BOREDOM ESCAPES US:
A CULTURAL COLLAGE IN ELEVEN STOREYS

by

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Abstract

Few sociologists have addressed the concept of boredom despite interest in the subject and experience of boredom from psychology, philosophy, the arts and popular culture. Classical sociological concepts of alienation, anomie and disenchantment are related to boredom, but do not address it directly. The history of the word boredom itself is not clear, though it appears it was first used in the late 19th century. Most authors agree that an increase in individualism and the concomitant rise in secularization, combined with industrial changes in labour and increased bureaucracy, help to explain a perceived increase in the experience of boredom. This dissertation is a phenomenological exploration of boredom, informed by the writings of Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin on the subject. Inspired by Benjamin's method of literary montage, from his monumental *Passagenwerk*, I construct a cultural collage of the subject of boredom. I use the metaphor of storeys (the levels of a building) as an organizing device to construct the empirical work of this project. These storeys include a consideration and analysis of: billboards, internet advertising, the reflections of an overseas development worker, art installations, a poem, a greeting card, a play, song lyrics and Kafka's short story character, the hunger artist. Each storey serves to inspire a sociological meditation on the subject of boredom, all of which are grounded in the historical, social and philosophical reviews in the first four chapters. These extensive reviews, as well as the eleven storeys, contribute a preliminary sociological analysis of the ambiguous yet ubiquitous experience of boredom in modernity.

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Chapter One
Introducing Boredom

> Against boredom the gods themselves fight in vain.
> ~ Nietzsche (2005[1895]:69)

> The expanding definition of boredom in our own time means that by now one might argue that virtually every word currently written speaks of the condition in one way or another.
> ~ Spacks (1995:ix)

Sociologist Robert Nisbet writes that, "among the forces that have shaped human behavior, boredom is one of the most insistent and universal" (Nisbet 1982:22; cf Russell 1996:48).

Boredom?

The word itself has an almost onomatopoeic quality; the very sound of the word evokes the whining echo from our childhood, "I'm boooorrrred." We remember the oppressive languor, the restlessness of waiting for an unnamed something; wanting to "eff the ineffable," as the incisive Samuel Beckett once said (in Eagleton 2006). But surely this is a description of individual frustration, a fleeting, finger-drumming experience of disinterest, a notably mundane and everyday subjective experience. How can it be of interest to sociology? What is actually sociological about boredom?

When I say, "I am bored," I am not simply saying "I have nothing to do," but rather, "I can think of nothing to do that is meaningful for me." The concept of boredom is intertwined with issues of *meaning* (Barbalet 1999; Healy 1984; Goodstein 2005; Svendsen 2005). This brings boredom into the realm of the existential; yet the experience is considered quite ordinary and everyday. In fact, boredom could be considered ubiquitous, at least in western culture. Heidegger lectured to his students: "Boredom – who is not acquainted with it in the most varied forms and disguises in which it arises, in the way it often befalls us, only for a moment, the way it torments and depresses us for longer periods too" (1995:79). It is just this everyday and universal quality that should, I argue, make it interesting to sociologists[1]. According to Elizabeth Goodstein, in her

[1] According to Murray Davis (1999:245-246), "the first criterion by which people judge anything they encounter, even before deciding whether it is true or false, is whether it is interesting or boring. The truth of

rhetorical treatise on boredom and modernity, "while boredom appears to be a private experience of primarily subjective significance, its very pervasiveness marks it as a socially meaningful phenomenon" (2005:12). The most obvious reason that boredom should be of interest to us, sociologically, is that its very existence, particularly in western culture, is difficult to explain. We have never had more to do, more ways and means with which to entertain ourselves (either individually or in groups), participate in civil processes, contribute our time or money to social causes, purchase widely available low-priced consumer items for the temporary pleasure and distraction this provides, or travel by land, sea and air. In short, we have no apparently good reason to claim boredom for anything more than a quickly passing moment of yawn-inducing disinterest. And yet, "From nowhere boredom breaks in; to nowhere the world slips away" (Bigelow 1983:257)[2].

Boredom, whether construed as a mood, an emotion, or an existential state of being, is implicated within both academic and popular writing, in a host of social ills. In popular English vernacular there are several expressions we use to attempt to describe the heights – or depths -- of feeling bored. We can be: bored silly, bored out of our minds, bored to distraction, bored to tears, bored stiff, mind-numbingly bored, and even bored to death. We say that boredom is stifling, implying a kind of tortuous oppression: we can literally pull our hair out due to boredom (Diefenbach et al. 2008). Not surprisingly, people with egocentric and banal behaviours bore us the most (Leary et al. 1986). Eighteenth and nineteenth century etiquette books warned hosts to be careful where to sit the known bore at a party; even today, it is a thorough moral indictment of one's character to be described as a boring person or one who induces boredom in others. We all avoid the crashing bore.

Indeed, "the charge of boredom is a forceful one, devastating even in its implication of triviality" (Colpitt 1985:361). From being bored or, worse, boring, at a cocktail party, to suffering the mental anguish of social segregation, clearly there are

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a theory is not even the main criterion of its acceptance, for an interesting falsehood will attract more followers than a boring truth…The interesting is the motivating engine of the mental life."

[2] In the first year of the 21st century, a US market research company, Yankelovich, reported the results of their annual consumer survey (N=2,500), in which they conclude that, "We are bored despite living in remarkable times," and speculate that we are experiencing a "boredom boom" (in Kuntz, 2000). Even whole countries are considered boring, including, infamously, Canada, and the US (Brissett and Snow 1993).

degrees and dimensions of boredom that may, or may not, be qualitatively related. Boredom might, at least in some instances, be contingent upon other psychological and social processes; not surprisingly, for example, there is a positive association between procrastination and boredom (Vodanovich and Rupp 1999) and individuals[3] who are high in negative self-awareness are more prone to boredom. None of us is immune; it is as common as feelings of loneliness, happiness, anxiety or satisfaction. According to Murray Davis (1999:245), "we chase the interesting, which continually eludes us; we are chased by boredom, which continually catches us." In fact, there is "no need to pursue boredom, for it pursues us: like the celebrated inevitabilities of death and taxes it'll be along soon enough" (Brooker 2001:30). Despite its ubiquitous and unrelenting prevalence across cultures[4] and class, however, sociology has barely shown any interest in the subject. According to Anderson (2004), "somewhat surprisingly, and in stark contrast to its experiential ubiquity, boredom has rarely been discussed within the social sciences" (p.739). It is this remarkable lacuna that my project addresses.

In this chapter, by way of introducing the subject, I consider some of the definitions and descriptions of boredom. I then move on to a brief discussion of the various literatures that have addressed boredom – academic, but also popular culture and the arts. Because there is a dearth of sociological literature on the topic, I have drawn from a wide variety of literatures in order to help ground my work. These literatures include: psychology, social work, business, occupations, occupational therapy, health, leisure, lifecourse, art history and theory, literature critique, philosophy, anthropology, history, geography, education, sexuality, addictions, nursing, criminology and cultural studies. After this introductory literature review, I turn to a consideration of the possible reasons boredom has remained, largely, outside of the sociological focus, followed by a brief discussion of what it is that sociology has contributed, in terms of the classical canon, although I discuss this at length in Chapter Four. I conclude this chapter with an

[3] It is important to note that the vast majority of psychology studies report using undergraduate students for their research. Thus, their results cannot be generalized and must be interpreted carefully.

[4] I should say here that my consideration of the subject does not examine boredom in the anthropological sense, in cultures other than western and mostly in North America. The only two published articles on boredom in non-typical western settings (Jervis et al.2003 and Musharbash 2007) are discussed in the literature review in Chapter Four.

outline of the entire project -- how each of the following chapters both contributes to the structure and also supports the ontological focus and objectives of my research.

In this dissertation I examine the complexities and textures of *boredom*, by problematizing it as a sociological concept and examining it through particular cultural images from the 20th and early 21st century. This examination leads me to consider the theoretical as well as substantive implications of my exploration of boredom.

Defining and Describing Boredom

Boredom "arrives late on the cultural scene" (Brooker 2001:30). The concept of boredom is indeed a modern one whose etymology (as "bored") can be traced only as far back as the late 18th century (Healy 1984; Spacks 1995;Conrad 1997). Throughout its short history, boredom has been "repudiated, embraced, attributed, claimed… changing shape with the times" and because of this, "offers an overwhelmingly rich subject for investigation" (Spacks 1995:xi). In this introductory chapter I make the point that, despite interest in the subject of boredom in various fields, sociology has seldom turned its focus on the topic[5]. The broad list of academic fields that have investigated the causes and consequences of boredom, as well as popular culture observations and speculations, and expressions of boredom in art and literature, only serve to emphasize how strange it is that sociology has paid boredom such little interest. But first, a brief consideration of what boredom actually is, "a task that is complicated by the fact that there are a great many forms of boredom" (Kuhn 1976:5) and there is no one Aristotelian definition. Indeed, I agree with Musharbash (2007:307) that "boredom's most defining feature from the available literature seems to be its definitional ambiguity, acknowledged outright by most authors and often managed with a propensity to use metaphors in its portrayals." Perhaps the best example of this is Walter Benjamin's oft-cited definition: "Boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream" (2002:105). More pithy but equally romantic is Roland Barthes' "boredom is… desire seen from the shores of pleasure" (1975:26).

[5] Interestingly, in a recent article published after her dissertation on everyday life in an Australian Aboriginal settlement, anthropologist Yasmine Musharbash notes: "I realized that boredom had been a sizeable aspect of the everyday but that, perhaps because of its normalcy, I had failed to collect systematic data about it and, what is more, that anthropology did not offer any frameworks within which to analyze this phenomenon" (2007:307).

Other writers are compelled to describe boredom using dramatic hyperbole. Healy (1984), for example, refers to it variously as "the emotional incubus" (p.16), "a deep seated agony" (p.28), "the escalating apprehension of the void" (p.92) and "the collapse of meaning" (p.99). Robert Nisbet is not alone in his rather melodramatic stance on the subject: "Boredom may become Western man's greatest source of unhappiness. Catastrophe alone would appear to be the surest and, in today's world, the most likely of liberations from boredom" (1982:28). Almost 40 years earlier, an author in a philosophy journal wrote that, "Boredom often generates wars, the supreme exhibition of human folly and wickedness" (Inge 1940:386). Political philosopher Eric Voegelin claimed that boredom is "the spiritual state of a society for whom its gods have died" (in Avramenko 2004:111).

Some researchers begin with vague descriptions, for example, citing what "people" themselves describe as "a feeling of tedium, meaninglessness, emptiness wearisomeness, and lack of interest or connection with the current environment" (Sundberg et al. 1991:210). In his article on boredom and religious rituals, Nuckolls (2007:33) uses the word boredom as a "catchall term." It appears we are not short of words to help us describe the concept and experience. Klapp (1986) lists the following 72 words that he argues are used variously to describe or denote boredom, "showing not only the prevalence of boredom but its various dimensions and kindred states, these words help us to conceive it better as a social and psychological problem":

> Accidie (acedia), anhedonia, apathy, arid, banal, banality, blasé, burn-out, chatter, chatterbox, glazed eyes, hackneyed, harping, ho hum, humdrum, inane, insipid, insouciance, repetitious, routine, rut, sameness, satiety, soporific, stagnant, stagnation, sterile, chitchat, chore, cliché, cloying, dismal, doldrums, drag, dreary, dry, dull, dullness, effete, enervation, ennui, flat, irksome, jade, jaded, jejune, languor, lassitude, listless, long-winded, monotony, museum fatigue, pall, platitude, prolixity, prosaic, prosy, stuffy, stupefying, surfeited, tedium, tedious, tiresome, torpor, trite, trivia, uninteresting, verbosity, weariness, wearisome, world-weary. (p.23).

Fritz Perls, the psychiatrist and psychotherapist who developed Gestalt Therapy in the 1960s, said that boredom was "the step just before terror" and Stewart Emery, a well-known figure in the US in the late 1970s and '80s, in what was called the Human

Potential Movement, defined boredom as "hostility without enthusiasm" (in Rule 1998:332).

The literature, both academic and popular, considers boredom variously as a drive, a state, a mood, a condition, a phenomenon or an emotion[6]. Indeed, according to Spacks, "no single definition can compass the meanings of so culture-bound a term, a word that in less than two and a half centuries has accrued multifarious ideological associations and complicated emotional import" (1995:14). I turn now to a discussion of some of the academic definitions and descriptions of boredom, including a consideration of whether or not boredom is an emotion. This discussion is largely confined to 20th and 21st century definitions; in Chapter Three I pursue the etiological and social historical roots of the word and the concept of boredom, and in Chapter Four I provide a more detailed analysis of the academic literature.

States of Boredom, Repression of Desires: Boredom in Psychology and Psychoanalysis

Academic definitions of boredom come mostly from psychology up until the 1980s. These definitions include descriptions and classifications related to drive states, internal and external motivation, and responses to repetitive stimuli (habituation). In his 1981 review of the psychology and psychiatric literature on boredom, Smith lists the various definitions of boredom from the 1920s to the 1970s as, variously:

> a conflict… a feeling…a drive state…the extinction either of the orienting reflex or of observing responses… the cessation of exploration … the repeated confirmation of an expectancy, or as synonymous with habituation, stimulus satiation… or conditioned and reactive inhibition. Boredom has even been used to mean anxiety or depression. However, most researchers have defined the term as a feeling, a drive or a conflict, i.e., a (usually) conscious motivator of behavior. (p.339)

In the early 1980s, psychologists defined boredom as a "unique psychophysical state that is somehow produced by prolonged exposure to monotonous stimulation" (O'Hanlon 1981: 54). This was followed by defining boredom by the resulting experience: "boredom occurs when stimulation is construed as subjectively monotonous and when few

[6] Anxiety, arguably boredom's second cousin, has similarly "been defined as a trait, a state, a stimulus, a response, a drive, and as a motive" (Endler and Kocovski 2001:232).

constructs relevant to need satisfaction are applied with the result that a high level of frustration is experienced" (Hill and Perkins 1985:237).

As well as these attempts to explain boredom biologically, that is, to explain why and how the human body produces and experiences boredom, even early psychologists had to admit that there is a subjective component that, at the least, can be defined as an unpleasant feeling. Sundberg et al. (1991:210) defined boredom as, "an internal state ranging from mild to severe unpleasantness, which people describe as a feeling of tedium, meaninglessness, emptiness, wearisomeness, and lack of interest or connection with the current environment."

Mikulas and Vodanovich (1993), the two psychologists who have written the most about boredom (particularly Stephen Vodanovich), define boredom by taking into account both the biological focus of the field of psychology, as well as the subjective experience of everyday life. They describe boredom as, "a state of relatively low arousal and dissatisfaction, which is attributed to an inadequately stimulating situation" (p.3), adding that, "for it to be boredom, the person must not like it" (p.4). According to psychologists Perkins and Hill (1985:222), "phenomenologically, boredom is an aversive state."

Boredom, then, has both a physical, bodily component, as well as a mental, psycho-emotional component. It is most often defined, as in the previous examples, as a *state*. Within the psychological literature, the state/trait debate defines states as transient experiences, and traits as the more permanent characteristics we have as individual personalities (much of the debate centers around how in/flexible these traits are). Thus, boredom is considered by most psychologists to be a state, something that is not permanent and does not necessarily define someone by describing their character (i.e., like the more permanent traits). Sundberg et al. explain that "boredom is the state and boredom proneness is the trait" (1991:210).

A number of psychologists start with the premise that boredom is a "common emotion" (e.g., Damrad-Frye and Laird 1989; Dankert and Allman 2005; Farmer and Sundberg 1986), or that at least there is "an emotional component" (O'Hanlon 1981:54). Sundberg et al. (1991) cite Plutchik's work on emotions: "Plutchik's structural model of eight basic emotions … places boredom as being close to, but milder than, loathing and disgust and bordering the other mild emotions, annoyance and pensiveness" (p.210).

Eastwood et al. (2007:1042) note that "although the bored individual focuses on the external world and how it fails to satisfy them, the underlying problem is actually a lack of emotional awareness."

Is boredom an emotion[7]? In her well-known work on the commercialization of emotions, particularly for airline flight attendants, sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) defines emotion as:

> a biologically given sense, and our most important one. Like other senses – hearing, touch, and smell – it is a means by which we know about our relation to the world, and it is therefore crucial for the survival of human beings in group life. Emotion is unique among the senses, however, because it is related not only to an orientation toward *action* but also to an orientation toward *cognition.* (p.219 italics in original)

If we conceive of emotions as biologically given senses (and I will add to that the idea that class, as well as gender, culture, ethnicity and other social circumstances, structure emotions beyond their biological "givenness"), and in particular as leading toward action and cognition, then I argue that boredom should not be conceptualized as an emotion. In fact, part of the experience of boredom is that it leaves us unable and unwilling to take any action. In terms of cognition, again, boredom most often leaves us not thinking too much at all; we complain of an absence of meaning when we are bored, an absence which we find hard to explain.

We don't experience boredom as a feeling, the way we do with happiness or anger; instead, boredom is an absence of feeling. Where feelings of happiness or anger have a compelling quality to them, we feel compelled to express them (to smile or engage with others, in the case of happiness, and to shout or lash out in the case of anger). Not so with boredom. Instead, boredom induces resignation, listlessness. Boredom is an absence of feeling, of emotions; an absence of meaning. This is significant. Emotions and feelings are a large part of what makes us human: we are stirred to emotion through our contact

[7] In the syndicated *Zits* cartoon (by Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman), a teenage girl and boy have the following exchange:
Her: "Why are girls so plugged into feelings while guys are so emotionally clueless?"
Him: "I resent that. Maybe other guys are that way, but I happen to be a very emotional person."
Her: "Okay! Okay! Sorry!"
Him: "Boredom is an emotion, right?"
(April 4, 2008, *Victoria Times Colonist*, p. D5). I thank Linda Leone for bringing this cartoon to my attention.

with other people (either physically present or in our mind's eye) and in our thoughts about our selves and other people or things. Because we have feelings, it is possible for us to have empathy and, therefore, to think about and care about other humans, even those we have never met. If boredom is defined, in part, as an absence of feeling, an absence of emotion, then there is an asocial quality to it; we, at least temporarily, feel unconnected to the social, and, importantly, unable to produce or respond to it. This is not to suggest that when we are bored we are less than human; rather, when we experience boredom we are disconnected from the social and exist, therefore, in a kind of social limbo.

