

A Philosophy of Boredom

Lars Svendsen

Translated by John Irons

REAKTION BOOKS

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ONE

The Problem of Boredom

BOREDOM AS A PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM

As a philosopher, from time to time one must attempt to address big questions. If one fails to do so, one loses sight of what led one to study philosophy in the first place. In my opinion, boredom is one such big question, and an analysis of boredom ought to say something important about the conditions under which we live. We ought not – and are actually unable to – avoid considering our attitude towards the question of *being* from time to time. There may be many initial reasons for reflecting on one's life, but the special thing about fundamental existential experiences is that they inevitably lead one to question one's own existence. Profound boredom is one fundamental existential experience. As Jon Hellesnes has asked: 'What can possibly be more existentially disturbing than boredom?'¹

The big questions are not necessarily the eternal questions, for boredom has only been a central cultural phenomenon for a couple of centuries. It is of course impossible to determine precisely *when* boredom arose, and naturally it has its precursors. But it stands out as being a typical phenomenon of modernity. On the whole, the precursors were restricted to small groups, such as the nobility and the clergy, whereas the boredom of modernity is wide-ranging in its effect and can be said to be a relevant phenomenon today for practically everyone in the Western world.

Boredom is usually considered as something random in relation to the nature of man, but this is based on highly dubious assumptions regarding human nature. One could just as well claim that boredom is embodied in human nature, but that would also presuppose that there is anything at all that can be called 'human nature' – a presupposition that seems problematic to me. Postulating a given nature has a tendency to put an end to all further discussion. For, as Aristotle points out, we direct our attention first and foremost to that which is capable of change.² By postulating a *nature* we are claiming that it cannot be changed. It can also be tempting to postulate a completely neutral human nature, where man has just as great a potential to experience sadness as happiness, enthusiasm as boredom. In that case, the explanation of boredom is exclusively to be found in the individual's social environment. I do not believe, however, that a clear distinction can be made between psychological and social aspects when dealing with a phenomenon such as boredom, and a reductive sociologism is just as untenable as a psychologism. So I choose to approach the matter from a different angle, adopting a perspective based partly on the history of ideas and partly on phenomenology. Nietzsche pointed out that the 'hereditary fault of all philosophers' is to base themselves on man at a particular period of time and then turn this into an eternal truth.³ So I will make do with stating that boredom is a very serious phenomenon that affects many people. Aristotle insisted that virtue is not natural, but that it is not unnatural either.⁴ The same applies to boredom. Moreover, an investigation of boredom can be carried out without presupposing any anthropological constants, i.e., anything given independently of a specifically social and historical space. We are dealing here with an investigation of man in a particular historical situation. It is *us* I am writing about, living in the shadow of Romanticism, as inveterate Romantics without the hyper-

bolic faith of Romanticism in the ability of the imagination to transform the world.

Even though all good philosophy ought to contain an important element of self-knowledge, it does not necessarily have to take the form of a confession modelled on Augustine's *Confessions*. Many people have asked me if I undertook this project because I suffered from boredom, but what I personally feel ought not to be of any interest to readers.⁵ I do not conceive philosophy as being a confessional activity, rather one that labours to gain clarity – a clarity that is admittedly never more than temporary – in the hope that the small area one feels one has shed light on will also be of relevance to others. From a philosophical point of view, my private conditions are irrelevant, even though they are naturally important to me.

I carried out a small, unscientific survey among colleagues, students, friends and acquaintances that revealed that they were on the whole unable to say whether they were bored or not, although some answered in the affirmative or the negative – and one person even claimed that he had *never* been bored. To those readers who have possibly never been bored I can say by way of comparison that deep boredom is related, phenomenologically speaking, to insomnia, where the I loses its identity in the dark, caught in an apparently infinite void. One tries to fall asleep, takes perhaps a few faltering steps, but does not gain sleep, ending up in a no man's land between a waking state and sleep. In *Book of Disquiet* Fernando Pessoa wrote:

Certain sensations are slumbers that fill up our mind like a fog and prevent us from thinking, from acting, from clearly and simply being. As if we hadn't slept, something of our undreamed dreams lingers in us, and the torpor of the new day's sun warms the stagnant surface of our senses. We're drunk on not being anything, and our will

is a bucket poured out onto the yard by the listless movement of a passing foot.⁶

Pessoa's boredom is obvious – it is distinct in all its formlessness. It is, however, in the nature of things that very few people indeed can come up with an unequivocal answer as to whether they are bored or not. First, moods, generally speaking, are seldom intentional subjects as far as we are concerned – they are precisely something one finds oneself *in*, not something one consciously looks *at*. And second, boredom is a mood that is typified by a lack of quality that makes it more elusive than most other moods. Georges Bernanos's village priest provides us with a fine description of the imperceptibly destructive nature of boredom in *The Diary of a Country Priest*:

So I said to myself that people are consumed by boredom. Naturally, one has to ponder for a while to realise this – one does not see it immediately. It is like some sort of dust. One comes and goes without seeing it, one breathes it in, one eats it, one drinks it, and it is so fine that it doesn't even scrunch between one's teeth. But if one stops up for a moment, it settles like a blanket over the face and hands. One has to constantly shake this ash-rain off one. That is why people are so restless.⁷

It is perfectly possible to be bored without being aware of the fact. And it is possible to be bored without being able to offer any reason or cause for this boredom. Those who claimed in my small survey that they were deeply bored were as a rule unable to state accurately *why* they were bored; it wasn't this or that that plagued them, rather a nameless, shapeless, object-less boredom. This is reminiscent of what Freud said about melancholy, where he began by stressing a similarity between melancholy and grief, since both contain

an awareness of loss. But whereas the person who grieves always has a distinct object of loss, the melancholic does not precisely know what he has lost.⁸

Introspection is a method that has obvious limitations when investigating boredom, so I decided to look critically at a number of texts of a philosophical and literary nature. I regard literature as excellent source-material for philosophical studies, and for the philosophy of culture it is just as indispensable as scientific works are for the philosophy of science. As a rule, literature is a great deal more illuminative than quantitative sociological or psychological studies. This applies not least to our subject, where much research has focused on how the deficiency or surplus of sensory stimuli cause boredom without this always being particularly illuminative when considering such a complex phenomenon as boredom.⁹ As Adam Phillips, a psychoanalyst, has expressed it: 'Clearly, we should speak not of boredom, but of boredoms, because the notion itself includes a multiplicity of moods and feelings that resist analysis.'¹⁰

It is often claimed that about ten per cent of us suffer from depression in the course of life. What is the difference between profound boredom and depression? My guess is that there is a considerable overlap. I would also guess that almost one hundred per cent of the population suffers from boredom in the course of their life. Boredom cannot simply be understood as a personal idiosyncrasy. It is a much too comprehensive phenomenon to be explained away in such a way. Boredom is not just an inner state of mind; it is also a characteristic of the world, for we participate in social practices that are saturated with boredom. At times, it almost seems as if the entire Western world has become like Berghof, the sanatorium Hans Castorp stayed at for seven years in Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*. We kill time and bore ourselves to death. So it can be tempting to agree with Lord Byron: 'There's little left but to be bored or bore.'¹¹

My small survey revealed that there were more men than women who claimed to have been bored. Psychological investigations also indicate that men suffer more from boredom than women.¹² (These investigations also support Schopenhauer's claim that the feeling of boredom diminishes with age.¹³) I have no good explanation as to why this should be the case. It may be that women to a lesser extent than men verbally *express* boredom, but that they are affected by it to an equal extent. Possibly, women have other needs and sources of meaning than men and are therefore less affected by various cultural changes that give rise to boredom. As mentioned, I have been unable to find any satisfactory explanation of this gender difference. Nietzsche too claims that women suffer less from boredom than men, motivating this by saying that women have never learnt to work properly¹⁴ – a more than dubious form of justification.

