Investigating Boredom

Reconsidering boredom in times of a prevailing overload of stimulations, impulses and information

Thesis

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Thesis

issue

Could boredom help us cope better with our lives, feel more in charge and make the world move a bit slower?

short description

Nowadays we live in a world that constantly feeds us with information, stimuli and impulses. This continuous stream leaves us no room for processing and organizing these notions into our neuronal network. Consequently we might need a tool or device that temporarily cuts us loose, endowing us with a ritual of interim.

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Why boredom?

Every day we are exposed to an overload of input information and impulses.

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When we reach a state of sensory solitude all the input could condense and organize itself.



Only then we can reach a receptive or inspirational status allowing us to process and digest the input information.



Maybe even with a great and beautiful outcome, at least we would not feel so enveloped by our everyday life. But instead of actually dealing with ourselves and trying to implement a moment of mental solitude, we just turn back to our cellphone and check out what 's new. Feeding our mind with more input, which is only possible by ommiting some of the old information. Of course this will help, but similarly as a painkiller soothes your headache: It removes the symptom, but not the actual cause.

So, why are we doing this?

Because the alternative would involve feeling bored. Being bored does not genuinely feel good. It is something we have overcome, that we do not have to regularly experience in the twenty first century. We have gotten rid of it through an extensive selection of distractions.

Therefore, my objective was to examine the phenomenon of boredom and investigate if it can have an positive inpact on our living. The following paper is a summary of how I went about this and my findings. Investigating boredom

Objects of boredom

I soon realized that an important factor in research of boredom, is finding some boredom to research on.

In order to explore the topic, I have created some objects that can be used in a playful manner to experience different forms of boredom. They illustrate my different thoughts and ideas concerning the state of being bored.

When played with, these objects should alter this state of mind from being undesirable, to something ritual in nature. They somewhat work as tools, whose purpose is to investigate if boredom can be some antidote for all the hurry and confusion in our everyday life. This is a pair of dice, which is showing the same symbol on all sides. Therefore, after each toss, the result will always have the same outcome. The actual purpose of dice or playing cards is the presence of different symbols, assigning each side or card a certain value. That is what makes them exciting and interesting. If this feature is taken away, do they not become extremely boring?

If the outcome of an event is predictable, we are very likely to stop being interested. When we are constrained to continuous focus on that action, we become bored. The results of an experiment showed that in the moment we start feeling bored, our brain partly shuts off.

When the focus of the volunteers did begin to waver, Weissman and his collaborators noticed that areas of the brain closely related to self-control, vision and language processing seemed not to communicate with one another. They discovered that, as concentration ebbs, the intensity with which nerve centres link up also fades. 'This is equivalent to those regions disconnecting' claimed Weissman, which seems to be linked with the feeling of boredom. What was particularly interesting about the experiment was that when the cranial crosstalk died down, particular regions of the cortex 'lit up'.'

Nowadays, we are rarely exposed to situations that are foreseeable or pointless. If we are, we just reach for our mobile phone and distract ourselves. However, may this continuous escapism change the way of paying attention? Is there eventually something operating as a threshold? Rising higher and higher, only letting things catch our attention that appear new, thrilling, diverse or noisy? A typical marble game usually requires a certain level of skill to become accomplished. This particular game only goes in a circle. It is repetitive, undemanding and has no end goal.

Many people may feel caught in their daily routine. This could be traced back to the times when humankind lived as hunters and gatherers: When facing the struggle for survival there was not much room left to complain about the monotonies of daily life.

Life has changed a bit since then. Many people nowadays, at least in first world modern society, have their basic needs met. So, is boredom maybe a luxury problem? Occurring only when everything else is settled?

This is a sitting cube. It's balance between seatable and uncomfortable makes it perfect to feel bored, without the risk of becoming too idle.

Still, an important factor of becoming bored is a certain level of convenience. It is rather unlikely to grow bored while running for your life or, a bit less severe, for not missing a train. It is boring though, when you are on that train, seated, waiting to arrive. Even if the enviroment is warm and cozy, one might feel captivated in this little wagon. Which is lacking in variety, except for the changing landscape outside the window.

