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Boredom in Pandemic Times: It Won't Make Us More Creative (Unfortunately)

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A distinguished Paris neurologist was consulted one day by a patient whom he had not seen before. The patient complained of the typical illness of the times—weariness with life, deep depressions, boredom. “There’s nothing wrong with you,” said the doctor after a thorough examination. “Just try to relax—find something to entertain you. Go see Deburau some evening, and life will look different to you.” “Ah, dear sir,” answered the patient, “I *am* Deburau.” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 108 [D3a,4]).

Walter Benjamin would have never imagined that the metaphor of the *epidemic* (1999, p. 108 [D3a,4]) that he used to refer to the boredom of the middle of the 18th century would take its literal meaning almost 150 years later because of a virus called COVID-19. Neither Hans Blumenberg (n.d., quoted in Ros Velasco, 2022) nor Henri Lefebvre (1970) before him would have bet that the metaphor of boredom as a *plague* would go literal as part of a pandemic at the beginning of the 21st century. Now, many of us are Deburau. Our daily life has changed completely because of COVID-19. The pandemic we all are facing for almost two years not only brought physical-related problems, but also disruptive socioeconomic and psychological effects worldwide. One of the latter has to do with the increased experience of boredom.

Boredom can be defined, according to the Meaning and Attentional Components (MAC) model by Westgate and Wilson (2018, p. 5), as “a functional emotion with both attentional (“can I focus?”) and meaning (“do I want to?”) components [...] experienced when people feel either *unable* or *unwilling* to cognitively engage with their current activity” due to environmental factors (e.g., insufficient stimulation), attentional aspects, and functional perceptions (e.g., the value of the task). This definition of boredom, as an emotion primarily dependent on the context and easy-to-overcome when we introduce novelties in it, responds to what has been called ‘state-boredom’ or ‘situation-dependent boredom’ in the specialized literature; what philosophers and writers called ‘simple boredom’ or ‘passing boredom’ over history. But boredom can also be ‘chronic boredom’ when the subject suffers from high levels of ‘boredom proneness’ (due to their personality or any other—presumably unknown—physical reason) and always get bored, no matter how exciting the context is. This is not the same experience as the ‘profound boredom’ or ‘complex boredom’ described by the philosophers and writers of the past, whose suffering might affect the individual alone or the entire society as a result of a particular (usually cultural, political, and economic) environment and whose experience extends over time. This is what I have called ‘chronified situation-dependent boredom’ (Ros Velasco, 2022), which sometimes leads to the well-known *l’ennui de vivre*, the boredom of living after a long enough time. Because of the restrictions caused by the pandemic, we were fighting these last two types of boredom at once. But not only. Our own way of addressing ‘simple boredom’ through media entertainment and the ineptitude of our social and political agents when facing the crisis are also responsible.

Complaints about boredom during this pandemic have been common from the very beginning, when we all went through the unbearable lockdown. In social networks like Twitter we could see the expression of boredom from one end of the planet to another: @cielito1889, from Argentina, said “I get bored and do anything but homework” (April 16, 2020); @Vegas_sin_s, from Madrid, shared “#WorkAtHome and I get bored” (April 17, 2020); @borja_gallego, from anywhere tweeted “I’m bored, I go for the fridge” (April 16, 2020), and so on endless “I get bored a lot”, “I get really bored”, “I get bored and I have no one to talk to”, “I get bored all day”, “I get bored at home”... Sharing our boredom with others, and knowing that we were all going through the same thing, was perhaps a fool’s consolation, but it did help us maintain a stoic attitude in the face of adversity after all.

Many of us have been suffering from boredom since the pandemic began, but not equally, nor has our experience been the same over time. Although the vast majority of us found that our routines had disappeared, the possibilities of adaptation to the new circumstance differed greatly depending on socioeconomic and demographic factors such as age, purchasing power, place of residence and characteristics of housing, the labor sector to which one belongs, the cultural level and even gender, to name a few. Likewise, those factors related to health were also determining, such as the fact of belonging to a risk group, having previous pathologies, one's personality, and psychological traits that make us unique, including the proneness to boredom.

In other words, the abrupt maladjustment we run into when we were deprived of the possibility of carrying out with our lives did not affect us all in the same way. People not very streety, used to enjoy the pleasures of home, did not get bored during the lockdown. Those who had a strong inner life were not so affected. Some others (like me) who usually work at home did not suffer as much as those who exercised their occupations outside. In the same vein, people confined in an apartment of 30m² were in a disadvantageous position. The unfortunate ones who fell prey to the coronavirus (or their relatives) had more important things to think about. Depressed people and patients with high levels of stress and anxiety felt fearful when their ailment was increased by lack of activity. Finally, those who were more creative were better able to avoid boredom, while those who get bored easily and tend to calm their boredom with little meaningful entertainment or activities faced then monstrous boredom.