I think Kierkegaard exaggerated when he claimed that 'Boredom is the root of all evil.'¹⁵ But it contributes to a great deal of evil. I do not believe all that many murders start because of boredom, for they are known most often to be acts of passion, but it is a fact that boredom is often used cited as the reason for a number of crimes committed – including murder. Nor can we say that wars start because of boredom, although it is a fact that the outbreak of some wars has been accompanied by manifest joy, with euphoric crowds filling the streets, as if celebrating the fact that something has finally broken the monotony of everyday life. Jon Hellesnes has written perceptively about this.¹⁶ The problem about war, however, is that it is not only deadly but that it also quickly becomes deadly boring; 'Wars without interest boredom of a hundred years' wars',¹⁷ wrote Pound. In *The Magic Mountain* it is the outbreak of war that finally awakens Hans Castorp from his seven-year slumber, but there is every reason to believe that Castorp is soon to be afflicted by boredom once more. In an attempt to say at least *something*

positive about boredom, the sociologist Robert Nisbet has claimed that boredom is not only the root of a number of evils but that it has also put an end to a number of evils, for the simple reason that they gradually became too boring. He takes the practise of burning of witches as an example, claiming that it did not die out for legal, moral or religious reasons but simply because it had become too boring, and that people thought: 'If you've seen one burn, you've seen them all.'¹⁸ Nisbet possibly has a point here, although boredom can scarcely be said to be a redeeming force. For implicit in his argument is the idea that boredom was also the cause of witch-burning beginning in the first place.

Boredom has become associated with drug abuse, alcohol abuse, smoking, eating disorders, promiscuity, vandalism, depression, aggression, animosity, violence, suicide, risk behaviour, etc. There are statistical grounds for making the connection.¹⁹ This ought not to surprise anyone, for the Early Fathers of the Church were already well aware of such a connection, considering the pre-modern forerunner of boredom, *acedia*, to be the worst sin, since all other sins derived from it. That boredom has serious consequences for a society, not only for individuals, ought to be beyond all doubt. That it is also serious for individuals is because boredom involves a loss of meaning, and a loss of meaning is serious for the afflicted person. I do not believe that we can say that the world appears to be meaningless because one is bored, or that one is bored because the world appears to be meaningless. There is hardly a simple relationship here between a cause and an effect. But boredom and a loss of meaning are connected in some way. In *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Robert Burton claimed that 'we can talk about 88 degrees of melancholy, since diverse people are diversely attacked and descend deeper or are dipped less deeply in the hellish pit.' Personally, I am unable to distinguish all that precisely between various degrees of boredom, but it covers everything from a slight discomfort to

a serious loss of all meaning. For most of us, boredom is bearable – but not for all. It is of course always tempting to ask the person complaining of boredom or melancholy to ‘pull himself together’, but, as Ludvig Holberg points out, this is ‘just as impossible to do as ordering a dwarf to make himself one cubit taller than he is’.²⁰

Almost all those who talk about boredom consider boredom to be an evil, although there are certain exceptions. Johann Georg Hamann described himself as a ‘Liebhaber der Langen Weile’, and when his friends criticized him for being a good-for-nothing, he replied that it is easy to work, whereas genuine idleness is really demanding on a human being.²¹ E. M. Cioran has a similar view: ‘To the friend who tells me he is bored because he is unable to work, I reply that boredom is a *superior* state, and that it is debasing it to connect it with the notion of work.’²²

There are no courses offered at the universities, apart from the fact that one is often bored during one’s studies. Nor is it obvious that boredom can any more be considered a relevant philosophical subject, although it has formerly been so. In a contemporary philosophy where almost everything has become variations on the theme of epistemology, boredom would seem to be a phenomenon that falls outside the framework of philosophy as a discipline. To busy oneself with such a subject will for some people be seen as a clear indication of intellectual immaturity. That may well be. If boredom cannot be considered a relevant philosophical subject nowadays, there is perhaps good reason to be concerned about the state of philosophy. A philosophy that cuts itself off from the question of the meaning of life is hardly worth getting involved in. That meaning is something we can lose falls outside the framework of philosophical semantics, but it ought not to fall outside the framework of philosophy as a whole.

Why should boredom be a *philosophical* problem and not just a psychological or sociological problem? I have to admit

here that I am unable to advance any general criterion as to what distinguishes a philosophical problem from a non-philosophical one. According to Wittgenstein, a philosophical problem has the form: 'I don't know my way about.'²³ Similarly, Martin Heidegger describes the 'need' that drives one to philosophical reflection as a 'not-inside-out-knowledge'.²⁴ What characterizes a philosophical question, then, is some sort of loss of bearings. Is this not also typical of profound boredom, where one is no longer able to find one's bearings in relation to the world because one's very relationship to the world has virtually been lost? Samuel Beckett describes this existentialist state to his first novel hero, Belacqua, in this way:

He was bogged in indolence, without identity . . . The cities and forests and beings were also without identity, they were shadows, they exerted neither pull nor goad . . . His being was without axis or contour, its centre everywhere and periphery nowhere, an unsurveyed marsh of sloth.²⁵

Boredom normally arises when we cannot do what we want to do, or have to do something we do not want to do. But what about when we have no idea of what we want to do, when we have lost the capacity to get our bearings in life? Then we can find ourselves in a profound boredom that is reminiscent of a lack of willpower, because the will cannot get a firm grip anywhere. Fernando Pessoa has described this as 'To suffer without suffering, to want without desire, to think without reason.'²⁶ And, as we shall see in the analysis of Heidegger's phenomenology of boredom, this experience can be a way into philosophy.

Boredom lacks the charm of melancholy – a charm that is connected to melancholy's traditional link to wisdom, sensitivity and beauty. For that reason, boredom is less attractive

to aesthetes. It also lacks the obvious seriousness of depression, so it is less interesting to psychologists and psychiatrists. Compared to depression and melancholy, boredom simply seems to be too trivial or vulgar to merit a thorough investigation. It is surprising, for example, that Peter Wessel Zapffe's 600-page study *On the Tragic* (1941) contains not a single discussion of boredom.²⁷ Zapffe admittedly touches on the phenomenon at various points, but it is not given its usual name. We do, however, find discussions of boredom by important philosophers, such as Pascal, Rousseau, Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Benjamin and Adorno. And within literature there are Goethe, Flaubert, Stendhal, Mann, Beckett, Büchner, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Baudelaire, Leopardi, Proust, Byron, Eliot, Ibsen, Valéry, Bernanos, Pessoa . . . This list is incomplete – the subject is so comprehensively described that any such list is arbitrary. We ought, however, to note that all these writers and philosophers belong to the modern period.

