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Chapter 7 Experimentations in Pandemic Boredom

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The quarantines, lockdowns and practices of social distancing during the global COVID-19 pandemic have been identified as a "boom time for boredom" (e.g., Rosenwald 2020; Hunt 2020). With the calls to stay at home, travels aborted and cities going in lockdown, life-spheres were quickly and violently reorganized and shrunk across continents. Days could seem to follow one another without much change to their rhythm and scenery in an undifferentiated temporality akin to something like a perpetual Tuesday, so that "three out of every four Americans have reported being bored stiff" (Blades 2021). The diagnoses of epidemic boredom within the COVID-19 pandemic have owed to the lack of physical mobility or sociability extending beyond networked, screen-based encounters, these themselves turning dull especially for those whose work tasks require them, day in and day out. Not being able to go out and get about is, simply, boring.

On a meta-level, the coronavirus pandemic has been identified as something of a "natural experiment" in both experiencing boredom and studying it (Talbot 2020).

> If you wanted to design an experiment to bring about boredom, you couldn't do better than the pandemic. Cooped up in our homes and apartments, we've been stripped of our everyday routine and structure. And without distractions, we are left feeling understimulated. It is this state of restless desire to do something – anything! – without a way of achieving our goal (if we even know what it is) that is the essence of boredom. (Friedman 2020)

Boredom is basically a matter of affective flatness – not an affect as such. If considered an affective experiment, the pandemic then focuses attention on a blandness of experience where intensities of feeling come across as lacking even as these are keenly desired (Anderson 2021, p. 198).

While it is banal to claim that, during the time of this writing late in the year 2020, we are living in historic times (since this is technically always the case), there is little doubt as to the specificity of this moment of crisis and uncertainty. The degree to which this moment was particular in the degrees of boredom it evoked is, however, a different matter, given that cultural diagnoses have foregrounded boredom as a key cultural zeitgeist characteristic, dynamic, symptom and symbol well before the year 2020. Concerns with affective flatness, or even nothingness, as being characteristic to the socio-cultural moment are both tenacious and long-standing; melancholy, ennui and boredom were all seen to comprise a 19th-century *mal du siècle* (Anderson 2004; Goodstein 2005; Toohey 1988).

This chapter argues that the specific circumstances of the pandemic moment offer avenues for thinking through the continuities, discontinuities and paradoxes involved in zeitgeist diagnoses of boredom in cultural inquiry, and asks what considerations of ambiguity may add to our understanding of its shape and impact. In doing so, it makes use of analyses of boredom brought forth by lockdowns to experiment with ways of differently understanding cultural diagnoses of boredom as they connect to networked media in particular. A moment in which the shortage of distractions, not their ample supply, and the lack of routines, not their grinding repetition, are seen to result in boredom involves a discursive reversal of causes, effects and cures. This, I argue, offers productive avenues to think about how the affective flatness of boredom comes about and how people live with it.

Starting with the figure of stalled time and fixed place within the pandemic, this chapter examines the ambiguities of boredom in a broader temporal perspective. It addresses

the argued specificity of boredom as a modern mood and form experience, asking what methodological choices have contributed to broad consensus on the issue. Shifting focus to psychological and sociological inquiry, it then attends to the different, often mixed accounts of boredom where media is seen as both its cause and cure. Moving from cultural theory to contextual circumstance and back again, the chapter asks what kinds of worlds boredom is seen to build as it is presented as a problem, a solution and as a more ambiguously positioned rhythm of experience. Finally, by addressing ambiguity in studies of affect, it argues against dualistic divides drawn between that which paralyzes (boredom) and animates (excitement) bodies, tending towards seemingly irreconcilable yet coexisting dynamics of feeling instead.

Flattened out

Across disciplinary divides, scholars generally define boredom as an issue of diminished potentiality, interest and liveliness that eats away at enjoyment taken in life, so that things no longer hold interest or seem to matter (Anderson 2004, p. 740). As interest gets sucked away, time itself seems to be grinding to a halt and one's capacity to act in the world becomes atrophied: “Nothing seems to happen and thus time seems to stand still” (Slaby 2010, p. 101; Mann and Robinson 2009, p. 243). This may be an issue of circumstance: “A sense of boredom or simple tedium may be the result of, say, being shut up too long” (Toohey 1988, p. 151) – as with COVID-19 lockdowns and quarantines where affective blandness has been primarily identified as an issue of circumstance. Within these, the “shrunk space and time also feels too spacey and too long, a time of boredom that feels insignificant to and incompatible with the time of the crisis” (Xin 2020, p. 35); the present moment “seems to be dragging itself along unbearably, it is as if nothing leads up to it and nothing will come of it” (Johnsen 2011, p. 485). As an “experience without qualities”, boredom then opens up

something of an existential crisis, spanning from disaffection felt toward one's conditions of life to a felt sense of meaninglessness (Goodstein 2005, p. 406).

