

FOR BOREDOM: A CONCEPTUAL NETWORK OF CULTURAL OBJECTS



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Boredom is a paradox. It belongs to the object and is at the same time related to the subject. Boredom is both cultural and personal, both structural and immaterial. It can be both stultifying and inspiring. We take boredom to be part of a cultural imaginary that tells both a tale of disenchantment and enchantment. In the former, boredom expresses and produces existential resentment and makes it hard to form ethical attachments to life. In the latter, boredom is a disruption of usual habits of experience, and therefore possibly a conduit of wonder, curiosity, or some drive for *something else* or *something more*. In either case, it signifies a warping of time and a challenge to the relation of self to world. Boredom is part of a cultural mood, neither only personal nor merely trivial.

Other scholars (e.g., Goodstein 2005; Dalle Pezze & Salzani 2009) have already built an historical case about boredom as a modern phenomenon construed by 19th century artists and thinkers in terms of a ‘spiritual crisis.’ What we are doing is arguing that it’s *productive* to understand late modern boredom—what Sharday has

called “overload boredom”—as a spiritual crisis (Mosurinjohn 2016; Mosurinjohn forthcoming¹). It may not seem obvious that the spiritual is related to boredom, so let us make that case. By ‘spiritual,’ we mean essentially, ‘existential,’ as in something bearing on the nature of the world and the significance of human and other beings in it. But because the category of the spiritual is so intimately related to the category of religion, what the word ‘spiritual’ does better than either ‘existential’ or ‘ontological’ is conjure up the whole set of debates and social processes around the demises, rises, and different guises of religion as a guarantor of order, meaning, and ends. In the standard history of boredom as an idea, it has always been a spiritual problem. The concept has religious roots from the early Christian monks who suffered, alone in the desert, from *acedia*. *Acedia* was a sinful feeling personified as “the demon of noonday,” who sapped the monks’ will to meditate, and even to live. There is a whole history of boredom as a dimension of religious and spiritual traditions (Raposa 1999) as well as a psychological function of any surfeit of solitude or sameness.

Today, there are huge demographic shifts away from traditional religions. The movement is toward all manner of spiritual innovations that nurture the subjective life: Spiritual But Not Religious; New Age; and many forms un-labeled. Crucially, ‘spirituality’ turns away at every opportunity to settle its own category because its ethos is precisely nonconformist, subjective, and fed by its ‘freedom-froms.’ This gives firmer historical grounding to the widespread sociological observation that, today, spirituality is usually associated with matters of fundamental selfhood, meaning in life, and connection with others (see Bender & McRoberts 2012; Heelas & Woodhead 2005), and of course with the concept of religion, on which it depends as a “semantically parasitic” category (Fitzgerald 2007, 54).

To be clear, we are not proposing that boredom is the cause of spiritual seeking. Rather, we note boredom as an affective counterpoint to all of these social strains that are sometimes louder, sometimes quieter in the mix at any given moment. But then there is boredom in its uniquely modern mode.

Overload boredom

If we’re being precise, “boredom” per se, as an English word, only came into the language around the time of the Industrial Revolution. The word came about to name a feeling that intensified with the repetitive monotony of factory line labour,

but also with the democratization of leisure made possible by the Industrial Revolution. Along with these, there was the democratization of existential skepticism made possible by the Enlightenment, plus a reservoir of Romantic melancholy to lament it all. Thus was born “the rhetoric of reflection” (Goodstein 2005, 98–99), a forerunner of contemporary therapeutic culture, ready to root in liberal individual subjectivity. At the same time, there was a reordering of temporality around the idea of historical progress promised by industrial material changes, as well as institutions, principles, and policies informed by democracy, liberalism, and nationalism. The affect of modern boredom incorporated the moral burden of ensuring that progress. That is, boredom registered resignation to the futility of the individual trying to arrange all their time in a way equal to the juggernaut task of contemporary life.

Talking of existentially inflected boredom isn’t so much in fashion these days. The word is more likely to evoke the stakes of a kid trapped inside on a rainy day or an office worker suffering through a long meeting. Yet loud echoes of industrial-era problems inflect the rhythm and speed of experience in late modern life. What was then characterized as a “time of endless ‘nows” (Lefebvre qtd. in Gardiner 2012, 44) still comprises both discordant registers of instantaneously fast and draggingly slow.