BOREDOM AND MODERNITY

According to Kierkegaard, 'The gods were bored; therefore they created human beings. Adam was bored because he was alone; therefore Eve was created. Since that moment, boredom entered the world and grew in quantity in exact proportion to the growth of population.'²⁸ Nietzsche's view was that God was bored on the seventh day,²⁹ and he claimed that even the gods fought in vain against boredom.³⁰ Henry David Thoreau supported Kierkegaard's idea ('Without a doubt, the form of boredom and lassitude that imagines it has exhausted all the happiness and variety of life just as old as Adam.'³¹), and Alberto Moravia claimed that Adam and Eve were bored,³² whereas Kant asserted that Adam and Eve *would have* been bored if they had stayed in Paradise.³³

Robert Nisbet decided that God banished Adam and Eve from Paradise to save them from the boredom that in time would have afflicted them.³⁴

It is reasonable to assume that certain forms of boredom have existed since the beginning of time, among them that which will be discussed later as ‘situative boredom’, i.e., a boredom that is due to something specific in a situation. But *existential* boredom stands out as being a phenomenon of modernity. There are exceptions here too. Take, for example, the opening chapter of Ecclesiastes that contains the statement ‘All is vanity . . . and also ‘The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.’³⁵ It is not unreasonable, however, to say that Solomon is here being prophetic rather than diagnostic on behalf of his age. And Pastor Løchen in Arne Garborg’s *Weary Men* seems to be right in claiming that this Old Testament book was written for the people of the present age.³⁶ There are also writings by Seneca where via the concept *tedium vitae* (tiredness of life) he describes something that is strongly reminiscent of modern boredom.³⁷ It is practically always possible to find earlier texts that seem to anticipate later phenomena. I do not assert that there is any clear, sharp break at any point in history, but insist that boredom is not thematized to any *major* extent before the Romantic era. With the advent of Romanticism, boredom becomes, so to speak, democratized and finds a broad form of expression.

Boredom is the ‘privilege’ of modern man. While there are reasons for believing that joy and anger have remained fairly constant throughout history, the amount of boredom seems to have increased dramatically. The world has apparently become more boring. Before Romanticism it seems to have been a marginal phenomenon, reserved for monks and the nobility. For a long time boredom was a status symbol, i.e., as long as it was a prerogative of the upper echelons of

society, since they were the only ones with the material basis required for boredom. As boredom spread to all social strata it lost its exclusiveness. There are further reasons for believing that boredom is fairly equally distributed throughout the Western world.

Boredom always contains a critical element,³⁸ because it expresses the idea that either a given situation or existence as a whole is deeply unsatisfying. As François de La Rochefoucauld already pointed out in his Maxims – which are mainly acute descriptions of life at the French court – ‘Almost always we are bored by people to whom we ourselves are boring.’³⁹ At the French court, boredom was the privilege of the monarch, for if another member of the court expressed boredom, it could scarcely be interpreted in any other way than that the monarch bored that particular person. Similarly, the earlier *acedia* had to be considered as an unprecedented insult to God when the monks sank into a fathomless void in their meeting with Holy Writ. How could God, in His perfection, ever be thought of as boring? To be bored in relation to God is implicitly claiming that God *lacks* something.

If boredom increases, it means that there is a serious fault in society or culture as a conveyor of meaning. Meaning has to be understood as a whole. We become socialized within an overall meaning (no matter what form this takes) that gives meaning to the individual elements in our lives. Another traditional expression of such an overall meaning is ‘culture’. Many theoreticians of modernity have concluded that culture has disappeared and that it has been replaced, for example, by ‘civilization’.⁴⁰ If boredom increases, this is presumably because the overall meaning has disappeared. There naturally is a mutual relationship between the overall meaning and the submeanings, i.e., between culture on the one hand and cultural products on the other – and we can also ask ourselves to what extent things are still bearers of

culture. Do things still thing?, to quote Heidegger. To put it another way: Do the things have a cohesive influence on a culture?

There are no completely reliable studies of how large a percentage of the population is bored, the figures varying considerably for the different studies, for the phenomenon is difficult to diagnose in any objective way.⁴¹ So we cannot, on the evidence of 'hard facts', decide whether boredom is decreasing, increasing or stable in the population. But are not the extent of the entertainments industry and the consumption of intoxicants, for example, clear indications of the prevalence of boredom? People who watch TV four hours a day will not necessarily feel or admit that they are bored, but why else should they spend 25 per cent of their waking hours in such a way? Leisure naturally presents itself as an explanation, but leisure gives one a great deal of superfluous time that has to be consumed in some way or other – and few types of apparatus destroy time more efficiently than a TV. There is ultimately hardly any other reason for watching TV for many hours an evening than to get rid of time that is superfluous or disagreeable. At the same time, many of us have gradually become terribly proficient at getting rid of time. The most hyperactive of us are precisely those who have the lowest boredom thresholds. We have an almost complete lack of downtime, scurrying from one activity to the next because we cannot face tackling time that is 'empty'. Paradoxically enough, this bulging time is often frighteningly empty when viewed in retrospect. Boredom is linked to a way of *passing the time*, in which time, rather than being a horizon for opportunities, is something that has to be beguiled. Or, as Hans-George Gadamer expresses it: 'What is actually passed when passing the time? Not time, surely, that passes? And yet it is time that is meant, in its empty lastingness, but which as *something* that lasts is too long and assumes the form of painful boredom.'⁴² One does

not know what to do with time when one is bored, for it is precisely there that one's capacities lie fallow and no real opportunities present themselves.

It is revealing to look at the frequency of the use of the word *boredom*. It is not found in English before the 1760s, since when its usage has progressively increased.⁴³ The German *Langeweile* was on the scene a couple of decades earlier, and admittedly has Old-German precursors, but these only denote a long period of time, not any experiencing of time. The Danes were quick off the mark with *ked-somhed*, which is first registered in an undated, handwritten dictionary by Matthias Moth (c. 1647–1719);⁴⁴ it is conceivable that the Danish *ked* is etymologically related to the Latin *acedia*. Generally speaking, the words that denote boredom etc. in various languages have uncertain etymologies. The French *ennui* and the Italian *noia*, both of which, via the Provençal *enojo*, have roots in the Latin *inodiare* (to hate or detest), go back as far as the thirteenth century. But these words are less usable for our purpose, because they are closely meshed with *acedia*, melancholy and general tristesse. The same applies to the English word *spleen*, which goes back to the sixteenth century. The standard dictionary of the Norwegian language does not mention any earlier occurrence of *kjedsomhet* than in the works of Ibsen and Amalie Skram, although it would be very surprising if there are no earlier uses of it.⁴⁵ The earliest Norwegian 'boredom novel' is probably Arne Garborg's *Weary Men* (1891), which deals with Gabriel Gram's life, one lived constantly on the run from boredom, and Gram's yearning for release, either in the form of woman or God. On the whole, I have chosen to restrict myself to *boredom*, *Langeweile* and *kjedsomhet*, because they appear at approximately the same time and are more or less synonymous. It is obvious, however, that they belong to a large conceptual complex with long historical roots.