Boredom within cultural theory has been largely defined as a modern phenomenon connected to overload of external stimuli that distracts people to boredom. More specifically, this overload has been associated with the speeds of modernity, capitalism and their mechanised systems of production, transport and mediation. For Walter Benjamin (2002, p. 108–109), the mass phenomenon of boredom "began to be experienced in epidemic proportions in the 1840s" as "weariness with life, deep depressions, boredom" resonant with the rhythms of industrial labour. In what is something of a founding argument in studies of boredom and modernity, the titillations of urban cities and the accelerating speeds of entertainment rendered focus impossible and gave rise to a blasé outlook of bored indifference: given the plethora of things to choose from, it became hard to choose, focus or care at all (Simmel 2002). This development accelerated with the emergence of modern media culture, from the cinema to the radio, and beyond, that bombarded the senses with audiovisual stimuli (Benjamin [1968] 2007; Kracauer [1963] 1995; Duttlinger 2007). The rhythms of modernity have been seen as simply incompatible with human cognition and sensation, and as feeding nervousness, unease, distraction and boredom. With industrialisation, both the production and consumption of culture, it is argued, sped up the rhythms of experience so that people just could not – and still cannot – keep up (Crary 1999; Anderson 2021, p. 201–202).

Boredom has, in sum, been conceptualised as an outcome of modern capitalism and its multiple logics of monetisation where the rhythms of labour are relentless, where people are extensions to the machine and where premodern communities have been replaced with urban alienation. In connection to this, boredom has been identified as an outcome of leisure-time as it became differentiated in the course of industrialisation. Ennui, as historically

identified with the idleness of the social elite (aka "the leisure class"), gave way to a dominant cultural mood of boredom across social strata (Leslie 2009), one "completely lacking and without profound resonance" (Haladyn and Gardiner 2017, p. 5). Following this line of argumentation, ennui was once the plague of the powerful with ample time on their hands while members of the lower social classes, tied to the grind of physical labour, were excluded from its grasp. With modernisation, consumer culture and mediated forms of entertainment came an affective flattening wherein idleness no longer yielded meaning (Thiele 1997, p. 492).

For Henri Lefebvre ([1958] 1991, p. 228), the boredom and greyness of everyday life, "its repetition of the same actions", are products of modernity where communal ties have been broken: "the all-too well known problem of saturation, of boredom, of lightning transitions from interest to tedium, produce techniques aimed at overcoming those very reactions" (Lefebvre 1995, p. 166). Yet others argue that the boring distractions of modernity render deep or profound boredom impossible, hence stopping people from reflecting on the nothingness – or, depending on perspective, the richness – of their being (e.g., Heidegger 1995; Kracauer [1963] 1995). Consequently, people never manage to be bored enough so that their experiences remain diminished. Boredom then meanders through a broad, heterogeneous range of cultural theory as something that results both from too much stimuli and from the stimuli being too flat and commodified; from there being either too much or too little to sense and to make sense of; and from lives growing empty, not being empty enough or not being empty in the right way.

Boredom and historical context

Despite the range and diversity of academic work currently conducted under the interdisciplinary umbrella of 'boredom studies', it is premised on boredom being coupled to

modernity to the degree that understanding one necessitates accounting for the other. This premise is often backed up through etymology: although similar words have existed in other languages well before the 19th century, the argument goes, it is the introduction of the English term of boredom to popular discourse that encapsulates novel forms of experience so that modernity and boredom grow strictly interconnected (Pezze and Salzani 2009, p. 5).

To map out boredom as both "a reflective moment on the nature of subjective experience" and as a "conceptual framework for sociocultural critique" (Haladyn and Gardiner 2017, p. 4), scholars often ground their arguments on analysis of literary texts so that, following Raymond Williams (1977), boredom is seen as a modern structure of feeling. Methodologically, the centrality of literary analysis raises the question of cultural forms and historical context, given that the modern novel, like the English word for boredom, was a product of the 18th century that gained dominance during the 1800s (Watt 1957). As a cultural form, the novel expanded possibilities for reflecting on both social contexts and individual life-worlds, experiences and feelings, which concomitantly became the foci of academic inquiry in the emergent fields of psychology and sociology.