Where the literature in psychology is concerned mostly with the physiology of boredom as an affective state, the psychoanalytic approach to boredom concerns the repression of unconscious desires: "from a psychoanalytic perspective, boredom is not so much a state of understimulation as it is of depersonalization" (Nuckolls 2007:42). In the early 20th century, Otto Fenichel, a member of the Viennese Psychoanalytic Association, tried to define boredom. According to Grant (1935:365), Fenichel:

> considers that boredom is characterized by an urge to activity, accompanied by an inhibition of activity and that this contradiction is at the core of the problem. In pathological boredom there is an instinctual tension of which the aim has been repressed; this means that when the bored person turns to other people to help him to find distraction, he is also seeking their aid in maintaining his repression.

In order to relieve, or recover from, this repressed state of desires, psychoanalytic treatment is required, to determine and analyze the causes of the conflicted desires and thus "treat" them so that they are no longer repressed. On the other hand, boredom might provide a positive function in that "boredom forestalls the eruption of unmanageable and conflicted desires" (Nuckolls 2007:42). In this sense, boredom is a defense mechanism, a "response to the ambivalence that results from a choice that cannot be made since doing so means giving up one desired alternative in preference for another" (Ibid. p.46).

The definitions of boredom, in psychology and psychoanalytic literature, therefore suggest that there is something wrong with the sufferer. For psychologists, the physical body's response to external, repetitive or monotonous situations, acts through drive states of internal and external motivation. The bored person experiences frustration in this temporary state. For psychoanalysts, on the other hand, boredom is the result of

repressing unconscious desires and is therefore a response to internal processes. I argue that it is not clear that we can clearly define boredom as an emotion, although clearly the above definitions and discussion suggest that we "feel" boredom, specifically in the resultant bodily discomfort and cognitive restlessness.

Descriptions of Despair and Disinterest: Boredom in Sociology

As I have noted, the literature addressing boredom in sociology is scant. This lack of attention, therefore, means that, unlike the literature on the subject in psychology, there is little consistency in the sociology literature. As well, the sociological definitions tend to be more cumbersome and descriptive. For example, Darden and Marks (1999) conducted a telephone survey asking American adults about their experiences of boredom. Based on the results of their survey, they defined boredom as:

> The socially disvalued emotion we experience in a setting where the drama fails for some reason; when the only scripts and props available are too well rehearsed and overly familiar; any roles which exist are undesirable and without the possibility of negotiation; there are no others whose roles we can or want to take, and we feel distant from our roles. The situation has no apparent future, in the sense of anticipation, although it may have a temporal dimension, because time seems to stretch endlessly ahead without a foreseeable denouement. Since display of boredom is usually improper or rude, we often deny it while usually leaving the scene, either physically or through fantasy. (p.18-19)

Although this seems a reasonable description of the experience, with sociological links to drama, roles and scripts (symbolic interactionism), it is not particularly insightful nor, therefore, potentially productive. One of the best (if not pithy) descriptions of boredom comes from sociologist Stanford Lyman. In his book on the seven deadly sins, he writes:

> Boredom is experienced as a special and most tortuous form of frustration. The world provides no zest, interest, sparkle, or challenge to energize the expenditure of human effort. Response seems a futile gesture, since that to which it would be directed is uninviting, uninteresting, and obdurate. Torpor of both body and mind, the characteristic condition of boredom, is itself an uncomfortable and disquieting experience. Seemingly at ease, the bored person cannot relax; he is fatigued but not tired, exhausted but unable to sleep, restive but denied any rest. Energy seeks outlets. Where exciting and inviting challenges are present, the person can leap into exhilarating action; where flatness and staleness seem to be everywhere, some will seek to create, to stir up the conditions to which they can respond with cheerful sprightliness or daring endeavor. (1989:18)

Brisset and Snow's definition is more succinct, yet less clear: "Boredom, in its most basic sense, is an experience of the absence of momentum or flow in a person's life. What is going on, and what the person is doing, seems to have lost impetus and life stands still" (1993:238). They also state that "boredom is the preoccupation, nonappreciation, and/or disinterest in what one already has" (p.240). Barbalet (1999) argues that boredom is more than simply lack of interest, but that it also involves "anxiety about the absence of meaning in a person's activities or circumstance… boredom, then, is a restless and irritable feeling" (p.641). In his book *Overload and Boredom*, Orrin Klapp's (1986) thesis is that "boredom as we experience it today is more likely to be from an overload than an underload" of stimulation and information (p.3). According to Klapp, our information society causes us to "suffer a lag in which the slow horse of meaning is unable to keep up with the fast horse of mere information" (p.2) and the result is boredom.

In the 1950s, however, Garfinkel listed boredom (along with shame and guilt) as an example of social affect, "an instance of a class of feelings particular to the more or less organized ways that human beings develop as they live out their lives in one another's company" (1956:421). Curiously, except for a few paragraphs by Goffman, addressing the social nature of boredom (1967), Garfinkel's suggestion of the social nature of boredom was not addressed for another 30 years, and seldom since, within sociology.

Unlike psychologists and psychoanalysts who locate the mechanisms of boredom within the individual (physiological and unconscious, respectively), sociologists, not surprisingly, look to the social empirical world for the source and causes of boredom. The failure here is not the individual's ability to respond appropriately; rather, there is something not right with the world "out there" in terms of failed social scripts, lack of "flow" or simply our response to what appears to be an uninteresting situation/experience, from which we cannot derive sufficient meaning. Like psychology and psychoanalysis, however, the result described by sociologists is feelings of frustration and restlessness.

Cultural Critics, Philosophers, Artists: Boredom as Liberator, Boredom as Dictator

Cultural critics, philosophers, writers and other artists have a knack for articulating the ineffable, often in succinct, even poetic ways. Brooker's three-word definition of boredom is both: "tedium taken neat" (2001:39). Some, more philosophical definitions, are intriguing, if not clear: "boredom is the absolute failure of sense, or rather, the near absolute failure of sense… boredom has no essence; it has no propriety and renders the self and things as a whole anonymous… boredom is the foreclosure on anxiety that is the forestalling of freedom" (Bigelow 1983:260-261).

Looking at some of the descriptions of boredom from this expressive group suggests that, generally speaking, they are of two minds on the subject: boredom is productive (i.e., our efforts to avoid boredom help to stimulate our thinking and creative processes), and boredom is an existential state, worse (almost) than death. Cultural critic Walter Benjamin wrote that, "boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in the leaves drives him away" (1969:91), suggesting that boredom is necessary, if sometimes elusive. Nietzsche had a similar perspective on boredom, suggesting that, ultimately, it has positive, productive qualities, despite the unpleasant affect that announces its presence:

> For thinkers and all sensitive spirits, boredom is that disagreeable 'windless calm' of the soul that produces a happy voyage and cheerful winds. They have to bear it and must wait for its effects on them. Precisely this is what lesser natures cannot achieve by any means. To ward off boredom at any cost is vulgar, no less than work without pleasure. (2001:57)

German culture and political critic, Siegfried Kracauer, was a close friend of Walter Benjamin's. In Kracauer's collection of essays, he included an essay called "Boredom" (Kracauer 1995 [1963]), in which he defines his subject as, "an inner restlessness without a goal, a longing that is pushed aside, and a weariness with that which exists without really being" (p.334). Ultimately he sees boredom, like Benjamin, as a potentially productive force. Rather romantically and idealistically, he says that in boredom, "one experiences a kind of bliss that is almost unearthly. A landscape appears in which colorful peacocks strut about, and images of people suffused with soul come into view. And look – your own soul is likewise swelling, and in ecstasy you name what

you have always lacked: the great *passion*" (Kracauer 1995:334). In the 1960s, Irish-American artist Brian O'Doherty wrote that, "far from having no content, boredom is a state of potential richness" (1967:237). According to Spacks (1989), "boredom acquires its positive valence by its function as a way station to something else: to wit or insight in its observer, to calm or wisdom, or at least a sense of superiority, in its sufferer" (p. 582). From these perspectives, boredom can be seen as the calm before the storm of creativity and productivity; it has a useful function in that it supports and engenders creative thinking, the path that leads us to do great things[8].

If, however, the experience of boredom can be positively construed, particularly with regards to promoting previously dormant, or absent, rational thoughts and creative ideas, the preponderance of these writers think of boredom in more grandly negative terms. Perhaps most dramatically, Schopenhauer (1850:19) said that, "boredom, which hovers over every secure life like a bird of prey… is a direct proof that existence is in itself valueless, for boredom is nothing other than the sensation of the emptiness of existence." Kant suggests that work is a cure for boredom: "In boredom, man feels a detestation or nausea at his own existence. It is a dread of the void, *horror vacui*, that gives a foretaste of a 'slow death.' The more one is aware of time the emptier it feels. The only cure is work, not pleasures. Man is the only animal that has to work" (in Svendsen 2005:54)[9]. One of the most famous expressions on the subject is Kierkegaard's classic, "boredom is the root of all evil" (1944:285), the adage to which many parents subscribe in their childrearing philosophy.

From this sampling, it seems that boredom is an existential form of evil chasing us towards certain death by robbing us of a sense of the value of experiencing time, especially the present, what William James (1950:631) called "the specious present, the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible."

Most recently, Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen asserts, "boredom is practically indefinable because it lacks the positiveness that is typical of most other phenomena. It is basically to be understood as an absence – an absence of personal

[8] Note that the way boredom works here is to cause or inspire us to do something to *avoid* boredom, or stop our experience of it. I will return to this idea in Chapter Five.

[9] This so-called cure, however, is meant sardonically and reminds me, in both style and substance, of Mark Twain's famous observation that, "man is the only animal that blushes, or needs to."

meaning" (2005:45). Svendsen also argues that temporary, transient boredom is an emotion, but the more existential boredom is a mood, where mood is something that lasts longer than emotion (2005:111)[10]. For Svendsen, "boredom can be understood as a discomfort that communicates that the need for meaning is not being satisfied" (Ibid p.30). Boredom, then, is about meaning, or the perceived lack of meaning.

In her rhetorical treatise on boredom, Elizabeth Goodstein points out that "the difficulty in defining boredom… marks an instability in the language of experience that neither empirical study nor philosophical inquiry can truly remedy" (2005:25). Perhaps it is this difficulty and instability that in fact draws philosophers and artists; the apparently ineffable qualities of boredom leave enough room for speculative, yet compelling, attempts at definitions. For philosophers and artists however, boredom is a two-faced Janus. On the one side, they see boredom as a productive force, an incubator for potential; on the other side, boredom is also an existential confrontation with the empty void, or, at the least, it is a longing that renders us, temporarily at least, unable to work or think productively. The swing between these two poles is likely what attracts philosophers and artists to the idea of boredom as a poetic concept[11].

In her book about the history of boredom in literature, Patricia Spacks (1995: *ix*) argues that "the expanding definition of boredom in our own time means that by now one might argue that virtually every word currently written speaks of the condition in one way or another." While this may be true, or just seductive hyperbole, it is my objective that this dissertation will serve to help us understand more clearly the contours and thematic content of this complex concept, particularly, though not strictly, from a sociological point of view.

I turn now to a discussion of boredom in a variety of academic literatures, boredom as conceived in popular culture, and boredom in the arts. I follow this with a brief examination of the place of boredom in sociology.

[10] In his essay on surrealism, Benjamin (2005[1929]:207) gives us a good example of boredom as a social and political mood when he writes of "the damp boredom of postwar Europe."
[11] In Chapter Four I present a typology of boredom that reflects the dichotomous sense of the experience.

Boredom is Interesting and (Almost) Everywhere

Boredom in Academic Literature

Cultural historian Joe Moran suggests that, "one of the reasons that boredom remains so interesting as a subject of cultural criticism is that it cuts to the heart of the complex relationship between everyday life and modernity" (2003:168). Academia itself has a long history of boredom, whether it is bored students, boring (and bored) professors[12], or boring textbooks and other long monographs (Baghdadchi 2005)[13]. More than forty years ago, Richard Lambert speculated about early 21st century leisure and, as an educator, he predicted that, "if we don't prepare our average students for this future of introspection, we risk unparalleled social upheaval directly traceable to boredom… Increased crime as well as stupefying boredom will result if we fail to help our students live on their inner resources" (Lambert 1966:769). Even more dramatically, Lambert suggested that, without sufficient intellectual preparation for the impending "incredible volume of leisure… the alternatives are clear: boredom and civic disorder – Watts times a thousand" (p.771). It is now that "40 years later" he wrote about and it turns out he was quite wrong, but also quite right: there are far fewer student protests now than 40 years ago, crime, in many places in North America, is actually declining, and certainly there are no signs of "unparalleled social upheaval" in North America[14] as well as most other parts of the world. What we might wonder about, however, are the causes for this decline and lack of civil protest by young people. Is it possible they are in some sense too bored to protest[15]? The sheer number of technological toys available to take up their (our) time, as well as the apparently unstoppable march of capitalist consumer glory[16] suggests that in the era

[12] In the New Testament, there is an example of a bored pupil listening to Paul: "when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight…And there sat in a window a certain young man named Eutychus, being fallen into a deep sleep: and as Paul was long preaching, he sunk down with the sleep, and fell down from the third loft, and was taken up dead" (Acts 20: 7,9 KJV).

[13] Poet Joseph Brodsky wrote, "A school is a factory is a poem is a prison is academia is boredom, with flashes of panic" (1983:17).

[14] In an article for the *New York Times*, Patricia Cohen (July 3, 2008) writes about the "move to the middle" in American universities, as older professors, who tended to skew to the political left, are retiring and the new generation of faculty members tend to be politically moderate.

[15] In their four-year prospective study of grade eight students in Cape Town, South Africa, Wegner *et al*. (2007) did find a positive correlation between leisure boredom and high school dropout, particularly for those students age 14 and older.

[16] The political and economic phenomenon of 'made in China' goods makes it possible for more people to afford any number of retail items that, until relatively recently, were inaccessible to lower income

of post-colonialism, it is now our time that is being colonized, ostensibly for the purposes of consumption-driven leisure.

Sociologists Darden and Marks (1999) claim that "sociology has largely ignored boredom, although producing a rather large amount of it" (p.33)[17]. Even volunteer participants in academic research can suffer from boredom during psychological experiments (D'Angiulli and LeBeau 2002), which should make us wonder about the validity of their responses. One of the approximately half a dozen books written about boredom, *Boredom, Self and Culture*, was inspired by educator Seán Healey's experiences as a teacher, trying to motivate students while keeping himself interested as well (1984:9). Like Lambert (1966), Healy speculated dramatically that boredom has "grown to pandemic proportions… [and it] seems on closer examination to be one symptom of an advanced stage of an entire culture in irremediable disintegration" (1984:11). Although there does not appear to be any solid evidence, many contemporary educators believe that the current generation of students, because of the time they spend in front of the television, computer, or using their cell phones and other hand-held devices, are "conditioned to expect immediate gratification … have shorter attention spans and also a low threshold for boredom" (Arhin and Johnson-Mallard 2003:121).

The concept of boredom, particularly in psychology, has been defined (e.g., Bergler 1945; O'Hanlon 1981; Fisher 1993; Mikulas and Vodanovich 1993), measured (Farmer and Sundberg 1986; Iso-Ahola and Weissinger 1990; Ragheb and Merydith 1995; Watt 2000; Vodanovich 2003; Passik *et al*., 2003; Vodanovich, Wallace and Kass 2005) and analyzed by age (the young tend to report more feelings of boredom) and gender differences (men seem more prone to boredom than women[18]) (Vodanovich and Kass 1990; McIntosh 2006). Various personality traits have been correlated with

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consumers. This apparent democratizing of the wealth of goods available and accessible, is only possible because the people (often women and teenage girls) who make the goods, are poorly paid and work in conditions that North American labour laws would forbid. We may use the expression that we find boredom *stifling*, but clearly the sense of oppression in this expression, is actually, materially, experienced by people who produce the (largely plastic) things we buy to keep ourselves amused.

[17] For example, according to Anthony Giddens, "to raise the question of functionalism is almost enough to put everyone immediately to sleep. For has not functionalism been the subject of one of the most protracted and boring debates known to sociology?" (1995:16). In his discussion of the difficulties inherent in explaining the historical and behavioural aspects of the relations between institutions, George C. Homans wrote, "we are boring enough already" (1987:76).

[18] Langbauer's (1993:80) feminist analysis of Sherlock Holmes stories posits the "twisted idea" that women are in fact the main cause of boredom in men's lives.

boredom proneness. For example: introverts are more prone to boredom (Barnett and Wolf Klitzing 2006); narcissism is positively correlated with boredom (Wink and Donahue 1997); procrastinators are at risk for boredom (Vodanovich and Rupp 1999); high boredom prone people are also prone to increased introspectiveness (Gana, Deletang & Metals 2000); spirituality is linked to lower levels of boredom proneness for women (MacDonald and Holland 2002); and boredom proneness is positively correlated with nonpathological worry (Kelly 2002). Boredom proneness is even linked with paranoid ideation (von Gemmingen 2003) (see Appendix A for a meta-analytic table of boredom studies in psychology).

Both psychologists and sociologists of organizations and work study the effects of boredom on employees as well as employers (Fisher 1998, 1993; Kass et al., 2001; Overheul 2001; Terkel 1973). Not surprisingly, high absenteeism rates are associated with boredom (Kass, Vodanovich and Callender 2001). Molstad (1986) notes that the results of numerous studies indicate (counterintuitively) that autoworkers and industrial workers do not necessarily report experiences of boredom on the job. However, other studies indicate that those of us who are "high-boredom-prone" are more likely to rate our efforts at routine work and school tasks as requiring more effort than those reported by our low-boredom-prone colleagues (Farmer and Sundberg 1986). Boredom in particular lines of work has been studied: boredom in the cockpit (Grose 1988), tollbooth workers' boredom (Sandberg 2003), bored lawyers (Harper 1987), boredom in the US Air Force (Charlton and Hertz 1989) and the Armed Forces[19] (Harris and Segal 1985; Ender 2005), bored surgeons (Csikszentmihalyi 1975), bored British patrol bobbies (Fielding 1987), bored brewery workers (Molstad 1986), and boredom in orchestra musicians (Parasuraman and Purohit 2000) amongst other occupations. Indeed, the decline of the British manufacturing industry in the 20th century has been blamed on boredom (Kenny 2005). According to Gemmill and Oakley (1992), in their examination of boredom in organizational life, "the smile of the seemingly cheerful but bored organization member is often a reflection of the indiscussability of boredom as a human problem that one is not willing to admit either to him- or herself or others" (p.366).

[19] A common expression in the army is that the job itself is hours of boredom, punctuated by moments of terror.

