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On the Political Aesthetics of Boredom

Abstract

This paper challenges traditional approaches to understanding boredom, typically conceptualized as either a physiological, existential, or ethical phenomenon, by insisting upon its historico-materiality. It critically examines as a false dialectic the ideology that positions entertainment as the abstract immediate and boredom as the negative concrete. I contend that boredom must not be conceived merely as a subjective, irrational experience but rather as an objective phenomenon produced by capitalist rationality. The paper concludes by adducing concrete examples from various art forms of a true dialectic of boredom.

Keywords

Aesthetics, Boredom, Historical Materialism, Marxism, Political Philosophy

The Origin and Dialectics of Boredom

First subsumed under philosophy by Kantian ethics, boredom becomes an object proper of philosophical inquiry with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in the 19th century. This is to say, boredom becomes a philosophical problem at the historical moment of the capitalist mode of production. Contemporaneous with this philosophical conception is its conception in modern art as *l'ennui* in the work of that lyric poet in the era of high capitalism, Baudelaire (Benjamin 1997). If this is so, if boredom becomes a conceptualised object at this precise historical moment, this is because boredom is a product of capi-

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talist society, and the subjective consciousness in which it appears as a phenomenon is precisely that of the proletariat. It is for this reason that a historico-materialist analysis is required.

The first moment of the aesthetic judgment that 'This book, composition, film, etc. is boring' is the subject's demand that the aesthetic object affect him. The general principle of this demand, then, is that all aesthetic objects, the aesthetic object as such, must be subjectively affecting. However, such a principle must be grasped, not as it is proposed, as an abstract generality, but historico-materially, that is, in the historico-material conditions that produce such a demand. At this historical moment, in demanding that the aesthetic object not be boring, that it affect him as subject, the proletariat is asking that the object re-endow him with an aesthetic sense, a sense which he has necessarily lost in his objectification as labor capital. In demanding that the object not be boring, that the object affect him as subject, the proletariat asks that the object prove to him that he is still a subject as sensible being. The truth the proletariat's demand recognizes is that if the object can be intuited as an object, an intuition that already requires an aesthetic sensibility, then dialectically, the subject is thereby posited. In the object's acquiescence to the subject's demand that it be subjectively affecting, it would thereby be proved that the objective is in fact determinable by the subject. The thesis that the objective is determined by the subjective is one which, in the total determination of his subjectivity by the objectivity of capitalism, the proletariat recognizes as not at all necessarily true. As the revolt of the subject against the total determination of his subjectivity by the objectivity of capitalism, the proletariat's intolerance of boredom gains its truth, and thereby points toward the aesthetic redemption of capitalist society.

On the other hand, by reproducing capitalist ideology, the proletariat's demand that the aesthetic object not be boring is directly falsified. For the aesthetic judgment that 'This book, composition, film, etc. is boring' is reducible to the demand that the subject be entertained. As Adorno and Horkheimer have already demonstrated, entertainment is boredom's dialectical negation: 'Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism. It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again' (Adorno & Horkheimer 2002, 109). If the proletariat demands entertainment, this is due to the unremitting boredom of 'the mechanized labor process.' Insofar as the mechanized labor process is not recognized by the proletarian consciousness as its historico-material determining ground, that is, insofar as this consciousness is not reflected into itself, its demand becomes false in its abstraction.

For the subject under capitalism, the historico-material determining ground of the concept of boredom is the labor process of the working day. If something is 'boring,' this is because it reminds him of work insofar as it demands a conscious effort of the subject. As such, the entertaining can only be that which does not demand any conscious effort of the subject. Thereby, in the labor process of the working day, boredom as a subjective phenomenon is first socially and objectively produced. The abstraction thus produced within the proletarian consciousness becomes entertainment as the abstract immediate and the boredom as the negative concrete.

If boredom has become a focal object of aesthetic philosophical enquiry, this is because capitalist ideology has reduced the totality of all possible aesthetic categories to the false dialectic of either the entertaining or the boring. It is this ideology Kantian ethics reproduces when it claims that, 'All occupation is either play or work' (Kant 2001, 154). The aesthetic conviction that work must necessarily, *ipso facto*, be boring, and because of this, the aesthetic object must necessarily, *ipso facto*, be entertaining is what gives birth to the culture industry. For this is the definition of the culture industry: a field in which all aesthetic objects, the aesthetic object as such, must submit *a priori* to the principle of being entertaining.

