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## On Boredom, Information Systems, and the Practice of Good Reading

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## On Boredom, Information Systems, and the Practice of Good Reading

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### Introduction: The Democratization of Boredom

Saint Augustine claimed to know what time was, although he admitted that it was beyond him to define it: "What, then, is time? I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled" (*Confessions*, XI, §14). The same thing could be said of boredom. The parallel is certainly no coincidence. Time and boredom are two closely related phenomena in that the latter is generated by a certain "quality" of the former, i.e., its ruthless infinity.

Despite the fact that boredom, under a variety of names, has been present on the earth ever since man was prone to experience it, it has emerged as a hallmark feature of modern man (Klapp, 1986; Svendsen 2005). It was recognized as an increasingly widespread experience, especially with the advent of existential philosophy, which has undertaken the particularly arduous task of trying to understand its role in human life. It is clear, however, that rather than through their ponderings of Kierkegaard's gloomy, convoluted thoughts as set forth in *Either/Or*, or Heidegger's weighty tome, *Being and time*, many readers will have felt their own bored souls described vicariously in the guise of the great characters of romantic literature, such as Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary and Werther, and in the various classics of the twentieth century by the likes of Beckett, Camus, Hemingway, Sartre and Moravia. And, with the dawning of the new millennium, the number of writers who tend to draw inspiration by generously imbibing from the spring of tedium has grown to the point of resembling a small army. It is interesting to note that many of the latter – who frequently rather than actually describing boredom, manage to evoke it in the reader – are defined by literary critics as postmodern, despite the fact that they are dealing with a subject that is typical of and specific to modern life. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to reread Giddens who asserts that "we have not moved beyond modernity but are living precisely through a phase of its radicalisation" (Giddens, 1990: 51), thereby cautioning ourselves not to focus on seeking breaks with the past, but instead seeking to recognize an overarching continuity in terms of connections that bind us to the century that has just come to a close.

A certain availability of time is an essential factor in understanding the spread of boredom in the contemporary world. In the past only the wealthy could afford to experience an abundance of free time, thereby opening themselves to the risk of indolence and boredom (Klapp, 1986: 31); emblematic, from this point of view, are the cases of Montaigne, Leopardi and Schopenhauer who wrote: "As want is the constant scourge of the people, so ennui is that of the fashionable world. In middle-class life ennui is represented by the Sunday, and want by the six week-days" (Schopenhauer 1909: 404). Today, on the other hand, leisure time has been democratized; large doses of it are within the grasp of everyone on a daily basis. We are on the threshold of living in a society *founded* on leisure time. Indeed, despite the fact that the modern work week is distinguished by so-called flexibility - which means, not only precariousness in terms of safeguarding one's own job, but also an increasing difficulty when it comes to tracing a clear line of demarcation between work time and leisure time – the fact that one has more time to engage in so-called recreational activities can hardly be contested. This is demonstrated by the exponential growth in the travel industry which today represents fully 10% of the worldwide GNP as proudly reported by the WTTC (World Travel & Tourism Council); it is further corroborated (if we care to take a peek inside our

own domestic precincts) by the ubiquitous use of extraordinary instruments for whiling away the hours, the electronic media. The recent success of the philosophy of “downshifting” is revealing in this regard; recovering the quality of life is necessarily achieved by reducing the pace of work and the rediscovery of those values that can only be appreciated at leisure moments, even though, as has been correctly observed (Levy 2005, 187), a simple reduction in the number of work hours is not sufficient to recover a lost sense of life. This is because having more leisure time on your hands doesn’t necessarily mean knowing how to best use it. True, one may experience boredom on the job, but in that case one is obliged to finish the task at hand, to reach a certain set goals. One is not beset by the tremendous burden of deciding how to organize one’s time, what goals to work toward and how best to pursue said goals, which is the true root boredom and its most profound manifestation. Only the latter, *existential* boredom, is actually associated with leisure time in that it assumes time for reflection, the opportunity to muster one’s spiritual resources, the ability to organize one’s daily schedule. If during the course of work my course of activity is determined, during my leisure time I must decide whether to embark upon a particular course or not. And, unfortunately, some people are unable to get motivated; in this case we are dealing with boredom which becomes pathological: depression (Barbalet 1999).