Boredom exists at many levels of the pay scale, from assembly line workers through to middle-management executives (Klapp 1986). Nobel prize winning scientist, James Watson (who discovered the DNA double helix with Francis Crick) gave a talk on the 40th anniversary of his discovery. Watson (1993:2) advised fellow scientists: "Never do anything that bores you. My experience in science is that someone is always telling you to do things that leave you flat. Bad idea." Charlton (2007) refers to Watson's advice as "the boredom principle," although clearly its applicability is limited only to those who, through social networks, education and financial backing, could even consider leaving or changing their work because their boss's ideas bored them.

As well as the workplace, we are bored at home, according to the research on bored housewives (Riley and Keith 2003), bored househusbands (Cobb 2004), and bored parents (Delle and Massimini 2004). We can be bored with our marriages (Aron *et al*. 2000), and our sex lives,[20] for which there is a sexual boredom scale (Watt and Ewing 1996). Indeed, according to Tunariu and Reavey (2003:68), "current cultural constructions of sex have transformed the issue of sexual boredom into an important feature of an individual's happiness, personal health and social well-being."[21] Despite the increasing number of television channels and cable programming, we are also bored with television[22] (though, ironically, we say we watch television *because* we are bored). Writing more than 20 years ago, (approximately 10 years before internet access in our homes became commonplace), sociologist Orin Klapp (1986) said that we are bored by information overload. But we can also be bored by our free time – for which there is a Free Time Boredom Scale (Ragheb and Merydith 2001). We are even capable of auto-boredom: boring ourselves (Brooker, 2001).

Seniors suffer from boredom[23] (Weinstein, Xie and Cleanthous 1995) and adolescents are especially bored even while suffering from time stress (Shaw, Caldwell

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[20] According to a French survey, 23% of French men and 31% of French women reported being bored while making love – "*l'atrophie du désir*" (in Spacks 1995:3).
[21] Teyssot (1996:54) points out that there is "a perfect anagram between *bedroom* and *boredom*."
[22] Singer Bruce Springsteen recorded the song "57 Channels (And Nothin' On)" in 1991. According to a 2006 CRTC report, 87% of Canadian households have cable or satellite television, providing them potential access to hundreds of channels (*How Many* 2006).
[23] In an interesting twist, Gana et al. (2004) found that seniors over the age of 85 who said they feel at least 15 years younger, report less boredom proneness than do those seniors who report feeling closer to their actual age.

and Kleiber 1996). Indeed, children, in North America at least, invented the geographically existential question, "Are we *there* yet?" Teenagers, of course, appear to have invented, if not perfected, the anguish of boredom, though research suggests it may be linked to the development of their autonomy, cognitive abilities and identity (Caldwell, Darling, Payne and Dowdy 1999). Philosopher and psychologist Rom Harré writes that, "the hopes of most young people come to nothing. The disappointments of the middle years of life are followed, for those who survive them, by the ugliness, pain and despair of old age… the pervasive tone of life for most people is boredom, but a boredom made more acute by resentment" (1979:31).

> In the public sphere, we can be bored by political activism (Tolor and Siegel 1989), political advertising (Scammell and Langer 2006), and bored with everyday life in general (Bargdill 2000; Conrad 1997)[24]. We are also bored consumers, bored with our food choices[25] (Moskowitz 2000; Finkelstein 2003) and our clothes, due to boredom with particular fashions[26] (Studak and Workman 2004). We can be bored with our leisure (Iso-Ahola and Weissinger 1987) -- for which there is a leisure-boredom scale (Iso-Ahola and Weissinger 1990) -- despite what some say is a culture of entertainment (Winter 2002). Boredom has been used to help explain our unsafe driving practices (Dahlen et al. 2005), and studied for its effects on sleepiness (Mavjee and Horne 1994), though no study links these two. Thermal boredom, the result of a lack of varied sensory stimulation in an optimally regulated heated/air conditioned building, can increase drowsiness and general dissatisfaction when indoors (Kwok 2000)[27].

Both psychology and criminology use boredom to help explain adolescent delinquency (Hirschi 1969; Newberry and Duncan 2001), although Newburn and Hagell (1994) found that the boredom experienced by delinquent youth could not be causally linked to their criminal activity. Boredom has been used to explain alienated youth

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[24] According to Auerbach (2005:284), in the 19th and early 20th century, "British imperial administrators at all levels were bored by their experience traveling and working in the service of king or queen and country."

[25] This is rather remarkable given the shift in emphasis in recent years evident in cookbooks. Where cookbooks were always written for an assumed "housewife" readership, (for example the still-popular *Joy of Cooking*), there are now so many and varied cookbooks that, in Toronto, there is an entire bookstore in the upscale Yorkville area devoted only to these books. Their titles are now sexier and clearly target a broader readership.

[26] In eighteenth century Europe, "a certain amount of boredom at court was relieved by frequent changes in dress. Thus, the Russian Czarina Anna, living in the first half of the eighteenth century, required that her courtiers appear in a different suit each time they were in her presence" (Freudenberger 1963:40).

[27] According to Kwok (2000), the American Society of Heating and Ventilating Engineers first established air conditioning standards for buildings in 1938, though at that time the concern was about health, rather than comfort.

(Caldwell and Smith 1995), Russian (Connor 1970) and American cold-war delinquents (Hollander 1969)[28]. Prisons, jails and detention centres impose boredom on inmates; some prisoners have reported that boredom was their motivation for agreeing to volunteer in medical drug trials (Moser et al. 2004). Indeed, the entire field of criminology itself has recently been charged with being boring (Ferrell 2004).

In the field of medicine, "very little is known about the cognitive or neural bases of the subjective experience of boredom" (Danckert and Allman 2005:236). However, boredom is medicalized as a disease[29] (Bergler 1945; Scitovsky 1999) and noted for its effects on self-reported health ratings (Weissinger 1995). It is examined in the lives of cancer patients (Passik et al. 2003), linked to anxiety and mood disorders (Sommers and Vodanovich 2000), implicated in psychiatric (Binnema 2004) and psychotic (Todman 2003) disorders, and in the lives of homeless people with mental illness (Cohen 2001) as well as in the lives of the mentally ill (Todman 2003; VanDongen 1997). In one Australian study of men's leisure time, researchers report that, "men who experience episodes of boredom and loneliness during free time are at a higher risk of mortality regardless of their levels of alcohol and tobacco use or their inactive leisure lifestyles" (Bloomfield and Kennedy 2006:16). Chronic boredom is implicated in stress related illness (O'Hanlon 1981); at least one study found that problems with boredom, combined with helplessness and loneliness, pose greater challenges than physical and functional impairments for nursing home residents (Slama and Bergman-Evans 2000). This makes sense in light of the fact that public health and medical science have served to increase our average lifespan, although this means that, as the chances of living longer increase, so do the chances of having cancer and other degenerative diseases (Weiss and Lonnquist

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[28] Writer Arthur Miller was concerned with the problems of youth violence and in 1962 he published an article in *Harper's* in which he noted that the problem was everyone's problem and not limited to young people: "Unless one grasps the power of boredom, the threat of it to one's existence, it is impossible to 'place' the delinquent as a member of the human race" (p.51).

[29] In a remarkable sleight of hand, von Gemmingen et al. (2003) write about the qualities of boredom that suggest it could find a place in the latest DSM, thus entrenching it as an "official" psychiatric ailment:

> According to the Diagnostic Statistical Manual-IV…somatization occurs when an individual vividly describes a continuous pattern of highly impairing complaints that cannot be explained by any existing condition. The DSM-IV asserts that the individual is not consciously aware that no real medical problem exists and that the complaints may be the physical manifestation of some underlying turmoil… Therefore, due to a probable combination of self-fixation, lack of stimulation, and unconscious conflict, persons prone to boredom may have an inclination to invent problems and may make negatively incorrect assumptions about neutral events. (p.908).

2000). This could mean more time alone, at home or in a hospital, in bed, bored. Occupational Therapists express concern over whether or not to intervene with bored hospital patients and their unexciting hospital routine, both because "boredom is not always bad," and, these professionals openly worry about how their profession is perceived when it appears that all they do is rescue people from the boredom of institutional life (Long 2004:87). In his autobiographical narrative account of his heart attack, stroke and recovery process, British academic Jon Prosser (2007:194) writes of the "grindingly boring" repetition involved in his cognitive rehabilitation.

Citing research from the mid 1970s, Iso-Ahola and Weissinger argue that, "boredom is becoming a major individual and social problem, not only to the middle-aged but to the young as well… Despite its threat to the mental health of citizens, the amount of research devoted to the topic of boredom is astonishingly small" (1987:357). Psychiatrists themselves struggle with boredom in their practices[30] (Morrant 1984) and with particularly boring patients (Taylor 1984). Boredom is implicated in addictive behaviour such as excessive drinking and drug use (Cohen 2001), gambling (Trevorrow and Moore 1998) and eating disorders (Abramson and Stinson, 1977). Adolescent drunk driving (Arnett 1990) and substance abuse (Iso-Ahola and Crowley 1991) have been related, in part, to boredom. However, boredom has also been reported in recovery from substance abuse (Corvinelli 2007). Proneness to boredom is one of the purported symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder (Kass, Vodanovich and Wallace 2003).

With respect to religion, according to Nuckolls (2007:33), "boredom [is] a danger and a threat to all doctrinal faiths." More grandly, boredom is associated with a collapse of American religious values (Cain 1983), the lamented loss of authority at the end of the 20th century (Nisbet 1969), and even linked to the threat of nuclear war (Giddens 1990) and the terror of contemporary existence (Neill 2001). According to philosopher Lars Svendsen, "boredom is not just a phenomenon that afflicts individuals; it is, to just as great an extent, a social and cultural phenomenon" (2005:52).

In this brief overview of boredom in academic literature I have attempted to show the variety of research that tackles this subject; the effect is to suggest that boredom, the

[30] In the Canadian Medical Association Journal, Rockwood, Patterson and Hogan (2006:1502) note (tongue-in-cheek) that, "low lights and boring materials" are the cause of doctors nodding off at medical meetings.

experience, has the potential to affect anyone and everyone. As well, boredom can have seemingly trivial consequences (disinterest in leisure activities), serious consequence (mental health problems, work and family problems) and even potentially catastrophic consequences, according to some writers.

Boredom is, indeed, "disconcertingly interesting" (Brooker 2001:30).

Boredom in Popular Culture: Print, Television and the Internet

The everyday nature of boredom, and our apparent difficulties in defining and explaining it, could mean that we run the risk of seldom acknowledging or discussing it, rather like the problem of asking a fish about the water in which it swims. But it turns out that we do find boredom noteworthy and from time to time it even makes the news, even the front page.

In the 1970s, *Psychology Today* magazine published a how-to article, "Chasing the Blahs Away: Boredom and How to Beat it" (Keen 1977), that begins with the assertion that "in recent years the malaise has grown to epidemic proportions" (p.78). The author conflates boredom and depression, something I have already pointed out are not the same condition. After a discussion of various possible solutions to cure boredom (recognize and accept it, try something new, do something creative, etc.), Keen concedes that:

> few 'psychological' problems can be solved at the psychological level, because the human animal lives within both a political and cosmic environment, and boredom is a symptom of a political and metaphysical disease… An adequate cure for boredom lies ultimately in some act of radical trust by which the person includes him- or herself within a living and meaningful universe (p.84).

The New York Times has published articles about boredom (e.g., Gruson, October 29, 1993; Kuntz, February 20, 2000), and more recently *The Guardian* (UK) printed an article about how boring internet sites can sometimes be the most interesting (remember the Trojan Room coffee pot webcam at Cambridge University?) (Burkeman 2007). Boredom even made the front cover of the bimonthly magazine *Scientific American Mind* for its first issue of 2008 (Gosline 2008). Clearly, we are interested in that from which we claim to suffer.

In 2004, journalist Steven Winn wrote an article about boredom for *The San Francisco Chronicle*. In his essay-length piece, Winn discusses various examples of how boredom has inspired artists and others. According to Winn, "as more and more people seem to recognize, the universal experience of being bored -- unengaged, detached, afloat in some private torpor -- may be far more precious, fruitful and even profound than a surface apprehension might suggest." Although his examples are largely positive (i.e., they demonstrate how boredom leads to insight or a creative production), he does mention the more complex side of boredom: "For many, boredom arrives with a spectrum of feelings shading from guilt and distress to bafflement and pleasure. It poses fundamental questions about our own identities and the connections we make, or don't, with the world around us."

In March of 2008, Carolyn Johnson, a business reporter for *The Boston Globe*, wrote a similar essay for the Ideas section of that paper, titled, "The Joy of Boredom." In her essay[31], Johnson argues that "we are most human when we feel dull," and that, "there is a strong argument that boredom -- so often parodied as a glassy-eyed drooling state of nothingness -- is an essential human emotion that underlies art, literature, philosophy, science, and even love." Johnson discusses the myriad ways we are now able to keep ourselves from experiencing boredom through technology[32]. In particular, our cell phones can be used to watch movie clips, video messages and advertisements, as well as for sending text messages and using the phone function, often in public, and often with no apparent purpose other than to stay occupied[33]. She equates the pharmaceutical and medical professions' tendencies to medicalize otherwise "normal" feelings (e.g., sadness and social anxiety) and offer drug cures, with the technology industry's drive to give us something to do to take up all our "spare" time, to cure our moments of non-communication with others. According to Johnson, "paradoxically, as cures for boredom

[31] Several other newspapers, including the *Globe and Mail*, picked up this story, and Johnson was interviewed on National Public Radio (NPR) in the US. She said she "did get a fair amount of feedback" from the article and that it was similar to the amount she has received for writing "a very popular business story" (personal correspondence).

[32] In his *Psychology Today* article, Keen makes the same point – thirty one years earlier.

[33] We used to answer or call (landline) telephones with the words, "hi, how are you?" With cell phones, we now ask, "Hi, *where* are you?" This new greeting requires a response of a geographical nature ("I'm on the bus" or "I'm in the checkout line") often followed by further descriptions of the person's mundane travel plans ("I'm getting off at the next stop so I'll see you in two minutes" is common on my own bus route). Perhaps the use of cell phones is making our phone conversations more boring.

have proliferated, people do not seem to feel less bored; they simply flee it with more energy, flitting from one activity to the next."

As well as technological solutions, there is no shortage of books about how to cure boredom, particularly for children. In an internet search for children's books containing the word "boredom" in the title, amazon.com, the online retailer, listed more than 40 different books (February 2007), the majority of which have been published since 1999. These book titles use the terms "boredom busters," "boredom blasters," "battle against boredom," and "boredom survival guide" among others. The books supply suggestions for games, crafts and other activities to keep children busy (i.e., not bored)[34]. In the introduction to a recent book, *Ennui to Go: The Art of Boredom*, published originally as a small paperback and obviously targeted to the gift-buying, adult consumer, author Jon Winokur (2005) says that:

> boredom isn't necessarily boring, and that while boredom experienced is depressing, boredom considered can be fascinating. This book is intended as a balm for bored people everywhere, to be browsed on the bus, the subway, the plane, while waiting in line or waiting for Godot, to assuage the ennui of daily life sort of like the way Ritalin calms hyperactivity.(p.xvi)

A book about boredom to assuage boredom – truly a postmodern curative. Business schools and trade magazines provide techniques to avoid boring one's audience (Ballaro and Bielaszka-DuVernay 2005; Sommerville 2004). In media and marketing studies, bored viewers are considered death to advertizing campaigns (Larsen 2004) and television programming.

The minutiae of rather boring, predictable, everyday lives was chronicled in the American television sitcom, *Seinfeld,* (1989 to 1998). The BBC comedy *The Office* (copied shortly thereafter by the Americans) parodies the often dull and tedious culture of office jobs, where managers are unable to keep employees interested in their work for any length of time, and employees rebel against, and yet within, the constraints of their workplace. Recently, two Swiss authors published a book intended for a management audience on this bored-at-work phenomenon they call "boreout" (Rothlin and Werder 2007). Based on their interviews with 100 managers, they claim that the new burnout at

[34] Surely the irony of this is mind boggling when one stops to consider the plethora of children's toys, games, movies, videos and television programming available now, compared with, for example, the options available for children 30, 50 or 100 years ago.

work is boreout – employees suffering from being underchallenged and whiling away their hours at their office desks.

In 2003, the first privately-owned, commercial television station in Romania, Antena-1, produced three television commercials as part of an "anti-boredom campaign." All three commercials depict people playing pranks on unsuspecting others, apparently in an effort to keep themselves amused and, therefore, not bored. The most successful commercial[35] features an elderly couple driving quietly along a tree-lined street. The passenger, clearly the man's wife, pulls out an unsecured steering wheel from beside her seat and, as she catches the eye of the driver in another car her husband is trying to pass, she pretends that she is careening into the driver then laughs as he tries to avoid the presumed impact[36].

The internet is replete with personal blogs of bored office workers, students, and parents alone at home, all grappling with the experience of boredom. The YouTube website, where users can upload a homemade movie, claims that they have over 33,500 movies with the word "boredom" in the title or accompanying explanatory notes[37]. There are a number of website domain names with "bored" or "boredom" in the title, including, but not limited to:

- www.bored.com
- www.imbored.com
- www.i-am-bored.com
- www.boredatwork.com
- www.atworkandbored.com
- www.arcadeboredom.com
- www.boredshitless.com
- www.utterlyboring.com
- www.boredom.com
- www.verybored.com
- www.boredomsucks.com
- www.BoredGirls.com

[35] The ad, known as "Steering Wheel," was shortlisted for the 2004 international Clio awards (for advertising and design) (http://www.clioawards.com/archive/results.cfm; Retrieved January 16, 2008).
[36] Unfortunately, the television station did not respond to my email enquiries, either in English, or, thanks to the translation skills of Nadine and Daniel Blumer, Romanian.
[37] http://ca.youtube.com/results?search_query=boredom&search=Search (Retrieved January 25, 2008). Without doing an actual content analysis, it appears that the majority of these "boredom" movies could be titled "I was bored and so I made this movie about X." That is, the movies are not about boredom, the concept, but about what people do to avoid boredom. There are many more similar movies listed under various language translations of "boredom."

- www.boredguys.com
- www.boredstudents.com
- www.collegeboredom.com
- www.boredpeople.com
- www.boredteens.com
- www.boredom-busters.com
- www.boredashell.com
- www.thecureforboredom.com
- www.bored.overnow.com
- www.antiboredomteam.com/checkitout
- http//:antiboredom.forumarena.com

Each of these sites provide links to other websites, most often to chat rooms, online games, quizzes, videos, cartoons, etc. Two of these appear to link only to sites about sex and pornography (boredashell.com and, unsurprisingly, boredguys.com)[38]. In other words, these sites offer to relieve passing boredom by offering distractions[39]. The explanatory blurb in the masthead of the antiboredomteam website could describe most of the above websites:

> Life, and in particular, the internet can be quite boring. While you're probably amused most of the time, what you're amused by is probably boring and culturally-bankrupt. Our goal is to find the least boring and least common entertainment, and present it to you, the viewer -- no guarantees, but we'll try.[40]

Stephen Vodanovich, the American psychologist who has published the most on boredom, has a website (with no apparent links to his university) called "The Boredom Site (A place for information about the experience of being bored)"[41]. The four links on this site lead to: definitions of boredom (15 academic definitions from various researchers in psychology); quotations on boredom (80, from various historical and cultural figures); a table of the consequences of boredom (in the areas of work, education, psychological and physical health); and a list of seven boredom measurement scales developed by academics.

