

## Abstract

we tend to fear boredom just as we fear boring other people. We shield ourselves with a culture of distraction, as though every moment must be usefully occupied. But boredom can be a rich experience because it can help us train attention - a bit like meditation practice. And that if we want to radically fight against boredom we need to work through boredom. Be radically, heroically boring. To deliberately subvert those nagging little fears. Boredom is usually so toxic because it has to be passively endured. But if you go of your own free will to be bored, or be humorously bored at a boredom conference, then you're turning it into an event of attention. Which is something that goes against the grain of our Must Be Interesting, Must Be Distracted information culture. I believe there is a better level of attention that comes after boredom, and that the mind can be induced to reach it by embracing boredom wholeheartedly.

**Boredom** — everyone has experienced it in some form or other. Much of our lives are spent actively avoiding or denying boredom, even though it's one of the commonest, shared elements of consciousness. Maybe it's the hydrogen of subjective elements, surrounding us at all times and universally pervasive. That was a boring party/movie/conversation. Let's avoid that boring person in future. What a boring place; I'm bored just sitting here.

Boredom is like time wasted and shrivelled up, a depressing and nullifying emptiness in the proper experience of life. It's like time *not* spent productively engaged and happy and all that; and hence something that's often hard to admit to. It's almost like we *fear* boredom and construct armies of distraction to fight it.

For all its negativity, boredom is nonetheless a *rich* experience — as indicated by its extensive presence in literature and detailed ways to describe it. One can be eloquent about boredom, one can wax lyrical and prosaic in distilling its (universal) effects. It can be approached and interpreted from a number of perspectives, humorously and seriously. Surely it can't be all bad?

### What it is, what it feels like

Let's unpack the experience in greater detail. Boredom is the wilful, helpless feeling of being stuck with yourself; a feeling whose sensation and endurance seem *forced* on the conscious brain. And the marked absence of patience and fortitude to endure the uninteresting moment.

It's usually an undesired effect, a reactive malaise affecting focus and mental interest. Wherever anything demands sustained attention, there is boredom. Whenever an activity without ego-appeal demands to be passively consumed, there's acres of available boredom. In fact, the studied phenomenon of *ego depletion* is one that boredom plays right into.

Or wherever a clamouring veneer of distraction begs indulgence, there's usually an undercurrent or tide of boredom. (hello internet). Actually, when self-distraction is easy, there's the cue.

Boredom is a depression of attention; like a fat, concave denting in the frontal fabric of awareness. A dark pit for attention to fall into, head first.

Boredom also slows the experience of time down to a painful crawl. It makes the mechanics of minutes feel like sheer drudgery, a state to be passively endured with grim submission and no seeming end in sight. It's a nullified form of waiting, with the brain berating itself at nothing-doing.

Nothing weighs on the mind like boredom. It pushes with a force like pneumatic jelly on the meninges. It manifests somewhere behind the eyes and moves like a low-pressure system to the rest of the brain, gradually sending its moody tentacles down to the heart. It causes postures to slump and cheeks to find hands. And according to research, it leads to reduced health and shortened working lives.

It might be timely to interrupt the disquisition with a bit of light comic relief, so your eyes don't glaze over too rapidly. Ambrose Bierce defines a Bore thusly: noun, a person who talks when you wish him to listen. Which is nicely underscored by Gravina's more serious counterpoint: A bore is a man who deprives you of solitude without providing you with company. Rest assured that I mean to be neither and both. Now we can carry on.

There is a scale, a qualitative grading of boredom — stretching from childish irritation to Camus-like angst on the existential end. But note how boredom is different from *ennui* — which is more a pathology of energy and torpor affecting the conscious brain like a monomania of will-lessness, a nausea of inertia. Boredom is more a psychological reaction in the moment than a chronic state of energetic dissipation — although it does give you the feeling that willpower is a depletable resource, draining away with one's interest. Boredom feels like something induced from the outside which then festers in the mind, and which sends the brain into a nap-ready state. Something which could be checked out from, in other words. Or broken by a brisk walk.

“Boredom” also calls for the plodding pronunciation of English — just say out loud: “I'm bored, this is *so boring*” and you'll get the idea. And then maybe the British do understand boredom better: the dole cues, low-grade socialism, the gray skies and rain, and the need for distraction in alcohol and drugs.

