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The Disappearance of Boredom

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The Disappearance of Boredom

Abstract

As Baudrillard's essay on the hypermarket makes clear, the mall is the true face of Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality. It is not merely the simulation of reality; it is, in fact, a vast, multilayered consumerist dreamscape in which everything you can imagine yourself wanting can be had in commodity form, even if that wasn't what you originally wished for. Today, though, Baudrillard's hyperreal hypermarket is to be found online and thanks to the smartphone it is constantly in reach. Smartphones are not just re-shaping space; they're also transforming time, most noticeably in our apparent loss of the ability to wait. Nowhere is that 'truth' felt more keenly than in airport departure lounges where waiting is widely considered torture. But contrary to the popular view, it is not torture because it is boring - it is torture because boredom is no longer possible. We embrace our electronic thralldom and thank the Gods for the fact we've conquered boredom once and for all. By conquering boredom consumer capitalism has extinguished its most potent critic. Boredom was our defense against the present.

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As Baudrillard's essay on the hypermarket makes clear, the mall is the true face of Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality. It is not merely the simulation of reality; it is in fact a vast, multilayered consumerist dreamscape in which everything you can imagine yourself wanting can be had in commodity form, even if that wasn't what you originally wished for. Today, though, Baudrillard's hyperreal hypermarket is to be found online and thanks to the smartphone it is constantly in reach. Smartphones are not just re-shaping space; they're also transforming time, most noticeably in our apparent loss of the ability to wait. Nowhere is that 'truth' felt more keenly than in airport departure lounges where waiting is widely considered torture. But contrary to the popular view, it isn't torture because it is boring – it is torture because boredom is no longer possible. We embrace our electronic thralldom and thank the Gods for the fact we've conquered boredom once and for all. By conquering boredom consumer capitalism has extinguished its most potent critic. Boredom was our defence against the present.

«We are bored when we don't know what we are waiting for. That we do know, or think we know, is nearly always the expression of our superficiality or inattention»

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

I.

No other public building – no other space – is as thoroughly contaminated with what Jean Baudrillard wisely calls the virus of boredom.¹ Consequently, other public building exemplifies more acutely Sartre's cruel judgement that hell is other people. It is a leviathan space in which everyone fights tooth and claw not to be held up and forced to wait. Now that the online universe of working, shopping, banking, and living, has created hyperreal smooth spaces for us to conduct our lives without ever having to encounter another actual human being, the airport is one of the last places in the first world where crowds are still encountered and queuing is still a necessity (entertainment complexes such as art galleries, movie theatres and theme parks are the only other places

¹ J. Baudrillard, *Art and Artefact*, London 1997, p. 52.

where one is likely to queue). And it was of course the queue that denoted the disintegration of society into seriality for Sartre. But we must ask, what does it say about a culture if it loses the art of waiting? Does that not mean we who make up 'this' culture no longer know how to amuse ourselves with only our inner selves for company? More importantly, if we lose the art of boredom, then we lose our resistance to the intrusions of the present.

Fatigue, depression, neurosis are always convertible into overt violence, and vice versa. The fatigue of the citizen of post-industrial society is not far removed from the 'go-slow' or 'slowdown' of factory workers, or the schoolchild's 'boredom'. These are all forms of passive resistance; they are 'ingrowing' in the way one speaks of an 'ingrowing toenail', turning back towards the flesh, towards the inside.²

Consumer capitalism cannot tolerate boredom, if it means we thereby become immune to its endless blandishments, which is doubtless why airports have transformed themselves into malls. Waiting isn't boring if you are shopping is the logic. But it goes further than that because the net effect is to envelop the traveller in a seamless bubble of consumption. To journey from Terminal 5 at Heathrow to London Westfield, for example, is to experience the shock of changing location without changing place. Indeed, as Marc Augé might put it, it is to experience the very absence of place or what he called non-place.³ In fact, a similar experience can be had visiting almost any major city, literally anywhere in the world. Admittedly it is more challenging in the mega-cities, like Delhi and Mumbai, or Chongqing and Shanghai, shot through as they are with vast slums, but even there if one has sufficient means, one can travel in a protected sphere from airport to hotel to mall to office park and never set foot in the 'real' city, never breathe in its dust and smells, never see its dark and dilapidated side.