However, the abstract separation of the entertaining and the boring produced by bourgeois ideology is false. Firstly, it is false because it is abstracted from the historico-material conditions, meaning the capitalist mode of production, that produce it. Bourgeois philosophy is resistant to tracing the subjective phenomenon of boredom back to the labor process as its determining ground as this would entail a critique of capitalist society. It is likewise resistant to a historico-material analysis of entertainment. It will not consider entertainment as a moment in the total process of the reproduction of capital. The capitalist needs the proletariat entertained in his off-hours in order to extract still more surplus-value from him. Firstly, by being entertained during his off-hours, the proletariat will arrive recovered from the previous working day and will thereby be able to continue to produce surplus-value for the capitalist. Secondly, by being entertained during his off-hours, the proletariat will be distracted from any thought which would critique this same capitalist system. Entertainment is thus one of the most essential ideological means by which capitalism ensures its reproduction. Otherwise said, capital does not merely determine the hours in which the commodity is actively produced; capital's rationalized determination tends to totality. For capital is inherently limitless, as proven by Marx in the chapter 'The General

Formula for Capital' in volume one of *Capital* (1982, 247-258) and by Rosa Luxemburg in the chapter 'The Adaptation of Capital' in *Social Reform or Revolution* (2006, 11-20).

Secondly, the abstract separation of the entertaining and the boring produced by bourgeois ideology is false because it allows no mediation: 'All occupation is either play or work' (Kant 2001, 154). Entertainment falls to one side and boredom to the other. By means of this unmediatedness, each moment is preserved still more securely in its self-identity. The preservation of each moment in its abstract self-identity only means the preservation of the totality that requires such unmediatedness in order to reproduce itself: namely, capitalism. The undialectical conception of the entertaining and the boring is thus proved to be an instance of ideologically false consciousness.

Nevertheless, as a piece of bourgeois ideology, the abstract separation of the entertaining as play and the boring as work dissimulates a material truth. The material truth it attests to is the fact that, for the proletariat, capitalism has laid down for it, as a law, the impossibility as a *contradictio in terminis* of 'playful work'. This is why Adornian aesthetics raises the playful or the ludic to the level of a philosophical concept: 'the element of play, without which there is no more possibility of art than of theory'; 'Art has a latitude of play in which models of planning can be developed that would not be tolerated by the social relations of production' (Adorno 2002, 39, 305 et al.). The playful is the conceptual redemption of the merely and falsely 'entertaining.'

When Adorno insists on play as a concept, he is pushing the third critique further than Kant himself will go: "The spontaneity in the play of the faculties of cognition, the agreement of which contains the ground of this pleasure, makes that concept [purposiveness of nature] suitable for mediating the connection of the domain of the concept of nature with the concept of freedom in its consequences, in that the latter at the same time promotes the receptivity of the mind for the moral feeling' (Kant 2000, 82). Play as such however is not to be found in the subsequent table. Although Kant recognizes that it is only in the practice of play that any mediation of the faculties is at all possible, Kant himself will not raise play to the level of a concept. The conceptualization of play by Adorno is a critique of Kantian aesthetics.

For, if Kant's prioritizing of the faculties and principles excludes proposing the conceptual importance of play, this is, above all, due to his bourgeois standpoint. As we have seen, the systematic unity of the higher faculties requires the mediation of both the work of the faculties of cognition—and assuredly cognition is work—as well their play. However, when bour-

geois ethics lectures that 'All occupation is either play or work,' it is only the theoretical unmediatedness that is reproduced (Kant 2001, 154). This can therefore only be an attempt to deny the lectured subject the systematic unity of the higher faculties. Bourgeois ideology does not wish for the proletarian consciousness to achieve a true mediation of nature and freedom. For, by such dialectical thought, the proletariat would theoretically and practically liberate itself. Aesthetic judgments of the proletariat such as 'This Varda film is boring,' or 'This Ligeti composition is boring' are only proof of the fact that bourgeois ideology has denied the proletariat the systematic unity of the higher faculties. This is to say, such judgments have their origin in class, meaning not any sense of a supposed highbrow-ness inherent to the aesthetic object itself, but rather the precise sense of the bourgeoisie's ideological domination over the proletariat. To attribute to the aesthetic object a condescending highbrow-ness, and to indict it on these grounds, is to make it lie for the reified social relations of capitalist society. It is to fall victim to the fetichism of the commodity.