The word *boring* is used incredibly frequently to denote a range of emotional limitations and lack of meaning in various situations. Many descriptions of boredom in literature are extremely similar, mainly consisting of a statement that there is nothing that can engender any interest, along with a complaint at how unliveable this makes life. Kierkegaard described it thus:

How frightful boredom is – frightfully boring; I know of no stronger expression, no truer expression, for only like knows like. If only there were a higher expression, a stronger one; that would at least indicate a shift. I lie outstretched, inactive; the only thing I see is: emptiness; the only thing I live off: emptiness; the only thing I move in: emptiness. I do not even experience pain.⁴⁶

Here, too, I can mention Iggy Pop's song *I'm bored*, which includes the following:

I'm bored
I'm bored
I'm the chairman of the bored
I'm sick
I'm sick of all my kicks
I'm sick of all the stiffs
I'm sick of all the dips
I'm bored
I bore myself to sleep at night
I bore myself in broad daylight
'Cause I'm bored
I'm bored
Just another dirty bore . . .

Boredom is apparently a concept that can be used to explain or even excuse a great deal. Dostoevsky's underground man,

for example, claims that ‘everything stemmed from boredom’.⁴⁷ It is common to use boredom as an excuse for most things. A typical formulation is to be found in Georg Büchner’s novella *Leonce und Lena*: ‘What do people not invent out of boredom! ⁴⁸ They study out of boredom, play out of boredom, and finally they die out of boredom.’ An even stronger version is found in Büchner’s more tragic *Lenz*: ‘Most people play out of sheer boredom, some fall in love out of boredom, others are virtuous, yet others dissolute. As for me, nothing at all – I don’t even feel like taking my own life, it’s all too boring.’ ⁴⁹ Similarly, Stendhal writes in *On Love*: ‘Ennui takes everything from one, even the desire to take one’s own life.’ ⁵⁰ For Fernando Pessoa, boredom is said to be so radical that it cannot even be overcome by suicide, only by something completely impossible – not to have existed at all.⁵¹ Boredom is used as an explanation for all sorts of action and for a total incapacity for action. Boredom underlies the vast majority of human actions of both a positive and negative nature. For Bertrand Russell, ‘Boredom as a factor in human behaviour has received, in my opinion, far less attention than it deserves. It has been I believe, one of the great motive powers throughout the historical epoch, and it is so at the present day more than ever.’ ⁵²

BOREDOM AND MEANING

That boredom is probably more widespread than ever before can be established by noting that the number of ‘social placebos’ is greater than it has ever been.⁵³ If there are more substitutes for meaning, there must be more meaning that needs to be substituted for.⁵⁴ Where there is a lack of personal meaning, all sorts of diversions have to create a substitute – an ersatz-meaning. Or the cult of celebrities, where one gets completely engrossed in the lives of others because

one's own life lacks meaning. Is our fascination with the bizarre, fed daily by the mass media, not a result of our awareness of the boring? The pell-mell rush for diversions precisely indicates our fear of the emptiness that surrounds us. This rush, the demand for satisfaction and the lack of satisfaction are inextricably intertwined. The more strongly individual life becomes the centre of focus, the stronger the insistence on meaning amongst the trivialities of everyday life will become. Because man, a couple of centuries ago, began to see himself as an individual being that must *realize* himself, everyday life now appears to be a prison. Boredom is not connected with actual needs but with desire. And this desire is a desire for sensory *stimuli*. Stimuli are the only 'interesting' thing.

That life to a large extent *is* boring is revealed by our placing such great emphasis on originality and innovation.⁵⁵ We place greater emphasis nowadays on whether something is 'interesting' than on whether it has any 'value'. To consider something exclusively from the point of view of whether it is 'interesting' or not is to consider it from a purely aesthetic perspective. The aesthetic gaze registers only surface, and this surface is judged by whether it is interesting or boring. To what extent something lands up in the one category or the other will often be a question of potency of effect: if a piece of recorded music seems boring, it sometimes helps to turn up the volume. The aesthetic gaze has to be titillated by increased intensity or preferably by something new, and the ideology of the aesthetic gaze is superlativism. It is, however, worth noting that the aesthetic gaze has a tendency to fall back into boredom – a boredom that defines the entire content of life in a negative way, because it is that which has to be avoided at any price. This was perhaps particularly evident in postmodern theory, where we saw a series of *jouissance* aesthetes, with such mantras as 'intensity', 'delirium' and 'euphoria'. The problem was that the postmodern state

was not all that euphoric and joyful for very long. It soon became boring.

We cannot adopt a stance towards something without there being an underlying interest, for interest provides the direction.⁵⁶ But, as Heidegger emphasised, today's interest is only directed towards the *interesting*, and the interesting is what only a moment later one finds indifferent or boring.⁵⁷ The word 'boring' is bound up with the word 'interesting'; the words become widespread at roughly the same time and they increase in frequency at roughly the same rate.⁵⁸ It is not until the advent of Romanticism towards the end of the eighteenth century that the demand arises for life to be interesting, with the general claim that the self must realize itself. Karl Philipp Moritz, whose importance for German Romanticism has only recently been truly recognized, claimed in 1787 that a connection between interest and boredom exists, and that life must be interesting to avoid 'unbearable boredom'.⁵⁹ The 'interesting' always has a brief shelf-life, and really no other function than to be consumed, in order that boredom can be kept at arm's length. The prime commodity of the media is 'interesting information' – signs that are pure consumer goods, nothing else.

In his essay 'The Narrator', Walter Benjamin insisted that 'experience has fallen in value'.⁶⁰ This is connected to the emergence of a new form of communication in high-capitalism: *information*. 'Information [. . .] lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear "understandable in itself" [. . .] no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation.'⁶¹ While experience gives personal meaning, this is undermined by information.⁶² At about the same time as Benjamin made his observation, T. S. Eliot wrote:

Where is the Life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? ⁶³

We know that information and meaning are not the same thing. Broadly speaking, meaning consists in inserting small parts into a larger, integrated context, while information is the opposite. Information is ideally communicated as a binary code, while meaning is communicated more symbolically. Information is handled or ‘processed’, while meaning is interpreted.⁶⁴ Now is it obvious that we cannot simply choose to do without information in favour of meaning, for if one is to be reasonably functional in today’s world, one has to be able to deal critically with an abundance of information communicated via many different links. Anyone insisting on gleaning all experiences personally would definitely come a cropper. The problem is that modern technology more and more makes us passive observers and consumers, and less and less active players. This gives us a meaning deficit.