The standardizing influence of capitalism has been much remarked upon, but the process is now so far advanced that we're in danger of forgetting how cities used to be. George Ritzer wittily coined the term McDonaldization to describe the process whereby cities everywhere seem to be shedding their distinctive local characteristics in favour of mass-produced global characteristics.⁴ But perhaps Jameson was nearer to the mark with his caustic description of the spread of corporate bland as being like an outbreak of toxic moss.⁵ McDonald's is very

² J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, C. Turner (trans.), London 1998, pp. 182-183.

³ See M. Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, J. Howe (trans.), London 1995. See also I. Buchanan, *Space in the Age of Non-place*, in Buchanan and Lambert (eds.), *Deleuze and Space*, Edinburgh 2005, pp. 16-35.

⁴ As Ritzer notes, conservative political pundits Thomas Friedman (*Lexus and the Olive Tree*) and Benjamin R. Barber (*Jihad vs. McWorld*) have expressed similar viewpoints to his. Interestingly, Ritzer seems not to be concerned that both Friedman and Barber depict McDonaldization as the welcome spread of social democracy and capitalist freedom. G. Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, California 2000, p. 233 n1.

⁵ F. Jameson, *Future City*, «New Left Review», 21, 2003, pp 65-79. See also I. Buchanan, *Practical Deleuzism and Postmodern Space* in M. Fuglsang and B.M. Sorensen (eds.), *Deleuze and the Social*, Edinburgh 2006, pp. 135-150.

far from the only culprit – nowadays, all brands long to be global. Fast food, coffee, clothing, jewellery, cars, electronic goods, all aspire to an ‘international’ style that heralds from some imaginary and perpetually ‘cool’ place that may or may not actually exist and most importantly never seems out of place anywhere. As Baudrillard’s essay on the hypermarket makes clear, this is the true face of Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality. It is not merely the simulation of reality, it is in fact a vast, multilayered consumerist dreamscape in which everything you can imagine yourself wanting can be had in commodity form, even if that wasn’t what you originally wished for⁶. If you want to float like a butterfly and rise above it all, then fly this airline, and if you want to be desirable then wear this fragrance. However, to see an advertisement for perfume in China featuring a blonde, Scandinavian woman is to be viscerally reminded of the truth of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of faciality and the omnipresence of the ‘white man’ standard⁷.

II.

Yet if anything can stop the ‘mall’ of the world (to use Kowinski’s phrase⁸), it will be the smartphone, the hyperreal device par excellence. It is transforming both how we use and experience space and at the same time shaping the kinds of spaces we need, which ultimately may not be the kinds of spaces we want. The huge increase in online shopping that has occurred over the past decade or so has placed enormous pressure on bricks and mortar retail, of all kinds, in some cases driving even big box stores like Borders out of business altogether. No one can predict where this trend will end, but it is clear that there will be more casualties as global shopping practices change. One effect of this that is having a noticeable impact on the urban environment, particularly in the suburban fringe areas, is that warehouses are replacing malls. Hypermarkets are literally becoming hyperreal as online retailers like Amazon who don’t need or want a shopfront, build immense distribution centres (Amazon calls them ‘fulfilment centres’) capable of processing thousands of orders per day. They’re also making increased use of robot technology to ‘fulfil’ these orders, thus further reducing the ‘human’ presence in these dull places. If all or even most of our shopping moves online the city will disappear (to use one of Baudrillard’s favourite words). Those who despair at the dreary uniformity of the strip mall will find themselves nostalgic for their tasteless exteriors when they’re replaced by the vacant grey walls of warehouses.

The city re-made as distribution centre will be the final triumph of the image because it will mean that the image of the thing has replaced the thing itself. We would only tolerate this if we weren’t paying attention, if our gaze wasn’t

⁶J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, S. Faria Glaser (trans.), Ann Arbor 1994, pp. 75-77.

⁷G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, B. Massumi (trans.), London 1987, p. 178.

⁸W. Kowinski, *The Malling of America: Travels in the United States of Shopping*, New York 2002.

directed elsewhere, and that is precisely what is happening: the smartphone's small screens have enacted a vast capture of attention.

