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Boredom on Facebook

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Unlike Us Reader

**SOCIAL MEDIA
MONOPOLIES
AND THEIR
ALTERNATIVES**

Unlike Us Reader

Social Media Monopolies and Their Alternatives

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Unlike Us Reader

SOCIAL MEDIA MONOPOLIES AND THEIR ALTERNATIVES

EDITED BY
GEERT LOVINK
AND **MIRIAM RASCH**
INC READER #8

**BOREDOM
ON FACEBOOK
/
D.E. WITTKOWER**

EXPERIENCE	BORED	VALUE
EMPTY	OTHERS	BEING
SOCIAL	SHARED	PLAY
MEANING	FRIENDS	EXISTENCE

I come to praise boredom, not to bury it. And boredom, for its part, is far from defeated. Indeed, all the more that we take up arms against it, and seek to surround and overtake it, all the more does it stand before us, quiet, resolute, unmoved.

Much can be said against boredom. Boredom is a listless casting-about for purpose; the drifting existential anguish of one's life experienced as meaningless, even if only temporarily so. It is the feeling that nothing is really worth it, where 'it' may be time or effort, and often a vanishingly small amount of either. But boredom is not depression: it does not claim that nothing is *actually* worth it, or that there is no purpose, only that, at this time, we don't feel that purpose, and don't care to get anything done.

Boredom has a perhaps unexpectedly specific political economic history. We see boredom emerge in Europe alongside industrialization. To some extent, it seems, bourgeois life brings freedom from an experience of purpose along with a freedom from want. The availability of leisure time – at least, in the absence of integration in a communal, village life, with its traditions: dance, craft, song, storytelling, etc. – brings the challenge of finding purpose for the emerging middle class. The empty time which the aristocracy had long before learned to occupy with amusement was brought to the bourgeoisie as an element of luxury, but without the thoroughbreds, hunting lands, and private chefs which made that time luxurious. Free time then becomes a precious commodity, worth more than the paltry amusements available to fill it with – unless, of course, we adopt a hobby: an activity which we engage in as a 'pass-time'/pastime without making any claim of its value (for example, we do not claim that everyone ought to be doing the same as we) or even claiming that others should understand why we find it to be a worthy investment of empty hours.¹

Reflecting on this problem of leisure, we may look to this striking passage from Arthur Schopenhauer:

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1. As Theodor Adorno said, 'I have no hobby. Not that I am the kind of workaholic, who is incapable of doing anything with his time but applying himself industriously to the required task. But, as far as my activities beyond the bounds of my recognized profession are concerned, I take them all, without exception, very seriously. So much so, that I should be horrified by the very idea that they had anything to do with hobbies – preoccupations with which I had become mindlessly infatuated merely in order to kill the time – had I not become hardened by experience to such examples of this now widespread, barbarous mentality. Making music, listening to music, reading with all my attention, these activities are part and parcel of my life; to call them hobbies would make a mockery of them'. (Theodor Adorno, 'Free Time', in J.M. Bernstein (ed.) *The Culture Industry*, New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 188–9.)

That human life must be some kind of mistake is sufficiently proved by the simple observation that man is a compound of needs which are hard to satisfy; that their satisfaction achieves nothing but a painless condition in which he is only given over to boredom; and that boredom is a direct proof that existence is in itself valueless, for boredom is nothing other than the sensation of the emptiness of existence. For if life, in the desire for which our essence and existence consists, possessed in itself a positive value and real content, then would be no such thing as boredom: mere existence would fulfill and satisfy us.²

Schopenhauer's view of boredom is in need of deconstruction, in a Heideggerian sense. A short detour to Descartes will be necessary.

In Heidegger's analysis of Descartes in *Being and Time* and 'The Age of the World Picture', among other places in his writing, Cartesian coordinates give to us a view of empty space as primary, with the lived experiences of place as a secondary cultural overlay.³ The truth is the other way around: it is a cultural artifact, and a foundational moment in the age of the modern-scientific world picture, where we begin to say that what is measurable is real, and that whatever makes the world most available to mathematics, exact science, and technological use is what is most real and most true of the world. Much as Bruno Latour found later in the Salk Institute,⁴ here too the result of a sociotechnical process is projected backwards as its own origin: posterior to creating a system whereby all place can be standardized and made available to calculation, the pre-existence of an empty three-dimensional nothingness is metaphysically projected as having been there all along, discovered by rather than created by sociotechnical practices.