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[38] the url www.boredhousewives.com takes you immediately to a site called "A Gentleman's Choice" (www.agentlemanschoice.com), an "escort service" able to provide the, presumably bored, male, consumer, with women "two for the price of one." Numerous other websites with "bored housewives" in the title are similarly related to pornographic material.

[39] One site even suggests to "write your college thesis on boredom. The material is endless" (www.squidoo. com/bore).

[40] Retrieved January 31, 2008.

[41] http://www.theboredomsite.com/

For several years, until 2004, the boringinstitute.com was an internet site run by American journalist Alan Caruba[42]. Originally started as a media spoof listing the year's most boring movies and celebrities, the site eventually included information about the general subject of boredom. In 1985, Caruba declared July to be "anti-boredom month" in the US. An entire month dedicated to battling boredom! In July of 2002, the official website for the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, posted an image (on their National Mental Health Information Center page) with "July is Anti-Boredom Month" and listed some ideas to help prevent boredom in children and adults during the summer months. Various e-card sites offer anti-boredom month e-cards (along with the usual birthday, new baby and anniversary greetings, etc.), while retailers and service sector industries use the anti-boredom month idea to sell potential customers on their "boredom-busting' products or hotel getaways.

In popular culture, then, boredom is most often characterized by its temporary, situational quality, one that prevents us from experiencing a more interesting life, thus negatively affecting our mental health. Addressing boredom is quite commonly referred to as the "battle" against boredom, suggesting that we marshal our own personal resources to "attack" boredom. The "cure" for boredom in popular culture is usually entertainment; underlying issues of meaninglessness are not addressed. Instead, entertainment centres, games, casinos, pornography and other sources of organized or individual leisure are posited as potential cures for our boredom. This is all, of course, strongly suggestive of the current high, or post-modern era that privileges an inherent right to individual happiness, while at the same time discouraging critique of the socio-economic system that distributes this "happiness" so unequally.

Boredom in the Arts

The worlds of literature and art represent and provide numerous and varied forms of critique about the concept and experience of boredom. Indeed, the ancient Greeks, the

[42] Caruba now runs "The National Anxiety Center," a website he calls "a noted think tank". The site is openly anti-liberal and espouses such views as the non-existence of global warming. The slogan of this website is "The good news is… The bad news is WRONG!" (www.anxietycentre.com).

culture upon which Western civilization is founded, can probably be credited with the first story about the powers of boredom[43].

According to Greek mythology (Hamilton 1961:76-77), Zeus had a dalliance with Io. In order to hide Io from the wrath of his wife, Hera, Zeus turned his mistress into a cow; however, Hera was wise to Zeus' strategy and asked for the cow as a gift, a request with which Zeus complied, if reluctantly. Argus was the 100-eyed watchman employed by Hera to stand guard over Io to ensure the two lovers would not reunite (best not to think too much about that coupling). When Zeus finds out his lover is not just a cow, but a watched cow, he sends Hermes to kill Argus. Hermes approaches Argus dressed as a peasant and plays the 100-eyed guard some music, hoping to lull him to sleep. Alas, Argus does not fall asleep and Hermes decides to tell him the longest and most boring story ever told. Eventually all of Argus' eyes close and when he is asleep Hermes kills him. It is likely that this represents the first recorded "bored to death" story[44].

Svendsen (2005) argues that:

> as a rule, literature is a great deal more illuminative than quantitative sociological or psychological studies. This applies not least to our subject [boredom], where much research has focused on how the deficiency or surplus of sensory stimuli cause boredom without this always being particularly illuminative when considering such a complex phenomenon as boredom. (p.15).

He points out that most of this literature is from the modern era. French writer, Gustave Flaubert's first published novel, *Madame Bovary* (1995 [1856]), tells the story of Emma Bovary, a bored, bourgeois French housewife, unhappily married to a mediocre doctor, in a small French town. The public outcry that greeted the publication of this novel had as much to do with Madame Bovary's statement that her adulterous affairs were too much like her boring marriage, as the (fictional) facts of her extra-marital liaisons (Brooker 2001). Russian writer, Ivan Goncharov's novel *Oblomov* (1954 [1859]), ultimately an indictment of serfdom, begins with an indefinite description of the main character, Oblomov, who spends much of the book actually in bed, or lying on a sofa:

> He was a man of about thirty-two or three, of medium height and pleasant appearance, with dark grey eyes, but with a total absence of any definite idea, any

[43] I am indebted to Nadine Blumer for bringing this myth to my attention.
[44] In this particular rendition, the words used are: "Hermes talked on and on as drowsily and monotonously as he could" and eventually Argus fell asleep, although the story Hermes told was not "especially tiresome".

> concentration, in his features…Occasionally a sombre look of something like fatigue or boredom crept into his eyes; but neither fatigue nor boredom could banish for a moment the mildness which was the predominant and fundamental expression not only of his face but of his whole soul, so serenely and unashamedly reflected in his eyes, his smile and every movement of his head and hands… All his anxiety resolved itself into a sigh and dissolved into apathy or drowsiness.[45] (p. 13-14)

French poet Charles Baudelaire is often invoked as the quintessential dandy of 19th century Europe. In his volume of poetry, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), he writes of "this bored world" (in *Benediction*), "the boredom… of our foggy lives" (in *Elevation*), "the black boredom of snowy evenings," and "the boredom of the vulgar herd" (in *The Venal Muse*)[46]. The poems in this volume are, in general, suffused with an air of languid boredom, the disdain of the new modern man evidently struggling with the changing values brought into sharp relief by the speedy evolution from a *Gemeinschaft* to a *Gesellschaft* existence.

American-born author Henry James' novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, (1881) stressed "the psychological force and moral inadequacy of the bored man…[allowing] full ethical analysis of boredom as aggression, as narcissism, as self-chosen style, as sign of a painful relation to time… James [understands] … the moral issues implicit in boredom as modern experience" (Spacks 1995:228). In her study of the history of boredom in literature, Patricia Spacks confines her research to England, "mainly because the subject becomes patently unmanageable if one considers France and Germany and Russia and Scandinavia, where boredom, its trivial and metaphysical meanings intertwining, supplies an enormous mass of literary material, particularly in the nineteenth century" (1995:28).

Some of the greatest writers of the 20th century not only wrote, directly or indirectly, about boredom, but also used it for mood as part of their writing style[47].

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[45] The colour gray, used here to describe the protagonist's eyes, is commonly used in descriptions that connote boredom. Benjamin (2002) in particular often refers to gray, which I discuss more in Chapter Five.

[46] To be more exact, in French, Baudelaire writes of ennui, which some translators translate as boredom. This translation is not necessarily accurate and I discuss the differences between boredom and ennui in Chapter Three.

[47] Of the five main academic texts on the subject of boredom, published in the past 30 years, two of them deal extensively with boredom as a theme in literature. Kuhn's (1976) *The Demon of Noontide* is a detailed "literary topography of ennui" (p.13) "from antiquity to the present" (p.xv), and Patricia Spacks' (1995) *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* combines a literary with a cultural analysis of the history of boredom. In this short section of my dissertation, I mean only to point out that boredom has often been written about in literature. My examples are thus somewhat arbitrary; they are limited to my own reading

According to Healy, "certainly almost every major writer in the twentieth century has dealt with [boredom] and many have dwelt upon it" (1984:36). Irish writer Samuel Beckett deals with themes of existential despair, alienation, meaning and boredom, perhaps most famously in his play *Waiting for Godot*, "a comedy of boredom" (Svendsen 2005:95), where main characters Vladimir and Estragon wait for someone who never appears[48]. Brooker argues that Beckett's novel, *Malone Dies*, "puts up a fair candidate for the most boring scenario in fiction: an ancient man in bed, close to immobile, barely able, so he tells us, to sense the existence of the parts of his own body" (2001:3). Henry James once remarked that reading Proust's *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*[49], was, for him, "inconceivable boredom associated with the most extreme ecstasy which it is possible to imagine"[50] (in Landy 2004:129). Kuhn (1976), who equates the French word *ennui* with boredom, points out that:

> Ennui is not just an idea about which authors have written. Inextricably linked with the notion of time and space, ennui is not only the subject of certain works of art but also a part of their temporal fabric and spatial structure. Hence… ennui is not the main subject of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, and yet ennui through its inevitable deformation of time determines the very rhythm of Proust's style, the mode of his thought, and the structure of his work. (p.5)

French sociologist Henri Lefebvre said that James Joyce's monumental *Ulysses* (1922), "demonstrates that a great novel can be boring. And 'profoundly' boring" (1957:27). Indeed, two years after its first publication, in London, a reviewer criticized Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for its long and boring passages, the word for which is *longueurs* (Dettmar 2004:xv). Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (1952), another[51] "unwieldy giant of a novel"[52] (Goodstein 2005:334), depicts

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knowledge of the more well-known literary works. I admit that I have tried, and failed, to finish reading Joyce's *Ulysses*.

[48] While writing this dissertation, I had the good fortune of seeing this play staged where Samuel Beckett most wanted it seen: in a prison. The inmates of William Head Federal Penitentiary, in Victoria, BC, mounted an excellent production during which I sometimes found myself bored and fighting to stay interested in what was, overall, a most interesting experience. I discuss this at length in Chapter Five.

[49] The first lines of both Proust's masterpiece and Goncharov's novel *Oblomov*, begin with images of the main characters lying in bed and both protagonists spend much of the respective novels in bed.

[50] Some may also say this of Wagner's *Ring Cycle* opera – all 14.5 hours of it.

[51] The novels briefly discussed here, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Joyce's *Ulysses,* Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, are often found on lists of "Greatest Novels of the 20th Century," the first three often in the top 10.

[52] In the edition I have, volume 1 is 1,770 pages and volume 2 is 725 pages, for a total of 2,495 pages.

bourgeois life in the pre-WWI Austro-Hungarian capital. This (unfinished) novel, in two volumes, "poses the question of what sort of relationship to one's own experiences is possible in modernity" (Goodstein 2005:334). Although the term boredom (*Langeweile*) is rarely used in the novel, Elizabeth Goodstein argues that "the problem of boredom, with its literal and figurative relations to the process of cultural modernization, permeates *The Man Without Qualities*" (2005:335). F. Scott Fitzgerald both glamorizes and criticizes post-WW1 life amongst wealthy North-Eastern Americans in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). The practiced, pretentious air of wealth and unease is described in the main character: "Gatsby, his hands still in his pockets, was reclining against the mantelpiece in a strained counterfeit of perfect ease, even of boredom" (Fitzgerald 1998[1925]:69).

In one of her essays in *Against Interpretation* (1967), American literary theorist and cultural critic, Susan Sontag, argues that, "the commonest complaint about the films of Antonioni or the narratives of Beckett or Burroughs is that they are hard to look at or to read, that they are 'boring.' But the charge of boredom is really hypocritical. There is, in a sense, no such thing as boredom. Boredom is only another name for a certain species of frustration" (p.303). Sontag challenges readers and viewers to work through, or rise above, their frustration with a particularly difficult film or narrative; she thus implies that boredom is only the first level of response and not thereby adequate to successfully and meaningfully process (and perhaps deeply understand) the works of talented writers and directors. For Sontag, then, boredom (of the reader or viewer) is not necessarily a response, but an absence of response, a deflection in the face of challenging work, akin to the way boredom can be an unreflexive response to the challenges of everyday life for some people.

In the novels of Italian writer, Alberto Moravia, "the ambience is frequently charged with existentialist anomie, absurdity, boredom, indifference, alienation, and anguish" (Baldanza 1968:513). In Moravia's novel, *Boredom* (1960), a prolonged, everyday boredom is the source of the internal struggle that leads the wealthy, failed artist, Dino, to fall obsessively in love with a young woman. Dino claims that he can "recall having suffered always from boredom" (p.5). In the first scene of the novel, Dino takes a knife to the painting he has been working on for two months and slashes it "to

tatters" (Moravia 1999:4). Immediately upon relating this story to us, Dino begins a 14 page discussion of boredom, beginning with:

> But it is important to understand what I mean by this word. For many people boredom is the opposite of amusement; and amusement means distraction, forgetfulness. For me, boredom is not the opposite of amusement; I might even go so far as to say that in certain of its aspects it actually resembles amusement inasmuch as it gives rise to distraction and forgetfulness, even if of a very special type. Boredom to me consists in a kind of insufficiency, or inadequacy, or lack of reality. Reality, when I am bored, has always had the same disconcerting effect upon me as (to use a metaphor) a too-short blanket has upon a sleeping man on a winter night: he pulls it down over his feet and his chest gets cold, then he pulls it up on to his chest and his feet get cold, and so he never succeeds in falling properly asleep. (p.5)

In the next chapter I chronicle the etiological and social history of boredom. It seems that it is possible that what we now know as boredom, is at least distantly related to a condition called *acedia*, or *accidie*, suffered by the solitary monks of the 4th century. However, *acedia*, or *accidie*, are not commonly used terms in the 20th century and so it was a surprise to find that the villain character, Ernst Blofeld, addresses James Bond, agent 007, with the following, in the book that became the movie, *You Only Live Twice* (2008[1965]):

> I will make a confession to you, Mister Bond. I have come to suffer from a certain lassitude of mind which I am determined to combat. This comes in part from being a unique genius who is alone in the world, without honour worse, misunderstood. No doubt much of the root cause of this accidie is physical, liver, kidneys, heart, the usual weak points of the middle-aged. But there has developed in me a certain mental lameness, a disinterest in humanity and its future, an utter boredom with the affairs of mankind. (p.243)

The art world, too, has addressed boredom, and of course been accused of producing it. In the 1960s, Andy Warhol[53] famously said, "I like boring things" (in Colpitt 1985:360). Artist and art critic Brian O'Doherty writes that, "Andy Warhol has become famous for his bright refusal to take on more responsibility than a machine, which leads to the fiction of an autolobotomized euphoria in which repetition and boredom are prime values" (1967:236). However, American art historian, Frances

[53] During the writing of this dissertation, I attended a Warhol exhibit at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Printed on one of the exhibition walls, in large orange letters, was a quotation, attributed to Andy Warhol: "I like boring things, I like things to be the same over and over again" (Printz 1989:457).

Colpitt, writes that, "what works of art do not do, at least ought not to do, is bore us… As far as I know, no artist, Warhol included, likes to be accused of making trivial or irrelevant works of art. Boredom negates the possibility of any enjoyment of, or interest in, a work of art" (1985:361). Indeed, art, by definition, is meant to engage us, to make us think and feel and even, in some cases, to respond politically. O'Doherty proposed a taxonomy of high-boredom and low-boredom art during the 1960s:

> If high-boredom art [e.g., "Pop art"] depends for its effect on suddenly forcing attention and then exhausting it, low-boredom art doesn't force attention and, in fact, is easily ignored outside the self-conscious context of the gallery situation. It tends to fade into the environment with a modesty so extreme that it is hard not to read it as ostentatious. (1967: 233)

He argues that the concepts of high- and low-boredom art are useful "in that they lead naturally to some of the main concerns of art in the sixties – to the ironies they conceal, to the techniques by which they are executed… and to the 'mimicking' of the machine, which in the last few years has constituted a new orthodox of unfreedom and freedom" (p.236). Psychologists Furnham and Avison (1997:928) report[54] that "those who get bored easily" prefer surreal art (from their study, Magritte's "The Red Model" and Picasso's "Girls With a Toy Boat) to representational art (Constable, Degas and Turner).

Musicians, as artists, make a living composing, playing instruments and singing about the largely emotional and interpersonal relationships in which we find ourselves entangled. Whether or not academics agree that it is an emotion, boredom has sometimes been the subject material for musicians[55]. There are few songs in which boredom is actually the centre of attention; instead, boredom appears to inspire the music or is used as an image. One quite notable exception where boredom is indeed the title and topic of the song is from the 1960s British group, Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band's 1967 cult classic album, *Gorilla*. Track 14 is the campy song, "I'm Bored." Some of the lyrics include, "I'm bored with everything I touch and see…. And quite apart from what one hears I've been like this for years and years, you see, ennui." Ten years later, there are two more examples of song titles, and contents, about boredom. From their 1977 self-titled album,

[54] Furnham and Avison list the respondents as 32 males and 30 females, between the ages of 18-34 years.
[55] I am indebted to audiophile Aldo Nazarko for his help with this section. His radio program, "Off the Beaten Track" (CFUV, Victoria BC; http://cfuv.uvic.ca/) includes rarely-heard music, "from the ridiculous to the sublime." He made useful suggestions for me on both counts, for this section.

The Clash, the English punk rock band's lead singer, Joe Strummer, sang, "I'm so bored with the USA" and in their song, "London's Burning," they sing the lyrics "London's burning with boredom now." American punk rocker, Iggy Pop's song, "I'm Bored" from his 1979 album *New Values*, includes the lyrics: "I'm bored, I'm the Chairman of the Bored, I'm a lengthy monologue, I'm living like a dog, I'm bored." According to music historian Jon Savage, "the entire punk style 'spoke of boredom', became a 'theatrical expression of boredom's prison'" (in Ferrell 2004:289). British alternative pop-rock icon Morissey, sings "The World is Full of Crashing Bores (and I must be one)" (see a YouTube performance of this song at http://ca.youtube.com/watch? v=s2GJXatOiaI).

More often, songs merely refer to boredom, to achieve or describe a mood, such as dejection, as sung by jazz singer Morgana King in "Down in the Depths" (from the album *Simply Eloquent*, 1986): "the one I most adore is bored with me…" In "Black Coffee" Diane Schuur (*In Tribute*, 1992) describes the slowing down of time, common to the experience of boredom: "I walk the floor and watch the door and in between I drink black coffee… I'm talking to the shadows one o'clock 'til four, and lord how slow the moments go when all I do is pour, black coffee…" In one of the funniest and hardest-to-get-out-of-your-head songs, Eartha Kitt sings "Monotonous" (1952/1999), which begins with: "everyone gets into a dull routine, if they don't get a chance to change the scene, I could not be wearier, life could not be drearier if I lived in Siberia…"

Despite the above humourous song lyrics, boredom in the arts tends to have more of a political edge, than boredom in popular culture. Sontag's assertion that there is in fact no such thing as boredom, can be read as a challenge for us to examine what it is, exactly, that causes our frustration. For writers of fiction, boredom is closely associated with the personal angst associated with meaninglessness. But here the struggle is represented in a particular character, or characters, while speaking to the universal human conditions of engagement with social and political life.