How writerly focus on people's experiential horizons in literary realism and in the Victorian novel connects to the emergence of the vocabulary on boredom is, however, far from self-evident. Rather than identifying accounts of boredom in 19th-century literature as speaking of something distinctly novel and unique to the moment, it can also be the case that the language around the shapes and nuances of experience expanded in fiction and social sciences alike during this period, and that the centrality of boredom in accounts of modernity owes to such expansions. The emergence of literary accounts does not prove that the experiences described were unequivocally new as such.

Concepts such as *taedium vitae* (profound ennui) and *acedia* (lethargy or listlessness) descriptive of affective flatness were in use in classical Antiquity and early Christian texts,

even as boredom scholars are firm in the argument that the "modern form of boredom . . . has no direct analogue in earlier types of subjective malaise" (Haladyn and Gardiner 2017, 5). Meanwhile, classics and religion scholars examining the uses of the notion of *acadia* from Hippocrates to medieval times position boredom much more freely as its cause or synonym (Benvenuto 2018; Wenzel 2017). Peter Toohey (1988, p. 151), for example, opens his discussion of ancient notions of boredom by stating that

> through fifteen hundred years of Western culture the notion of boredom has been a vital one. Ranging from dark age and medieval monastic acedia, from the 'English disease' of the seventeenth, eighteenth centuries and the French Enlightenment, from the *mal de* [*sic*] *siècle* of nineteenth-century Europe, to the 'nausea' and alienation of twentieth-century existentialists and Marxists, the concept has had a long and powerful history.

For Toohey, the phenomenological experience of boredom has simply been described with a different vocabulary across centuries.

Within sociology, modernity has been mapped out against the enchantments of premodernity characterised by communal belonging, even magic, so that the routine-bound and socially stratified lives of farmers and servants – somewhat paradoxically – come to stand in for lost fullness of experience (see Bennett 2001; Paasonen 2020; on historical imagination and premodernity, see also D'Arcens and Lynch 2018). According to this line of argumentation, running through the work of Karl Marx to Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Émile Durkheim, modern capitalism destroyed the enchantments, belongings and sociabilities of previous forms of life, breeding alienation and estrangement instead. Premodernity is the necessary comparator against which modernity and its structures of feelings have been

outlined (Schnell 2020, p. 9), yet as disagreements between those studying premodern and modern boredoms show, neat periodisations are not easily achieved when addressing forms of experience in a historical context.

Attempts to demonstrate the specificity of boredom as a modern experience – of which there is no easy consensus across disciplines – through historical sources are met with methodological challenges in that such documentation does not extend to people's everyday experiences, and especially not to those with lower social status. We simply have limited access to how premodern life was experienced beyond those who could write and whose records have been preserved, namely members of the clergy and the social elite. The speeds and boredoms of conveyor belt labour differ in obvious ways from the repetitive rhythms and chores of premodern manual labour. However, given the degree to which studies of everyday life have identified mundane repetitive routines, habits and rhythms as not merely that which structure the quotidian but also as that which fundamentally bores (Highmore 2004), it can be asked how we can know that premodern lives – unaffected by media technologies, urban thrills and the rhythms of capitalism – were free of boredom.

As historical imagination does not necessarily meet historical evidence, there are few means of knowing how rich or flat, magical or dull, meaningful or boring premodern lives may have felt. And if this is something we cannot know for the lack of historical documentation, the argument for boredom as a uniquely modern phenomenon is less solid than it may appear within its reiterations. This also means that the causal logic that sees the media as an apparatus for boredom is open to questioning.

Rescues from boredom

Twentieth-century cultural diagnoses saw boredom, as the general flattening of experience, spreading horizontally across Western societies as an affective pandemic of sorts with the aid

of film, radio and television. More recently, networked media, and social media in particular, have been identified as machines of boredom in their habitual rhythms capturing users in numbed blandness of "digital disaffect" (Lorenz 2018; Petit 2015). There is considerable continuity to these diagnoses, even as the contexts and examples they address, from 1930s cinema to 2020s Instagram cultures, differ drastically. For Michael Hand (2017, p. 116), contemporary life, of which social media forms a ubiquitous part, marks an intensification of modern boredom in its "fragmentation, repetitiveness, standardisation and commodification" where the speeding up of life results in uniformity of experience and where people passively engage with trivia to distract themselves. Social media then become the terrain of "'digital boredom' which characterises contemporary life as technologically mediated, repetitive, rushed and denying solitude and in which multiple practices of presencing, tracking and connecting are at once efforts to alleviate boredom, contributing to experiences of boredom, and occluding the possibility of a more profound boredom" (Hand 2017, p. 115).