It is not all that easy to give an account of what I mean by ‘meaning’ here. In philosophical semantics there are a host of different theories about meaning that – especially in continuation of the works of Gottlob Frege – seek to provide an account of meaning in terms of linguistic expression. But the concept of meaning I am referring to has a further perspective, because we are talking about a meaning that is inextricably linked to being a meaning for *someone*. Peter Wessel Zapffe attempted to articulate a concept of meaning:

That an action or some other fragment of life has meaning means that it gives us a quite specific feeling that is not easy to translate into thought. It would have to be something like the action having a good enough intention, so that when the intention is fulfilled, the action is ‘justified’, settled, confirmed – and the subject calms down.⁶⁵

This is an odd sort of definition, but it contains the vital element – that this meaning is related to a person’s goal-oriented use of the world. At this point, I would just mention that an important difference between Zapffe’s and my concept of meaning is that he justifies it biologically, while I justify it more historically. As Zapffe also indicates, these actions also point forward to something more – to life as a whole. I do not intend to pursue Zapffe’s considerations here, but will content myself with stating that the meaning we are looking for – or even demand – is ultimately an existential or metaphysical meaning.⁶⁶ This existential meaning can be sought in various ways and exists in various forms. It can be conceived as something already given in which one can participate (e.g. in a religious community) or as something that has to be realized (e.g. a classless society). It is conceived as something collective or something individual. I would also assert that the conception of meaning that is particularly prevalent in the West from Romanticism onwards is that which conceives existential meaning as an individual meaning that has to be realized. It is this meaning that I refer to as a *personal meaning*, but I could also call it the *Romantic meaning*.

Human beings are addicted to meaning. We all have a great problem: Our lives must have some sort of content. We cannot bear to live our lives without some sort of content that we can see as constituting a meaning. Meaninglessness is boring. And boredom can be described metaphorically as a meaning withdrawal. Boredom can be understood as a discomfort which communicates that the need for meaning is not being satisfied. In order to remove this discomfort, we attack the symptoms rather than the disease itself, and search for all sorts of meaning-surrogates.

A society that functions well promotes man’s ability to find meaning in the world; one that functions badly does not. In premodern societies there is usually a collective

meaning that is sufficient.⁶⁷ For us ‘Romantics’, things are more problematic, for even though we often embrace collectivist modes of thought, such as nationalism, they always ultimately appear to be sadly insufficient. Of course, there is still meaning, but there seems to be less of it. Information, on the other hand, there is plenty of. Modern media have made an enormous search for knowledge possible – something that undeniably has positive aspects, but by far the most of it is irrelevant noise. If, on the other hand, we choose to use the word ‘meaning’ in a broad sense, there is no lack of meaning in the world – there is a superabundance. We positively wade through meaning. But this meaning is not the meaning we are looking for. The emptiness of time in boredom is not an emptiness of action, for there is always *something* in this time, even if it is only the sight of paint drying. The emptiness of time is an emptiness of meaning.

Horkheimer and Adorno made a point that is close to Benjamin’s assertion concerning the growth of information. In continuation of Kant’s theory of interpretation, schematism, they wrote that

The contribution that Kantian schematism still expected of the subjects – relating in advance the sensory diversity to the underlying concepts – was taken from them by industry. It carries out schematism like a service for the customer . . . For the consumer there is nothing left to classify that has not already been anticipated in production’s own schematism.⁶⁸

I believe that boredom is the result of a lack of personal meaning, and that this to a great extent is due precisely to the fact that all objects and actions come to us fully coded, while we – as the descendants of Romanticism – insist on a *personal* meaning. As Rilke wrote in the first of his *Duino*

Elegies, we are not as a matter of course completely at home in the interpreted world. Man is a world-forming being, a being that actively constitutes his own world, but when everything is always already fully coded, the active constituting of the world is made superfluous, and we lose friction in relation to the world. We Romantics need a meaning that we ourselves realize – and the person who is preoccupied with self-realization inevitably has a meaning problem. This is no *one* collective meaning in life any more, a meaning that it is up to the individual to participate in. Nor is it that easy to find an own meaning in life, either. The meaning that most people embrace is self-realization as such, but it is not obvious what *type* of self is to be realized, nor what should possibly result from it. The person who is certain as regards himself will not ask the question as to who he is. Only a problematic self feels the need for realization.

Boredom presupposes subjectivity, i.e., self-awareness. Subjectivity is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for boredom. To be able to be bored the subject must be able to perceive himself as an individual that can enter into various meaning contexts, and this subject demands meaning of the world and himself. Without such a demand for meaning there would be no boredom. Animals can be understimulated, but hardly bored.⁶⁹ As Robert Nisbet has argued:

Man is apparently unique in his capacity for boredom. We share with all forms of life periodic apathy, but apathy and boredom are different . . . Boredom is much farther up the scale of afflictions than is apathy, and it is probably only a nervous system as highly developed as man's is even capable of boredom. And within the human species, a level of mentality at least 'normal' appears to be a requirement. The moron may know apathy but not boredom.⁷⁰

Goethe remarked somewhere that monkeys would be worth considering as humans if they were capable of being bored – and he may well be right about that. At the same time, boredom is inhuman because it robs human life of meaning, or possibly it is an expression of the fact that such a meaning is absent.

With Romanticism there comes a strong focusing on a self that is constantly in danger of acquiring a meaning deficiency. The growth of boredom is linked to the growth of nihilism, but the problem-history of nihilism, and possibly its end, is a terribly complex issue of its own and will not be dealt with here to any great extent. Boredom and nihilism converge in the death of God. The first importance use of the concept of nihilism in philosophy is in F. H. Jacobi's 'Brief an Fichte' (1799).⁷¹ One of the main points made by Jacobi in this open letter is that man has chosen between God and nothingness, and by choosing nothingness man makes himself a god. This logic is later reiterated, but this time in the affirmative, by Kirilov in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*: 'If God does not exist, then I become God.'⁷² As we know, we chose nothingness, although the word 'choose' is probably misleading here – it *happened*. But man did not fulfil the role of a god all that successfully. Kirilov also claims that in the absence of God 'I am obliged to express my own wilfulness.' In the absence of God man assumed the role of gravitational centre for meaning – but this was a role he managed to fill only to a small extent.

BOREDOM, WORK AND LEISURE

Boredom is connected to reflection, and in all reflection there is a tendency towards a loss of world. Reflection decreases via diversions, but this will always be a passing phenomenon. Work is often less boring than diversions are, but the person

who advocates work as a cure for boredom is confusing a temporary removal of the symptoms with curing a disease. And there is no escaping the fact that many forms of work are deadly boring. Work is often onerous, often without potential to promote any meaning in life. The answer to the question as to why people get bored does not lie in work or leisure on their own. One can have a lot of leisure without being noticeably bored, and one can have only a little leisure and be bored to death. The fact that by increasing profits from production in modern industry it has been possible to shorten working hours and prolong leisure does not necessarily lead to any improvement in the quality of life. Boredom is not a question of idleness but of *meaning*.

In his *Book of Disquiet* Fernando Pessoa puts it this way:

It is said that tedium is a disease of the idle, or that it attacks only those who have nothing to do. But this ailment of the soul is in fact more subtle: it attacks people who are predisposed to it, and those who work or who pretend they work (which in this case comes down to the same thing) are less apt to be spared than the truly idle.