Boredom in its late modern mode is intensified by the impact of digitization, especially social media and information media. This “overload” boredom is what comes not from too little stimulation, but by too much—information, connectivity, choice. In this overabundance of content, though, there is correspondingly an affective, aesthetic, and ethical paucity. That is, we can think of overload as a cultural condition for what Steven Tipton (2002) has called the “multiplication of moral ideals” that “accounts for the apparently inconsistent and self-contradictory cosmologies modern individuals hold simultaneously” (33). On one hand, this multiplication of worldviews and viewpoints renders any given one less plausible. On the other hand, the speed at which the multiplication happens through always-on communication media means that there is no longer any languid asynchrony to process these inputs, unlike what the early Internet afforded with its bulletin board systems and chat rooms. Instead, there is a constant state of emergency—what Douglas Rushkoff (2013) calls “present shock”—borne of trying to keep up with everything happening in a perennial “now.” Increasing the volume of content does not therefore straightforwardly increase the resources with which lives can find their worldly orientations; instead, sheer abundance and speed can be disorienting.

More than ever before, individuals have to bear the responsibility of meaning-making. They are like independent contractors sourcing the key parts of an orienting story about the nature of human beings in the world. And more than ever before, people *expect life to be interesting* in the sense of being personally meaningful. The tool par excellence for doing so is choice. Instead of tradition and other shared plausibility structures, a raft of productivity hacks is what's on offer to navigate toward something that might add up to a life. Melissa Gregg calls this productivity's vacuous post-secularism. Speaking of productivity and time-management apps, she writes:

The labor of time management is a recursive distraction that has postponed the need to identify a worthwhile basis for work as a source of spiritual fulfilment ... Productivity pivots on the belief that right actions will liberate an extraordinary class of worker from the concerns of this world (96–8).

Productivity is spiritually vacuous insofar as ignores labor politics by personalizing work limits and insofar as it ignores how the power of personal choice is sharply curtailed by the mundane fact that there's only so much time in a day and in a life.

The overabundance of both information and choice makes each disempowering. Too many choices and too little time prevents us from demonstrating to ourselves that we are making enough of the right choices to feel in control of our lives. Too much information fails to inform, rewarding the pursuit of clarity with meaningless noise. The energy required to manage this overload is great. Yet we punch out of this cognitive and affective labour at the peril of our own life prospects. The strain of relating self to world under these conditions is what we name “overload boredom.”

The key feature of overload boredom is that it makes us withdraw from engaging the very problems that cause it, making it even harder to recognize as an already elusive thing. Overload boredom is a problem of meaning in a dual sense. There is boredom as the forestalling of experiential presence in the world, a symptom of spiritual (or existential) malaise. Rather than being tied to any given era, this is boredom as a creative function of the human will. Then, in the historical present, there is the failure to make sense of information—the overload component of contemporary boredom.

Materializing overload boredom

In Fall 2017, we (Sharday Mosurinjohn and Nelly Matorina) started a website called *For Boredom* (<http://forboredom.com>). It features a curated set of excerpts of works, dated from the year 2000, in a variety of media (text, drawing, film, etc.). All of them have something to do with the concept of boredom. The three concepts that *For Boredom* is organized around are, therefore, boredom, spiritual(ity), and information. Since their medium must be transformed somehow to exist in a website format, we have made choices in each instance about how to do this—for example, a set of screen grabs from a video, a detail of a drawing, a page of a long poem. These digital representations become the ‘objects’ that *For Boredom* works with. The way these objects are arranged owes to the functionality of three pieces of software: Wordpress blog, Hypothes.is annotation plug-in, and InfraNodus text network visualizer. These tools enable us to add new objects continuously, and they enable visitors to: visually compare objects, annotate objects, search objects’ textual elements, and visualize all of the website’s text as a network.

For Boredom’s proposition is that we might materialize the ephemera of overload boredom in order to sustain reflection on it. Its method is neither traditional literary criticism, nor discourse analysis, nor genealogy. We might call it a curatorial analytics, a blending of aesthetics (i.e. having to do with art, but also with sensation in the broadest sense) and informatics (the interaction between the information systems and the user, as well as the construction of the interfaces between the two). On the site, works appear in fragments so that they are amenable to annotation. They are allowed to outgrow their taxonomies in order to jostle alongside diverse media and genres. This way, the site can be infinitely and collaboratively expandable, and increasingly dense and synthetic, owing to the functions of searching and hyperlinking.² But it also aims to deal with overload by putting parameters around it.

In some sense, these parameters perform a fairly standard curatorial function. They select a subset of objects from an open set. But our interest lies in the interplay of enabling constraints of the site’s software, of the artworks (e.g. their genre, medium, length, etc.), and the user’s interpretive agency. If the cultural present is “awash in a sea of private languages” (Foster 1985, xiv), then *For Boredom* seeks a lingua franca by creating hyperlink relationships between manifold

excerpts and offering the concept of “overload boredom” as a cipher for apparently disparate elements of contemporary culture. Into the conversation, “overload boredom” invites its correlated social horizons: the information age and the spiritual turn.