As much of everyday life – from schooling to work tasks, shopping and social interaction – shifted online with COVID-19, networked media, addressed as a tool for boredom in many an academic and journalistic account, became reframed as an instrument for managing it. Social media has been identified as a coping mechanism among adolescents dealing with COVID-19 anxiety (Cauberghe et al. 2020) and the networked excitements on offer – "a new dance on TikTok"; "a virtual vacation, . . . book club, cooking club, or a club that studies medieval art" (Westgate 2020; Sreenivasa and Weinberg 2020) – have been recommended as cures for COVID-19 boredom (e.g., Chao et al. 2020). No longer a figure of rush or solitude denied, social media have been reframed as the means to set in motion time that feels to be standing still and for breaking away from social isolation. As face-to-face communication, which critics of networked exchanges routinely position as more authentic, real, meaningful and threatened by ubiquitous social media use (e.g., Turkle 2014), has posed

the risk of infection with potentially lethal consequences, familiar lines of argumentation have been at least temporarily reorganized.

Psychological literature differentiates between circumstantial state boredom as “both the (objective) neurological state of low arousal and the (subjective) psychological state of dissatisfaction, frustration, or disinterest in response to the low arousal” and trait boredom as an individual propensity to experience boredom (Vogel-Walcutt et al. 2012, p. 102). In this framing, situations can be boring, and some people are more easily bored than others. Bringing understimulation together with sensations of frustration, anxiety and stuckness in situations beyond one’s control, the pandemic has been seen to result in broad state boredom that people find hard to cope with (Martarelli and Wolff 2020). It has been especially seen to threaten those susceptible to boredom by trait so that they may resort to “excessive drinking, abusing drugs (for example, stimulants), overeating, or even compulsive use of social media” (Sreenivasan and Weinberger 2020).

To amend this and to help people out of boredom during lockdowns, psychologists Shoba Sreenivasan and Linda E. Weinberger (2020) provide a series of tips, from adding fun to one’s routines to connecting with others, exercising, cultivating one’s curiosity, treating oneself (within the confines of moderation), trying to veer away from doomscrolling news updates, and cultivating gratitude and kindness in accordance with the tenets of positive psychology. Social psychologist Erin C. Westgate (2020) chimes in with suggestions of reminding oneself of the meaning and purpose of social distancing, finding rhythm and structure to one’s daily routines, embracing novelty, making room for guilty pleasures and connecting with others. Here, both networked media and habitual routines, largely identified as causes for contemporary boredom, shift discursively to act as cures instead. It is such shifting of causes, effects and cures, I argue, that renders the pandemic moment productive as an experiment in boredom in both experiential and analytical sense.

Originally writing in the mid-1970s, Stan Cohen and Laurie Taylor (1992, p. 45) saw routines giving rise to "boredom, monotony, tedium, despair" that people try to momentarily escape through casual distractions. This line of thinking, where the stuckness and repetition of habitual routines yields boredom bears resemblance to Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's (2000, p. 141) contemporaneous discussion on the ubiquity and pervasiveness of boredom and anxiety in everyday life that are countered with attempts at managing, avoiding and alleviating tedium – for example, by daydreaming, reading or watching television. Csíkszentmihályi (2000, p. 3) associates boredom especially with work in contrast to leisure catering different kinds of pleasures: "the former is what we have to do most of the time against our desire; the latter is what we like to do, although it is useless". While Csíkszentmihályi goes on to challenge this dichotomous view of work and play, he basically considers boredom as an issue of motivation and pleasure connected to circumstance. It then follows that boredom, shifts and lifts, and ranges in its pervasiveness without qualifying as a general crisis of meaning, and certainly without being an outcome of leisure as such.