It's also worth reiterating a gloss from David Foster Wallace, who observed that the word “interesting” entered the language pretty much concurrently with “boredom”. As though before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, neither concept had been fully realised or experienced sufficiently before, to the degree of requiring specification — which begs much speculation and thought (well, there was the Latin idea of *otium*, but that was a lot more pleasant). Take for example building the Pyramids of Egypt — a riot of fun and sustained interest no doubt. Every block the *same* size and weight. The 20-year work in progress never seeming to get much higher. The group supervisors comparing notes on whipping vs cursing the workers, the fine line between effective *whipped* inducement and overwhipped non-productivity. The best whipping leather, soaking overnight. The size of the expected beer bonus that month. Etc. Or maybe they just called it “work” — neither boring nor interesting and hence precluding descriptives for those who have no right to speak back anyway. Bless those Britons and their gift to the language.

Recent generations have discovered (and made) thousands of new sources and shades of boredom. Flicking through TV channels, habitually checking the inbox, waiting for a public service that requires taking a number, listening to speeches by unprofessional or political speakers, humiliating telemarketing work, airport cues and long-haul flights ... all the seams and wrinkles through which boredom enters our sophisticated, modern lives. Wherever there's no TV or wi-fi. The millions of apps to deny its ever-near presence.

### **Causing boredom**

Boredom is prevalent and yet we also fear causing it — especially in public speaking or conversation where it's the reactive opposite of engaged attention and participation. Boredom is one of the biggest social turn-offs and a conversation killer without peer. We all want to sound interesting and unique and worthy and rewarding of people's attention. Because we really are interesting, engaged, funny, sincere.

Am I boring you?

Think about all those cues for better public speaking or conversational networking — like inserting a light joke here and there, making a point of paying close attention with the appropriate amount of eye contact and subtle nods and affirmations. Or leading with a big, interested question. Modulating the voice for variety and effect so you don't drone away ad nauseum. Jazzing up your PowerPoint slides. The subtle tricks of

confidence that help you win influence... all the rhetoric that managers soak up about persuasion and leadership.

And in turn, underlying that performative fear there's another fear brewing in the bored subject. It's slightly more abstracted but siphoned off with whingeing and cruel humour after the fact (usually over beer); and that fear is that being well bored on a regular basis will also make oneself boring too. When something starts to feel normal or prevalent and lived in, it can't help become one, it seems. The boring dayjob; the boring friendship. Like regularly hanging out in churches: eventually you start feeling churchy.

Which again is complicated by the fact that to discuss or describe boredom openly is to incite further boredom (intolerant, angry boredom) in one's listeners. What could be more tedious than listening to someone describing their boredom in detail (not unlike the above paragraphs)? Although I suspect this fear of boredom's boringness does not exist in a large swathe of Britons, or in close readers of Russian literature.

What I mean is that there's a tangle of small fears whirring away within and below boredom and all around it.

### **Attention etc**

A state of mind, a problem of attention, endurance — that is what boredom boils down to. A test of self, of perception and self control. Boredom is not an experience you can own or master in the moment, but it is something you can *manage*. I mean to try and help.

It is, weirdly, like a form of meditation practice. Meditation is the management and study of attention, or rather of mindful *inattention* — in ways that approach purer forms of attention of the undistracted kind. Boredom in this sense is like misapplied attention; a bad, habitual reaction and recourse, kicking itself. And like guided meditation, its real subject (or target, stamping ground) is the mind.

Meditation depends on large efforts of deliberate, strenuous and monotonous activity. The goals or psychic end-states might be far-off (and all the richer), but the work to get there is still inherently physically boring. Deliberately so. It's a similar facet, but from the other side of the perspective.

Any state of mind, whether positive or negative, is subject to change, or itself become a process that generates change. Despite its native negativity, there is something that comes after boredom — a reorientation of attention.

After — or rather *through* boredom — comes an undirected attention or non-waiting that forgets time, that's lighter and leaner than before, that's largely unchanging.

It's not about fastidiously ignoring or sweating out the cloying boredom of the brain, it's about changing the frequency of its perception. It's about holding a contradictory state of mind in one's sights. Boredom (and all its self-negation) on the one hand and focused attention on the other, like subjectively conjoined twins.

Maybe the best way to see through it is to invoke a level of detailed attention that does away with the glum self-negation. To out-stare boredom, in a fashion. I think the trick is to indulge or over-inflate one's attention so the black elephant in the room ceases to matter. To inflate attention (and boredom) to popping point. Like a zen moment.

### **The fix**

Let's get back to that earlier item about the fear of inducing boredom in others and hence being regarded as personally boring. All those patented ways to deflect potential boredom — in events that usually can't help being intrinsically boring — are they missing the point?