So, where is that narrow line between comfort and anxiety? And why can't we just be satisfied by the watching the changing landscape? When oftentimes, the varying scenery is entertaining enough. Perhaps boredom can also be seen as a form of collecting energy. Or as Walter Benjamin once quoted:

Boredom is the threshold to great deeds.ⁱ

Hourglass

Is there a connection between boredom and time? The German term for boredom, *Langeweile*, when literally translated would mean something as *a long while*. This rather metaphorical word describes appositely the perception of time while being bored. Time seems to take forever to pass by. Why is that so? As the author of *prettyfedup*. *com* puts it:

And what you do, in an attempt to stave off death due to lack of stimulation, is you check in with the sensory world. In a boring 50 minute lecture, you might notice the fly in the room, the newspapers other people brought, the dirt on the window, the bad fluorescent lighting, the wart on the teacher's nose, the color of your shoes, etc., etc. 50 or 60 times. You might check in with the sensory world once a minute or more.ⁱ

But why are we experiencing time as such a drag, when we are waiting for something ? Shouldn't time run faster when you have less sensory input to process in your brain?

When we daydream there is much more information to be progressed than usual. It is as if we have to build up an imaginary world. Same as when we begin to notice some details, that we normally would not. Our senses are sharpening. We begin to observe and listen.

But when was the last time we actually exposed ourselves to waiting? We constantly avoid stagnation with earplugs, books or screens. Is waiting something we unlearned?

i

This is a tiny model of a hill where a marble is to be pushed up over and over again. This should vaguely exemplify the fatigue the mythological figure Sisyphus must feel in his eternal punishment.

Sisyphus was punished by the gods by having to roll a boulder up a hill. As soon he reaches the top, the boulder rolls down again. This penalization is worsened, since he has to carry out this task for eternity.

With the advantage of eventual release, people become fed up with going to work, school or uni everyday. It is a funny thing. Whether we sit around with nothing to do, waiting, or if we have to fulfill an unpleasing task, we never seem to be satisfied. Ultimatey, we are fed up by having to roll our very own boulder up a hill.

We must imagine Sisypuos happy^{*i*}, concludes Camus his famous essay.

Camus' optimistic outlook is that Syssiphus is able to carry out his task with no worry as soon as he accepts his fate. At least he has direction in a world full of disorientation. Though, perhaps it is not the most pleasant perspective, it might be a way to deal with monotony.

Camu, Albert: The Myth of Sisyphus, Paris, 1942

i

Machines have been embracing their impact on our lives more and more since the industrial revolution. Which, in fact has been more of a technical revolution. Machines are constructed by humans but are yet so different. They do what they are built for, without complaining. Is this the reason working with them such a drag?

For sure, they significantly changed the way we work and live. Among other things, thanks to them, division of labour became much more efficient. This has both positive and negative aspects. Let us have a look at a negative one:

Before, a worker was usually involved in the whole process of production. Whereas today, he only plays a tiny role by adjusting something a little bit. Lost and gone is the understanding of what he is doing. He now feels replaceable and his work appears tiresome and dreary.

As we know now, in the beginning, the first implication of machines caused much trouble, revolt and misery. Even though machines themselves can not be blamed, they played an important part. This poem of *Heinrich Heine* conveys the misery and rage of early industrialization:

The shuttle flies, and the loom groans loud, By day and by night we are weaving your shroud, Old Germany, weaving your fateful hearse, We weave into it the threefold curse: We weave, and weave!ⁱ

Now over 150 years later, the expectations to live happily in wealth and idleness, the promise that machines gave us, are still missing in fulfillment. But if fulfilled, will we then become tremendously bored?

i

This is a model for a motion light. When a candle is put under, it will begin to move and throw a pattern of light dots that are circulating on the walls of the room.