A similar notion of boredom management emerged in students accounts of mundane media and communication technology use that I collected for my class on media and networks from 2012 to 2018. It described browsing social media during boring lectures and other tedious circumstances – bus rides, solitary lunches – where the surrounding world held little interest. Some students described their personal networked devices as primary foci of entertainment so that if a mobile phone or laptop broke down or the network connection failed to work boredom grew imminent: "Often, when things are frustratingly boring, I open the computer as last resort in order to have the Net entertain me. If the Net doesn't work, I'm doomed to boredom." This account echoes promises attached to social media in corporate rhetoric as the loci of virtually endless novelty, entertainment and distraction – catered, for

example, by clickbait such as Bored Panda, Boreburn and Boredom Therapy promising to battle the impending boredoms of everyday life (Kendall 2018).

The call for users to engage with social media as a means of escaping boredom is, of course, diametrically opposed to critiques according to which social media itself bores. The case is nevertheless less clear-cut than it may appear given how it becomes the task of individual users to manage the flows of available data in order to be un-bored, even as how these flows are algorithmically curated according to the principle of homophily, love of the same, where similarity is seen to attract and breed similarity (Chun 2018). The already seen and the novel, the boring and the interesting intermesh in rhythms where one can be alternatively "bored, not bored, bored, not bored, bored" (Petit 2015, p. 180).

As social media is figured to be a solution to boredom, the challenge is to find sufficiently novel and interesting content as a curatorial quest of sorts. Tina Kendall (2018, p. 81) identifies social media users as "above all as boredom managers – agents who are responsible for, and capable of coordinating, the affective texture of their own experience as it unfolds in real time". The affective texture of experience simply takes work, even when the activities involved are those of leisure or ones aiming to lift the boredom of work tasks. As in Csíkszentmihályi's discussion of boredom and pleasure, a binary division between work and play then fails to hold – not least given the degree to which the spaces and times of work and leisure intermesh. In what Melissa Gregg (2011) addresses as "presence bleed", smart devices and mobile technologies move work into the personal realm so that labour extends well beyond formal workplaces and working hours. This bleed is further accelerated within the pandemic for those who have worked remotely from home using the same -devices for occupational tasks as for the purposes of entertainment and reorganizing their work hours around private and domestic commitments.

Following the diagnostic frame of modernity and boredom, all this would speak of the tedium of life in industrialised capitalism that offers mediated distractions as placebos of kinds to the ills that it itself causes, adding to further shallowness and unhappiness. My interests lie in less definite and causal accounts of the experiential horizons of networked media that leave room for affective ambiguity – the ambiguities of boredom included. I find it necessary to move to more contextually grounded forms of inquiry that are open to the complexities of everyday life and the diverse affective ranges within which it is experienced. This calls for more flexible and expansive ways of understanding how affective flatness oscillates with interest, excitement, pleasure and surprise in both quotidian rhythms and in patterns of social media use. Since a discussion of my empirical work on affective ambiguity and networked media is not possible here due to limitations of space (see Paasonen 2021), I offer something of an exemplary anecdote instead.

Networked frivolity

During the first wave of COVID-19 lockdowns in the spring of 2020, it became an international trend for people to recreate famous artworks at home with the domestic materials at hand and to share the outcome on social media, tagged as #quarantinart, #isolationart, #covidclassics, and things beyond. People recreated art historical classics as live tableaus in mundane spaces, documenting them and posting the remakes and originals side by side for others to witness, compare and hopefully enjoy. The shots foregrounded circumstantial creativity where the human and inhuman bodies of classical paintings were replaced with something completely different: collar lace with hoarded toilet paper; animal models with human ones, and vice versa; helmets with tinfoil hats; swords with toilet brushes; and gallant horses with wheelchairs, perplexed dogs, annoyed cats and fluffy toy unicorns.

Calls for re-enactments were shared by art museums that were forced to close their doors and extend audience outreach to digital platforms. The efforts of some social media groups, such as the Russian Izoizolyacia, grew viral. In a thread that I myself found particularly gratifying, a Facebook group dedicated to photos of bad art found in second-hand shops around the world was temporarily reimagined as these shops were no longer open. People then turned to recreating images of previously posted, often markedly bizarre and maladroit pieces of visual art, some of which had gained hundreds, if not thousands of likes, wows, hahas and snarky comments, effectively forming a contingent and contextually bound canon of amazingly terrible art. With great care and attention to detail, people crawled around in their backyards, refashioned their living rooms, painted their bodies and repurposed domestic objects, family members and companion species as more or less willing props in order to approximate such lowbrow objects of art.