No Boredom in Sociology?

Despite the apparent interest articulated in academic literature, popular culture and the arts, it is curious, to say the least, that sociologists have not engaged in much discussion

or study of the concept of boredom[56]. True, we experience boredom as a private, individual experience; we most often describe it as an unpleasant feeling, something to do with our own self. However, as C. Wright Mills (1959) famously pointed out, if only one person is bored (in his example, unemployed), then it is most likely the trouble of that particular individual, but when thousands of people experience boredom, then a sociological analysis is not only appropriate, but requisite. In 1979, sociologist Anton Zijderveld included a 13-page chapter on boredom in his book *On Clichés*. Zijderveld speculated that the reason sociologists had thus far not considered boredom a worthy topic of study, "lies partly in the fact that the general methodological thrust of contemporary sociology prevents most of its experts from seeing and then defining a culturally conditioned phenomenon like boredom as a sociological fact" (1979:75).

While many writers, academics and others, have written melodramatic descriptions and interpretations of boredom, interestingly enough, it is a sociologist who tries to minimize the fuss. Peter Conrad (1997) concludes that, "boredom may be a malaise of modernity, but in the pantheon of human problems it is a relatively minor irritation" (p.474). This is an unfortunately superficial observation that only appears to close a conversation that never really got started.

According to sociologists Darden and Marks (1999:14), "most sociologists have used the term boredom as an undefined primitive or an independent variable, or used it in a commonsense manner, and we have taken its disvalued nature for granted." Oddly, some authors on the subject refer to a sociological literature, but it is not actually extant, at least not as "the sociological study of boredom." For example, Nisbet declared that "there is a history as well as a sociology of boredom" (1982:27) without actually pointing to any particular literature. According to Healy (1984:32), "descriptions, analyses, diagnoses, and prognoses of boredom multiplied with the turn of the century, and from being mainly the preoccupation (and often the condition) of writers and philosophers, it now began to become the professional terrain of the social scientists – sociologists, psychologists, and economists."

[56] A handful of sociologists (Barbalet 1999; Bracke et al. 2006; Brissett and Snow 1993; Conrad 1997; Darden and Marks 1999; Klapp 1986) have published on the topic and I discuss their work in Chapter Four.

In the preface to her historical study of boredom through literature, Spacks (1995) writes that "the narrative [of boredom] comes to a stop if not an end in the present moment, when comic strips and advertisements as well as novels and sociological … treatises… attribute to boredom enormous and essentially unalterable power" (p.ix) and she refers to "sociological investigations" (p.x) as part of the increasing body of academic literature on boredom. Only one of these so-called treatises (Klapp 1986) is referred to, briefly, again.

Boredom, within the social sciences, has largely remained the purview of psychology, in part, at least, because of traditional reasons of disciplinary boundaries: boredom is perceived as a phenomenon affecting individuals, not groups or institutions, the traditional purview of sociology. However, in the 1930s, Alfred Shütz incorporated Husserl's phenomenological philosophy into sociology, beginning with an examination of Weber's use of *verstehen* (Shütz [1932]1967). Husserl's phenomenology, the study of how we consciously make meaning of our life worlds, or *Lebenswelt*, was, for many sociologists, an antidote to the growing epistemological primacy of positivism and its overly deterministic focus on social structure. Sociological studies of "the everyday" while arguably still considered second-class citizens within mainstream sociology, proliferated since Shütz's early work, and at least four have become major texts within the area: Henri Lefebvre's three volume *Critique of Everyday Life* ([1947] 1991), Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*[57] (1984[1980]) and Dorothy Smith's *The Everyday World as Problematic* (1987). Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) is arguably the most influential phenomenological study in the field and at least two generations of sociologists have since had to situate their own work in response to Berger and Luckmann's insistence that "sociology must be carried out in a continuous conversation with both history and philosophy or lose its proper object of inquiry" (p.189). All this to say that the reason boredom remained outside sociological analyses cannot be said to be linked strictly to issues of territory. Phenomenology paved the way

[57] Michel de Certeau was not actually a sociologist (he was educated in psychoanalysis, philosophy and held a PhD in theology); however, *The Practice of Everyday Life* is a sociological analysis that is particularly well-known among sociologists interested in phenomenology and theory.

in sociology, eventually, for studies of the body (Featherstone 1982) and emotions (Hochschild 1983), yet still boredom is little studied.

Instead, what sociologists have written about is not boredom, *per se*, but alienation (Marx), anomie (Durkheim) and disenchantment (Weber), and this is likely the literature to which non-sociologist authors point when they refer to an extant sociology of boredom. All three of these foundational classical theorists were skilled in showing us how these otherwise abstract concepts ineluctably link biography with history (Mills 1959). Since their works formed the classical canon of sociology[58], all sociologists have, in some way or another, had to deal with these important concepts and their concomitant issues. I address these classical sociological concepts and their connection to boredom in more detail in the literature review in Chapter Four. It is the critical focus of sociology that I hope to turn on boredom and, as well as drawing on Walter Benjamin (below), I draw on Herbert Marcuse and other critical thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School, as well as other traditions of critical thinking.

Boredom and Benjamin

Both the intellectual substance and the methods of my dissertation are inspired by the work of Walter Benjamin, particularly his *Arcades Project (Passagenwerk)*(2002[1999]). I discuss this in more detail in the next two chapters, but first, a brief consideration of the relevance of his work is appropriate here.

Benjamin's sensibility as a critical cultural and literary theorist is incisive, erudite and sometimes intellectually eccentric. This combination, in my opinion, gave him the intellectual as well as moral courage to write about what was meaningful to him, to address, critically, *à la* Frankfurt School, the social and political issues of the 19th and early 20th century. The *Arcades Project* is a strange piece of work and both its substance and theory (in this case, apparent lack thereof) have been criticized by Benjamin's peers as well as readers since; however, it remains one of the most intriguing pieces of social criticism of the 20th century. Its late publication into English (1999) introduced it to a North American audience at a time when social theories of the postmodern seemed the

[58] Despite the fact that sociologists like Georg Simmel and Gabriel Tarde also contributed important work, both substantively as well as stylistically, most introductory text books still reproduce the idea that the "Founding Fathers" of sociology are Marx, Durkheim and Weber.

most appropriate moment into which this work would be received. I make no claims that my project is like Benjamin's, for certainly it is not; but there are similarities. I discuss these in more detail in the following chapter, but I think it is important to make the point here that Benjamin's particular aesthetic has long been an inspiration to me and it is with such pleasure that I build my own project, to some extent, in response to the vernacular of his work.

The empirical content of my project is similar to Benjamin's in that I rely on a wide variety of cultural images (i.e., graphic) and imagery (i.e., in the written word) in order to more fully explore my subject of boredom. Referring to Benjamin's *Arcades*, Wolin (1989:213) says that, "thinking in images (instead of concepts) presented itself as an alternative insofar as the sensuousness of the image retained greater affinities with the concrete character of lived experience itself." Because of the somewhat ephemeral qualities of boredom, I chose to use images to support a materialist as well as idealist investigation of boredom.

Like Benjamin, I did not construct the empirical part of this work with any preconceived, positivistic rationale. I chose my cases, as I can only presume Benjamin did, because I found them compelling in some way. Ultimately, Benjamin calls his method in *The Arcades* a "literary montage" and, as I explain in more detail in the next chapter, I call mine a "cultural collage." The images I have here assembled are "about" boredom (though not all in the same way); however, the metaphorical glue of this collage is an admixture of critical theory, juxtaposition and some judiciously applied poetic license. Ultimately, I hope this approach has led to both an intellectually detailed as well as an *interesting* analysis of boredom.

This dissertation is an in-depth exploration of the complexities and textures of the concept of boredom. Surprisingly little has been written about the subject by sociologists and so I hope my work is a contribution in this regard. I problematize boredom as a sociological concept and investigate its many contours through particular cultural images from the 20th and these first few years of the 21st century. I combine a traditional approach to a literature review, with a historical component *vis-à-vis* an historical, etiological consideration of the origins and development of the concept boredom.

Together, with this introduction, these chapters form the foundation for my substantive empirical and further theoretical considerations.

Chapter Outline

The aims of this introductory chapter were threefold. First, by way of introduction, I wanted to draw attention to the broad scope, and amount, of various literatures that address the subject of boredom. Secondly, I asked why sociology has not addressed the subject, other than in a few scant articles. The third aim was to begin to attempt to situate the subject of boredom sociologically, although this remains the focus of the rest of the dissertation.

Chapter Two is a discussion of my methodology and methods, where "methodology" refers to the philosophical assumptions and strategies I employ as part of my empirical data gathering and analysis. This dissertation is a theoretical and empirical, qualitative analysis of boredom. Inspired by Benjamin's literary montage, the empirical focus of this project is a cultural collage of images about boredom in the tradition of Simmel's and Adorno's cultural sociology.

In Chapter Three I provide an etiological and social-philosophical history of boredom from a speculative connection to the fourth century (though not then as the actual word "boredom"), to its use in contemporary North American culture. Specifically, I consider the writings of philosophers from the 17th to the 21st centuries, on the subject of boredom.

Chapter Four is a detailed review of the academic literature in psychology, psychoanalysis and sociology, specifically addressing boredom.

In Chapter Five I present and analyze my empirical cases. These are 11 cases of boredom from a variety of sources, including urban billboards, advertising websites, art installations, poetry, fiction and music lyrics. Each of these cases represents a fragment of my cultural collage, and all 11 cases, or storeys as I call them, together structure the empirical focus of this dissertation.

Chapter Six concludes my dissertation with a note on my methods, strengths and the limitations of the research, as well as speculation regarding future research.

Traditionally, a literature review follows the introduction; however, for two reasons I am not proceeding this way. First, as I have discussed in detail in this chapter, there is not much of an extant literature of boredom in sociology upon which to draw. Secondly, as I explain in detail in the following methods chapter, the literature review that I do present in Chapter Four is part of my methods; that is, the literatures that I combine for this review are intended as an integral part of my methodology. I present a chapter on the etiological and philosophical history of boredom, followed by a more traditional literature review, in order to help ground the empirical chapter that follows – the cultural collage.

It may seem strange to begin a dissertation with the observation that sociology has inexplicably remained relatively quiet on this subject, and then follow up this observation with more than 100 pages of literature review, much of which is from sociology, or is at least sociologically focused. I should therefore take pains to point out here that, particularly in the case of the sociology literature review, what I provide is not so much a summary of selected, key, recent and canonical literature on the topic; rather, it is more accurately an attempt at a comprehensive, inclusive catalogue of the extant literature in sociology on the subject of boredom. Of course I hesitate to suggest this literature is a complete (i.e., exhaustive) list, but I am confident that not much escaped my search. Because part of the purpose of my project is to bring boredom into sociology, this type of extensive review was necessary and is thus an important contribution of this project.

Chapter Two
Methodological Approach and Methods for a Sociological Study of Boredom

> Unlike inductive logic which ascends from the individual to the universal slowly through intermediate steps, aesthetic comprehension bridges this gap immediately, by a sudden leap.
> ~ Davis (1973:327)

Introduction

The ubiquitous nature and ineffable qualities of boredom present challenges for an empirical sociological study of boredom. This is not to say that other subjects are less complex and thus more easily studied; rather, the existential element of the experience of boredom suggests a metaphysical component (e.g., issues of time and being) that is not the usual stuff of sociology[59].

In his meticulous attempt to describe a phenomenology of boredom, Heidegger suggests that the phenomenon is almost impossible to study because to get inside boredom, to really wrestle with it in an attempt to wrest meaning *from* it, it would seem that we would first have to know how to stop time. Once inside stopped time, we would, presumably, encounter the experience of boredom, study it, and then restart time. However, once inside stopped time, it would not be possible, by definition, to actually study boredom, as this attempt at a study would in itself remove us from boredom. Heidegger explains (with an almost audible sigh of frustration) that, "in that case we do not have a pure, isolated action of boredom, but our reaction against it, the reaction and that which it reacts against, not one lived experience, but two which are coupled together. It does indeed seem like this, and yet things are otherwise" (1995:91). In a sense, what we see when we try to stare at boredom, or when we put it under the metaphorical microscope, is naught but a para-reflection; something that is (we hope) related to boredom, but not necessarily an accurate representation. Boredom, in this way, "precludes its own intelligibility" (Bigelow 1983:256).

Philosophically speaking, "to be engaged in articulating [boredom's] structure is to have already annulled it; but this is… something that comes on after the scene, like a

[59] See Edward A. Tiryakian's review and discussion of existential sociology and the contributions of phenomenology in *American Sociological Review* (1965).

coroner outlining a corpse – while boredom remains intractably behind the scenes" (Bigelow 1983:253). We do not necessarily study boredom, itself; rather, we study what produces boredom and what boredom produces. Because boredom is experienced as a state of restlessness, an absence of interest and meaning, beyond this "fact," can we only study boredom's epiphenomena? Indeed, is boredom itself an epiphenomenon?[60]

An examination of boredom needs to address concomitant issues of time and meaning. Such an endeavour could quickly become unmanageable as the literature in philosophy and history also beckon and demand close scrutiny. In order to ground this project empirically, thereby circumscribing what could easily become an unwieldy socio-philosophical treatise, it is necessary to choose empirical examples and an analytical focus that is ultimately productive, and critical in focus.

Before I turn to a discussion of the empirical cases in my dissertation, I will start with a comment on the overall approach I am taking to this project, to help put in perspective the various components that follow. I then discuss Benjamin's method of literary montage and my own method of cultural collage. I address Adorno's critique of Benjamin's project and how my own project speaks to these weaknesses. Finally, I turn to the empirical cases themselves – why and how I chose them, and the process of engaging with them in my analysis.

Lyrical Sociology

When I read Andrew Abbott's (2007) article on lyrical sociology, my perspective did not so much shift, as re-align itself with what I can only assume were my original hopes, if not actual, conscious intentions, for this project. Abbott frames his argument for lyrical sociology, "against narrative"[61] (2007:67), but here I will confine my discussion to what he means by *lyrical sociology*. According to Abbott, the *lyrical impulse* describes the stance of the writer toward the focus of her interest, but also her readers. Abbott describes this stance as *engaged* and emotional, an "intense participation" (p.74) in the research

[60] Even Heidegger appears to be somewhat bemused by his subject and his own attempts to unravel and understand it. After almost 15 pages of the topic, he states, "Yet have we advanced even a single step with all these discussions? Not at all! On the contrary, now everything really has become confused" (1995:87). Fifteen pages later, he says, apparently sarcastically, "A boring thing is one that belongs to a boring situation. What an exemplary explanation!" (p.102).

[61] By narrative sociology, Abbott is referring to sequential, causal arguments, often told in story fashion, "recounting, explaining, comprehending" (2007:73).

that the researcher wants to communicate to her readers. Importantly, this engagement should not be ironic; that is, the researcher should not hold herself outside of the situation. As well as being engaged, *location* (particular place and time) is key for the lyrical stance. According to Abbott, "the lyrical writer is acutely conscious of his or her self not just as author but as the person whose emotional experience of a social world is at the heart of his or her writing" (p.74). As well as engagement and personal location, *time* is an important component of the lyrical stance, because "the lyrical is momentary. This above all is what makes it non-narrative. It is not about something happening. It is not about an outcome. It is about something that is, a state of being" (p.75). For my work on boredom, clearly this approach to time and being are highly relevant to the metaphysical aspects of my subject. Boredom is, among other things, an experience of time (time stopped, time dragging, etc.) and, as I discussed in Chapter One, it is most often considered to be a state of being (rather than an emotion or a mental affliction such as depression).

As well as *stance* (engagement, location, time), Abbott argues that *mechanics* help to explain lyrical sociology (and thus differentiate it from narrative sociology). Where a narrative account describes an event and then tries to explain it, "a lyrical writer aims to tell us of his or her intense reaction to some portion of the social process seen in a moment" (p.76). Most significantly, for its relevance to my project, Abbott stresses the difference between story (narrative) and image (lyrical). Where the narrative story is an attempt to order a sequence of events, or variables, "by contrast, lyrical writing centers on an image or images" (p.76). Abbott does not necessarily mean graphic images; rather, he means the images that this kind of thinking and writing evoke in the reader, something which provokes further response. The empirical examples I present in Chapter Five are images, both graphically and literally constructed; I focus on each of these images to discuss the characteristics, practical implications and theoretical applications of boredom.

For Walter Benjamin's work (below I elaborate on how my own work relates to his *Arcades Project*), "narrative continuity was [for him] the flaw that doomed traditional history writing to a tacit complicity with the ideology of the ruling class" (Jennings 1987:29). According to Benjamin, "history breaks down into images, not into stories" (2002, N11).

Ultimately, Abbott argues that this lyrical impulse is neither qualitative nor quantitative alone, but informs both, and that, "the lyrical moment is ultimately in the service of (larger) narrative" (p.87). Again, this serves my purpose for this project. Because boredom is seldom discussed in the sociological literature, it would be misguided, to say the least, to offer this dissertation as a summary narrative of "The Sociology of Boredom." Instead, I hope that the detail of my work in the individual lyrical moments (i.e., my empirical cases) is, as Abbott suggests, in the service of the larger narrative. I cannot say that I am attempting to undermine ideas of structure; however, there is a dearth of sociological literature on boredom and so it does not seem appropriate to offer a traditionally structured, normative, closed narrative. Instead, I want to open up what it is we might know about boredom, begin to consider ways we could think about it.

There is, however, one significant departure from this lyrical approach in my project. Chapters Three and Four are historically constructed and narrative in their description of apparent sequences of events. In Chapter Three, I trace the etiological history and then philosophical treatment of boredom, a discussion that reaches back to the fourth century. In Chapter Four, I provide a largely chronological analysis of the psychology, psychoanalytic and sociology literature on the subject, from the 20th century. As I will explain further, below, my traditional historical narratives are a necessary response to criticisms made of the method of empirical enquiry that I bring to bear on the cases in Chapter Five.

I turn now, from this discussion of my overall approach to the empirical core of this project, to a discussion of Walter Benjamin's method of literary montage in his *Arcades Project* (*Passagenwerk*). Benjamin's literary montage both inspires and informs my own methods to explore boredom: a cultural collage of images.

