasm. This also explains why Kracauer, when diving into radical boredom, just finds cheap pictures that resemble the movies in the cinemas:

> If […] one has the patience, the sort of patience specific to legitimate boredom, then one experiences a kind of bliss that is almost unearthly. A landscape appears in which colorful peacocks strut about, and images of people suffused with soul come into view.[44]

If that is all one can expect from radical boredom, why should anyone want to expose oneself to this experience? In the end, Kracauer's mild fantasy seems to be the opposite of what one would consider fitting to the notion of radical boredom. It is nothing but mind candy. But what then, if anything, should one understand by radical boredom?

Existential boredom

An answer to this question might come from Emile Cioran. Cioran writes that the experience of *ennui* is part of his early childhood memories (as it is, one supposes, for nearly everybody). Cioran experienced boredom in the form of a fundamental sensation, which he could not even flee by distraction. All of a sudden, everything loses content and sense: there is a void opening up within and outside ourselves.[45] The ennui reveals 'universal meaninglessness'.[46] However, Cioran emphasises, this experience is not necessarily depressing, sometimes it even leads to a feeling of burning excitement and lust for life: 'A clarification is necessary: The experience which I describe is not necessarily depressing, because sometimes it is followed by a state of arousal, that transforms life in a blaze, in a desirable inferno.'[47] Boredom reveals that there is *nothing*: just think of this certain viscosity of parties and other events, the sudden moment when they get buried under a thick layer of ennui. Boredom conjures a void that equally seems to be part of the inner, as well as of the outer, world. At the same time, the bored ones become open for something beyond all ostensive meaning. This kind of existential boredom seems to be an anthropological quality, and therefore it is unlikely to dissolve. Of course, this also is the notion of boredom Pascal had in mind; yet, he tended to ask for

[41] Siegfried Kracauer, 'Boredom', in *The Mass Ornament* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 334.
[42] Siegfried Kracauer, 'Langeweile', *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 324.
[43] Kracauer, 'Boredom', p. 331.
[44] ibid., p. 334.
[45] Emile Cioran, 'Glossar', in *Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), p. 2016.
[46] ibid. [my translation].
[47] ibid. [my translation].

solutions to this problem. He was, unlike Cioran, not able to embrace radical boredom as an epiphany of the absurdity of existence, and hence had to frame it as failure or vicious temptation. However, it is no wonder that Cioran, in his very own manner, praised Pascal:

> 'I feel close to a sceptical and broken Pascal, one, who could have been faithless, a Pascal without grace, without religious refuge. This Pascal I feel akin to… because you easily can imagine Pascal without faith. By the way, Pascal only is interesting in this respect… my whole life I thought about Pascal.'[48]

It is Cioran as a reversed Pascal who is intrigued by boredom. Even though there might be an existential boredom, it is noteworthy that boredom nevertheless remains a historical phenomenon with its peaks and recessions.

Boredom and socio-cultural change

Did boredom not start its triumphal march in the time of Romanticism, the true epoch of boredom, in the time of the *mal du siècle*? And is it just by accident that this time was also a time of great technological changes? Boredom dripped through the network of telegraphy, it contaminated the printer's ink of the newspapers, and was emitted by the steam of the locomotives. Without a doubt, it is a culture of speed that is bored all the time.

Simmel was convinced that the modern urban dweller is characterised by this blasé attitude. Modern city life does not just lead to the overstimulation of the senses, to nervousness, but also to a blasé attitude and intellectuality.[49] Walter Benjamin later took up this approach when he said that boredom is caused by the acceleration of the process of production: 'The boredom in the production process arises with its acceleration (through the machines). The flâneur, with his ostentatious calmness, protests against the production process.'[50] During the 19th century, nonchalance was so omnipresent in European metropolises that it even became an issue of medical concerns.[51] The city in this century not only became a place that never sleeps, it also became a place of constant fatigue and boredom. Benjamin speaks of an 'epidemic boredom' that grew in Europe from the 1840s onwards.[52]