Such networked silliness is hardly novel in social media that thrives on the sharing of memes and cat videos, nor was recreational creativity a zeitgeist phenomenon specific to the year 2020. I suggest that this particular strand of frivolity, combined with the degrees of care and attention that people put into their recreations for the sheer purpose of merriment, pushes analysis beyond easy juxtaposition between the silly and the serious, things that distract and those that matter. These shared, often laborious recreations speak of finding interesting things to do under conditions that threaten to flatten one's sense of liveliness – and, no less crucially, of the pleasures gained from participating in networked social theatre unfolding in posts, comments and reactions. Since new pictures of bad art could not be shared, previously bad art became the focus of creative making in a collective effort of, and experiment in affective management. Some motivated their efforts through attempts of fighting boredom; some just felt otherwise compelled.

Whatever was being done here in terms of boredom, broad diagnoses of ubiquitously bland, flat and meaningless modernity (and late modernity), as repeatedly evoked in cultural theory, fail to do the critical work required for analysing it. In order to explain at least some of this, it is necessary to consider mundane fascinations and boredoms in more expansive and ambivalent terms – be it in the pandemic context, or beyond. Conceptualised as a "natural experiment", lockdowns can be productively used for critically revisiting the master narrative of boredom so that contextual nuance and ambiguity become central concerns and analytical foci. Within the pandemic, boredom has been diagnosed to emerge from the lack of external stimulus rather than from its excessive supply while both networked media and quotidian routines are seen to afford releases from the heaviness of boredom, rather than function as their cause. All this sets established conceptualisations of boredom in motion and helps to foreground discontinuities and ambiguities that cut across them. What may come across as a uniform telling of affective flatness is, on closer inspection, rife with paradox and discontinuity, from the limits of methodological choices to disagreements over historical periodisation or the causes of and the cures for boredom.

Following Csíkszentmihályi, Cohen and Taylor alike, boredom remains perpetually present and is therefore ultimately impossible to escape: it is less a spectral threat looming on the horizon than a quotidian backdrop or base note for the rhythms of everyday life. Minor and major instances of interest, excitement and desire cutting into and playing with boredom entail shifts in rhythm and intensity that move bodies from one state to another (also Paasonen 2018, p. 227). In different ways, sociological and psychological queries have framed the affective flatness of boredom as oscillating with affective intensities that make things matter and increase the pleasure taken in life. As boredom is set in an active dynamic with interest, joy, anger, and a range of affectations beyond, experience itself entails their fundamental inseparability. Rather than understanding boredom as the opposite of

enchantment or excitement, the issue can then be conceptualised as one of shifting intensities and qualities of experience – as in the cycles of "bored, not bored, bored, not bored, bored".

Writing on the affordances of hyper-casual gaming in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns, Liu Xin (2020) points out that the repetitive rhythms of networked media do not just bore and dull: they can equally function as techniques of self-care that maintain and possibly add to the liveliness of bodies. This means that routine and repetitive things (such as the rhythms of a casual game or the newsfeed of a social media platform) can be enchanting and comforting precisely due to their dullness, so that predictability and routine intermesh in ways irreducible to the specific circumstance within which they are experienced. Repetitive routines oscillate in sharper and duller registers of attention and feeling so that it is not possible to mark them as being either causes of or cures for boredom.

Ambiguities of boredom

As a "boom time for boredom", the COVID-19 pandemic is argued to be historically specific. Meanwhile, broad diagnoses of boredom and modernity have remained relatively unaffected by 20th century crises and times of rupture, such as the "Spanish" flu pandemic (1918–1920), the Great Depression (c. 1929–1939) or the First and Second World Wars (1914–1918; 1939–1945) all of which, in different ways, undid the conditions and rhythms of life, and life itself, on expansive and radical scales. The predominance of boredom in cultural analysis amounts to something of a master narrative recounted in different variations without sufficiently attending to contextual specificities and multiplicities of experience, as these are bound to play out under different regional, economic, legal and political circumstances among people of varying ages, genders, ethnicities, classes, religions, abilities or citizenship statuses. As Hand (2017, p. 124) notes, the narrative of digital boredom that he sets forth comprises "a largely melancholic, romantic and often pejorative critique of everyday life"

that does not aid explorations in the ambiguity of networked exchanges. The same applies to many other retellings of modernity, media and boredom.