Nothing is worse than the contrast between the natural splendour of the inner life, with its natural Indies and its unexplored lands, and the squalor (even when it's not really squalid) of life's daily routine. And tedium is more oppressive when there's not the excuse of idleness. The tedium of those who strive hard is the worst of all.

Tedium is not the disease of being bored because there's nothing to do, but the more serious disease of feeling that there's nothing worth doing. This means that the more there is to do, the more tedium one will feel.

How often, when I look up from the ledger where I enter accounts, my head is devoid of the whole world! I'd be better off remaining idle, doing nothing and having nothing to do, because that tedium, though real enough,

I could at least enjoy. In my present tedium there is no rest, no nobility, and no well-being against which to feel unwell: there's a vast effacement of every act I do, rather than a potential weariness from acts I'll never do.⁷³

Pessoa is right in saying that hard work is often just as boring as idleness. I have personally never been so bored as when I was in the process of completing a large dissertation after several years of work. The work bored me so much that I had to mobilize all my will in order to continue, and all that I felt in doing so was a tremendous tiredness. The work seemed to me to be completely meaningless, and I completed it almost like an automaton. When I handed in the dissertation I felt an enormous sense of relief, and thought that I would find life more meaningful again, now that I could be idle. And so I did for a few weeks, but then things returned to the same as before.

Leisure is in itself no more meaningful than work, and the more basic question is *how* one chooses to be idle. Very few of us indeed have any reason to live a life of total idleness, and alternate between work and free time. We start by working the whole day, then watch TV all evening before sleeping all night. This is a fairly common life-pattern. Adorno linked boredom to alienation at work, where free time corresponds to the absence of self-determination in the production process.⁷⁴ Free time is a time where you are free, or can be free. What sort of freedom are we talking about? A freedom from work? In that case, it is work that provides a negative definition of freedom. Are we freer in our free time than during our time at work? We undeniably have a slightly different role, for while we are producers in our working hours, we are mainly consumers in our free time. However, one is not necessarily more free in the one role than in the other, and the one role is not necessarily more meaningful than the other. As mentioned, boredom is not a question of work or freedom but of meaning.

Work that does not give very much meaning in life is followed by free time that gives just as little meaning in life. Why does work not give any real meaning? Naturally, it might be tempting simply to refer to alienation, but I prefer instead to talk about an indifference, for I do not believe that the concept of alienation is all that applicable any more. I return to this in the last part of my book. In Milan Kundera's *Identity*, one of the characters, Jean-Marc, says:

I'd say that the quantity of boredom, if boredom is measurable, is much greater today than it was. Because the old occupations, at least most of them, were unthinkable without a passionate involvement: the peasants in love with their land; my grandfather, the magician of beautiful tables; shoemakers who knew every villager's feet by heart; the woodsmen; the gardeners; probably even the soldiers killed with passion back then. The meaning of life wasn't an issue; it was there with them, quite naturally, in their workshops, in their fields. Each occupation had created its own mentality, its own way of being. A doctor would think differently from a peasant, a soldier would behave in a different way from a teacher. Today we're all alike, all of us bound together by our shared apathy towards our work. That very apathy has become a passion. The one great collective passion of our time.⁷⁵

Kundera is considerably romanticizing the past here, but, even so, I believe has got hold of something essential in drawing attention to the levelling out of differences and the resulting indifference. This also indicates why work in itself can no longer be considered as some sort of list of answers. Work is no longer part of some larger context of meaning that gives it meaning. To the extent that work could possibly be a cure for boredom today, it would be so in the same way as a fix or a bottle – as an attempt to escape from time itself.

BOREDOM AND DEATH

Is modern life first and foremost an attempt to escape from boredom? Boredom enforces a movement towards transcending barriers, which in Baudelaire is mainly identified with perversities and the *new*. And *Les Fleurs du mal* ends in 'Le Voyage', where death is the only new thing that remains:

*Ô Mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps! levons l'ancre!
Ce pays nous ennuie, ô Mort! Appareillons!
Si le ciel et la mer sont noirs comme de l'encre,
Nos cœurs que tu connais sont remplis de rayons!*

*Verse-nous ton poison pour qu'il nous réconforte!
Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau,
Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?
Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!*

O Death, old captain, the time has come! Let's raise the anchor!

This country wearies us, O Death! We'll hoist the sail!
Even if both heaven and sea are inky black,
Our hearts, how well you know, are filled with light.

So, pour out your poison, it will comfort us!
As this fire boils our brains, we want to plumb
The abyss's depths – who cares if it's heaven or hell? –
To find, in the deep vaults of the unknown, the *new*!⁷⁶

As Walter Benjamin stated in *Zentralpark*: 'For people as they are today there is only one thing that is radically new – and it is always the same: death.'⁷⁷

Events, no matter how unimportant they may be, take place surrounded by camera lenses and microphones, and they can be blown up to enormous proportions. Everything is poten-

tially visible – nothing is hidden. We can speak of a pan-transparency, where everything is transparent. The transparency and the packaged interpretations of the world are interrelated. The transparency is precisely not immediate, always mediated, as the world is seen through something, i.e., an already existing interpretation that empties it of secrets. The world becomes boring when everything is transparent. That is why some people hanker for what is dangerous and shocking. They have replaced the non-transparent by the extreme. That is probably why many are so obsessed with the ‘street violence’ and ‘blind violence’ that the tabloid press thrives on reporting. How boring life would be without violence!

This is well expressed in a poem written by a former skin-head:

Everywhere they are waiting, In silence.
In boredom. Staring into space.
Reflecting on nothing, or on violence . . .
Then suddenly it happens. A motor-cycle
Explodes outside, a cup smashes.
They are on their feet, identified
At last as living creatures,
The universal silence is shattered,
The law is overthrown, chaos
Has come again.⁷⁸

The chaos and violence is what moves one from boredom to life, awakening oneself. Providing life with some sort of meaning. We have an aesthetic attitude towards violence, and this aesthetic was clearly apparent in the anti-aesthetic of modernism, with its focus on the shocking and the hideous. In addition, we have a moral attitude towards violence, which we want to see reduced – but I do not know if the moral regard necessarily outweighs the aesthetic one. The conflict of values in modern societies does not only occur between

dissimilar social groups – it is perhaps just as much a question of conflicts within the individual subjects, who participate in different spheres of values, as, for example, a moral and an aesthetic sphere. Just as little as the conflicts between the various groups can be resolved by referring to a neutral, higher instance can the conflicts within the individual subjects be resolved in such a way.