Smartphones are not just re-shaping space; they're also transforming time, most noticeably in our apparent loss of the ability to wait. The Siren's song of consumer capitalism, which disguises itself as entertainment, grows louder in our unstopped ears with each passing day. Like the great traveller Odysseus, we do not try to avoid the Siren's fateful music; but unlike him, we assume our freedom – our sense of our 'self' as an autonomous agent – will protect us from its deadly melody.⁹ In contrast to the benighted schizophrenic unable to stop the voices in their head, we invite them in, we let them crowd-out our heads to such an extent we forget our 'self' and we're grateful for the loss, as though it was our 'self' that is tedious and not the place we're trapped in. That is the reality and the tragedy of contemporary life. Nowhere is that 'truth' felt more keenly than in airport departure lounges where waiting is widely considered torture. But contrary to the popular view, it isn't torture because it is boring – it is torture because *boredom is no longer possible*. We embrace our electronic thralldom and thank the Gods for the fact we've conquered boredom once and for all, forgetting that this means that we can now never be, as Siegfried Kracauer once put it, «as thoroughly bored with the world as it ultimately deserves».¹⁰ By conquering boredom consumer capitalism has extinguished its most potent critic. Boredom is our defence against the present.

Kracauer's diagnosis was made in 1924 when newspapers and magazines were the dominant media forms and cinema and radio were still in their infancy, albeit maturing rapidly. TV had yet to be invented, and the Internet was more than half a century away, but already the idea of an unbearable form of 'bare' or non-mediated time was being promulgated. Already there was 'too much' going on.¹¹ Looking back we might think this early period in the history of mass media was much less intense in its effects than our own media-saturated universe is today, but that fails to grasp just how radical the *media form* was to those who encountered it then, many for the first time in history.¹² Kracauer's contemporary, Walter Benjamin, was especially clear-eyed in this regard. He argued that the form of newspapers, particularly the way news stories render the flow of the experience of events as a punctuated sequence of 'things that happened', i.e., as pure information, was such that it could not be assimilated *as* experience by its readers. Today the 'crawl' of seemingly random headlines that trace their way across the bottom of the TV screen during a news bulletin is a

⁹ T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, J. Cumming (trans.), New York 1998 [1944], p. 59.

¹⁰ S. Kracauer, *Boredom in The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, T. Levin (trans.), Cambridge 1995 [1924], pp 331-336, p. 332.

¹¹ For an excellent account of how modernity has changed how we experience time see J. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Cambridge 1999.

¹² Those of us 'old' enough to remember the advent of email and the birth and growth of the internet have had a similar experience, perhaps without realizing it at the time.

powerful reminder of the truth of Benjamin's thesis. Watching the crawl cannot by itself give rise to experience: its very structure is alienating.

The principles of journalistic information (freshness of news, brevity, comprehensibility, and, above all, lack of connection between the individual news items) contribute as much to this as does the make-up of the pages and the paper's style¹³.

The net effect was something he bluntly called 'shock'.

Benjamin frames his discussion of 'shock' in two ways, both of which are relevant today as we try to think about the impact of digital media on our daily lives, i.e., not as a source of (mis-)information, or distraction, but as a formative agent shaping our very subjectivity. To begin with, he frames it historically, arguing that each new mode of communication competes with the one that came before and in doing so increases the atrophy of experience by moving further and further away from 'original' story forms. Although Benjamin doesn't specify what kind of story form he has in mind here as the putative original form (and to be clear he never refers to it in this way either), his subsequent comments suggest that he is referring to myth, particularly oral myth. He charts a shift from narration to information to sensation and suggests that it is only narration – the story form – that can be assimilated as experience. This is because the storyteller has already embedded what they want to say in their own life, thus rendering it *as* experience from the outset.¹⁴ The second frame is drawn from Freud, specifically Freud's essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (though he's careful to say his purpose in turning to it is to test the fruitfulness of Freud's concepts rather than confirm their correctness). He also draws heavily on Bergson and Proust, particularly the latter's concept of involuntary memory.