It is indicating the sameness of the universe. How everything is a repeating pattern, if you scale it up to infinity. As *Friedrich Nietzsche* put it:

What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: ,This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will he nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you all in the same succession and sequence-even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over and over, and you with it, a dust grain of dust.¹

So if you look into the stars, and realise each of them is a sun of an entire universe, baring thousands of planets or molecules or atoms, that might be suns to something again. Does it not make you sway and shiver in a kind of dizziness. Not knowing what it is for, why it is and where it started or ends. Maybe there lays the origin of boredom: Not knowing where to start. This is a mobile that should resemble the cosmos. The four hanging bars are from middle to outside mercury, venus, earth and mars in correct ratio and distance to each other. It is a symbol of the sameness and infinite repetition of life, universe and everything, causing a kind of nausea in the person whom is reflecting on it.

Mobile

The mere narcotizing effect which cosmic forces have on a shallow and brittle personality is attested in the relation of such a person to one of the highest and most genial manifestations of these forces: the weather. Nothing is more characteristic than that precisely this most intimate and mysterious affair, the working of the weather on humans, should have become the theme of their emptiest chatter. Nothing bores the ordinary man more than the cosmos. Hence, for him, the deepest connection between weather and boredom. How fine the ironic overcoming of this attitude in the story of the splenetic Englishman who wakes up one morning and shoots himself because it is raining. Or Goethe: how he managed to illuminate the weather in his meteorological studies, so that one is tempted to say he undertook this work solely in order to be able to integrate even the weather into his waking, creative life.¹

It can be looked at when it is raining outside.

This is a colouring book with especially simple motifs. For colouring it the only thing needed ist a piece of black coal. Filling it out should resemble a task, that is of such low mental and creative demand, that you instantly get bored.

If a situation is highly undemanding, we tend to loose interest in it. We become distracted by basically everything. Boredom might also be seen as a status when your attentional system is not operating at its usual capacity. This can happen when something is sub challenging you, as well as when you are overstrained. Then our mind starts to wander. Almost like it is leaving your body. Daydreaming can be a very nice occupation.

Nonetheless, since everything is moving faster and faster, we sometimes cant even finish a two minute video on the web we started watching for some reason. Why can we not even withstand concentrating for two minutes sometimes. Maybe we could if we tried to focus a bit more on what we are doing, even if it is just doing the dishes or riding on a train.

On the other side, sometimes it seems like we get caught up in situations to often, that actually are pretty pointless when considered closer. If we do not enjoy these, perhaps we should listen to our feeling and quit them. Not in the means of, if you hate it, quit your job, go party. Rather when you find yourself clicking through boring videos and websites, instead of doing what you were originally supposed to. Would it then not make more sense to just get done the unpleasant thing instead of wasting time with something slightly less annoying? And, if not, at least do something truly delightful? Kendama

This is a Kendama toy. Usually, the challenging principle is to catch an object with another object, joined by a string. In this case, a simple mechanism consisting of a weight on one end of the string, makes it very likely to suceed and therefore derrides its purpose.

Again, where is the fine line between undemanding and too complex?

We usually want to manifest the best possible outcome. And this is not only correct when referring to the very ambitious. Especially if we are passionate about something. Today, many people have the freedom of actually liking what they are doing. Work is not only something you clock in and out of, it is a personal fulfillment. This has a dark side. The lines between work and our private lives become blurred. And the pressure we put on ourselves increases. This can be the source of mental disorders as burnout-syndrome.

So, maybe we should remember that in many cases we ourselves, determine the standards of what success truly is.

Whereas a Newton's Cradle in usage as a executive toy may stand as a symbol for reaction, impulse or success, this one reflects on opposite models: weariness, futility and vanity.

Sometimes life just seems to swing back and forth. When an action is not causing any effect, it appears worthless. If there is no reaction in some form, be it money, glory or a nice feedback, we start feeling frustrated.

But is this model of achievements and goals still a working one? Why can we not be happy with the oscillating itself, like sitting on a swing or lying in a hammock. This is a model for a solitary hideout. Here for a moment we can escape the many stimuli we are exposed to continuously.