Benjamin's Literary Montage: Show, Don't Tell

Walter Benjamin, the historian and philosopher associated with the *Institut für Sozialforschung* in Berlin in the 1920s and '30s[62], proposed the method of literary

[62] In his interesting article on the origin myths of the Frankfurt School, Neil McLaughlin points out that "Benjamin never did formally join as a full-time faculty member and was never part of Horkheimer's inner circle" (1999:112).

montage in response to his critique of the idea of linear, historical progress (Benjamin 2002:460). In his monumental work on the bourgeois shopping arcades of mid 19th century Paris, *Passagenwerk* (2002), Benjamin rejected the pedagogy of a chronological, linear history, compelled to inscribe a teleological ideal of progress. According to Radnóti, "for Benjamin the continuum of history is a homogeneous scandal from which one must be redeemed" (1989:130). He actively resisted narrative coherence (Jennings 1987:24). Instead, Benjamin chose to "demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress…Its founding concept is not progress but actualization" (2002:460). To describe his method of literary montage, Benjamin writes, "I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations" (2002:460).

Benjamin's literary montage includes sources from an apparently uncircumscribed universe of "data," including what would now be judged an over-reliance on citations. But this too is part of Benjamin's project, which also includes what appear to be flashes of insight, similar to a Joycean epiphany ("In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows"[63]); observations ("Asphalt was first used for sidewalks"[64]); aphorisms ("Isn't there a certain structure of money that can be recognized only in fate, and a certain structure of fate that can be recognized only in money?"[65]); poetic one-liners ("There is a peculiar voluptuousness in the naming of streets"[66]); diary-like entries and long quotations from contemporary or historical political and cultural figures. The work itself is divided, mainly, into what has been translated into "Convolutes" [*Konvolute*] though its meaning is akin to "sheafs" or "files" of information (Buck-Morss 1989). These Konvoluts vary in length, from the 10-page Konvoluts on "Modes of Lighting" (T) and "The Collector" (H), to the 160-page section devoted to 19th century French poet and critic, Charles Baudelaire (J). Some of the other 26, alphabetically-arranged main Konvoluts (there are an additional 23, small a-w Konvoluts) are dedicated to such wide ranging subjects as fashion (B), iron construction (F), the flâneur (M),

[63] Benjamin 2002;N1,1 p.456.
[64] Ibid, M5, 9, p.427.
[65] Ibid, O3,6, p.496.
[66] Ibid, P1,8, p.517.

prostitution and gambling (O), photography (Y) and automated dolls (Z). These juxtaposed entries (for much of *Passagenwerk* does read like the diary of an intellectual curator, a collector of ideas and wisdom[67]) are not mere haphazard renderings; rather, they are interrelated ideas in what Benjamin refers to as a *Konstellation*.

Each of the Konvoluts circles, if not centers, around the iron and glass enclosed Paris shopping arcades and Benjamin's project to critique the post-industrial, spectacular consumer moment of modernity that was the 19th century. This singular focus anchors his project and gives him the latitude to examine seemingly disparate and unrelated ideas in an unbounded constellation; indeed, Benjamin is limited only by his own creativity and critical insight, and not the constraints of a more traditional method. However, *Passagenwerk* is commonly, if sometimes affectionately, referred to as a "monumental ruin" (Sieburth 1989:13), "a torso" (Wolin 1989:210) and even "a book that was never written" (Buck-Morss 1989:ix). Sussman goes so far as to say that "its aggressive repudiation of any prior known or recognized genre qualifies it to be the literary counterpart of an exile" (2003:169)[68]. Indeed, Benjamin's unorthodox methods of historical analysis lead to the University of Frankfurt's refusal to accept his *Habilitation* (titled *On the Origins of German Tragic Drama*). However, more recently, architect Teresa Stoppani (2007) argues that:

> it is not the unfinished nature of [*Passagenwerk*] that triggers continuations and developments by other voices, but its very structure, made up as it is by juxtaposed and cross-referencing quotations and fragments and, most importantly, by the potentially endlessly expandable and often undefined space in-between them, the connective tissue or the hiatuses that produce a space of speculation. (p.543)

It is this space of speculation into which I insert my own project, drawing inspiration from Benjamin's work, and, I hope, adding something meaningful to the project he started. It is important to underscore that my own project is not an exploration or exegesis of *Passagenwerk* itself; that project has been ably done by others (e.g., Buck-Morss 1989;

[67] Benjamin "had a simple predisposition for the tiny and the inconsequential," something Ernest Bloch called a "micrological sense" (Jennings 1987:25).
[68] Sussman also says that *The Arcades Project* "is Benjamin's Talmud, disguised as a text-medium Web site of nineteenth-century Paris… [It] illuminates the tectonic forces by which texts in general, exemplified by the Talmud and its typographical counterparts, organize themselves into registers of composition, reference, meaning, and misunderstanding" (2003:176); and later, "The Arcades Project, in a particular sense, is a translation of the Talmud" (p.178).

Jennings 1987), and will likely continue for many years given the open nature of Benjamin's text. Instead, my project is inspired by Benjamin's approach which so closely links method and substance. While my methodology is inspired by Benjamin's own, substantively I also draw on his Konvolut D ("Boredom, Eternal Return"), particularly in Chapter Four.

Dialectical Images

In his method of literary montage, Benjamin uses what he calls dialectical images. Indeed, "the dialectical image is the methodological cornerstone of the Arcades Project" (Wolin 1989:213). Auerbach (2007) writes that *Passagenwerk* is itself "an elaborately woven net designed to catch a dialectical image." Benjamin believed that historical materialism had become a bourgeois project, with its accumulation of historical "facts" that attempt to tell a story of "progress." In response to this, his idea of the dialectical image supplanted the notion of epistemological concepts and by extension eliminated, as he saw it, the need for a (presumably bourgeois) interpretation. Benjamin believed in "truth," that it existed in noumenal form. The dialectical image is an image that, according to Benjamin, is seen in a sudden flash of insight; the past is merged with, and fuses together with the *now* in a dialectical tension that reveals truth. In Benjamin's words, from *Passagenwerk*:

> image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash, with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. — Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic)… Only dialectical images are genuinely historical (that is, not archaic) – images. The image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded. (2002:462-463)

His use of dialectical images was his strategy of presenting (not discovering) truth, in what he considered to be an unmediated and, therefore, uncontaminated form. In other words, for Benjamin, "the past is never there waiting to be discovered, to be recognized for exactly what it is. History always constitutes the relation between a present and its past" (Berger 1977:11).

It is not Benjamin's intention that the dialectical synthesis of the two images (then/now) results in an altogether new image; rather, the image from the past is redeemed through its crystallization in the moment with the now. This is not a transition (in a Marxist materialist sense), but a *transcendence*: in a flash, the image from the past is redeemed by being taken up in the dialectical image. In a sense, we could say it is rescued from history, even restored. According to Buck-Morss, these images are "a way of seeing that crystallizes antithetical elements by providing the axes for their alignment . . . the 'synthesis' of which is not a movement towards resolution, but the point at which their axes intersect" (1989:210). The dialectical image, then, is Benjamin's ontological strategy for investigating, while at the same time rehabilitating history from the "'once upon a time' of classical historiography. The history that showed things 'as they really were' was the strongest narcotic of the century" (Benjamin 2002:462).

However, Benjamin's concept is not necessarily clearly explained nor adequately theorized, as Auerbach (2007) notes:

> Maybe there is no such thing as a dialectical image. Despite the insistence of Benjamin's claims, it is not at all clear whether such an image belongs to material or to virtual reality; whether it is something more like a picture or a perception. Nor is it obvious how we should distinguish the hypothetical dialectical image from figures of speech such as metaphor, or from literary forms such as the Denkbild (thought-image) upon which Benjamin modelled his writing.

For my own purposes, Haverkamp's (1992) attempt[69] at a definition is particularly relevant:

> The dialectical image is a text and depends on all its 'dialectical' as well as 'schematic' qualifications on the readability of texts, even if those texts eventually come as pictures. They resemble pictures, since they are framed and logically structured; but they are text, because they can be indefinitely reframed and restructured. (p.74)

Ernst Bloch suggested to Benjamin that his dialectical image was "history flashing its Scotland Yard badge"[70] (2002:462). I find this amusing analogy to be one of the more helpful definitions of dialectical image: that it is an image that at once recognizes the past

[69] I mean this without sarcasm; numerous scholars have struggled with Benjamin's concept of dialectical image and the resultant books and journal articles have, in my opinion, served to deepen the theoretical potential of this concept.
[70] This in itself presents an interesting dialectical image!

that leads to this present, shines a light on this history, and critiques its still-presence in the current image.

In his thesis for his Habilitation, *On The Origins of German Tragedy*, Benjamin was interested in allegory and allegorical images of the Baroque period; however, for Benjamin, the allegorical image held no possibility of redemption, whereas the dialectical image does hold the possibility of redemption. According to Goldstein (1998:184-185), "whereas allegorical images are theological but unable to be redeemed, dialectical images are sociological but redemptive. The dialectical image is a dialectical secularization of the allegory."

The most powerful example of this is the dialectical image of the prostitute. She sells her body and her self, to survive, and in so doing she becomes a commodity. In Konvolut O, Benjamin writes that prostitution "is regarded less as the opposite than as the decline of love" (p.493) and it is this decline that "fuses… with the very same aspect in the decline of the arcades" (p.494). The image of the prostitute becomes the symbol for both commodity fetishism and the catastrophe of history that so interested Benjamin. According to Buck-Morss (1989):

> Whereas every trace of the wage laborer who produced the commodity is extinguished when it is torn out of context by its exhibition on display, in the prostitute, both moments remain visible. As a dialectical image, she 'synthesizes' the form of the commodity and its content: she is 'commodity and seller in one'. (p.185)

While I have modelled my project on Benjamin's Arcades, my own work is in no way constructed as an attempt to replicate Benjamin's style or substance. Instead, I draw on his work for inspiration, to help inform a non-traditional sociological approach to my subject. Although I do rely on images and imagery for my empirical cases, they were not necessarily chosen for their dialectical content. As well, my project is not about the images themselves, but about what they can lead us to think about boredom. While some of the images in this dissertation may be considered to have at least dialectical properties, the images are just the beginning of my investigations, the inspiration for my analyses. Benjamin and I differ on one important point. Where he says that the world breaks down into images (not stories), I would argue that the world breaks down into images that then require stories.

Adorno's Critique

Benjamin's friend and colleague, Theodor Adorno, criticized the method of literary montage in *Passagenwerk,* arguing that the presentation of dialectical images alone is not sufficient and requires an accompanying dialectical argument to critically interpret the images (in Buck-Morss 1989:73). Benjamin's "I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations" (2002:460) is exactly what Adorno critiques[71] when he says of Benjamin's method that "motifs are assembled but they are not elaborated"; that is, there is no attempt at theory, to mediate between the images and possible receptions:

> The mediation which I miss, and find obscured by materialistic-historical evocation, is simply the theory which your study has omitted… the theological motif of calling things by their names tends to switch into the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts… one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. The spot is bewitched. Only theory could break this spell—your own resolute and salutarily speculative theory. It is simply the claim of this theory that I bring against you here. (Adorno, in Helmling 2003:22)

Adorno understood that Benjamin's project was based, philosophically as well as methodologically, on fragments, the juxtaposition of these images. However, his "relentless critique" (Auerbach 2007) judged the results a failure: "The motifs are collected, but not carried through… Let me express myself here in as simple and Hegelian a manner as possible. If I am not very mistaken, then this dialectic is in need of one thing: mediation" (in Jennings 1987:30).

Benjamin explains that his approach is an expression of "a feeling of vertigo characteristic of the nineteenth century's conception of history. It corresponds to a viewpoint according to which the course of the world is an endless series of facts congealed in the form of things" (p.14). But Adorno believed that the real work of a critic is to liquefy again what has congealed over time: "The thought movement that congealed in them must be reliquified, its validity traced, so to speak, in repetition" (1990[1966]:97). Benjamin's method of literary montage, where he appears to let his

[71] From Adorno's correspondence with Benjamin, specifically about the Konvolut on poet Charles Baudelaire.

dialectical images speak for themselves, runs the risk of "literary impressionism" (Jennings 1987) although, at the same time, "a great deal of Benjamin's appeal does lie in his sense for the appropriate detail and the startling juxtaposition" (p.41).

To address these critiques of Benjamin's methods, in my own work, I make three changes, one perhaps subtle, though I think important, the other two more dramatically transgressive of Benjamin's anti-linear approach to cultural history. I turn now to a discussion of these changes that comprise my own methods for this project: cultural collage, historical and systematic literature reviews, and critical analyses.

Cultural Collage of Boredom

Benjamin's montage of images and quotations in *Passagenwerk*, reflected his involvement in the Surrealist movement of the 1920s (Jennings 1987) when the use of montage in both film (e.g., Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein) and painting became popular. There was a certain kind of shock value inherent in these apparently oddly-grouped images, a concentration of information that was intended to jolt the observer out of her complacency and assumptions. The current Canadian Oxford English Dictionary (OED) definition of montage is:

> 1. Film a. a combination of images in quick succession to compress background information or provide atmosphere. b. a system of editing in which the narrative is modified or interrupted to include images that are not necessarily related to the dramatic development. 2a. the technique of producing a new composite whole from fragments of pictures, words, music etc.

My method is instead a *collage*, which, although similar in meaning to montage, and also dating from the early 20th century (where it was associated with the Dada art and cultural movement), differs in one important way. According to the OED, a collage is:

> a form of art in which various materials (e.g. photographs, pieces of paper or cloth) are arranged and assembled or glued to a backing 2. a literary, musical or cinematic work involving the juxtaposition of several genres or elements 3. a collection of unrelated things

Both montage and collage are aesthetic attempts to create a new whole from a variety of fragments; however, the collage lacks a certain dramatic performativity inherent in montage. There is an element, or essence, of speed, which the montage requires, particularly for its shock value. Collage, on the other hand, does not (necessarily) induce

visual panic. Instead, its fragments are presented at the same time and in the same space as one another, that is, not sequentially, one after the other, as in a film montage. Archaeologist Michael Shanks suggests that collage "is an extension of an artist's pallet or a writer's vocabulary… it is direct quotation, literal repetition or citation of something taken out of its context and placed in another," whereas montage "is the cutting and reassembling of these fragments of meanings, images, things, quotations, borrowings, to create new juxtapositions" (1922:188). Collage, I argue, demands a more thoughtful and considered response, whereas the aesthetic impulse of montage can, purposefully, become its own end. According to Buck-Morss (1989):

> When Benjamin praised montage as progressive because it 'interrupts the context into which it is inserted' he was referring to its destructive, critical dimension (the only one that Adorno's observations recognize). But the task of the Arcades project was to implement as well the constructive dimension of montage, as the only form in which modern philosophy could be erected. (p.77)

My intentions with my project are more modest and I assume an exploratory approach, while maintaining a critical focus. Thus, unlike Benjamin, I am not looking to interrupt a context by introducing a destructive dimension; rather, I examine a phenomenon with a sociological eye to first describe and then attempt a critical analysis. The elements in my collage are more accurately described as cultural, rather than literary; while I take my approach from Benjamin's idea of the literary montage, the presentation of my work is more suitably described as a *cultural collage*.

The term collage is closely related to the term *assemblage* (Marcus and Saka 2006:102) used by Deleuze and Guattari. Assemblage refers to a "

> describable product of emergent social conditions, a configuration of relationships among diverse sites and things… Assemblage thus seems structural, an object with the materiality and stability of the classic metaphors of structure, but the intent in its aesthetic uses is precisely to undermine such ideas of structure. (Marcus and Saka 2006:102).

Similarly, the images in my collage are structured both in terms of the order of their presentation (that is, their relationship to the previous and following collage image), but also in terms of the structure within the presentation of each image (description, analysis, speculation). I chose the specific images because they are compelling cases and serve to highlight various aspects of the subject of boredom.

I find both the image of the collage, and the actual collage itself (in my case, a cultural collage) powerful metaphorically and productive heuristically. Like the use of the term assemblage, "its [use] here and there is actually keenly symptomatic of one of the major, if not the major, thrust of critical social and cultural theory toward the emphasis on the modernist focusing of attention on the always-emergent conditions of the present" (Marcus and Saka 2006:101-102). It is particularly useful to me in exploring a subject that has seldom been explored in sociology and whose content is not immediately apparently "sociological." Specifically, it seems intuitively appropriate that the examination of a subject like boredom, with its existential and ineffable dimensions, could benefit from the use of images. According to Cooetzee and Wood (2007), this type of fragmentary method provides:

> an overall account, from micro-details, reflecting all the richness of social existence, even if it encompasses a number of competing sub-dimensions. As such it is particularly appropriate both to gaining understandings of the interconnectedness of seemingly insignificant everyday phenomena, and as the basis for the deployment of open-ended tools of qualitative enquiry. (p.137)

Use of Images: a Visual Sociology of Boredom?

The images that form my cultural collage are both graphic, visual images (e.g., advertisements, signs) and the imagery evoked through the spoken and written word. I treat them all as images that can be analyzed as social texts[72] (Brown 1987). That is, I do not make distinctions between the visual and the mental image for the purposes of analysis. I include representations of the graphic images, as well as the actual words that evoke the mental images, in Chapter Five.

Although I use images in this dissertation, I do not make any claims that my work fits within the sub-field of visual sociology. Many visual sociologists are also photographers, or were once photographers, and blend their skills in photography with their work as social scientists (Becker 2007). I do not claim any particular expertise nor anything more than an amateur knowledge of how to use my own camera; the photographs I took, presented in Chapter Five, were taken to capture[73] particular images

[72] Benjamin had a "remarkable ability to read cultural objects as texts" (Jennings:1987:18) and it is his example that inspires my own, more modest attempt.