Freud helps to explain an apparent anomaly in the history of media, as Benjamin maps it, namely its increasing propensity to 'shock' as each new media form distances itself from storytelling. One may wonder why each new media form should want to follow this trajectory since at first glance it would seem as though this would be increasingly off-putting to its potential audience. Benjamin doesn't address this issue directly, strangely enough, but one may suppose that it has to do with the needs of advertisers, who have an obvious vested interest in producing 'shock'. They want their products to be memorable, which as I'll explain shortly means they have to penetrate the veil of the conscious, but more than that they want to insinuate the desire to buy at a level below or somehow beyond the reach of the conscious mind. Their ultimate goal, not to put too fine a point on it, is to program the unconscious so that buying something – in fact, one can just say shopping, which as Jameson has argued has been

¹³ W. Benjamin, *Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, in *Charles Baudelaire*, H. Zohn (trans.), London, 1973 [1939], pp 107-154, p. 112.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

divorced from buying so as to become a fantasy activity in its own right¹⁵ – is regarded as a pleasurable end in and of itself. And in this regard they have been spectacularly successful. Shopping is the dominant cultural activity today.¹⁶ It also calls into question the current vogue (initiated by the scarcely disinterested CEO of Google Eric Schmidt) of referring to digital as the ‘attention economy’ because – if we follow Benjamin – the goal of this particular mode of capitalism is in fact a somewhat deeper layer of the mind.

What interests Benjamin is Freud’s hypothesis that that which becomes conscious cannot also become a memory trace. «In Freud’s view, consciousness as such receives no memory traces whatever, but has another important function: protection against stimuli».¹⁷ In Freud’s view, protection against stimuli is just as vitally important as the reception of stimuli and his whole theory of dreams turns on the hypothesis that their essential purpose is to manage excess stimuli by repeating it and ‘working’ it until it can be ‘experienced’ and mastery over it thus obtained. Similarly, in everyday life, as Freud’s discussion of his grandson’s cotton reel game explains, we use rituals to gain control over otherwise uncontrollable thoughts and feelings. In effect, repetition is a form of training, or what Benjamin called ‘shock defence’, that enables us at the level of the unconscious to internalize the hitherto indigestible stimulus and ‘make sense’ of it without ever having to think about it. This, Freud suggests, is what his grandson did – it was his way of dealing with his mother’s uncontrolled presences and absences and behind that the loss of his father who was ‘at the front’. At the extreme edge of this spectrum of behaviours is the schizophrenic, who is bombarded by so many stimuli, both from within and without, that they are eventually forced to abandon even the attempt at mastery. In Deleuze and Guattari’s language, the schizophrenic then retreats to their body without organs (a notion they borrow from the schizophrenic French poet Antonin Artaud), sealing themselves off from the world and effectively making themselves ‘shock proof’.¹⁸

Boredom is something like this. It is simultaneously a walling off from external stimuli and a negation of internal stimuli: it is this sense that it is a defence against the present. It is both a rejection of a situation and a protection against it. To be bored waiting for a plane (to update and simplify – a great deal – Heidegger) means that time has reasserted itself in a paradoxical way: on the one hand, it has lengthened – the moment seems never to pass, it becomes bloated, expanding without end – but, on the other hand we do nothing to

¹⁵ F. Jameson, *Future City*, cit.

¹⁶ It is against this that one should read Fredric Jameson’s polemical and frequently misunderstood proposition that late – by which he meant contemporary – capitalism is characterized by the prodigious expansion of multinational capital and its penetration and colonization of the ‘last’ two pre-capitalist enclaves, Nature and the Unconscious, because it plainly rings true. F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London 1991, p. 49.

¹⁷ W. Benjamin, *Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, cit., p. 115.

¹⁸ I. Buchanan, *Schizoanalytic Modernism: The Case of Antonin Artaud*, in P. Ardoin, L. Mattison and S. Gontarski (eds.), *Understanding Deleuze, Understanding Modernism*, London, 2014, pp 196-206.

shorten it – indeed, we refuse to pass the time and thus make time pass. In such a state we are, as Kracauer avers, impervious to the blandishments of capitalism. No commodity, however bedazzling, can entice us out of this funk once we've sunk into it; and, no entertainment is sufficiently entertaining to force us to relent and make time pass again. As Heidegger's brief discussion of waiting at train stations suggests, we fall into the funk of boredom because we feel time has been stolen from us by a space that seems to have let us down. But what more could we expect of the station? Heidegger's answer is very much of his own time (1929/30). The empty platform, as miserable as it is, is all one can expect because it does precisely what it is supposed to.¹⁹ Today, this line of thinking makes no sense to us because we've been taught to expect that the last thing a train station or airport (or even an art gallery) should be is purely functional, a place to do nothing more than wait. We've learned to think the absence of our train or plane is a welcome opportunity to relax, to shop, to eat, to be entertained.