The Material Truth of Boredom

Were boredom to be conceived historico-materially, as the part of political philosophy that it in fact is, a true mediation of nature and freedom within the proletarian consciousness would become possible and this consciousness would thereby theoretically and practically liberate itself. It is for this reason that bourgeois philosophy must insistently subsume boredom under ethics. It is precisely this subsumption of boredom under ethics, the determination boredom as an ethical concept, that Nietzsche criticizes when he writes: "What is the task of all higher education?" To turn men into machines. 'What are the means?' He must learn to be bored. 'How is that accomplished?' Through the concept of duty' (Nietzsche 2008, 57). By proselytizing the resignation to boredom as an ethical duty, bourgeois ideology ensures the reproduction of capital. For, not only is the subject thereby ideologically conditioned for the tedium of the working day. More importantly, by conceptualizing boredom as an ethical duty, boredom becomes an *a priori* practical necessity. Conceived thusly, as an *a priori* practical necessity, boredom no longer has any sensible relation to phenomenal conditions. Boredom, the subjective experience of boredom, cannot thereby be used as a criticism of actual society. Boredom ceases to be a subjective reflection of objective conditions. Ethics does indeed produce 'the good life,' but it is the good life for the capitalist.

Boredom has hitherto been refused its historico-material conception, and instead been insistently subsumed under bourgeois ethics, because such a historico-material conception would demonstrate its relation to liberation. For boredom can only lead to 'the good life' for the proletariat if it is comprehended theoretically as one of the contradictions immanent to the capitalist mode of production, as one of the contradictions by means of which the socialization of society becomes possible. In this case, it is the necessary aesthetic contradiction immanent to capitalist society of the omnipresence of entertainment and the total determination of time by mechanical, repetitive tasks, so much so that entertainment itself becomes such a task. As one of the contradictions immanent to capitalist society by which the socialization of society becomes possible, the aesthetic contradiction is no different from, and is a reflection of, its economic contradictions, e.g., the contradiction that inheres in the commodity between use-value and exchange-value.

It is now evident what renders all previous, bourgeois conceptions of boredom false. Hitherto, analyses of boredom have fallen into one of three conceptions. The first is that which conceptualizes boredom as a physiological state of the subject, a clinical symptom of some mental deficiency. This is the physiological conception of boredom. To this belongs O'Brien's article 'Boredom' in *Analysis* (2014, 236-244). The second is that which, taking after Kierkegaard and Heidegger, confers upon boredom a metaphysical significance: the existentialist conception of boredom. The third chapter of Svendsen's *A Philosophy of Boredom* is dedicated to this school (2005, 107-132). The last is that which posits boredom as an ethical problem. To this conception, Svendsen's final chapter and Elpidorou's *Propelled: How Boredom, Frustration, and Anticipation Lead Us to the Good Life* belong (ibid., 133-152; cf. Elpidorou 2020). This is the ethical conception of boredom. The objection to all, and what these conceptions have in common, is that they treat of boredom as a mere subjectivism. Boredom is always to be attributed exclusively to the subject: as a physiological state of the subject, as a mode of the subject's being in the world, or as the subject's insufficient dutifulness. Thus, they repress the dialectical relationship between the subject and object: that whatever is found in the subject must be determinately reflected in the object. For the subject is not the world as such, as the socio-historical totality over and against it proves, and neither is the subject immediately the subject as such, but rather always the subject as mediated by the object.

In its exclusionary attribution to the subject of the blame of being bored, such philosophy implicitly affirms the sufficiency of the world as is, thereby proving itself a reactionary piece of bourgeois ideology. However, boredom

is not the irrationality of a contingent subjectivity. As has been demonstrated, boredom, as well as its dialectical other, entertainment, is an objective product of the capitalist mode of production. If the contemporary subject, meaning the subject under capitalism, feels bored or entertained, this is due to the total rational determination of the socio-historical objectivity.