The context in which this pandemic was unleashed favored to some extent that the latter occurred more frequently than we would like to admit. Since technology plays the leading role in almost all scenarios of our daily life, including, of course, entertainment and leisure time, we had not had to face a situation of lockdown and mobility restriction like this one. At the beginning of the new millennium, we have experienced SARS, in 2002, but it mainly affected Southeast Asia and did not require confinement measures worldwide. Three years later, the H5N1 strain of bird flu became a pandemic threat, but there were only a few dozen victims to mourn. Between 2009 and 2010, swine flu of North American origin was classified as a pandemic for 14 months but did not require quarantine. Ultimately, from 2014 to 2016, several Ebola outbreaks of sub-Saharan origin alerted the world, again without the need to take measures of social isolation. We can safely assume that this was the first time that two important elements converged: on the one hand, a quarantine due to a pandemic loaded with a lot of time to spare and, on the other, a predisposition to the use of technology as a means with which to entertain ourselves and fill our leisure time.

The COVID-19 pandemic rendered many helpless in the face of boredom. We have spent a good percentage of our history trying to reduce the *time of duty* [Mußzeit] in favor of the *time of power* [Kannzeit] (Blumenberg, 1986), but when we had the first in abundance, it was a hindrance, and we got bored because we did not know what to do with it. We were forced to deal with a large amount of time to spare, which months before we longed for, without being clear about how to fill it. We were sure what we would like to do on vacation, on a weekend getaway, but not in these circumstances where we could not leave the house, spend time with our loved ones or practice some of our favorite hobbies outdoors. Many found themselves disoriented in the face of the accumulation of blank time imposed by lockdown and mobility restrictions.

We have lost the ability to tolerate boredom over time. Furthermore, we have become used to having little time to spare. One always must work, take care of the offspring, attend to friends, and accumulate material and non-material capital. But perhaps the most remarkable thing these days is that when we have a little time to ourselves during the day in which we can perhaps experience boredom, we are easily content with the fastest available entertainment option. If we have a couple of free hours in the afternoon, we can watch a Netflix series, and the next day the same, and the next, without worrying too much about what will happen when it ends because the platform itself will already have another series that matches our tastes ready for us. If, during a subway trip, we want to enjoy some music to distract ourselves on the way, we will only have to think about the first song, and the YouTube algorithm will do the rest. When we are sitting in our doctor's waiting room, Facebook makes the wait more pleasant. Is there a line to pay at the supermarket? We enter Instagram. In case we do not know what to do on the weekend, TripAdvisor is the solution. But all this gets us bored in the end.

This phenomenon was observed in social networks too: @tomasmuller1414 said, on April 16, 2020, "I am bored with Netflix, I am bored with games, I am bored with social networks, I AM BORED WITH EVERYTHING"; @zuryzaaday told the world "I'm bored with chatting, I'm bored with watching videos, I'm bored with Netflix, I'm bored with existing" (April 15, 2020); @Candelaglez wrote, "from Twitter to Instagram, through Netflix, WhatsApp and Parcheesi, and so on for hours until I get bored and fall asleep."

During the first two weeks of the pandemic, the novelty of the situation put our adaptive mechanisms to the test, revealing then who were the strongest, that is, those who were best prepared to react constructively to boredom and to tolerate it for a longer time. Many, unfortunately, were left behind because they were so unaccustomed to having to deal with their time to spare to the point that, when the usual remedies failed, they panicked. And it is that prolonged state-boredom demands something more on our part not to become 'chronified' and to lead to the most profound experience of boredom. It is no longer enough to fill time in some way; we need to occupy ourselves in something meaningful. But we do not know what this is! We do not know ourselves; we do not know what we like, what fills our heart, and what makes our *being-in-the-world* meaningful because we have not had to bother ourselves thinking about it for a long time. We have not had to listen to our boredom for at least a couple of decades.

For the disoriented, the machinery of fast entertainment offered through technology has created countless resources to avoid the suffering of having to think about what to do with boredom. The Internet is plagued with pages and articles entitled "Corona Lockdown: 50 Great Ideas to Avoid Boredom at Home"; "Harnessing Boredom in the Age of Coronavirus"; "Overcoming Free-Time Boredom During COVID-19"; "Six Things to Do If You're Bored at Home During the Coronavirus Pandemic"... The list is endless. Those capable of better reorganizing their routines could fill their time with meaningful activities that they would have never thought about under normal circumstances. Boredom made restless minds rethink many things. Does this mean that boredom makes us more creative? Unfortunately, not.