## **Boredom and Information Systems**

A key phase in the democratization process of boredom is represented by the quantification of the amount of time destined for work. Based on the Marxist theory of value, in 1903 Simmel in *The metropolis and mental life* (Simmel 1971: 330) and later Polanyi in *The great transformation* (1944) reasoned that, as soon as money is used as the measure of all things – from natural resources to the value of human work – the quality of both inevitably tends to be relegated to a secondary importance relative their reciprocal value, that is, their transformation into sellable goods according to the laws of the market. As everyone knows, the modern science of information technology is based on the model developed by Claude Shannon, which allows the information that travels along a certain channel within a certain unit of time to be quantified (Shannon 1948). These two trends develop contemporaneously. The earliest theories regarding the quantification of work time were formulated by David Ricardo in 1817-21, while the first calculator was designed by Charles Babbage in 1822. And, of course, this was no coincidence. Indeed, if one manages to segment and quantify the manufacturing process that leads to the production of an object, one can then go on to imagine how to improve it, and how to finely tune each stage of the process. Next, one can imagine how to replace manual labor with a mechanical device that in the beginning performs simple operations that gradually over time become more and more sophisticated. Evidently, one day Frederick Winslow Taylor, the greatest theorist of the scientific organization of work, upon observing a worker who was busily organizing his own work station, exclaimed: “You are paid to work, not to think”. The fact is, that even the hapless Charlie Chaplin, when forced to work on a horribly tedious and demeaning assembly line, wretched as he is, remains a thinking creature and it is this ability that in the end renders him capable of carrying out the most rudimentary operations – like tightening a nut or fitting together two components – using an infinitesimal percentage of his intelligence.

This, however, is not true of a machine which, if it is to replace the manual operations of a human worker, must be informed down to the minutest detail what it must do and when it must do it. In other words, what is needed is an information technology sort of approach to the problem: the type of approach that men like Babbage, Turing, Von Neumann, Shannon and Weaver specialized in. For the first time in the history of human technology a machine has been created – the computer – capable of carrying out what we desire, that is, as long as we manage to express our wishes in algorithmic terms. The automation that results from this increasing ability to delegate to machines autonomy in terms of the ever more varied tasks that they perform provides us with increasing amounts of leisure time (Darden & Marks, 1999: 29). Leisure time and information overload: these are the two main culprits leading to boredom, the two ingredients that also happen to distinguish the specific “quality” of contemporary boredom. As Bertrand Russell wrote, “boredom as a factor in human behaviour has received, in my opinion, far less attention than it deserves” (Russell 1932: 57). But, if in the past boredom was seen as a sort of defense mechanism against an excessive lack of stimuli serious enough to lead to a progressive weakening of cerebral functions, today, now that we have been able to construct elaborate systems capable of

providing us with information in real time and in infinite quantities from all over the globe, boredom seems to be manifesting itself as a symptom of information overload syndrome. In any case, whether we are dealing with information anorexia or bulimia, boredom sets in when our organism is subjected to either too much or too little information, that is, when there is no longer a balance between the information we receive and that which we are able to process (Klapp 1986: 35).

## The Dream Thieves

Considering boredom as a sort of alarm bell signaling a dangerous drop in curiosity, in a person's healthy interest in the world, amounts to imbuing it with a positive connotation which is generally overlooked in the haste to overcome a distressing sensation of inner emptiness. Speaking of which, there are a number of measures which can be taken, all of which, however, amount to compensatory strategies. If I'm hungry, I eat; if I'm thirsty, I drink; if boredom signals time on my hands, I try to fill it in a meaningful way. It's all quite simple. As a matter of fact, as was said above, the sort of boredom typical of contemporary life is not generated by a dearth in informational stimuli, but rather a deluge of the same. Confusing the symptoms of ennui with those of indigestion, one proceeds to formulate a therapy that, instead of curing, risks being disastrous for the patient. Since we constantly find ourselves in an environment saturated with information, we should welcome the onset of boredom as an opportunity to finally have a breather, but instead we steadfastly insist: "We love information. Our heads are full of it and we are always looking for more" (Bernstein 1982: 345).