Definition of the Boring

We have thus arrived at boredom's objective nature from the side of the subject. However, the objective nature of boredom is still further proved from the side of the object.

The boring cannot be that which is unmediated. The boring object is not the abstract immediacy of sense certainty (cf. Hegel 2018). Indeed, the object of abstract immediacy is always ahistorical and, therefore, novel; if it were to possess a history, it would be concretely mediated and, therefore, precisely not an abstract immediacy. Otherwise said, if one never hears the judgment 'This tree is boring,' or 'This sun is boring,' but only ever rather 'This book, composition, film, etc. is boring', this is because the binary aesthetic categories of bourgeois philosophy of the boring and the entertaining are only valid for the products of its society. By means of this subjective reduction of aesthetic categories, the objectivity that can be qualified as aesthetic is thereby reduced to those products determined by the capitalist mode of production. By means of this false binary aesthetic philosophy, bourgeois ideology seeks to foreclose any objectivity not totally determined by the capitalist mode of production. If it is only possible to conceive of objects as either entertaining or boring, a thought which is not totally determined by bourgeois ideology becomes impossible.

If the boring cannot be that which is unmediated, the boring must be that which is thoroughly mediated. The precise quality of being thoroughly mediated is what the proletariat's labor time and a symphony of Théodore Dubois share in common. The boring is precisely those structures in which the relations have become totally reified. This is why the boring is that which is predictable. It was Lukacs who, in 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,' clarified the theoretical relationship between reification and prediction: 'For a system in the sense given to it by rationalism—and any other system would be self-contradictory—can bear no meaning other than that of a co-ordination, or rather a supra- and subordination of the various partial systems of forms (and within these, of the individual forms). The connections between them must always be thought of as 'necessary', i.e., as

visible in or 'created' by the forms themselves, or at least by the principle according to which forms are constructed. That is to say, the correct positing of a principle implies—at least in its general tendency—the positing of the whole system determined by it; the consequences are contained in the principle, they can be deduced from it, they are predictable and calculable' (Lukacs 1971a, 117). In the same way that, by means of bourgeois thought which tends toward total rationalization, the production output, and thus profit margins, of the capitalist mode of production become ever more predictable, by means of this same thought, the movements of the aesthetic object become ever more predictable. The aesthetic object becomes a commodity, not by the contingent possession of any sensible attribute, but by its subjection to the total rationalization of bourgeois thought. The judgment that an object is boring is the reified thought of the bourgeoisie confronted with its own reified structures.

The criterion of the aesthetic work must then become its movement according to that which is immanently necessary according to the conceptual logic of the aesthetic material, however not predictable according to the reified structures of bourgeois thought. The aesthetic work finds its life in what is necessary yet unpredictable. Thusly, it resolves the antinomy between the necessary and contingent. In its proof of a necessity that is not predictable from the reified structures of bourgeois thought, the aesthetic work points toward a historical redemption. This is the political significance of the aesthetic in late capitalism.

The Boring in Art

If bourgeois philosophy has hitherto closed its eyes to the class nature of boredom, this class nature is gleaned still more evidently in its French translation, *l'ennui*. When the aristocracy of the *Ancien Régime* feigned *ennui*, that which they sought to prove was that they did not need to be entertained. For the need to be entertained, the need for a moment of levity, betrays the burdensomeness of a coarse life.

That which *l'ennui* had been under feudalism, namely, a witty proof of the leisure of one's life, this same *l'ennui* cannot be under capitalism. That is to say, the concept is determined historico-materially. The concept undergoes a historico-material change with the increasing domination of the capitalist mode of production throughout the late 18th and 19th centuries. The proof that one did not need to earn a living becomes proof of the lifelessness of living.

In its mimetic absorption with *le semblable*, bourgeois philosophy has ignored the fact that it is *l'ennui* and not *le semblable* which not only of all the sensationalist catalogue Baudelaire compiles is the worst of the lot, but which, more importantly, is the only one capable of undoing the world as such:

Il ferait volontiers de la terre un débris
Et dans un bâillement avalerait le monde;

C'est l'Ennui!