Ours is an aesthetic strategy that might resist the logics of overload culture. It aims at, but cannot promise, a new narrative through which we can locate ourselves historically. We are “for boredom” in the sense that we advocate for the critical potential of “overload boredom” as a concept and as an affect that forces reflectiveness about the conditions of contemporary boredom and how it feels.

What do Networks Want? The Real?

When surveying the language arranged by the text visualizer InfraNodus, we found that terms like “spiritual” or “spirituality” are actually rare in our network. Instead, there are allusions through broader concepts like “meaning-making,” “the existential,” “ontological significance,” among others. This automated aversion to using particular key terms yields thesaurus-like chains of proxies. While these connections form, connections between conventionally related terms like “god”

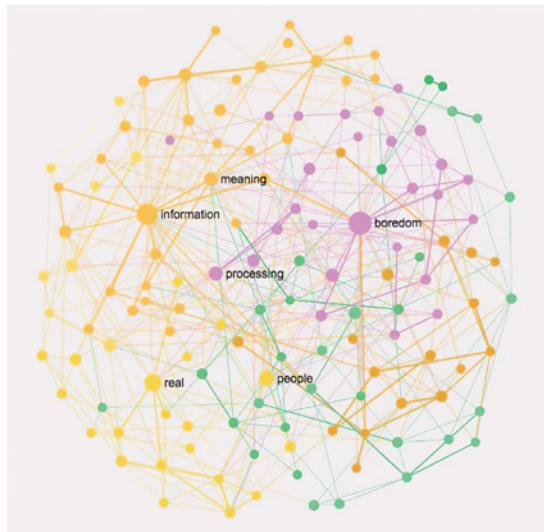


Figure 3. InfraNodus annotation network as a whole. Captured September 3, 2018. Maximum number of nodes set to 150.

and “prayer” and “spiritual” break. Admittedly, while InfraNodus is unbiased by the same catchword associations with which we are culturally imbued, inevitably we have planted some of what we expect to reap. That is, some constantly fluctuating proportion of textual relations belongs to the objects and the other to us.

Because InfraNodus has a rule that nodes can be deleted but connections between nodes cannot, connections (or lack thereof) can only be generated by the text itself. Yet InfraNodus does allow users to manually connect terms that didn't appear connected in the eyes of the algorithm. For instance, we connected: “bored” to “boredom”; “spiritual” to “prayer”; “prayer” to “search” (eg. typing into search engines but also “seeking” as in “i feel better after i type to you”). Nonetheless, these breaks help us see how conventionally religious categories can be useful as analytic categories, much as Gordon Lynch (2012) has done with his cultural interpretation of “the sacred” as denoting what is morally good in social life. This is valuable because it challenges us to ask how different cultural forms of the sacred, or of the spiritual, or of the divine, arise and influence social life. It is also valuable because it asks us to take seriously the way a variety of discourses manifest desires for enchantment and supra-empirical frameworks of meaning, even when they are outside of religious traditions. But just as the network breaks conventional discursive frames of reference, it also suggests that we consider new discursive conjunctions.

Among InfraNodus' analytics is a function called ‘Questions to Ask,’ which finds “gaps” in the network where connections are sparse, pushing us to explore how these concepts are related. Our response, in turn, immediately changes the network's shape. Two questions the network asked was: what is the “real,” and what is its relation with the conceptual trio boredom-spirituality-information?

Canvassing the annotations containing the “real,” one pervasive construal of the real is as a state. In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the real is the state of nature from which we have been severed by our entrance into language. It erupts, however, whenever we are forced to confront the affective materiality of our existence, as with needs and drives for hunger, sex, and sleep. The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips invokes the real in the context of the death drive: if people are beings tending toward death, not in a masochistic way, but just that they “are simply dying in their own fashion”—“to describe someone as self-destructive is to assume a knowledge of what is good for them, an omniscient knowledge of

the ‘real’ logic of their lives” (2000, 81, cf. 77). Elsewhere, Mark C. Taylor (2013) describes the thought of the real as synonymous with the concept of “god” with respect to the *origin, the absolute* (4-5):

Within religious traditions West and East, God, the gods, and the sacred do not always bring light, certainty, and security; all too often they disrupt ... human life. Their “heirs” are writers and philosophers for whom the real, however it is conceived, is other, wholly other ... [and] must be approached indirectly in works that artfully figure what eludes precise language, clear concepts, and transparent images (5).

This real is a speculative real, synonymous with the provisional, not devotional, ‘god’ of the philosophers. It urges us not to overlook the spiritual preoccupations wrapped up in the making of apparently secular culture.