There is persistent ambiguity to boredom, despite the seemingly unequivocal qualities of affective flatness that define it. For Alison Pease (2012, p. 4), “boredom is experienced as an irritating emptiness, a desire for something unknown to relieve the claustrophobic, enervating sense of time passing slowly.” In this sense, it entails agitation – “a corporeal irritation or restlessness, an agitated inertia in response to a current situation that holds no interest, both temporally and spatially” (Hjorth and Richardson 2009, p. 32). In a literary framework, Sianne Ngai discusses the seemingly paradoxical aesthetic category of “stuplimity” where boredom meets astonishment in simultaneous excitation and fatigue. For Ngai (2000), stuplimity builds on repetition, and is at once dulling, irritating and agitating.

Ngai (2012) further positions the interesting and the boring in a dynamic relation where the one feeds the other – much less as polar opposites than as intermeshing intensities. Moving Ngai’s conceptualisation from literary analysis to the context of networked media and everyday life, it helps to map out experiences thereof as ambiguous amalgamations of excitement and boredom in constant motion. For psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins (2008), interest is one of basic positive affects that, when growing in intensity, turns to excitement. Excitement is elusive in that it grows thinner with repetition and familiarity, yet it also invests life with a sense of magic, to the degree of being the stuff that makes the self (Tomkins 2008, p. 193). Bringing Tomkins’ discussion of excitement together with Ngai’s examination of ambiguity helps to see how the affective flatness of boredom comes speckled with minor and major fascinations so that our life-forces can be simultaneously amplified and atrophied as we are made and unmade in our encounters with the world.

Reframing boredom as a herald rather than a symptom, Ben Anderson (2021, p. 205) arrives similarly at affective ambiguity and identifies boredom as “the inarticulate expression

of a desire for more to life". To approach boredom on such terms, he further proposes, makes it possible to "encounter boredom for its potentiality, for its restlessness, for how it moves subjects into new relations and attachments" so that scholars can "suspend judgement and follow what opens up in the wake of the detachment that is boredom, staying close to and valorising escape attempts, from daydreaming to world historical revolutions" (Anderson 2021, p. 205). Indeed, within all kinds of quotidian practices, interest cuts through and intermeshes with boredom and gives rise to instances of everyday marvel (Bennett 2001), the fascinations of which are in dynamic tension with the flatter notes of feeling of which much everyday life is composed. Understanding boredom as attached to fascination, enchantment, interest and excitement does not mean subscribing to an understanding of affective spectrums oscillating between positive and negative intensities in a binary manner, or as shifting from richness of sensation to the flatness of ennui and back again (although this is also possible). To conceptualise such intensities as intermeshed is a means to foreground ambiguity in both experiences of everyday life and in cultural analysis, so as to account for the unstable ripples of affect that cut through and fuel individual, social and collective lives, both within pandemic times and beyond.

Conclusion: Thinking with ambiguity

Working with and through ambiguity in the context of boredom means (at least) two things: acknowledging the intermeshing and unpredictability of different intensities of feeling and trying to hold on to seemingly irreconcilable tensions without attempting to resolve them. Ambiguous things are not the one or the other, this or that, but *both and* (see Coleman 2016). Boredom is both a modern experience, and not; the same things that bore excite and give joy. As indeterminacy of meaning, ambiguity is by necessity messy, as are the diffuse phenomena that make culture, society and the world beyond. In this sense, academic embrace of

ambiguity means following John Law's (2004, p. 2, 3) call for analytical approaches capable of dealing with "mess, confusion and relative disorder . . . things that slip and slide, or appear and disappear, change shape or don't have much form at all" and finding "ways of knowing the indistinct and the slippery without trying to grasp and hold them tight".

My suggestion is that approaches open to and respectful of ambiguity, affective and other, offer means of countering cultural critiques casting networked media, and social media in particular, as machines of distraction, boredom and unhappiness in unequivocal terms (e.g., Lovink 2019; Pettman 2016). I also suggest that, by violently shifting our concrete conditions of life, the extended pandemic time of exception has opened up experimentational spaces for coining more granular and situated understandings of the worlds we make in our cohabitations with physical spaces, devices, media streams and bodies of people. Being stuck in place, and time feeling stuck, has allowed for rethinking causalities in how boredom comes about, what it allows for and generates, and what roles networked media play in this. Carrying such experimentational lessons over to post-pandemic times involves the promise of productively ambiguous forms of critical thought.

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