In other words, we have become literally addicted to information which is assimilated with the sole aim of placating a neurological need, completely divorced from any cultural or genuinely human needs. Paradigmatic in this regard is the use people make of technological gadgets during moments of boredom: from the television to video games, from cell phones to the Internet. All you have to do is observe yourself and those around you during the course of an average day to find examples of behaviors designed to compensate for or mask inactivity, behaviors that we feel are the fruit of our inner convictions, but are actually largely induced by interests that have managed to turn boredom into a business. The point is this: it is against the rules to get bored. The way that the realm of leisure time has been colonized, i.e. invaded and monopolized by the entertainment industry, is genuinely keeping us from meeting the healthy challenge posed by boredom and transforming it into creative indolence. A world sick with predigested information is offered diversion by means of a fast-food entertainment formula; the natural stimulus that spurs people on to re-create their free time is transformed into the superficial and ephemeral pleasure of being able to decide which form of amusement to purchase based on the amount of money they can afford. Perhaps it is indeed true that, "there is no better emblem of the transformation of reality by commerce and the displacement of the actively imaginative reader by the passively receptive spectator than the commercial theme parks that increasingly dot our landscape" (Barber 1996: 128). Eliminating the possibility of defining one's leisure time as one sees fit further damages the relationship, in many ways already compromised, that people have with the reality in which they live. According to Svendsen:

Humans are world-forming beings who actively constitute their own world, but when everything is always already fully coded, the active constituting of the world is made superfluous, and we lose friction in relation to the world. (Svendsen 2005: 32)

On the altars of the information society, not only have we sacrificed the concept of the state as it has been developed since the Renaissance, but also our ability to invent, dream and be original. When everything – even "sweet idleness", i.e. creative indolence – is translated into something that can be neatly packaged, advertized and marketed, it is obvious that any individual ability for autonomous thought is greatly diminished, not to say completely abolished. If only fifty years ago one could say "the emptiness in boredom is due to the repression of forbidden instinctual aims and objects along with inhibition in imagination" (Greenson 1953: 16), today we can speak in terms of a genuine "theft of imagination". Armed with power and charisma, one may inhibit without being accused of committing a crime, but you can't steal without being considered a thief.

Shows of ostentation have always existed in more or less stereotypical forms, depending on tried and proven rhetorical formulas. Today, however, we exist only to the extent that we exhibit something: feelings, relationships, money or our bellybuttons. This progressive process of exposing our inner selves, this shift in focus from the inside to the outside of our bodies, parading our private selves and eagerly exposing them to the view of others – all the people we physically encounter, as well as those that we meet simply by means of our avatars – is a phenomenon that was already noted by McLuhan, one which today is amply described by De Kerckhove:

The most important psychological change in the long run may be that, even as we begin to explore external tactile perceptions in our extended thought processes, our personal, ordinary internalized consciousness will itself become externalized. The whole external world will become an extension of our consciousness, just as it used to be for the most “primitive” cultures of the planet. This spells not the end, but the removal of *Homo theoreticus* from centre stage, to be replaced by *Homo participans*. (De Kerckhove 1997: 49)

I’m not sure how eager we should be for this process, that leads to a sort of “pan-transparency” (Vattimo 1992) to quickly reach its ultimate manifestation. What we are witnessing is a process in which a world obsessed with the compulsion to translate everything into information is becoming terribly boring. How else can one explain the extraordinary interest in “no limits” activities, like extreme sports, if not in terms of the need to generate a dose of endorphin capable of countering the catatonia of everyday life.”

## Boredom and Reading

Faced with this far from rosy prospect, at this point it seems only appropriate to speak in terms of possible countermeasures or antidotes. One feels compelled to consider which strategies might prove effective in converting bored time into creative time, moments of spiritual re-creation and regeneration. In other words, boredom should be looked at as an opportunity in that “it gives people a chance to be contemplative” (Darden & Marks, 1999: 33). One suggestion in this regard that has been handed down to us from the classical world is the following:

If you apply yourself to study you will avoid all boredom with life, you will not long for night because you are sick of daylight, you will be neither a burden to yourself nor useless to other, you will attract many to become your friends and the finest people will flock about you. (Seneca, *De tranquillitate animi*, 3, §6).

Any serious resumption of the studious life inevitably involves reading, a sort of reading, however, that is not simply entertainment, i.e. just another means for escaping the tedium of unoccupied time, but rather a genuine process of delving, enrichment, stimulus and, indeed, amazement. If one considers reading as simply another potential option for whiling away time, it too will inevitably become just another boring endeavor. This is demonstrated by the story of Emma Bovary who, like many young people, concludes her reading career with the peremptory assertion: “I’ve read everything” (*Madame Bovary*, part I, chap. 9). Unable to make the most of her solitude by diligently applying herself to study, Emma will attempt to escape from the prison of her ennui by surrendering to her sexual drives, as does, for that matter, Katerina Izmailova, the heroine of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* by Shostakovich, who also has at her disposal a library, a useless remedy for the boredom that will ultimately lead to her ruin. Svendsen underscores how “the boredom experienced by Emma Bovary, on the other hand, seems to be more of the ‘modern’ kind, even though her boredom is also object-related via the imaginary object she attempts to realize sexually” (Svendsen 2005: 42). It has been known since ancient times that – when it comes to making the most of one’s leisure time – sex and reading are competing activities and that the latter, namely reading, is inexorably destined to succumb whenever an opportunity presents itself to indulge in the former. It has been a typical strategy of modernity, on the other hand, to ally sex and boredom; indeed, Emma Bovary’s modernity consists in her selection of sex as the supreme weapon in her battle against her sense of emptiness, relegating reading to the category of useless exercises in this