Of course, being cut off from our familiar level of sensory impressions, we may also quickly arise to a feeling of entrapment or isolation within in ourselves. Again, there seems to be a certain balance, a certain rate, that we can stand. Our whole consciousness is constructed through our senses. Does sharpening them mean, we would get a bigger picture of reality?

Still, everybody occasionally feels the urge of hiding somewhere. This romantic feeling of solitude. The famous painting, *Casper David Friedrich's Der Wanderer im Nebelmeer*, might come to mind. It reflects our longing for a brief escape from all the shops, cafes and daily routines quite well. Just like *Jack Kerouac* explains in his short essay *Alone on a Mountaintop*:

"Well, boy, now we're gonna put ya away where we can't reach ya - you better get ready."

"It's just what I want, Andy, be alone for three solid months nobody to bother me."i

He is describing his experiences as a fire lookout in Mount Baker National Forest. This means living for three months in a little shack on top of a hill, fittingly called Desolate Mountain. He goes up there because he is fed up by his bustling life in New York.

No man should go through life without once experiencing healthy, even bored solitude in the wilderness, finding himself depending solely on himself and thereby learning his true and hidden strength. – Learning, for instance, to eat when he's hungry and sleep when he's sleepy.ⁱⁱ

Kerouac, Jack: Lonesome Traveler, NewYork, 1960

i ii

Shed

Keruac, Jack: Lonesome Traveler, NewYork, 1960

Blinkers

This pair of glasses is designed to shut off sensory impressions for a moment. By preventing one from the ability to see or hear, it is depriving our most commonly used channels for connection to the outside world.

Sometimes, we just need to filter out some of the confusing white noise of sensory impressions. Evolutionary, we are still at a level in which we could cope better with forests and rivers. Instead, we have cars, mobile phones and flashing lights. The technical development is happening a bit too fast. Do we need some kind sensory filter to prevent us from going insane? This is a Yo-Yo with a string, that is too long to pull it back up in the right moment. This feature makes it utterly frustrating.

Most of the time, we do not live in the moment. We live in the past, reflecting and reconsidering. Or we live in future, through planning our next actions, days and weeks. We therefore imagine a certain branch of future, an ideal version, where everything goes right. But sometimes life plays in a different direction. Things turn out differently than we expect them to. This causes frustration.

I do not want to come up with some *be happy about what you have*-advice, but isn't it interesting that we usually expect things to go our way? In our consciousness, we always are the hub of everything. Surely, life is a story told from a first person perspective. But we also know that the universe itself does indeed circulate around something else. So, perhaps before we get frustrated, fed up or annoyed, we should sit back and remember this notion. Fountain

This is a model for a dripping fountain. Its idea is to annoy the observer by continuously dropping, just like a leaking tap or c Chinese water torture.

An interesting connection of torture and captivation with boredom draws Stefan Zweig in his short novel The Royal Game:

Here the mysterious character of Dr. B. tells his story of being hold imprisoned one year for investigation reasons. Although he is not harmed in a physical way, his tortured by being isolated in room without windows or books or anything to take away his mind.

So I had something fresh, something different to look at with my ravenous eyes, something new at last, and they clutched avidly at every detail. I examined every crease in those coats, I noticed for example a raindrop hanging from one of the wet collars, and, as ridiculous as it may sound to you, I waited with absurd excitement to see whether this drop would eventually run off along the crease, or whether it would defy gravity and keep clinging—yes, I stared and stared at that drop breathlessly for minutes on end as though my life depended on it.ⁱ

Shortly after he gains possession of an book of famous chess games. The only content is a detailed description of every move. In lack of anything better he reads through it so often and reenacts all of the strokes in his head. His captivation even drives him into splitting his personality, in favour of being able to play agains himself.

Cruel as it sounds, it shows what there lies some high potential in boredom.

Aspects of Boredom

While building these objects or tools was a very intuitive approach, I then tried to structure my thoughts on boredom. I was able to define that most situations where it occurs can be traced back to six major aspects of it: Confinement, Predictability, Sensory Deprivation, Subchallenge, Routine and Surfeit.