[73] I mean this quite literally as the actual things I took pictures of were eventually removed – the large advertising poster and the billboard were eventually taken down and replaced with other images.

so that I might use them for my analysis. Of course, as a sociologist, as well as someone with a general interest in photography, painting and writing, my personal sensibility, or habitus (Bourdieu 1984[74]) is such that I find particular images more compelling than others and I am, therefore, predisposed to taking a photograph from a certain angle, including its wider context, or not, etc. In this sense, the photographs are not completely naïve representations. As Immanuel Wallerstein wrote about social scientists in general, and sociologists in particular, at the turn of this century (2000):

> We are products of our social biographies, and our thought processes are framed by these biographies. We can make efforts to become conscious of the ways in which our biographies have determined our thinking, and we can make efforts to disclose these constraints to our readers, whenever it would not be obvious. But we cannot dispense with our values. They constitute our personality and inform our scientific ethos. (p.308)

Howard S. Becker points out that, "the social sciences have lagged behind the natural sciences in the use of visual materials. For a long time, sociologists viewed visual imagery as the mark of a reformist perspective that, they were taught, was not 'real science'"[75] (2000:333). This perception persists:

> It is as though using photographs and films in a research report constituted pandering to the low tastes of the public or tying to persuade readers to accept shaky conclusions by using illegitimate 'rhetorical' means (a version of the accusation of being 'insidious'). Using visual materials seems 'unscientific,' probably because 'science' in sociology came to be defined as objective and neutral, just the opposite of the crusading spirit that animated the early muckraking work, itself generally tied to photography. The definition of visual materials as unscientific is odd, since the natural sciences routinely use visual material as evidence. Contemporary biology, physics, and astronomy are unthinkable without photographic evidence. (Becker 2007:191)

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[74] Bourdieu's disaggregation of the dimensions of taste and his analysis of how they contribute to social reproduction, established the connection between economic and social conditions and their effects on taste and lifestyles. Significantly, Bourdieu (1984) argued that tastes are socially structured. Most work in this area, since, is, arguably, a response to Bourdieu, whether as critique or extension of his theorizing. Bourdieu's insight, that class structures taste, was decisive in shaping subsequent sociological research in culture.

[75] More grandly, Becker asserts that :

> one of the marks of an advanced science is the use of photographic and cinematic methods of recording and analyzing data. I don't say that to be cute. It's obvious. Astronomers, for instance, work by making photographs of the sky. Nuclear physicists photograph the collisions that take place in particle accelerators and inspect those images for traces of the unusual events that give them clues to the structure of elementary particles. Biologists rely on photographs made through the electron microscope for their data and evidence. (2000:333)

My decision to use images in this work is not the result of a particular affinity with the sub-field of visual sociology; it is more the result of a conflation of two ideas, one substantive, the other methodological. Substantively, the subject of boredom presents challenges as a focus of analysis because of the very nature of the experience: boredom, or being bored, is about, among other things, experiencing absence (of interest, of meaning, of desire), and becoming unusually vigilant about the passage of time. I could have conducted interviews with people in various occupations, or in various stages of life, etc., and asked them about their experiences of boredom. I could also have analyzed documents about boredom, in, for example, private diaries from different eras. Either one, or both of these, would no doubt prove fruitful; however, I wanted to find a way to reach beyond our everyday thinking of boredom, while still keeping with everyday boredom as a focus of analysis. For example, I did not want to ask people specifically about their experiences and ideas about boredom because I wanted to avoid the circumstances where intelligent research participants feel obliged to consider an otherwise mundane experience in light of a university researcher's presumed agenda. This is something more serious, in many ways, than the Hawthorne Effect, for qualitative researchers. I argue, based partly on experience, that this can lead to a stunting of the researcher's thinking. For example, when a particularly articulate participant's words are recorded, and noted, sometimes the temptation for the qualitative researcher is to believe that she or he has made an important discovery amongst the "data" (i.e., the dozens or hundreds of pages of transcription). The researcher experiences a moment of "aha," either because she has just read something that confirms an existing belief, or strongly held suspicion, or because she has read something that she thinks she can use to validate the exploration of another angle or "category." Given that boredom has rarely been the focus of sociological analysis, I wanted to explore the subject with as few intellectual constraints as possible[76].

As well as substantive considerations, the second reason I chose to use images in this research is methodological. My concerns, as described above, led me to consider alternative approaches to studying boredom. Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, although

[76] Of course, this dissertation research was restricted by institutional and financial resources which also limit empirical data gathering and analysis.

problematic in some ways, provided me with both the inspiration and example of how I might begin to construct a sociological analysis of boredom. At the centre of Benjamin's analysis is the physical structure of the Paris arcades which is something quite different from the subjective experience of boredom that I present here; however, the use of imagery, both pictorial and descriptive, serves to ground my analysis in everyday empirical experiences.

As I have detailed in my introductory chapter, there is little written, sociologically, about the subject of boredom itself. However, the few academic books that do tackle this enigmatic subject lean heavily on examples from literary fiction, both historical and contemporary (e.g., Goodstein 2005; Healy 1984; Lepenies 1992; Spacks 1995; Svendsen 2005). It would seem that the treatment of an existential subject (or a subject that has a significant existential dimension) requires consideration through the more prismatic lens of art; in this sense, my own work using images to explore boredom, both fits well with the existing genre, as it stands, and also contributes another methodological, and hopefully substantive, perspective. We cannot talk about boredom without also talking about meaning, unlike information, which "is ideally communicated as a binary code…[whereas] meaning is communicated more symbolically" (Svendsen 2005:29). It is my intention to use images for my analysis in order to more fully explore the issues of meaning.

Responses to Adorno's Critique

Adorno's main critique of Benjamin's *Arcades* project was that it was not critically nor theoretically grounded. Benjamin says that his literary montage speaks for itself and does not require further analytical comment. He does not address the issue that the choice to include (and thereby also exclude) images for his montage is already a kind of analysis and interpretation. So too is the juxtapositional motif of the montage itself, literally, in terms of which pieces are placed adjacent to one another. I side with Adorno on this: images do not speak for themselves, and a picture may in fact *require* a thousand words. In response, I provide comprehensive historical and academic literature reviews to form the foundation for a critical analysis of each of my empirical cases.

(1) Systematic, Reflexive Literature Reviews

My project differs from Benjamin's in that the central focus of my research is not an empirical thing, but a concept, an experience[77]. Although boredom *can* be described and defined, it has the distinct character of being ultimately inexplicable; both the concept and the experience remain enigmatic. Thus, to provide an anchor for my own exploratory study, this dissertation begins with a thorough and systematic review of the academic literature on boredom, beginning with a traditional historical approach to the etiological, philosophical and social roots of boredom. This review is not limited to sociological monographs or even to academic sources, although these comprise the bulk of the review. My purpose in beginning with a traditional literature review, in a project that is in other ways somewhat nontraditional, is to strengthen the collage approach by grounding it in a multi-layered and historical context. In his consideration of "where sociologists should be heading," Immanuel Wallerstein (2000:307) asserts that:

> We cannot do our work well unless we are conscious that whatever we are studying is imbued with its historical path, legacy, and context; therefore, one can never eliminate this past from its analysis. But it is also true that any description of these particulars presumes choices based on theoretical premises. Nor should the tasks (historical recounting, theoretical analyzing) ever be divided between two separate scholars; rather, all scholars ought to fuse the tasks consciously and constantly.

The exploratory[78] nature of this project is, I hope, supported and strengthened by this foundation, although I run the risk of constructing a historical boredom that appears to reproduce enlightenment as well as modern progressive forces. Bearing in mind this potential weakness, the literature review provides at least a working schema from which to approach my empirical inquiries. Substantively, it is a contribution to a lacuna in the sociological literature.

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[77] This is not to say that Benjamin only focuses on the empirical reality of the Arcades, because of course he uses the arcades to explore bourgeois capitalist ideals in 19th century Europe.

[78] By *exploratory* I mean specifically that: (1) there is little sociological literature about boredom and so I am exploring it without the usual ballast of extant discussion and analysis, and (2) the method of analyzing cultural images has not been used in the study of boredom. It seems to me that often the phrase "exploratory research" is used loosely by qualitative researchers to hide what we might legitimately critique as a lack of methodological consideration appropriate to their research.

(2) Discussion and Critical Analysis of Empirical Cases

Benjamin writes about his literary montage that he "needn't say anything. Merely show" (2002:460). I have neither his confidence nor the time and resources it took him to work on what ultimately became a 1,000 page book[79]. Instead, I provide detailed discussion and critical analysis for each of my cases. I draw on a variety of thinkers and theories for these analyses and ultimately bring them to bear on my attempt at a sociological analysis of boredom. I hope this method would not garner the critique from Benjamin that I have cavalierly appropriated "ingenious formulations" (2002:460). Instead, I mean to address Adorno's critique that dialectical images do not speak for themselves. Novelists and short story writers are advised to "show, don't tell" in their writing. Certainly Benjamin's use of this technique makes *Passagenwerk* a compelling and intriguing read; however, for my own project, I can neither provide the sheer number of images that Benjamin managed to collect over the years, nor trust that such a nascent study of boredom could adequately address the sociologically and otherwise relevant issues.

Critical Theory, first proposed by Horkheimer and thus linked to the Frankfurt School, was unlike traditional theory in that critical theory:

> assumes that both science and the reality it studies are a product of social praxis, which means that the subject and the object of cognition are *socially preformed*. The object is not just there in front of us, waiting to be apprehended, nor is the subject a simple recorder of reality. Both subject and object are the result of very complex social processes, and therefore the main task of Critical Theory is to reflect upon the structures from which social reality and the theories that seek to explain it, including of course, Critical Theory itself, are constructed. (Castro-Gómez 2001:139)

Critical Theory was thus a response to traditional positivism's objective stance and the division of labour which kept firm the boundaries between disciplines. Instead, Critical Theory involves not just sociology, but also philosophy, history, and literature. According to Horkheimer, the work of the critical theorist "'is the struggle, to which his thinking belongs.' Critical theory is 'one single elaborate existential judgment'" (in Therborn 1996:63). This judgment was largely based on Marx's concept of exchange from which sprung his indictment of capitalism. Although "the umbilical cord to the

[79] Benjamin worked on *Passagenwerk* for at least 13 years and as it was not completed before he died in 1940, it was not published in his lifetime. It was kept hidden in the National Library of Paris, by Benjamin's friend Georges Bataille, and first published in German in 1980.

Marxian critique of political economy was never cut" (Therborn 1996:650), in the 70 years since its inception, Critical Theory has grown to include a broader focus of analyses (arguably because the issues and conflicts of late capitalism present these 'opportunities' for our critical attention). My own work in this dissertation is a critical analysis of culture through the images I have selected for my analysis. Critical cultural analysis of mass, or pop, culture, can be traced at least as far back, in the Critical Theory tradition, as Adorno's work on the culture industry (2001) and, to a lesser extent, Herbert Marcuse (1966).

Cases: Eleven Storeys of Boredom

The empirical focus of this research is a cultural collage of artifacts and representations centred around the concept of boredom. One of these is an advertisement for a car, on a large, outdoor poster. After I had decided that I would likely use this poster as part of my project, I considered how I would best describe it, in particular, its size. It appears to be custom-made for the side of a wall on a residential apartment building, and is so large that it can be read clearly for at least two city blocks. Its actual measurements, in terms of metres and centimetres, did not seem either important or, oddly enough, appropriately descriptive. Looking at the poster from my vantage point across the street, I noticed that it spanned the length of several floors of the apartment building. I counted the number of floors; there were eleven, and so I knew I could best describe the poster's immensity by saying that it was "eleven storeys" tall. Because the word *storeys* is similar to the word stories,[80] I began to think of the heuristic possibilities for this word.

Storeys are a way of describing structure. Multi-storey buildings are tall, for example, while a two-storey building is about the height of an average house. Storeys are a way of describing levels within buildings; different levels are situated in different proximity to each other. Although this seems an obvious fact – i.e., that the third floor sits above the second and below the fourth, it is important because it also means that each level is built on the previous one. Structurally, in the case of a building, if something

[80] The word "storey" is the British, and, therefore, Canadian spelling, where the American spelling for the word of the same meaning is "story."

happens on a particular storey, the people in that storey at the time are affected (e.g., fire or flood or noise), but so too, are the people immediately below and above.[81]

Each of the cases I use in this dissertation is structurally linked to the previous and following one, and together they form a larger structure, or project. A weakness in one, weakens the others in the way I conceive them. This architecture was neither immediately apparent, nor arbitrarily imposed; after collecting my cases I decided how I should best structure them in terms of their order (more on this below). Following this metaphor of storeys, I must point out that although the cases I present are structurally linked to each other, they are not necessarily hierarchically arranged, as are the storeys in a building; that is, the storeys are not presented in order of lesser or greater importance. Inspired by my flâneur experience of seeing a large poster on the side of a downtown city building and pausing to wonder how best to describe its immensity, I am calling what might otherwise be called "cases" in this project, "storeys."[82]

All of the storeys are images, although only six of the 11 storeys are about actual graphic images (in advertising posters and websites, billboards and art exhibits). The remaining five storeys induce such powerful (mental) images, that they are also treated here as graphic images. Referring to Benjamin's *Arcades*, Wolin (1989:213) says that, "thinking in images (instead of concepts) presented itself as an alternative insofar as the sensuousness of the image retained greater affinities with the concrete character of lived experience itself." Similarly, I hope that my choice to use images helps to concretize the often enigmatic experience and concept of boredom.

Phenomenological Lineage

The empirical data for my dissertation are presented here as eleven storeys (i.e., cases) of boredom. These data were not so much collected, in the traditional sense of purposefully seeking out relevant cases based on search criteria, as they were gathered in the course of thinking about, and writing, the historical and theoretical framework for this project.

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[81] The most dramatic and tragic example of this is, of course, the mental image many of us have from the television footage of the 2001 collapse of New York's World Trade Centre Twin Towers, 110 storeys each, reduced to so much dust.

[82] After I had decided on this strategy, I read Lars Svendsen's book, *A Philosophy of Boredom* (2005). The title of his second chapter is, "Stories of Boredom"; however, although he introduces a variety of material in this chapter, his use of the word "stories" does not resemble mine in the way I have explained it here.

Some of what became storeys in this project, have been ideas in my mind for a number of years, things I found intriguing in some way, though not at the time because of the idea of boredom (the last words of Kakfa's Hunger Artist have been with me for more than 20 years). In a few instances, particularly the physical posters and billboards, potential cases came to my attention in the way that things often do after we first become aware of a new idea: our attention is heightened and we think that we are seeing or hearing about the new idea everywhere.

The first storey, the eleven-storey car poster, suggested the idea of "eleven storeys" and as I began to think and write about boredom, I kept this in mind as the formal structure for the empirical focus, my organizing metaphor. As I continued to read and think and write about boredom I became aware of particular images (both literal and figurative) and considered whether and how they might 'fit' in this project. In this sense, the data collection proceeded in a manner similar to that proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Their constant comparison method was developed to assist in the development of what they have, now famously, called grounded theory, where theory building is closely linked with the process of data collection and analysis. Although Glaser and Strauss proposed the methods of grounded theory as a qualitative strategy, in practice, it is actually similar to the process of quantitative analysis (I am referring here to their elaborate coding procedures) and is rarely actually used by researchers because of the laborious work involved[83]. When performed diligently, the constant comparison method is onerously time-consuming[84].

My method of data collection for this research project is similar to the methodology proposed by Glaser and Strauss in that I incorporate each case into the ongoing project rather than first developing a criteria of inclusion and then purposefully seeking relevant cases. This method of data collection, called theoretical sampling, is described by Glaser and Strauss in the form of questions the researcher must ask herself: "The basic question in theoretical sampling (in either substantive or formal theory) is:

[83] Interestingly and oddly enough, although Glaser and Strauss' monograph was first published in 1967, and many qualitative researchers have since employed the method of constant comparison, "the application of the method remains rather unclear" (Boeije 2002:391) more than 35 years later.
[84] The NU*DIST and NVivo software programs were designed with Glaser and Strauss' methodology in mind (Creswell 1998).

what groups or subgroups does one turn to next in data collection? And for what theoretical purpose?" (1967:47).

As well as choosing my empirical cases for their compelling qualities, one case at a time, my analysis was not suspended until the "final case" was gathered; rather, my treatment and analysis of each particular case often led me to my next case. It was not my intention to build a new theory, *à la* grounded theory; however, "letting the data drive the analysis" (versus the standard positivist method of choosing a theory and then collecting data to fit a pre-determined criteria), is a more accurate description of my method of enquiry.

Ultimately, however, my method is more similar to the methods of Georg Simmel and Erving Goffman. According to Murray Davis (1997):

> Simmel and Goffman… remain interesting by continuing to employ induction without switching to deduction. They proceeded not by finding their general themes in particular phenomena but by continuing to examine particular phenomena to discover their general themes… Indeed, they seem to become aware of their general themes at the end of their investigations rather than at the beginning. They did not look for particular instances to which to apply their general themes but came upon aspects of particulars that struck them as so interesting that they must be used to augment their general themes. The advantage of their continual inductions is to maintain their readers' interest in their general themes, which are enlivened by their interpretation of all their particulars… The reader cannot predict what Simmel and Goffman would say about a new topic because they did not know themselves. (p.372-373)

At the risk of drawing immodest parallels between my own project and the work of Simmel and Goffman, it is indeed their style and approach that I assume here. Funnily, and appropriately enough, Davis continues: "If the drawback of mechanical deduction is *boredom*, the drawback of continual induction is *confusion*, for the general idea produced by leaping from one instance to the whole does not always fit together clearly with the general idea produced by leaping from another instance to the whole" (1997:373 italics in original). This potential weakness of my approach, and its implications, will be discussed in Chapter Six.

Finally, the tradition from which my project could be said to owe its intellectual debt is that of phenomenology, both that envisioned and defined by the philosopher Edmund Husserl, and the version proposed by his student, Martin Heidegger. Husserl's

major contribution to philosophy was his idea that *things in themselves* should be enough for our scientific analysis, that if we could get back to only the thing itself, we would have direct access to its meaning. Husserl's phenomenology is evidence of his determination to make philosophy a rigorous science. However, Heidegger argued that philosophy and philosophical thinking do not come without presuppositions; that is, the thing in itself is always preceded by the ideas, knowledges, assumptions of others, and, hence ourselves. In this sense, Heidegger argued, phenomenology as Husserl conceived it, ignored history. According to Harman (2007), Heidegger believed that "we will have radical and serious phenomenology only when people see that direct presence of the world is never possible and that concealment belongs to the very nature of phenomena" (p.33).