As Luhmann writes, if there is a steady stream of irritation, one cannot act at all, because then nothing makes sense anymore. The excess of impressions basically leads to the same effect as the absence of suggestions: 'Constant irritation by everything or almost everything could not crystallize into any meaning for action. In effect, it would coincide with the absence of any

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[48] Emile Cioran, 'Glossar', p. 2044. [my translation].
[49] Cf. Georg Simmel, 'Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben' in Georg Simmel, *Individualismus der modernen Zeit und andere soziologische Abhandlungen*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), p. 319.
[50] Walter Benjamin, 'Zentralpark', in *Gesammelte Schriften Band I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 679. [my translation].
[51] Cf. Ingrid Wurst, 'Der Keim des Lebens liegt in der Masse. Revolutionen im Staatsorganismus, ca. 1850', in *Massenfassungen, Beiträge zur Diskurs- und Mediengeschichte der Menschenmenge*, ed. by Susanne Lüdemann and Uwe Hebekus (München: Wilhelm Fink 2010), p. 77.
[52] Cf. Benjamin, 'Zentralpark', p. 165.

stimulation: with boredom.'[53] A thing that one absolutely does not understand or is not able to relate to one's life quickly becomes boring.

Modernity means variation and change. The expectation of change, therefore, must also be incorporated in the psychic structures of modern individuals. We thirst for news and for variation, but because our mental map is socially and culturally adapted to this information overflow, we also become more indifferent and blasé about events. In modernity, to a certain extent, people must be more capable to adjust to new information than to maintain it. A 16th century farmer knew quite well what is important for him to know and what things he has to care for; in contrast, during the 18th and 19th centuries, throughout the course of the industrial revolution, the downfall and dissolution of old social structures, and rural-urban migration, such knowledge was not provided for most people anymore. The same, of course, applies to today's situation: things become boring so fast because they are not as valid anymore as they were the moment before. In 'liquid modernity', their validity, usefulness and aesthetic beauty just melts away like anything else; therefore, boredom has a profound functional value for society's perpetuation.

Learning to cope with boredom

Form an information-theoretical stance, boredom must be seen as an effect of exuberant redundancy: if one is bored, he will likely perceive things as "more of the same". However, that also means that boredom could be read as the mental prerequisite to recognise new information and variance. There must be a lot of redundancy (a medium) to recognise variance (information). So, perhaps, boredom is a mental state that also serves as a medium that allows us to perceive newness.

Umberto Eco writes that an excess of redundancy can also lead to the impression of multiple meanings.[54] This effect is caused by a growth of potentially informing possibilities.[55] However, meaning becomes possible with a certain degree of clarity, convention and redundancy: the more improbable and ambiguous a structure is, the more informative it is, because there are more possibilities for the perceiver to be surprised by this structure.[56] On the one side, redundant things perfectly serve as media (think of the digital code, grains of sand, pixels or alphabetic characters). On the other side, a lot of redundancy *within* a medium is boring, because it lacks information: if the news was the same everyday, no one would watch them—except, of course, in order to take a nap.

In psychoanalysis, one does not speak of redundancy but of repetition. The psychoanalyst René Spitz, writing in relation to Freud's 'Beyond the pleasure principle', wrote about boredom in relation to the lust for repetition: children tend to repeat well-known, lustful

[53] Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 285.
[54] Cf. Umberto Eco, *Semiotik, Entwurf einer Theorie der Zeichen* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987), p. 360.
[55] ibid.
[56] Umberto Eco, *Das offene Kunstwerk* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 168.