effort. This is the same approach that was taken by Dino, the protagonist of *Boredom* (1960) by Alberto Moravia, another lost reader:

I would take down a book – for I had a small library and have always been fond of reading – but very soon I would let it drop: novels, essays, poetry, drama, the whole literature of the world – there was not one single page that succeeded in holding my attention. In any case, why should it? (Moravia 1999: 18)

Dino has lost his ability to draw from literature the sort of stimuli capable of giving meaning to the passage of time: he used to be a “good reader”, but he no longer is. If it is “quality reading” that manages to keep boredom at bay, we should also ask ourselves why it is that in today’s world so many people behave like the protagonist in Moravia’s novel: indeed, the ranks of “good readers” are inexorably continuing to grow thinner.

But before we proceed any further let’s try and understand what is meant by the concept of “quality reading”, allowing ourselves to be guided by George Steiner who in 1978 devoted an essay to this subject, *The uncommon reader* (now in Steiner 2009). According to the French critic there are certain environmental conditions that tend to promote authentic reading, the main one of which, it goes without saying, is silence. As we know, this is a commodity that is hard to come by in the hectic, noisy world of today, in which, by the way, it seems almost obligatory that all our activities be carried out to the accompaniment of more or less appropriate background music. If it is true that we are all actors in a gigantic “Truman Show”, it is inevitable that the sound track should play a key role in terms of enhancing the quality of this finished product. The result is that having ingested a surfeit of music one is loathe to seek out books. The quest for silence in a certain sense implicitly defines the most suitable logistic organization for the activity of reading, which means – and here we have reached a second essential point in Steiner’s argument – hypothesizing a basic attitude of respect with which the reader approaches the text. One can read anywhere and under any circumstances, but quality reading involves the exercise of good manners as it is a highly ritualized sort of act; we are dealing with the transmission of thoughts from one human being to another by means of an instrument, a book, that is capable of bridging the barriers of time and space: when confronted with superhuman manifestations of this magnitude, irreverent distractions and sloppiness are simply not to be brooked. Naturally, the text, in order to inspire respect, must be respectable. One cannot experience quality reading in the case of poorly edited, not to mention poorly printed, books: “he who passes over printing errors without correcting them is no mere philistine: he is a perjurer of spirit and sense” (Steiner 2009: 7).

If the choice of venue and the reader’s attitude are important elements in determining a quality reading experience, there is another element that is essential in achieving this result, namely, writing. Indeed, a good reader is someone who underscores, annotates, comments and takes notes, enthusiastically filling the margins of the pages with observations. In other words, a good reader is someone who relates to the text in an active manner: “to read well is to enter into answerable reciprocity with the book being read; it is to embark on total exchange” (Steiner 2009: 6). One understands why at the beginning of the age of enlightenment the debates regarding teaching the masses to read were particularly heated, not only regarding the necessity of teaching the greatest possible number of people to read, but, above all, regarding the wisdom of teaching people the rudiments of writing (Pawley 2003: 438). If reading is capable of instilling doubt, writing can be downright subversive. If reading can be either active or passive, writing is always the fruit of a specific expressive determination. Having reached this point it becomes clear why boredom and quality reading are mutually contradictory terms: in order to properly function, a book requires the active collaboration of the reader since, as maintained by the champion of the digital revolution, Nicholas Negroponte, “the written word sparks images and evokes metaphors that get much of their meaning from the reader’s imagination and experiences” (Negroponte 1995: 8).

As mentioned above, as soon as these spaces devoted to dreams and the imagination are colonized, i.e. invaded and monopolized by the entertainment industry, the operation of the text’s

pleasure function is brought to an abrupt halt, compromising the experience of quality reading and ushering in boredom. One desultorily trots around in the prefabricated little gardens devoted to the marketing of books, the major international book fairs and shows, nibbling here and there, reluctant to truly engage profoundly with serious books.