A second set of meanings of the real emerged in our network around the pairing of ‘real’ with the concepts of ‘pattern’ and ‘noise.’ Taylor goes on to state that our contemporary task is to “sort through the historical and cultural debris of the latter half of the twentieth century in the hope of finding patterns where there seems to be nothing but noise” (196). It seems the real bounces between extremes of the bodily and the ineffable. In its immaterial mode, the real is full of patterns (conducive to meaning) that are disguised as noise (conducive to boredom). When material, it shows up as noise disguised as patterns. An object from our original set, Simon Morris’ *Re-writing Freud*, suggests a way of interpreting the significance in this relation. *Re-writing Freud* runs the text of *Interpretation of Dreams* through a program that selects one word at a time to reconstruct an entirely new “book.” As Morris puts it, “[w]hen one word is placed next to another, meaning is suggested, and even though the syntactical certainty of Freud’s sentences have been ruptured by the aleatory process, flashes of meaning persist, haunting the text” (qtd. in Dworkin & Goldsmith 2011, 448).

This has led us to think of the real as haunting our network, causing elements of images, footnotes, annotations, titles, references, and the like, to variously come forward and recede as ‘real’ or fabricated, primary or secondary, pattern or noise. In his 1986 *Overload and Boredom*, Orrin E. Klapp wrote, “meaning and interest are found mostly in the mid-range between extremes of redundancy and variety—these extremes being called, respectively, banality and noise” (2). Redundancy is repetition of the same, which creates a condition of insufficient difference, while noise is the chaos of non-referentiality, or entropy. In a way, these extremes

collapse into each other, in that both can be viewed “as a loss of potential ... for a certain line of action at least” (Klapp 1986, 3). The line of potential, then, that *For Boredom* sustains amid the stabilizing pressure of its force graph is along the chains of proxies for our central concepts all the way to the ‘real.’

In a way, this “return of the real” (*c.f.*, Foster 1996) describes what the website is trying to do: to turn the focus away from the singular nature of the artwork itself to the context housing it in order to creatively analyze the limitations of “unreal”—digital, symbolic, evanescent—culture. This is about getting in touch with the existential core of the overload problem, the maddening contingency of flash-in-the-pan media spectacles as they circulate and multiply, copy-pasting over the possibility of narrative, crowding out any thought of the future in service of immediacy. At the same time, it is also forces some reflection about the intransigence of media, when, for instance, each visual and time-based object has to be translated into a text-image hybrid in order to annotate. Meanwhile, at the conceptual level the emergence of the real directs our comparative focus beyond the boredom-spirituality-information triad, to a psychoanalytic concept for whatever is accessible to first-person awareness behind phenomenal appearances.

The emergence of the real raises the question: what is the form of presence and reality to ground this moment? What algorithms should we run to detect the “patterns that look like noise”? The network yields no determinate answers, but certain kinds of invitations to make culture. This analytics is one of surprise, being to culture something like tarot cards are to a psyche: a heuristic device for reflection—guided, but not systematic. Or, to switch from a divinatory to a medical metaphor: even if boredom is experience without qualities (anaesthetized experience), it leaves traces just as surgery under anaesthetic leaves psychosomatic traces even though not consciously registered. *For Boredom* pursues these traces in order to visually realize an expanding picture of the informational conditions that seek to conceal themselves in experiential deficit.

How can we put technologies in their right place? Instead of training our attention to expand ever more with the demands of these technologies, we might instead embrace the winnowing powers of attention to tailor what’s too fast and too much to human size. All *For Boredom* can do is model this winnowing. Its form embodies the act of circumscribing (via curatorial algorithm) some area of the mediascape populated by objects already invested with focused attention. Rather than accelerating and disintegrating experiences in the network, our time spent in close reading, and annotation (re)calibrates the affective tonality throughout the network and across its objects.

Endnotes

1. Mosurinjohn, S. (forthcoming) is a book (tentatively titled *Overload Boredom: Religion, Dis/Affect, and Late Modern Meaning*, McGill-Queen's University Press) that the website, *For Boredom*, is a companion project to. The book takes a more traditional scholarly format to advance analytical arguments, often with aesthetic objects as touchstones. The website experiments with an aesthetic-affective mode of engagement with the "overload boredom-as-spiritual-crisis" heuristic by enabling a certain kind of close reading.

2. We based *For Boredom* loosely on the model of UbuWeb, an archive of avant-garde multimedia artworks shared freely online. UbuWeb is like "a library which is ever-expanding in uncanny—and often uncategorizable—directions....The future is eminently scalable" (Goldsmith 2011). However, our own site is not so bold in terms of radical distribution (as we consult with our university copyright office and seek artists' permissions) or gift economics (with university web hosting unavailable, we secure hosting with grant monies).

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