Violence is ‘interesting’, no matter what. Towards the end of his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ Benjamin observed that ‘Mankind . . . , which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.’⁷⁹ Boredom leads to most things appearing to be a tempting alternative, and it might seem as if what we really need is a fresh war of a major catastrophe. Nisbet believes that boredom can be catastrophic: ‘Boredom may become Western man’s greatest source of unhappiness. Catastrophe alone would appear to be the surest and, in today’s world, the most likely of liberations from boredom.’⁸⁰ The problem is that there is no particular reason to believe that those who survive after a catastrophe will be spared boredom. But for the person who is outside the catastrophe, the world stricken by a catastrophe will seem to be an interesting alternative to boredom. In *The Diary of a Country Priest*, Georges Bernanos prophesies that boredom will be the most obvious cause of the destruction of mankind:

For if the human race disappears, it will be out of ennui and boredom. Mankind will gradually be consumed like a beam is eaten up by an invisible fungus . . . Look at these world wars, for example, which apparently bear witness to a violent vitality in man but which actually prove its growing lethargy. It will end with vast numbers being led to the slaughter at certain times.⁸¹

Boredom gives a sort of pallid foretaste of death, and one could imagine that violent actual death would be preferable, that one would prefer the world to end with a bang rather than with a miserable little whimper. Nietzsche has also mentioned the pleasure and sublimity associated with a world meeting its doom.⁸²

What boredom is to have is that it provides some sort of perspective on existence, where one realizes that one is completely insignificant in such a vast context. Joseph Brodsky reckons that ‘boredom speaks today’s language, and it will teach you your life’s most important lesson . . . that you are completely insignificant.’⁸³ As a finite being, one is surrounded by an infinity of a time that is devoid of content. The experiencing of time changes, with the past and future disappearing and everything becoming a merciless now. Talking Heads sing ‘Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens.’ In that respect, boredom seems heavenly. It is as if infinity has moved into this world from the beyond. But this infinity, or monotony, is different from the one described by mystics. Simone Weil elaborates on the difference between the two:

Sameness is both the most beautiful and repulsive thing that exists. The most beautiful if it reflects eternity. The ugliest if it is a sign of something endless and unchangeable. Conquered time or infertile time. The symbol of beautiful sameness is the circle. The symbol of cruel sameness is the ticking of a pendulum.⁸⁴

Time in boredom is not something that has been conquered: time is imprisoning. Boredom is related to death, but it is a paradoxical relationship because profound boredom is like some sort of death, while death assumes the form of the only state possible – a total break with boredom. Boredom has to do with finitude and nothingness. It is a death within life, a

non-life. In the in-humanity of boredom we gain a perspective on our own humanity.

TYPOLOGIES OF BOREDOM

Much boredom derives from repetition. I am often bored, for example, when I go to museums and galleries and only find pale imitations of works I have seen already far too many times. I am bored when I hear a lecture for the fourth time, and I am bored when *I* give a lecture for the fourth time.

It can happen that one accepts assignments one is not really qualified for, simply because one will surely learn something new in the process. Seen thus, boredom is a positive source of human development, though not necessarily of progress. We can be bored in many ways. We can be bored with objects and people, we can be bored with ourselves. But an anonymous form of boredom also exists where nothing in particular bores us. *One* feels bored, for boredom does not have any content that can make it *mine*. In this last instance, it would perhaps be more correct to say, in true Heidegger style, that boredom is bored.

There are many different typologies of boredom. Milan Kundera, for example, lists three: passive boredom, as when one yawns disinterestedly; active boredom, as when one devotes oneself to a hobby; and rebellious boredom, as when one – as a young man, say – smashes shop windows.⁸⁵ I don't feel this typology is particularly illuminating. It does nothing more than emphasise that one can react passively or actively, and it fails to distinguish qualitatively between various forms of boredom.

I prefer Martin Doehlemann's typology, which distinguishes between four types of boredom: situative boredom, as when one is waiting for someone, is listening to a lecture or taking the train; the boredom of satiety, when one gets

too much of the same thing and everything becomes banal; existential boredom, where the soul is without content and the world is in neutral; and creative boredom, which is not so much characterized by its content as its result: that one is forced to do something new.⁸⁶ These four overlap, but there are clear distinctions.

Flaubert distinguished between 'common boredom' (*ennui commun*) and 'modern boredom' (*ennui moderne*),⁸⁷ which, broadly speaking, corresponds to our distinction between situative and existential boredom. It is, however, not altogether easy to determine the boredom that afflicts the characters in Flaubert's novels in relation to this division. Is the boredom that afflicts Bouvard and Pécuchet 'common' or 'modern'? It is 'common' in the sense that they are bored when prevented from doing something concrete, i.e., devoting themselves to their insane studies of everything between heaven and earth, but it is more 'modern' in the sense that it affects their existence as a whole.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, I am inclined to say that both of them suffer from 'common' boredom. The boredom experienced by Emma Bovary, on the other hand, seems to be more of the 'modern' kind, even though her boredom is also object-related via the imaginary object she attempts to realize sexually. A way of distinguishing between situative and existential boredom would be to say that while situative boredom contains a longing for something that is desired, existential boredom contains a longing for any desire at all.

We can note the fact that situative and existential boredom have different symbolic modes of expression, or rather: While situative boredom is expressed via yawning, wriggling in one's chair, stretching out one's arms and legs, etc., profound existential boredom is more or less devoid of expression. While the body language of situative boredom seems to signal that one can cast off this yoke, squirm oneself free and move on, it is as if the lack of expression in existential bore-

dom contains an implicit instinct that it cannot be overcome by any act of will. To the extent that there is a clear form of expression for profound boredom, it is via behaviour that is radical and breaks new ground, negatively indicating boredom as its prerequisite. It actually helps to wriggle in one's chair during a lecture or a meeting, and it helps to go on a trip. One gains temporary relief from boredom. As the narrator says in Alberto Moravia's novel *La Noia*, comparing his own boredom with that which plagued his father:

Father had indeed suffered from boredom, he too, but for him this suffering had been acted out in a happy vagabond-like existence in various regions. His boredom, in other words, was a vulgar boredom, as one normally understands the term, a boredom that does not require anything else to be assuaged than new, unusual experiences.⁸⁹

The narrator himself, on the other hand, suffers from a boredom that goes much deeper, and a more profound form of boredom obviously needs a more desperate remedy, i.e. behaviour that is more radical and transfrontier. Georges Bataille has commented thus: 'There is no feeling that is more exhilarating than the awareness of the emptiness that surrounds us. This does not at all mean that we do not experience an emptiness inside ourselves, on the contrary: but we overcome this feeling and enter into an awareness of the transgression.'⁹⁰ The awareness of an emptiness is the prerequisite for crossing frontiers, but, as we shall see, crossing frontiers does not help in the long run, for how is one to escape from a *world* that is boring?⁹¹