Similarly, Schopenhauer finds that leisure and freedom from toil and want give way to a discovery of an underlying boredom, which forms the empty space-time in which our lives occur. His view implies that boredom has always been the fundamental character of existence, and if it has not always seemed this way – and it hasn't – then it is because we have been heretofore too busy and unhappy to notice the quieter background noise of our essential boredom, revealed in leisure and satisfaction like the 60Hz hum of the lights as we sit in an office, staring blindly wondering what next to do.

As is often the case, Friedrich Nietzsche provides a useful correction and expansion to Schopenhauer's misdirected brilliance. We turn to the famous §125 of *The Gay Science*:

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers [...] What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still

2. Arthur Schopenhauer, 'The Vanity of Existence', in *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, New York: Penguin, 2004, pp. 53–4.

3. Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, New York: Harper, 1977; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, New York: State University of New York Press, 1996.

4. Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979.

any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?⁵

God is dead today because god is not God. The centrality of the Church in European society gave way to the marketplace, where this pseudo-Diogenes raises his voice and hoists his lantern. The purposelessness felt in boredom is not a truth underlying existence *per se*, but rather a product of this historical moment, as Lars Svendsen⁶ and Elizabeth Goodstein⁷ have also argued. It is not the vanity of existence that is revealed in boredom, but the vanity of modernity. It is in modernity's quiet moments when we begin to smell the divine putrefaction, and, through this, the time when the madman can be heard begins to near.

It is to this that I will now turn: the sense in which boredom stands before us as a threat, a challenge, an opportunity. Let me sing now a panegyric to boredom, a hymn of praise to this experience of emptiness – for it is, as Heidegger has argued, a *clearing*.

Here, like Lars Svendsen in *A Philosophy of Boredom*, I follow Heidegger's analysis of boredom in his *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*⁸ only up to a certain point, but veer away from metaphysics into practical ethics. I'm not interested, at the moment at least, in boredom as a clearing that gives us an opening to the question of the meaning of being, but rather as a clearing that gives us an opening to the question of our particular being – a clearing from which we can view *Dasein* rather than *Sein*.

Boredom as a dissatisfaction with what lies before us is, as Walter Benjamin has claimed in Convolute D of his *Arcades Project*, 'the threshold to great deeds',⁹ which is fundamentally optimistic. It is a seeking out and a moving forward, compelled by the breath of empty space and the stench of the rotting god. Being bored by something motivates a break, a change, and as such a motivation, requires an opening up of possibilities. Boredom-by, in this way, is the clearing away, the emotional negation of the past and the established, which opens a space of innovation.

But we are not only bored-by; we are sometimes gripped by a more fundamental boredom, an objectless boredom in which we are not only bored by what we are doing, but bored by the things we could be doing as well. This too is an opening and a clearing away, and provides a space for open reflection, not in how to reach a goal, but in our values themselves.

We shy away from this existential boredom, and fail to worry that we are losing something of value. With our children, as they become ever busier with school, music lessons, sports, and so forth, we worry that they are losing their interiority and self-direc-

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage, 1974, pp. 181–2.

6. Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, trans. John Irons, London: Reaktion, 2005.

7. Elizabeth Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

8. Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1995.

9. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 105.

tion, since they are never confronted by free time. Similarly, we worry that with toys that dictate certain forms of play, and which come pre-packaged with their own narratives, our children are losing capacities for imagination, creativity, and story-telling, better supported by childhoods running through forests and parks, playing with sticks and cardboard boxes. Should we not worry that adults stand to suffer similar losses through the devaluation of, and attempt to, eliminate boredom?

I hasten to say, though, that tedium, circumstantially necessary and unavoidable boredom, is not such an opening, and deserves no praise. Those who are bored by the necessary steps of continuing forth, and have no other options – those working multiple jobs just to get by day-to-day, who are denied creative opportunities, and have few alternatives – to them boredom is a pain unredeemed in the absence of the opening of alternatives.

Boredom that disguises itself from itself is also not deserving of praise. The ‘entertainment’ taken in watching whatever happens to be on television, for example, is a form of boredom that calls itself pleasure, and in this deception allows empty experience to persist without being impelled toward questioning and reconsideration. Sometimes it is admittedly desirable to shut off the brain and stare blankly at something that does not occupy the mind, but this form of boredom that hides from itself does not present the virtues of boredom to us.