Captivity

If you are feeling trapped in a situation, you instantly want to change something about this situation. This dilemma could probably not be described more accurately than in this anecdote of Jerome K. Jerome. By a doctor he is ordered to stay in bed for a month, to recover form an illness. At first glance, it seems to him as an great opportunity to lay idle the whole day.

It seemed a delightful prospect. "This man evidently understands my complaint," said I, and I pictured to myself a glorious time--a four weeks' dolce far niente with a dash of illness in it. Not too much illness, but just illness enough--just sufficient to give it the flavor of suffering and make it poetical. I should get up late, sip chocolate, and have my breakfast in slippers and a dressing-gown. I should lie out in the garden in a hammock and read sentimental novels with a melancholy ending, until the books should fall from my listless hand, and I should recline there, dreamily gazing into the deep blue of the firmament, watching the fleecy clouds floating like white-sailed ships across its depths, and listening to the joyous song of the birds and the low rustling of the trees. Or, on becoming too weak to go out of doors, I should sit propped up with pillows at the open window of the ground-floor front, and look wasted and interesting, so that all the pretty girls would sigh as they passed by.ⁱ

But soon enough he realises that he was mistaken:

But "drinking the waters" was only a small portion of the torture I experienced during that memorable month--a month which was, without exception, the most miserable I have ever spent."

As soon as we are find ourselves confined in a situation, our mind revolts by setting us out to boredom.

It is impossible to enjoy idling thoroughly unless one has plenty of work to do. There is no fun in doing nothing when you have nothing to do. Wasting time is merely an occupation then, and a most exhausting one. Idleness, like kisses, to be sweet must be stolen.ⁱⁱⁱ

- *i Jerome, Jerome K.: Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow, 1889*
- *ii* Jerome, Jerome K.: Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow, 1889
- *iii Jerome, Jerome K.: Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow, 1889*

Predictabitlity

The thing about predictability is, it is not really possible to do so. But we have learned to draw some conclusions of what will probably happen next. Despite all the benefits of this ability, on some occasions it causes boredom. Concerning this point, there is an interesting part in Douglas Adams novel Mostly Harmless. The protagonist, Arthur Dent, ends up on a planet whose inhabitants are amazingly similar to humankind, except the fact they don't pursue anything. Consequently Arthur undergoes some difficulties coping with their culture and mindset. For example, he is not the great enthusiast of their literature:

He preferred not to think about it. He preferred just to sit and read - or at least he would prefer it if there was anything worth reading. But nobody in Bartledanian stories ever wanted anything. Not even a glass of water. Certainly, they would fetch one if they were thirsty, but if there wasn't one available, they would think no more about it. He had just read an entire book in which the main character had, over the course of a week, done some work in his garden, played a great deal of netball, helped mend a road, fathered a child on his wife and then unexpectedly died of thirst just before the last chapter. In exasperation Arthur had combed his way back through the book and in the end had found a passing reference to some problem with the plumbing in Chapter 2. And that was it. So the guy dies. It just happens.ⁱ

There seems to be some deep connection between boredom and the lack of excitement. However, nowadays we face more and more complex and confusing situations. Is it influencing on when we start to experience something as too predictable? If something bores us, can we just rush off in a sonicyouthy whirlwind, heat and flash?

For Arthur, the reaction upon realizing how utterly boring his residence was, turned out rather drastic:

Arthur threw the book across the room, sold the room and left.^{*ii*}

- i Adams, Douglas: Mostly Harmless, London 1996
- ii Adams, Douglas: Mostly Harmless, London 1996

Subchallenge

According to Robert Plutchik, the inventor of the wheel of emotions, boredom is a mild form of disgust. It is the brain's way to protect us from undemanding situations. So maybe boredom might be seen as a self-defense mechanism of our brain: It is telling us to occupy ourselves with something more important.

Sensory Deprivation

A different side to the lack of excitements is when we do not experience any sensory stimulation. Sensory impressions are a bit like fuel for our brain. If deprived of these, it starts complaining. Or is taking you somewhere else.