Schopenhauer described this boredom as a 'tame longing without any particular object'.⁹² In profound boredom one loses the capacity to find any object whatsoever for one's desire. The world has withered and died. Kafka complained in his diary that he experienced something that was 'As if

everything I owned had left me, and as if it would scarcely be sufficient if all of it returned.’⁹³ In Moravia’s *La Noia*, it is said that boredom is ‘like a disease of the things themselves, a disease that leads to all vitality withering and dying, almost quite suddenly vanishing.’⁹⁴ Boredom is like a ‘fog.’⁹⁵ We also find this expression in Heidegger, who refers to profound boredom as a ‘silent fog’ that draws together all things and people, including even itself, into a strange indifference.⁹⁶ Garborg also has an apt description: ‘I can’t find any better way of referring to it than a mental cold – a cold that has gone to the mind.’⁹⁷ The descriptions vary, from ascribing the numbness and emptiness to the ego and to the world, presumably because it belongs to both spheres. Freud claims that ‘in mourning it is the world that has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.’⁹⁸ As Adam Phillips points out in commenting on this passage: ‘And in boredom, we might add, it is both.’⁹⁹ It is impossible to say if something is boring because one happens to be in a state of boredom or whether one begins to feel bored because the world is bored. It is impossible to make any clear distinction between the respective contributions made by the subject and object to boredom, because the emptiness of the subject and object is so interwoven. Fernando Pessoa describes being affected by boredom as like having the drawbridge over the moat round the castle of our soul suddenly raised, so that there is no longer any connection between the castle and the surrounding land. Further:

I observe myself. I’m my own spectator. My sensations pass, like external things, before I don’t know what gaze of mine. I bore myself no matter what I do. All things, down to their roots in mystery, have the colour of my boredom.¹⁰⁰

Dostoevsky talks at one point about boredom as being a

'bestial and indefinable affliction'.¹⁰¹ This apparently vague description is actually very precise. Boredom is practically indefinable because it lacks the positiveness that is typical of most other phenomena. It is basically to be understood as an absence – an absence of personal meaning. And, as I shall say later in my discussion of Heidegger's analysis of boredom, this loss of meaning reduces human life to something analogous to an existence that is purely animal.

BOREDOM AND NOVELTY

Martin Doehlemann has claimed that boredom is characterized by a dearth of experiences.¹⁰² This applies to situative boredom, where it is something specific, or the lack of something specific, that bores one. Although it ought to be clarified that both a surplus *and* a deficit of experiences can lead to boredom.¹⁰³ Existential boredom, on the other hand, must fundamentally be understood on the basis of a concept of a *dearth of accumulated experience*. The problem is that we try to get beyond this boredom by piling on increasingly new and more potent sensations and impressions, instead of allowing ourselves time to accumulate experience. It is as if we believe that we will manage to establish a substantial self, free of boredom, if only we manage to fill it with a sufficient number of impulses. When one throws oneself at everything that is new, it is with a hope that the new will be able to have an individualizing function and supply life with a personal meaning; but everything new soon becomes old, and the promise of personal meaning is not always fulfilled – at least, not more than just for the time being. The new always quickly turns into routine, and then comes boredom with the new that is always the same, boredom at discovering that everything is intolerably identical behind the false differences between objects and thoughts,¹⁰⁴ as Pessoa expresses it, because the

fashionable always reveals itself as the 'same old thing in a brand new drag', as David Bowie sings in *Teenage Wildlife*.

Modernity has had fashion as a principle, and fashion, as Benjamin said, is 'the eternal recurrence of the *new*'.¹⁰⁵ Fashion is a tremendously important phenomenon.¹⁰⁶ In a world with fashion as a principle we get more stimuli but also more boredom, more emancipation and corresponding slavery, more individuality and more abstract impersonality. The only individuality in fashion is one that consists in out-bidding the others, but for precisely this reason one ends up being completely controlled by them. As Georg Simmel pointed out a century ago, it is actually the case that the leader ends up by being led.¹⁰⁷ And the person who decides to adopt a negative attitude towards fashion by consciously deviating from it – for example, by being unmodern – is just as bound by fashion, because the personal style is simply defined as a negation of fashion.

A fashion object does not strictly speaking need to have any quality except that of being new. *Quality* comes from the Latin *qualitas*, which perhaps can be translated as nature, or character.¹⁰⁸ The quality of an object has to do with what sort of a thing it is, and an object without quality is an object without identity. For earlier societies, things were bearers of continuity and stability, but this is the diametric opposite of the principle of fashion. The principle of fashion is to create an ever more rapid tempo, to make an object superfluous as soon as possible, so as to be able to move on to a new one. Kant was probably right in saying that it is better to be an idiot of fashion than just an idiot,¹⁰⁹ but every idiot of fashion will, sooner or later, be let down. And fashion is impersonal by nature. So it cannot supply us with the personal meaning we are striving for.

When everything becomes interchangeable and, in terms of value, non-different (read: indifferent), genuine preferences become impossible, and we end up either in total

randomness or in a total paralysis of action. Remember Buridan's ass, which starves to death because it cannot cope with having to choose between two identical heaps of food? Rational decisions presuppose preferences, and preferences presuppose differences. The novel that best presents this decadent mania of distinction is probably J.-K. Huysmans' *A Rebours* (1884). In it the Count of Esseintes, ill with boredom, can only bring content into his life by hyper-subtle distinctions and by making well-staged surroundings artificial.¹¹⁰ In Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, the difference between, for example, two types of mineral water or two recordings of *Les Misérables* becomes more important than anything else in life. We distinguish one brand of clothing from another, one malt whisky from another, one sexual practice from another. We are desperate in our search for differences. Fortunately, or regrettably, the advertising industry is there to save us with new distinctions. Advertising is essentially nothing more than creating qualitative differences where there are none. Most products of a certain type (clothing, cars, etc.) are almost completely identical and therefore without *qualitas*, without their own nature. For that reason, it becomes even more important to create a difference that can distinguish products from one another. It is the actual distinction that is important, not its content, for by establishing such differences we hope to maintain a belief that the world still has qualities.

We become major consumers of new things and new people in order to break the monotony of things being the same. Somewhat cryptically, Roland Barthes wrote that 'Boredom is not far removed from desire: it is desire seen from the shores of pleasure.'¹¹¹ I think that pleasure should be understood here as meaning 'the same', while desire should be understood as that which goes beyond 'the same', that which is 'outside' – transcendence. Boredom is immanence in its purest form. The antidote must apparently be transcendence. But how can transcendence be possible within an imma-

nence – and immanence that consists of nothing? For a transcendence has to be a something. How do we escape from nothing to something? And is boredom in its most profound form not characterized by our becoming indifferent as to whether anything exists?¹¹² Jean Baudrillard claims that while the traditional philosophical question used to be ‘Why is there anything at all, rather than nothing?’, the real question today is ‘Why is there just nothing, rather than something?’¹¹³ These are questions that spring from a profound boredom. And in this boredom all of reality is at stake.

Fernando Pessoa describes this emptiness beautifully:

Everything is emptiness, even the idea of emptiness. Everything is said in a language that is incomprehensible to us, a stream of syllables that do not re-echo in our understanding. Life is empty, the soul is empty, the world is empty. All the gods die a death that is greater than death itself. Everything is emptier than emptiness. Everything is a chaos of nothing.

When I think like that, and look around me in the hope that reality must surely quench my thirst, I see expressionless gestures. Stones, bodies, thoughts – everything is dead. All movement has come to a standstill, and everything stands still in the same way. Nothing says anything to me. Nothing is known, though not because I find it strange but because I do not know what it is. The world has been lost. And in the depths of my soul – which is the only thing that is real at this moment – there is a sharp, invisible pain, a sadness that resembles the sound it makes, like tears in a dark room.¹¹⁴