And if all else fails, we have our smartphones to keep us company. How could we be bored? In the screen-age boredom has been as thoroughly delegitimated as the welfare state. Any moment or place where boredom might creep in is saturation-bombed by media-messaging – TVs, radio, canned music, billboards, electronic message boards, not to mention our own personal devices, which do the same thing under the guise of 'social media' so we don't even notice that we're being blitzed by marketers. Behaviour that passes for 'normal' today is in many cases indistinguishable from the key clinical symptoms of schizophrenia. We 'listen' to the disembodied voices of advertisements all day long and happily do as they instruct us – buy this, buy that, think this, think that – without questioning how weird this really is. Our digital devices bombard us with messages and stimuli and we think nothing of it, but the reality – as research is beginning to show – is that it is transforming 'us' individually, culturally and socially that haven't been fully mapped. Not only that, we put in headphones so as to block out the rest of the world and give our fullest attention to the disembodied voices on our phones and other devices. Should someone try to talk to us when we're thus engaged its thought rude and inconsiderate that one should have been interrupted, which is to say it is no longer rude or impolite to actively ignore one's fellow humans.

In the space of only a handful of years, less than an evolutionary blink of the eye, the mobile digital device has gone from being present-at-hand, in Heidegger's sense, to fully ready-to-hand, meaning it has passed from being something that is merely of interest, as perhaps an idea or concept might be, to being something that is a practical tool we use intuitively, without conscious thought. Not only do we use the mobile digital device without thought, now, as Heidegger said of hammers, it has in many ways supplanted thought, thus rendering large parts of our minds redundant. So long as we have Google maps

¹⁹ M. Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, W. McNeill and N. Walker (trans.), Bloomington 1995 [1929/30], p. 99-105.

we don't need to remember the way home or know how to read a map in order to get somewhere – our device can tell us. Nor do we need to remember to pick up groceries, our device can remind us to do that, or else enable us to order them home-delivered. Our device can also translate all languages into English or any other language we choose. Similarly we can program our TVs no matter where we are and we can connect with friends via social media no matter where they are. And since practically everyone has a mobile digital device – and not just in the first world, either – these days we don't even need to concern ourselves with such old-fashioned questions as to whether so-and-so has a phone. Of course they do!

This trajectory is of course the one mapped out for us by the designers and manufacturers of digital technology. The great technological revolution of the early 1970s, when Bill Gates and Steve Jobs were just geek university drop-outs, not billionaire gurus, came about because innovators like Gates and Jobs could see that computers had the potential to be machines that people used in their homes and in their everyday lives. The prevailing view until then had been that computers were both too complicated and too expensive for anything but commercial, military or enthusiast (i.e., geek) applications. And even then they had no idea of just how pervasive digital technology could and would become once they let the genie out of the bottle. Digital technology is, to say the least, a profound new kind of distraction, one that amplifies all the previously existing distractions 'consumer society' could throw at us – cinema, magazines, radio, TV, and commodities themselves – and effectively forecloses on the possibility of escaping its clutches. There is literally nowhere one can go these days that isn't somehow in the thrall of commodity capitalism.

There has been no device in the history of technology more efficient than the smart phone when it comes to capturing 'our' attention. So much so it has made time itself seem unbearable in its absence. One can hardly imagine waiting for a bus or a plane or a coffee without the distraction of one's phone. It's as if seconds and minutes stretch into hours and days when not contained by a digital device of some kind. Adults and children, young and old, men and women, are all equally afflicted. No one sits and contemplates the world anymore. Our eyes are glued to our screens, checking email, checking-in with our social media or watching a video. It no longer seems rude or impolite to do check one's phone while talking with someone else. Unmediated time, or what I have called 'pure time' because it is time experienced without the mediation of a digital device (in any of its manifestations), has all but vanished from our lives. And let's not kid ourselves this has been the goal of every new piece of information technology since the invention of writing. As Fredric Jameson argued more than two decades ago, the final frontier of capitalism was always consciousness itself and that moment has arrived.

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