Routine

The actual opposite of new and exciting would be routine. A loop, a program with no distinguishable beginning or end. Boredom often is referred to as nausea. Maybe the thought of all the repetition and rotation of the universe makes us feel sickly. Like riding in a fast carousel.

When we look at it, there are quite a lot of routines around us: Days, seasons and years to name but a few. When do these change for us into a dreadful daily grind?

Surfeit

Another facet is to be fed up by something. A too much or too often of information, work, etc. can evoke boredom. It is in some ways the opposite of deprivation. But is has a similar symptom.

As we are attracted by diversion, we get an aversion against too much of one thing.

This is maybe where boredom comes from nowadays. Since we are set out to more and more stimulation and information, it is just logical that our brain sometimes needs some rest.

Do we need more boredom?

Boredom as an important part of creativity

Due to all of the input we receive, it is comprehensible that we need some time in exchange, to digest it. And in my opinion scrolling through facebook or watching movies is an inappropriate option. It may serve a purpose in order to idle, but for being creative it requires an alternative choice. In the words of Walter Benjamin:

This process of assimilation, which takes place in depth, requires a state of relaxation which is becoming rarer and rarer. If sleep is the apogee of physical relaxation, boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation. Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in the leaves drives him away.ⁱ

This excerpt of a text about storytelling could be transferred to all creative tasks. These are hard to obtain in a world where it seems that craft has become a label for expensive beers.

As an alternative to overproduction and increase of desires..

Apparently, we would have everything we need: Enough food to feed everybody on the planet, an economy producing masses of consumer goods, a breathable atmosphere. I admit, most of it is not fairly shared. But let us imagine just for a moment it would be.

And it is even getting better. Technical innovations as computers, artificial intelligence and machines are promising us the prospect of a bright future without any tedious work to be done by humankind.

And if we expand on that notion, there occurs one big question. We will have to ask ourselves: Then what we shall we do the whole day?

I am not trying to say, that we will all be horribly bored. But asking this question might in some way protect us from steering Spaceship Earth into a doomed, dark future. We can start right now: Do we need all the things that marketers are trying to make us believe we do? Will doing nothing automatically drive us into madness, depression or drug abuse? Can we not just allow ourselves to be happy?

Further outlook

A year ago, I spent a few days in a little moroccan village named Mirleft. It is a calm little town at the seaside. We had a wonderful time there. It was an easy living. Daily routine consisted of barbecues at the beach, having a coffee or a cup of tea now and then, strolling around the market and at six o' clock in the evening grab a fresh fish sandwich at the best grill shop, before they were gone. And they were gone very quick. We even became friends with some of the village people around our age.

It was nice for a week or so, but we soon asked ourselves if it was something we could endure forever. Would we trade our realities with our new Moroccan friends if we had the chance to? We definetely recognized all the difficulties: No job opportunities, the depressing vacuity, lack of variety and an overall tedium of daily routine in that desert environment.

One day I was sitting with a cup of mint tea on the rooftop of the cafe where everybody goes, chatting with a fellow fisherman. Quite incidentally he made an notable remark, *You europeans drink your teas to fast*.

All endings are the beginning of something new. And since I like to defer finishing my projects, I would like to postpone this ending as well. The plan is to take some of the findings towards boredom and transfer them into designing a tea set. A small approach to implement a ritual in our everyday life. The tools for a ceremony dedicated to celebrate boredom. To help us practice virtues as waiting, modesty, tranquility and serenity. And to help us handle aversions like surfeit, weariness and deprivation.

After all, sometimes the best way to cope is having a cup of tea.

Eidesstattliche Erklärung

Hiermit erkläre ich, dass ich die diese Arbeit selbständig verfasst, noch nicht anderweitig für Prüfungszwecke vorgelegt, keine anderen als die angegebenen Quellen oder Hifsmittel benützt sowie wörtliche und sinngemäße Zitate als solche gekennzeichnet habe.

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