Being bored along with others, however, is a process of creating meaning when it does not collapse into boredom in disguise. Watching television with others, for example, may be as empty as watching alone. But it can also be an occasion for snide comments, heckling, and conversation; far more creative and active forms of doing nothing in particular.

Being actively bored along with others is, in fact, a primary source of meaning in our lives. We find it important to take time to sit around with friends, go to lunch, out for drinks, or just waste time together. This is not because there is anything terribly important about the content of this time. It is not important because we speak of anything important; usually we do not. It is certainly not important because we are eating an important sandwich. It is meaningful because it is a space free of purpose, of needs, of ends, and therefore a space where collaborative creativity in *creating* meaning can be practiced. Whether anything of value comes out of that practice is not only beside the point, it is even *against* the point.

These meaningful moments of boredom-alongside are meaningful because they are stretches of time devoid of meaning, in which means have no end and therefore cannot be means, in which we are given free play in the creation of meaning and value on our own terms. Just as in Kant’s aesthetic theory from his *Critique of Judgment*,¹⁰ disinterestedness is a precondition of the perception of beauty, which is our enjoyment of the free play of understanding and imagination. Similarly, boredom is a precondition (though not a necessary one) of ‘hanging out’ and ‘quality time’, which are constituted by our enjoyment of the collaborative free play of our ability to determine our own values and define meaningfulness in our lives. Boredom is our experience of the greatest

10. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987.

weight, to invoke Nietzsche once more: the burden of modernity in the experience of our lives as without purpose. But it is also the gateway to the greatest possibility of modernity (that we should create meaning along with others) and we find being bored along with others to be meaningful because it gives us the experience of doing so.

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It has taken us quite some time to get to the second part of the topic of this text, and I'm sure I have tried your patience. (Perhaps you have become bored?) But here we reach it. Having outlined the value, meaning, and meaningfulness of boredom of certain kinds, I can finally make the claim that one of the great successes of Facebook is the way in which it allows us to be bored together.

To be sure, there are ways of being bored on Facebook that are not deserving of praise, just as there are unpraiseworthy forms of boredom in our lives offline. Just as we may flee from boredom into mindless entertainment through the empty gaze of watching whatever happens to be on television, so too may we mindlessly occupy our time in *Farmville* or other antisocial forms of 'social games'.¹¹ But Facebook games may also be engaged in as a social activity among friends. Like watching something along with friends may be made into a social activity through heckling and conversation, so too may the pastime of gaming – perhaps *Words with Friends* or *Draw Something* may be better examples here than *Farmville* – be made into a social experience and a convivial way of filling empty time.

A more insidious form of fleeing boredom into entertainment is the approach to the friend feed, which seeks distraction and approaches friends as mere content providers rather than friends. Here, our boredom is treated as an isolated fact: we say 'I'm bored', and approach the friend feed as a source of unengaged entertainment. We might call this 'friendertainment'.

By contrast, we look often enough at the feed not as a source of distraction and friendertainment, but as a great crowd of friends and family engaged in conversations which we are implicitly or explicitly invited to join. Here, the value of boredom emerges, and emerges in a way well supported by the communications structures and affordances of the Facebook platform.

The conglomeration of large portions of our offline and online social graphs in a single location ensures that, when we find ourselves bored, we can easily find others we care about who are also bored and seeking to start conversations, share experiences, and play. Aimless navigation to a single site opens up a wealth of opportunities for sociality, without having to determine in advance whether, for example, we might wish to be bored along with others by getting into an argument, sharing common views, hearing about their kids, or watching something together. The simple practice of, as we say in American English, 'shooting the shit', need not wait for a leisurely afternoon appointment for coffee or beers, but may be taken up at any given moment when we are waiting for the beans to finish cooking, folding the laundry, standing on queue, or avoiding something tedious but 'important'.

11. See for example, Elizabeth Losh, 'With Friends Like These, Who Needs Enemies?', in D.E. Wittkower (ed.) *Facebook and Philosophy*, Chicago: Open Court, 2010, pp. 33-48.

Facebook also provides for collaboratively interpreted shared media experiences as a social practice of boredom and the play of meaning creation. When we share a music video, a cat video, a picture of a baby otter, or any other audiovisual content, we are making two implicit statements: first, that we have watched and enjoyed this, and second, that we are inviting others to view and experience this as if alongside us. When we watch something that someone else has shared, we watch it with the imagined co-presence of our friend alongside us; we imagine her reactions, and look out for the content's merits informed by our knowledge of her taste and sense of humor. As I have argued elsewhere,¹² the result is best understood not as merely watching some content or other, but as an asynchronous shared experience at a distance, for the value we find in it inheres at least as closely to our friendship as it does with enjoyment of the content for its own sake, especially when the posting is accompanied by commentary and interpretation, and when we follow up on the threaded-commentary format of the posting by engaging in discussion and banter.