In the information society being able to read is an essential requirement, as it serves the society's ends in terms of enabling its citizens to consume the output of information upon which the entire economic structure of the occidental world rests. A minimal level of reading skills and textual comprehension does not necessarily lead to the ability to further development in the direction of a quality reading experience, as it rather encourages an ever greater accumulation of unrelated, jumbled data: counterproductive when it comes to nurturing and refining sound critical thinking skills. It's been over one hundred and fifty years since writers like Manzoni (see the character of Don Ferrante in *The Betrothed*) and Flaubert (*Bouvard et Pécuchet*) tried to warn us about the perniciousness of this superficial type of reading. One wonders just how many people today are still capable of heeding their warnings.

### **Conclusion: The Role of Libraries**

Can a library as an institution serve as a valid venue capable of promoting quality reading?

One must bear in mind that it is not an intrinsic characteristic or task of libraries to promote good reading. By definition a library is not intended to serve as a place that motivates or obligates readers to assume a particular attitude toward the documents it contains; its role is to simply house and provide said documents. Its particular qualifying adjective will determine the conditions of access, i.e. public, private, multimedial or digital library etc.

If we change the thrust of our discourse from an ontological one to considering the particular historical function of libraries in our society, we have to ask ourselves – given the fact that in recent years much has been said regarding the values of contemporary librarianship (e.g. Gorman 2000; ALA 2004) – if these institutions represent a bulwark of resistance against the degradation of the quality reading experience.

Before answering the above question one must first of all consider the fact that “libraries have never been the source of anything other than what they were strictly intended for, nor were they the first or the only places from which to obtain information (or, in broader more specific terms, knowledge and culture)” (Petrucciani 2004: 204). Moreover, the consequences of nurturing good readers should be taken more seriously, considering that we are speaking of individuals who doubtlessly have a critical attitude to the world in which they live, but are often maladjusted and at great risk of a nervous breakdown:

I can't stomach the notion that serious fiction is *good for us*, because I don't believe that everything that's wrong with the world has a cure, and even if I did, what business would I, who feel like the sick one, have in offering it? It's hard to consider literature a medicine, in any case, when reading it serves mainly to deepen your depressing estrangement from the mainstream; sooner or later the therapeutically minded reader will end up fingering reading itself as the sickness. (Franzen 2003: 73)

Given the above and therefore fully aware that motivating the practice of quality reading in today's world may reveal itself to be socially dangerous, one must recognize how the efforts in this direction carried out by libraries have played a fundamental role in the history of modern librarianship, a fact that, by the way, is also acknowledged by the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto. The importance of these efforts consists in the librarians' ability to also hand down, along with the documentary patrimony entrusted to them, the keys for accessing the same for reference purposes. If, indeed, the trend is toward a more superficial sort of approach to reading imposed by the digital technologies, we will be passing down to posterity, not true libraries, but rather stockpiles of worthless and unusable documents, just as occurred with many data banks created not too many years ago and today inaccessible due to the fact

that the appropriate software that would have rendered them accessible for reference purposes was not saved. Librarians have always been on the front lines in terms of underscoring the importance of adequate computer skills, which are essential when it comes to understanding and using the new media, and to becoming familiar with the processes of codification and decodification, without which the documents – regardless of the sort of supports they happen to be on – would remain, so to speak, dead letters. The librarian knows full well that the task is concluded as soon as he or she has duly provided the reader with the document that has been requested. But the librarian also knows that in many contexts it simply does not suffice to content oneself with this minimal, although fundamental, level of service.

Today libraries suffer from a sort of “performance anxiety”, in the sense that excessive concern with excellent performance in terms of effectiveness and efficiency have tended to neglect a crucial aspect of the quality reading experience, i.e. a measure of spontaneity and fortuity, which are fundamental to any genuine cultural process. This dimension of spontaneity is increasingly suppressed by the dynamics of the digital systems in which the relevance of a document is measured in terms of its correspondence to certain keywords or its algorithmic popularity on the Internet. As opposed to the ironclad efficiency of search engines and their IR systems, a library should be a place of doubt, a place that reflects the multiplicity of reality. Personally, I would be even more drastic and would like to say along with Cioran, that “a book should dig into wounds, indeed, it should even inflict them. A book should constitute a *danger*”(Cioran 1979: 87).

How subversive, how dangerous are our libraries today?

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