Baudelaire 2019, 13

Rape, poison, the dagger, etc., may disrupt the laws and order of bourgeois society, but they do not put the world at ontological risk. The philosophical problem becomes: how precisely does *l'ennui* as a historico-materially determined conception of boredom threaten to undo the ontological as such?

Capitalism is characterized by 'progress, which permits an enormous increase in production within a shorter and shorter amount of time' (Marx 1982, 544). *L'ennui*, on the other hand, is characterized precisely by its lack of productivity. For the object the subjective posturing of *l'ennui* is meant to negate is precisely progress: 'j'entends par progrès la diminution progressive de l'âme et la domination progressive de la matière' (Baudelaire 1999). It is an objective domination that threatens to become total, an objective domination which at this historical moment can only be that of the capitalist mode of production. The admonition to 'just do something' upon the admission of boredom is then the attempt by capitalist ideology to bring the wayward subject back into the fold. This finally is the material truth of the latter half of Kant's ethics: 'Better to be occupied in play than with nothing at all, for in that way we at least continue to be active' (Kant 2001, 154). That which such bourgeois ethics recognizes and would preempt is that the subjective posturing of *l'ennui* is the subject's negation of the objective domination of the capitalist mode of production.

Otherwise said, the Decadent movement is the rejection of the subservient subsumption of the aesthetic to the total determination of the capitalist mode of production. This is the theoretical basis of the aestheticism of *l'art pour l'art*. However, this theory, by abstractly and mechanically removing art from the social, directly becomes false. For not only is art—as all manifestations of spirit, including reason, the ethical order, and religion—a product of

the social, but more importantly, by thusly abstracting art, any possibility of a dialectical mediation with the social is impossibilized. Art and the social fall apart. Art, just as the social, becomes the abstract immediacy of *une donnée*: "Their [exact sciences] underlying material base is permitted to dwell inviolate and undisturbed in its irrationality ('non-createdness,' 'givenness') so that it becomes possible to operate with unproblematic, rational categories in the resulting methodically purified world' (Lukacs 1971a, 120). The aestheticism of art and the exactness of the sciences share their theoretical basis precisely to the extent that they are bourgeois. Nietzsche makes 'the concept of the "selfless" [...] the distinctive sign of decadence' because the world, as a given datum, becomes an objectivity upon which the subject denies himself any influence (Nietzsche 2000, 790). The objectivity of the world becomes without subjectivity. For the artist, this is because the given objectivity of the world cannot be allowed to be determinate of his subjectivist aesthetics: the given objectivity of the world must be neglected at all costs. For the scientist, this is because subjectivity cannot be allowed to determine his objectivist findings: the given objectivity of the world must be preserved at all costs. In either case, the world becomes the difference of the operation of the subtraction of the subject.

Thus, the subject and the object grow further apart historically until they are severed the one from the other. This is the philosophical truth of such artistic representations of the type of Ramón Casas's *Joven decadente*, van Dongen's *Woman on Sofa*, etc. One can, in practice, rest unbothered precisely because one has already, in theory, cut the world off. In poetry, this is represented in Mallarmé's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. The sleep of the fawn is proof of the subject's disengagement with the world, while the however many nymphs are only so many worlds, which, as world, are without consequence for the subject. This is why the question of their reality is beside the mark and doubt, reaching its historical moment of absoluteness, ceases to be, as it once was for Descartes, a problem:

Aimai-je un rêve ?
 Mon doute, amas de nuit ancienne, s'achève

Mallarmé 2021, 234

The non-consequence of these worlds is heard in Debussy's music: the music changes keys from D \flat major to E major, to C major, to E \flat major, and so on. None of these changes requires either harmonic preparation nor har-

monic resolution precisely to the extent that they are non-consequential for the subject. This music is within the subjective consciousness of the fawn; it is the music that he is hearing.

We can now understand why, according to Baudelaire, boredom alone is capable of undoing the world as such, why boredom puts the ontological at risk. The objectivity of the world becomes without subjectivity. However, as a dialectical relation, there is no objectivity without subjectivity. In the subject's abstraction from the world, in the subject's divorce in thought and practice from the world, the latter falls into non-consequence. Any logic of the *ontos* becomes impossible, for a logical argument requires the concept of consequence.