What if courting deliberate boredom is the best way to challenge the wandering malaise of other people's inattention? What if there is pleasure to be had in *precocious* boredom; what if you seduce and sanction its

affect? What if you indulge and force-feed these underlying fears, and deliberately push the borders by being as boring as humanly possible? (*Heroically* boring? Is that an oxymoron?) And thereby also subvert the anxiety to be so damn *interesting* all the time.

This means being boring and bored with a degree of art and humour, of course, and skirting the absurd. Setting off little threshold-explosions of boredom in people's minds. But really *going to town* on boredom, consciously, creatively — so the inspired anti-attention might help the audience better deal with it, to turn attention into an art again — a maximally engaged skill and something not given lightly but with full intent and control. A precious resource.

To fight boredom with boredom. To out-bore boredom. This is a *challenge*.

And so I say in my strongest motivational voice: Be boring. Be *superboring*. Be a leader of boredom! Be fearlessly bored, boldly bored beyond anything you've experienced before. Become the empty pit of boredom, and look out again.

Something always comes *after*. It's Attention (with a new capital A) that looks out over the edge with new eyes.

Just like a hangover is more pleasant to deal with shared, assembling together for focused boredom is a way of applying managed attention. This can only have a positive effect.

If the process involves *voluntary* boredom, you disarm the passive nullity of it — that feeling of being forced to endure. If you seek out boredom, what you're really doing is offering your attention with a more noble purpose in mind, to bypass by honing in on it.

Being wilfully, creatively bored together is not boring. *It's an event*.

We need more of these events. The challenge is to bore an audience with flair and precision, to achieve a *pure* boredom without distraction — a rich variety and sublimation of boredom. And draw attention to that attention. As a means to transcend, ultimately.

And to do so if only to recognise (and shame by outing) the underlying prevalence of boredom in our information society. Subverting and playing against the notion that all of life's moments need to be filled with distraction and interesting content and cheap thrills. That it's ok to be bored — guilt-free — and create a state of mindfulness at the same time. To be bored, and not be distracted.

Who knows, it might have developmental benefits — it might create better, more durable and patient minds in the process.

[Inspired by a boredom conference organised by James Ward called Boring 2010, and the study of controlled attention in DFW's *The Pale King*.]

#### Notes & out-takes

- The developmental place of boredom — at least for those born before the Internet, having to learn to deal with nothing doing, is also in a small way a character-building exercise; learning to experience the borders of one's personality, becoming self-sufficient in a way or more aware of self and need. Maybe it's indirectly about being able, being comfortable with being *alone*... as opposed to the social-broadcast-solitude of say, Facebook.
- Or perhaps it's all quite simply about self-control; a growing issue for the immersive-distractive information age.
- Boredom is an ego problem; I suspect people with low presence-signature egos are also less bored.
- Attention is a precious but rich resource; it's what the marketing and economic punditry depends on, ultimately; but we don't treat it sustainably or respectfully [related perspective: the Attention Economy]. Hence — an absurd, comic overcompensation or flood is called for.
- On distraction, I'm reminded of *Kundun*'s subtle, instructive refrain: "Don't be distracted".

- In the workplace, we can't expect others higher up to manage or pre-empt our boredom — it's purely a creative, personal directive to manage ourselves.
- Think about it: what are the standard prescriptions for boredom? Variety of job and interaction; new hobbies or habits; aversion and reward therapy; distraction and play. “Get over it” “Stop being narcissistic” “Get a life”. Plenty of admonitions, but very little group-think, because groups are so often boring.
- Precedents for group boredom: minimalist music performances; Gertrude Stein readings; Beckett plays; bureaucracy in general.
- For the conference effort, here's a sample of potential presentation titles, in line with Boring 2010: (Truly herculean, deliberate digression is on the cards):
  - iPhones and Lattes - a study of pedestrian hand usage between 2008 and 2011.
  - The percentage of 'A History of ~~~' books that lose interest by chapter 4.
  - Statistical meta-analysis of references to solitude in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*.
  - Green tea.
  - Incidental analysis of the letters “D” and “X” in digital camera model names.
  - Paper cuts and GSM — the unconsidered danger factor.
  - Vermeer's signatures — name as symbol, rune, symbol.
  - What the Accountant Knew (thriller)

A new theatre of the absurd? *Theatre de l'ennui*. Instructions at the door: Please switch off phones, smart phones, internet-enabled devices. We do not expect you to comply, but recommend doing so in order to gain the full effect.
- Ironically, such a boring event would likely have more native success, traction, in England than in Australia or USA...