situations.[57] For the child, this is a way to gain the impression of safety.[58] It is a way to deal with different unknown threats. These threats can be real dangers stemming from the environment, they can be inner dangers like hunger and pain, the threat of a breakthrough of the drive, or the threat of a revitalisation of single scorned desires.[59] Repetition also enables ecstatic conditions: as an example, Spitz mentions the dance of the dervishes, who fall into trance-like conditions.[60] During the sixth life year, Spitz claims, repetition increasingly becomes something that is perceived with displeasure.[61] Why? For the child, the feeling of safety is a matter of repetition and routine. For the grown-up, the repetition of well-known seductions does not only feel morally forbidden, there is also a certain kind of danger that lies in repetition. Boredom becomes a defence against a former lust that now is prohibited: boredom, Spitz says, therefore becomes a guardian of morality.[62] In this sense, if Spitz was right, boredom serves as a psychosomatic mechanism against the excess of the sexual drive. However, this specific bourgeois morality has a lot to do with rationalisation and cultivation. It is quite fascinating that the bourgeois cultivation of boredom did help to maintain societal needs. One might also see this cultivation at work in the form of the novel. A stylistic peculiarity of the bourgeois novel is the technique of fillers.[63] Nothing happens at all, or rather, the essential things unfold within duration, not within singular events. Franco Moretti goes so far to call this the only narrative innovation of the 19th century.[64] Fillers fit to the regularity of bourgeois life.[65] Moretti writes of how this stylistic novelty rationalises the world of the novel, in which there are no big surprises, no adventures or wonders. With fillers, Moretti concludes, the logic of rationalisation captures the narrative rhythm of the novel.[66] However, the narrative filler is also the sound of never-ending afternoons, dreary tea parties, and of waiting for the arrival of a loved person. Of course, the capability to cope with this *tristesse* requires properties like patience, balance and temperance. Such virtues neither resemble the proletarian morality nor do they resemble the aristocratic virtues of the absolutist epoch. The bourgeois is a figure that permanently postpones his needs. The aristocratic self-conception on the height of its decay was utterly different. When the Marquis de Sade got stuck in a traffic jam, in a fit of rage he rammed his sword through the belly of a horse.[67] In a particular way, there were no cultural techniques to deal with boredom in the decadent nobility. And also, our modern way to deal with boredom is not bourgeois at all: somewhere on the way into consumer society, we lost the sense for the bourgeois virtues of coping with boredom.

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[57] Cf. René Spitz, 'Wiederholung, Rhythmus, Langeweile', in *Imago, Zeitschrift für psychoanalytische Psychologie, ihre Grenzgebiete und Anwendungen*, XXIII (Wien: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1937), p. 172.
[58] Cf. Spitz, 'Wiederholung, Rhythmus, Langeweile', p. 172.
[59] ibid., p. 173.
[60] ibid., p. 179.
[61] ibid., p. 183.
[62] ibid.
[63] Cf. Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois, Between History and Literature* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 79.
[64] ibid.
[65] Moretti, *The Bourgeois, Between History and Literature*, p. 82.
[66] ibid.
[67] Robert Darnton, *George Washington's False Teeth* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), p. ix.

Conclusion

We usually tend to distract ourselves from boredom: that means, we just do anything, regardless if what we do makes any sense at all. We go out for a walk, watch TV or do drugs. Perhaps television seems to be the medium of distraction par excellence, as our consumption of it does not depend on content. The web 2.0 and social media platforms are steadily fed with content, and yet it is not a singular piece of content that makes these platforms successful. Perhaps, boredom is not inevitable in times of permissive and ubiquitous distraction, at least not in its permanent form. However, the personal virtues that are needed to cope with this experience are lost, which means that boredom, when it occurs, might occur in a more devastating form than in former times. The consumption sphere as a generalised system of distraction seems to be by far less problematic than most of its alternatives, above all teleological answers to boredom that inhere destructive potentials—one of the many lessons that can be drawn from the *Man without Qualities*. Nevertheless, if again one uses Kracauer's terminology, entertainment only seems to eliminate 'vulgar boredom' and 'radical boredom', while Cioran's 'existential boredom'—in occasional moments of clarity—persists.

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