We all know that boredom, far from being a state of passivity, is reactive (Neu, 1998). The experience of boredom is so powerful that it cannot be ignored. When we get bored, time seems to stop, and life is emptied of sensations. When the bored person feels that the environment

does not meet their needs, thanks to its unpleasant experience, they begin to be aware that something is not going well and must be changed: boredom makes us react. Boredom is a sign of dissatisfaction with the present situation and includes a critical element (Toohey, 2011), an expression of deep discontent (Svendsen, 2005). After this first stage of introspection and cognitive reappraisal, boredom leads us towards the change, towards action. We can say that boredom expels us from our comfort and prevents us from continuing to be happy minors who delegate Netflix the responsibility of leading our lives.

Many people responded positively to boredom during the pandemic; they adapted and learned to tolerate it, showing the best of themselves. But this does not mean that thanks to the boredom suffered during the lockdown, for example, we can become more creative. This optimistic outlook on boredom has begun to spread on the Internet with headlines such as “How Boredom Can Spark Creativity”; “COVID-19 Lockdown Is Unleashing People’s Creativity”; “Coronavirus Lockdown: Bored Yet? Good — You’re on the Verge of a Creative Explosion,” and even those that pray “Lockdown Boredom May Prompt ‘Greatest Period of Creativity in History’” and “How the Boredom of Lockdown Could Lead to the Most Creative Period of All Time.”

But think about this: If we say that boredom is responsible for increasing our levels of creativity when we observe that some respond to it creatively, then we also must admit that boredom is the culprit that deviant and pathological behaviors occur when others react to it destructively. Boredom is not the source of creativity or destruction, despite Kierkegaard’s regret (2004). Do not think that by being at home bored during your time to spare, you will write a bestseller when you had never read a book, or you will discover skills to open a gourmet restaurant when you could not dress a salad before. Do not be terrified, either, thinking that because of boredom and being in full possession of your mental faculties, you will take a knife and stick it in the dog. Boredom will only make us feel bad and react to discomfort; what comes next will depend, again, on a wide range of social and psychological factors. Probably, if you were already a creative person before COVID-19, you will react to boredom more creatively. If, on the contrary, you were a destructive person, your reactions will be too. Likewise, if the coronavirus came at a time when your context was healthy, with space for recreation, some savings with which to buy new things and good company in a united family, the possibilities that your reactions to moments of boredom were creative are greater than if the bored person lived alone, in a hovel without windows and without a coin because their company fired them out.

We should not, therefore, condemn boredom due to the bad reactions that it sometimes triggers, not even in times of coronavirus. But, on the other hand, we should not voluntarily promote boredom to provoke creative responses. This is clear if we think about children. Boredom is not something we want for ourselves or our children. There is little point in forcing children to be bored in the false hope that they will become more creative later. But neither is boredom something that we can permanently avoid in ourselves or them. Teaching children to tolerate boredom instead of offering them continuous entertainment will prepare them for an adult life in which they will have to deal with boredom on many occasions. But this – learning to tolerate boredom – only means that we must be willing to listen to its message and to think of escape strategies against boredom that are effective in the long term. Getting bored is not good,

but not getting bored never is worse. Not getting bored never increases our intolerance to boredom and is detrimental to our ability to react. This does not make us more or less creative or destructive, or better or worse people; it simply increases the discomfort of those who get bored when these fast entertainments fail in times when they cannot meet expectations for which they have not been designed.

The pandemic provided us with a reality bath. But, after this experience of COVID-19, what we all wonder is what has happened after having recovered our routines. The fact that many felt truly helpless when this all started, and that regular entertainers like Twitter and YouTube quickly left them in the lurch, could make us wake up. Surprisingly, the suffering was not really accompanied by a further reflection on the destiny of our lives and on the future of contemporary society and our usage of technology after all. That we have resulted in being unable, in some cases, to manage boredom should make us rethink many things. This phenomenon might have had consequences in our lives after the coronavirus. Old remedies might have given way to more meaningful forms of entertainment after a period of personal discovery. But the reality is that we have not been able to see in the first person if boredom, not only individually, but also socially, has that emancipatory charge that is usually attributed to it.

We are being guinea pigs of a social laboratory that no one would have imagined a few years ago and from which it is still too early to conclude, but it seems to me that the return to normality has been no more than a return to the situation preceding the coronavirus despite the boredom we all have suffered. Boredom could sow the seeds for revolution from the individual (but shared), private (but public) experience of the lack of meaning, but nothing new happened after all (and this can even be a cause for celebration).

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