Conclusion

Of course, given the false abstract separation of work and play promulgated by bourgeois ideology, it is only by falling into the sleep of pure subjectivism that the subject can enjoy any 'free play of the imagination' at all (Kant 2000, 103). The problem remains, however, that, as the negative infinity of absolute subjectivism, the subject's redemption of the objective as its dialectical reflection is thereby made impossible.

A true dialectic must be found. Given the definition of the culture industry as a field in which all aesthetic objects, the aesthetic object as such, must submit *a priori* to the principle of being entertaining, one possible dialectical solution is to produce aesthetic objects that are boring, that is, to produce aesthetic objects that do not submit *a priori* to the principle of being entertaining. For this is not merely abstract negation. Such a practice is not reducible to mere abstract negation because the social totality is reflected in the work of art. The negation is determinate: it is a negation precisely of the aesthetic principle of bourgeois society. In reflecting the social totality, a dialectic between the aesthetic and the social is materially produced. This is why the mind-numbing inanity of certain moments of Shostakovich are true, not in spite of but, precisely because of their mind-numbingness. The dullness of a Shostakovich symphony is more true than the entertainment of a Disney film.

In his aesthetic judgment of Shostakovich, Boulez merely reproduces bourgeois ideology: 'Well, Shostakovich plays with clichés most of the time, I find. It's like olive oil, when you have a second and even third pressing, and I think of Shostakovich as the second, or even third, pressing of Mahler. I think, with Shostakovich, people are influenced by the autobiographical

dimension of his music' (Boulez 2015). Its theoretical manoeuvre is to attribute the music's clichéd quality as the cause of its boringness, to the autobiographical, meaning to the merely subjective. This thereby betrays itself as merely a means to disallow the conception of boredom as an objective product of the social totality.

Even if, in a kind of Pierre Menard exercise, Shostakovich had reproduced Mahler note for note, the same aesthetic object produced during the late romantic era of early capitalism cannot be the same as this object produced during the modernism of late capitalism. That is to say, an object's historico-material determination is inherent to the object itself. To affirm the contrary would be thoroughly ahistorical, dismissing the historico-material nature of consciousness. The difference is between that of a thought which is not yet totally reified and one in which reification has become total. If, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the *Ländler* could still represent a naïve conception of nature, by the late 20th century, the concept of nature could only be that of nature as, in Lukacs's words, 'the historico-philosophical objectivation of man's alienation from his own constructs' (Lukacs 1971b, 64). What was once comforting can today only be heard in its hideousness.

To adduce a final instance of a possible true dialectic, we turn to film. As we have seen, *l'ennui*, which began as the negation of capitalist progress, soon devolved into a mere aesthetic languor. Certainly, such an *ennui* is represented in the films of Antonioni. In his celebrated long tracking shots, that which Antonioni stages in such films as *L'Eclisse* is precisely this subjective aimlessness, the wandering character at dawn. To stop the analysis here, however, would be to fall into the trap of subjectivist readings, which recommend as the sole concern the abstract internality of the protagonist as a means of forestalling all reflective thought of the objective. Such readings thereby betray the reactionary nature of all such non-dialectical thought. They are the theoretical attempt to cordon off the objective from any dialectical subjective interference and thereby render the objective unalterable. For the essential here is that this aimlessness has as its backdrop, that is, has as its historico-material conditions, the construction of bourgeois apartment blocks taking over the outskirts where the laborers' children once played. Subjective *ennui* is situated precisely within the midst of the objective limitless expansion of capitalist society. This is precisely because the one is the cause of the other, that is, because they are dialectically related. It is the non-teleological nature of capital which objectively produces the non-teleological *ennui* of the subject. By mediating the two moments that have, in the reified thought of the bourgeoisie, become abstracted the one from the other, Anto-

nioni re-dialecticizes the two moments and makes them true again. The bourgeois ideology which would claim boredom as merely a particular and contingent irrationality of the subject, that is, as having no reflection on the objective totality of capitalist society, betrays itself as merely a means to preserve this same objective totality and is thereby proven to be false.

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