Although this is more commonly done on Twitter, Facebook is also used for ongoing synchronous commentary on shared experiences at a distance; for example, posting status updates about or live-tweeting a prominent political speech or popular television program. In a recent example, many users produced a collaborative live commentary and discussion for the Summer Olympics, resulting in a social backchannel to otherwise isolated media consumption, and producing numerous spoilers for those watching events with a time-delayed broadcast.



Author unknown. Retrieved from <http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/233301-condescending-wonka>.

In many cases, though, the shared experience at a distance is online-native. Alongside discussion, debate, and advice-seeking, we engage in memetic play, sharing lolcats, political images, humor, and simple silliness. 'Meaningless' play in meaning-creation abounds on Facebook, and spins off into systems of communicative elements which persist apart from any reference or importance outside of themselves. Ceiling cat and the Lolrus have their own narratives, open to and robust enough to support playful interaction within those narratives themselves, as in the crowd-authored Lolcat bible, as well as being ported out into commentary and interpretation of life outside of these memetic spaces. 'Condescending Wonka' has taken on a distinctive role in political argumentation; 'Y U NO Guy' allows a playful way of voicing frustration and criticism.

Facebook not only provides these various affordances for performing the active boredom that gives us an experience of free-play in value creation, but also provides a touchstone which supports carrying over the practice of active boredom into our lives outside of Facebook. The online détournement of 'websurfing' is transformed from a reception of content to a series of potentially shared experiences. The ready sharability

12. D.E. Wittkower, 'Friend is a Verb', *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and Computers* 12.1 (Fall 2012): n.p.

of new media, along with Facebook's constant background presence (either figuratively or literally – in a background window), results in a social reading and viewing of material. As we wander around online, we find our friends' interests engaged along with our own, and take note not only of those things which we find engaging, but also those things that others will value, care about, or be angered by. We need not regard this as a mere illusion of sociality, but an ideation of social experience that is often enough realized through subsequent sharing and asynchronous shared experiences. In our offline lives as well, living with Facebook in the background produces an active boredom wherein we narrate our experiences to ourselves, and see them as already occurring in the context of a future retroactive sociality and shared process of interpretation and reflection. The future gaze of the absent friend transforms our current empty time into a prospective experience of boredom-alongside, allowing us to find our current boredom not as empty time under the tedious meaningless of which we suffer, but as time wasted along with others: leisure well but purposelessly spent.



Author unknown. Retrieved from <http://memegenerator.net/instance/23997416>.

We can see a kind of performative confirmation of these claims in the much-derided practice of photographing pictures of your lunch. As discussed before, it is a natural thing to ask your friend what they're getting as you sit together looking through a menu, and to ask how her lunch is as you eat. Yet this does not have to do with any inherent value in this particular sandwich, nor is it (for the most part) self-interested angling for an offer to taste it. We ask because we care for our friend, and desire an experience of closeness; her experience of the dish is of interest because we desire to share lunch, and information of the inner experiences of our friend is a part of the shared event.

The impulse to take a picture of your lunch and post it to Facebook or Twitter only makes sense when we view this as an invitation to participate in a shared asynchronous experience at a distance. The picture of the sandwich is not self-important or narcissistic. The picture of the sandwich is an invitation to have lunch together.

These ways in which Facebook supports a kind of active boredom-alongside play a significant and unobvious role in Facebook's success. This role is unobvious, for the most part, because boredom is undervalued and misunderstood, hence the need for such a large portion of this chapter to be devoted to a rehabilitation of boredom. Nonetheless, as little as we might understand and consciously value boredom, boredom plays a large role in our lives, and the provision of affordances for valuable forms of boredom has a significant impact on the user experience, and on the value that users obtain through the platform. This is not diminished by the user's unawareness of the importance of boredom; boredom is still something we engage in, and seek to engage in well.

As we look to understand Facebook's success, we should not ignore boredom. And as we look to what alternatives may effectively replace the social and individual functions of Facebook, we certainly cannot ignore Facebook's role as a platform for both friendertainment and active boredom of a praiseworthy sort.

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