From his book, *The History of the Concept of Time* (1985), the three key points of Heidegger's phenomenology are (1) intentionality, (2) categorical intuition, and (3) the original meaning of *a priori*. Intentionality means that, as observers, we must begin with the way things appear to us, the way things impress themselves upon our consciousness, without recourse to existing preconceived theories. Categorical intuition means that, as things impress themselves upon my consciousness, and I become aware of them, each of my perceptions is made up of layers upon layers. These layers were there from the beginning, but are revealed to me through further analysis. In other words, there is more here than meets the eye (Harman 2007). Thirdly, Heidegger argued that the Latin term *a priori* was not being used in its literal sense; that is, philosophers had come to use it to mean simply "before" as though the actual meaning of "before" would immediately be understood. In a sense, Heidegger problematized *a priori* by arguing that it does not refer to what we knew before something, but refers instead to what *is* first, that is, before our before-knowing. In other words, for Heidegger, *a priori* has to do with being, not with knowing. Heidegger's phenomenology, the phenomenology which informs my own project, proposes that we analyze all the layers of a phenomenon, but that this analysis incorporates the layers that need to be continually uncovered as the phenomenon (object or experience) reveals itself to us by our holding it in our consciousness. This should not be – but I think it often is – confused with the more simplistic qualitative notion that a phenomenon should be described and analyzed in great detail, though it does also mean

this. The detail, or in this example, the layers, are not just layers that are extant in the phenomenon itself; that is, these layers are not simply sitting there waiting to be discovered through sheer force of insight and observation. Rather, Heidegger's phenomenology calls on us to wrestle with the qualities, or layers, that come *before* the existence of the very phenomenon we are studying, the layers of meaning that in fact constructed the phenomenon. This is the great contribution of Heidegger to Husserl's phenomenology – Heidegger argued for the historicity, the *a priori* layers that served to instantiate the phenomenon into its own being before we have even turned our consciousness upon it. Derrida argues that, "the phenomenologist… is the 'true positivist' who returns to the things themselves, and who is self-effacing before the originality and primordiality of meanings" (1978:155).

The Eleven Storeys

The first two storeys are based on car advertisements, both of which, in some way, appear larger than life. The messages here are about avenging the villain of boredom, and trying to escape from it. The third storey is inspired by the experience of a young student working in an overseas development project. Her extreme boredom was the impetus for her wanting to escape through her writing, a project she soon gave up as she laboured under the weight of too much meaning. The fourth storey is a consideration of the representation of boredom (i.e., can boredom be represented?) and includes images from a billboard as well as artistic attempts to signify boredom. The fifth storey is a Goffman-esque analysis of the performance of boredom. This storey begins with the image of Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, and two unexpectedly bored audience members. In the sixth storey, I consider the political economy of being branded "boring," as one city was, in a Hallmark greeting card.

In the seventh storey I consider the imagery in a poem on boredom and how it speaks to the dimension of time inherent in the German word for boredom, *Langeweile*. In the eighth storey I start with the images of advertisements for "erectile dysfunction" and then explore the connection that boredom has with impotence and failed desire. The ninth storey begins with a description of a hypothetical scene of Heidegger at a dinner party, apparently bored, though not yet fully aware of his boredom. This storey explores the connection between boredom and hope.

The last two storeys, ten and eleven, bookend the 20th century. In the tenth storey, the lyrics of a popular song from the 1990s, by the US grunge band Nirvana, are analyzed in terms of the despairing refusal that characterizes boredom. This feeling of disenfranchisement is perhaps an echo of the words of Kafka's hunger artist more than seventy years earlier. The eleventh and final storey is a consideration of the hunger artist and what his life, and last words, can tell us about the search for meaning and the despair of futility.

In a building structure, the basement is not generally considered to be one of the storeys although clearly the storeys above a basement are dependent on it for a secure foundation. In the next chapter I present an etiological and philosophical history of boredom, followed by a literature review of boredom, in Chapter Four. These review chapters are the foundation upon which the eleven storeys (Chapter Five) are constructed.

Chapter Three
Etiology, Social and Philosophical History of Boredom

> There is a strange haziness about the state commonly referred to as boredom… What emerges is the rather puzzling fact that, again unlike other mental states, boredom has a complex and enigmatic past, and an ambiguous present.
> ~ Healy (1984:9)

> To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion.
> ~ Sontag (1967:276)

Introduction

I begin this chapter with an etiology and social history of the English word "boredom." I also consider the French word, *ennui*, and the German word for boredom, *Langeweile* and briefly discuss the problems inherent in translated material. Next, I highlight the contributions of specific social theorists and philosophers from the 17th to the 21st centuries, where I pay more detailed attention to the work of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, and German literary and cultural critic, Walter Benjamin, both of whom address boredom specifically, and at some length, in their most well-known writings.

Etiology of Boredom

The experience of what we now call boredom, is traced, by some researchers, to fourth century accounts of the Christian Early Fathers in the deserts outside Alexandria (e.g., Kuhn 1976; Healy 1984; Raposa 1999; Svendsen 2005). These accounts detail their experiences with the *daemon meridianus* (noonday devil, or demon), "visitations that could devastate them, utterly sapping their energies in the pursuit of God, reducing them to blank lassitude, indolence, and despair" (Healy 1984:16). This spiritual lethargy was called *acedia* (also *akedia*, *accidie* and *accidia*).

Acedia

Early Christian spiritual seekers followed the lead of Saint Paul of Thebes and, later, Saint Anthony, and moved to the deserts of Egypt to live as anchorites, or religious hermits. Small huts began to cover the desert, though at some distance from one another, as word spread that this life of fasting, prayer and self-punishment was effective in

supporting people in their relationship to the Christian God. Individual hermits became known to others as being more successful in living the solitary life, and wise in their spiritual endeavours; as a result, spiritual seekers built their huts in closer proximity to these wiser hermits in order to learn from them. This monastic movement, as it is known now, eventually spread to (what is now) Europe and official orders and rules were established for each monastic community (Raposa 1999).

The idea of cardinal sins comes from this time, when these early religious hermits, or *athletae Dei*, athletes of God (Kuhn 1976:41), enumerated the various forms of temptation and evil which they faced, despite – or perhaps because of – their religious life. One of the most difficult challenges they faced was a direct result of their solitary lifestyle: endless hours and days of solitude, broken only by repetitive prayer and occasional, frugal eating. In their lists of vices, *acedia* often made the number one spot.

Acedia is from the Greek, and means lack of interest and "spiritual sluggishness, dullness in prayer" (Raposa 1999:2). St. Thomas Aquinas defined *acedia* as the refusal of joy (Raposa 1999). According to Bigelow, *acedia* is "the privative, the deprivation, of kedos which means care, concern, trouble, sorrow, and affliction, and which comes from the verb *kedomai*, meaning to be anxious over or about" (1983:258)[85]. For these desert Fathers, *acedia* "became the recognized designation for a condition of the soul characterized by torpor, dryness, and indifference culminating in a disgust concerning anything to do with the spiritual" (Kuhn 1976:40). Irvine lists the symptoms of *acedia* as "chronic depression; unwarranted sadness; crippling lethargy; lack of joy; lack of at-peaceness with the universe; addiction to activities, objects, or states of mind which give no true fulfillment; the constant desire to flee from ascending states of deep anxiety by resort to such addictions; and, lack of mystic vision or imagination" (1999:99).

In the late Roman period, *acedia* was linked to the dualistic relationship that defined people's relationship to the universe:

> It is now known that the Desert Fathers drew on dualistic tendencies inherent in Iranian, Hellenistic, Stoic, Gnostic and Judaic worldviews to formulate the so-called 'demonological' view of the capital sins or temptations. The demonological system held that human actions in the world were influenced by both good and

[85] According to Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen, the Danish word for boredom is "*kedsomhed*." He speculates that it is possible that the *ked* root in this word is related, etymologically, to *acedia* (2005:24).

> bad angels or spirits. The bad spirits were believed to be under the control of Satan and the good were said to be under God's control. (Irvine 1999:95)

Because *acedia* was experienced as a direct result of spending time alone, ostensibly seeking religious wisdom through communion with God, it was considered the most severe of the sins, and was limited to the experience of those in this religious life, and not the lay people. Svendsen points out that because it arose during religious contemplation, *acedia* was "considered as an unprecedented insult to God" as it implied that God might somehow be found lacking (2005:22). We might blame this noonday demon experience simply on the living conditions of the monks: they lived in small cells, alone, fasting and praying, with little communication between themselves or with others – of course they got bored out of their minds. However, if this were the case, as Irvine (1999) notes, why did they stay and why did other monks continue to join the lifestyle? From historical documents, it appears to be the case that these religious hermits purposefully set out to reach this state of *acedia* (i.e., by living these isolated and ascetic lives) precisely in order to conquer it. By reaching for the more angelic states of being, the Desert Fathers had to work through, as we might say now, the temptations of the more destructive states of being (Irvine 1999:98). In this sense, *acedia* was actually a desired state, but only because by reaching it a monk earned the opportunity to transcend it, to reach the coveted state of spiritual grace and joy associated with a devoted and pure love of God in the Christian tradition. As Charles Taylor (2007) explains, acedia "doesn't involve doubt and questioning about the value of the activity in question. For a monk to suffer from acedia in his vocation was a sin; it was not a form of questioning of God" (p. 308). Unlike modern and contemporary boredom, *acedia* was sought, despite the fact of its unpleasantness; it was welcomed, and seen as a step on the journey towards God.

Evagrius of Pontus was one of these early Christian monastics and is credited with developing the first list of eight capital sins[86], where *acedia* was given the longest treatment (Kuhn 1976). Evagrius talked about acedia as the *noontide demon*, as many of the monastics experienced their most trying times in the fasting and solitary hours leading up to midday. Probably because *acedia* was considered the most evil of the sins,

[86] Although it is generally agreed upon by religious scholars that Evagrius' list was the first, the concept behind his list has itself "an ancient and complex background" (Bloomfield 1941:128).

conquering *acedia* brought with it the promise of greatest reward. According to Kuhn (1976):

> Evagrius, like so many others, believed that each sin has as its counterpart a virtue that manifests itself as soon as the corresponding vice has been eliminated. So, for example, the person who has overcome avarice necessarily embraces generosity. The most dramatic substitution of this sort occurs when the monk succeeds in expelling acedia, which is automatically replaced by the highest of all virtues, namely, joy. This is the ultimate triumph because a person of joy cannot possibly be assaulted by any temptation. Acedia, then, can be the progenitor not only of all sins but of all virtues. (p.44)

Acedia was thus a moral concept, whereas the current concept of boredom is most often constructed as a psychological state (Svendsen 2005). *Acedia* was considered to be the sin from which all other sins sprang and overcoming it was thought to lead to virtue (Svendsen 2005; Raposa 1999). Overcoming *acedia* was said to bring great joy, in a religious sense, where joy meant the experience of feeling fulfilled by God's presence; in other words, "acedia is the diametric opposite of the joy one ought to feel towards God and his works" (Svendsen 2005:51). For the Desert Fathers, "acedia was one of the worst temptations (demons) because it tried to make the monk give up the religious life completely. It was thus one of the major hurdles to controlling the passions and thus to the monk's salvation and desired union with God" (Irvine 1993:96). Yet, ironically, "acedia is almost a precondition for a life of eternal bliss" (Kuhn 1976:45), a step towards ultimate salvation.

Saint John Cassian studied the lives and spiritual practices of the monastic life in the desert of Egypt. When he returned, he set up a monastery for men, and one for women, in Marseilles (Kuhn 1976). He eventually wrote of his experiences and these writings were used to help codify the monastic life. In this work, *De Institutis Coenobiorum* (*Foundations of Coenobitic Life*), Cassian spent the last eight chapters addressing the issue of *acedia*:

> Our sixth contending is with that which the Greeks call 'a-kedia'… and which we may describe as tedium or perturbation of heart. It is akin to dejection and especially felt by wandering monks and solitaries, a persistent and obnoxious enemy to such as dwell in the desert, disturbing monks especially about midday, like a fever mounting at a regular time, and bringing its highest tide of inflammation at definite accustomed hours to the sick soul…

> When this besieges the unhappy mind, it begets aversion from the place… and scorn and contempt for one's brethren, whether they be dwelling with one or some way off, as careless and unspiritually minded person…
> Towards eleven o'clock or midday, it induces such lassitude of body and craving for food as one might feel after … hard toil… one is slothful and vacant in every spiritual activity, and no remedy, it seems, can be found for this state of siege than a visit from some brother, or the solace of sleep… (in Irvine 1999:96-97)

In Cassian's second book (*Collationes*, 425 A.D.), a monk describes *acedia*:

> We feel overwhelmed, crushed by dejection [tristitia] for which we can find no motif. The very source of mystic experiences is dried up… the train of thought becomes lost, inconstant and bewildered… We complain, we try to remind our spirit of its original goals. But in vain. Sterility of the soul! And neither the longing for Heaven nor the fear of Hell are capable of shaking our lethargy. (in Irvine 1993:98)

Acedia was thus a kind of gateway sin, "because it opens the way for all the other vices" (Kuhn 1976:52). Evagrius of Pontus said that it was "'the most troublesome of all' of the eight genera of demonic thoughts" (Crislip 2005:143). St. Thomas Aquinas, like Cassian and Evagrius before him, agreed that the way to conquer acedia was resistance (Raposa 1999). This resistance, according to Aquinas, should take the form of persevering in focused prayer and meditation in order that "joy and peace must eventually be restored" (Ibid p.24). Failure in this, according to Aquinas, could lead to despair, one of the "daughters" of acedia.

One hundred and fifty years after Evagrius's protégé, Cassian, however, Gregory the Great merged the two sins of *tristitia* and *acedia*, and the resulting list of seven cardinal sins has remained the same since, even if the interpretations of the sins have changed over the centuries (Irvine 1999). *Tristitia*'s (sadness) merge with *acedia* (indifference) resulted, in English, in the sin of sloth. Although sloth is usually considered to mean laziness and idleness, its original meaning is closer to *acedia* and refers to joylessness in spirituality resulting in apathy. Indeed, those who were full of joy were believed incapable of sin (Svendsen 2005). For contemporary culture, this concept of sloth is interpreted to mean not fully developing one's talents and gifts. According to Spacks (1995), "the complaint of boredom, subjectivity's product, violates the Christian ethical imperatives of faith and good works, which together fruitfully occupy mind and

body and improve the hope of salvation. The bored man, insisting that nothing can interest him, denies the discipline of faith and the obligation of occupation" (p.33).

Acedia remained the affliction of monks, in both concept and experience, until the 14th century when it is linked to more secular forms in Italy (Healy 1984), as well as to illness (e.g., the Greeks and trouble with the humors, especially the spleen) (Svendsen 2005). By the 14th century, the vice of sloth had already lost some of its original meaning associated with spiritual apathy, and more often referred to laziness (Healy 1984). Chaucer provides us with this description in his "The Parson's Tale":

> Accidie maketh hym hevy, thoghtful, and wraw… He doeth alle thing with anoy, and with wrawnesse, slacknesse, and excusacioun and with ydelnesse, and unlust… He loveth no bisynesse at al. It forsleweth and forsluggeth… and they ne may neether wel do ne wel thynke. Accidie comth first, that a man is anoyed and encombred for to dooth any goodnesse… drede to bigynneth to werke any goode werkes. He rekketh of no thyng… Thanne comth the synne of worldly sorwe, swich as is cleped tristicia … Thereof comth that a man is anoyed of his owne lyf. For certes, ther bihoveth greet corage agains Accidie, lest that it ne swolwe the soule by the synne of sorwe, or destroy it by wanhope. (in Healy 1984:17-18)

During the Renaissance, the concept of melancholy became more dominant. Indeed, by the early 1600s, when Robert Burton wrote his lengthy tome on melancholy, the word acedia appears not to have been in use anymore and instead he describes *taedium vitae* as:

> a common symptom, *tarda fluunt ingrataque tempora* time passes slowly and without enjoyment, they are soon tired of all things; they will now tarry, now be gone; now in bed they will rise, now up, then go to bed, now pleased, then again displeased; now they like, by and by dislike all, weary of all… often tempted, I say, to make away with themselves… they cannot die, they will not live… they are weary of their lives, weary of all. (in Healy 1984:18-19)[87]

Where *acedia* had a moral component to it, and was largely restricted to the religious life, whereby it was incumbent on the sufferer to rid his or her soul of this condition through belief in God, or in work, melancholy was considered more natural, and linked to the body (Svendsen 2005). According to Svendsen, "it is also worth noting

[87] Healy points out that Shakespeare also used the word *weary* (approximately 20 different instances) where we might now think of boredom: King Henry IV says, "I stay too long by thee, I weary thee," and Hamlet's famous words are, "How weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable/ Seem to me all the uses of this world." Of course we cannot know whether Shakespeare would have used the word boredom, instead of weary, had the word been available to him at the time of his writing.

that while melancholy is an ambiguous concept that includes both illness and wisdom, *acedia* remains a purely negative concept. While melancholy can contain its own cure, the cure for *acedia* always lies outside the state itself – for example in God or in work" (2005:51). I would add that melancholy involves a focus on the past, a longing for what already happened (or didn't happen), whereas boredom is more focused on lack of meaning in the present and thus the foreseeable future.

Acedia?

While a number of writers link boredom to *acedia* in their search for a historical link and context, not all agree that *acedia* is in fact the etiological precursor to boredom.

In Peters' (1975) attempt at an "archaeology of boredom," *à la* Foucault, he traces the meaning and social history of *acedia* in monastic psychology literature from the sixth to the twelfth centuries, to the earliest use of "bore" and "boredom" in the mid-18th century. His research leads him to argue that, although no English language dictionary posits a universally accepted definition of bore or boredom, these words are *not* synonyms for *acedia*, sloth, and melancholia (p.507) as others suggest:

> *Boredom*, then, appeared late in English, possessed no certain ancestor and seems to have shared little of the theological, psychological, and philosophical dimensions of *acedia*, *melancholy* and *ennui*. And in fact, boredom never became the psychological and spiritual equivalent of these terms, particularly *ennui* [which] itself appears in English at about the same time as *bore*. (Peters 1975:508 italics in original)

Crislip (2005:145) notes a recent interest in the word and meaning of *acedia*, and comments that "the very persistence of the term 'acedia' betrays the fact that none of the modern or medieval glosses adequately conveys the semantic range of the monastic term." In his article, after 15 pages of discussion of the symptoms of *acedia*, Crislip says, "it should be clear from the preceding discussion that the traditional equivalents of acedia – boredom, tedium, and ennui – fail to capture the semantic range of the term" (p.158).

Where *acedia* is subject oriented, boredom is object oriented, a response to the world "out there." Though he is not talking specifically about boredom, Charles Taylor (2007:303) says of *acedia* that, "it was a specific condition, one might say, a spiritual pathology of the agent himself; it said nothing at all about the nature of things. It cast no

doubt on the ontic grounding of meaning. But this ontic doubt about meaning itself is integral to the modern malaise" (Taylor 2007:303).

Ennui

The French word ennui can be traced to the 12th century when it was first associated with "a form of moral pain particularly associated with the loss of a loved one" (Goodstein 2005:109). According to Healey (1984), ennui was used, in French, as the synonym for *acedia*, since the 1200s. Some authors differentiate between ennui (French) and boredom (English), where ennui is generally considered to be a psychologically deeper, more severe and pervasive form of boredom, and *boredom* is considered more situational and transient. According to Spacks (1995:12), "ennui implies a judgment of the universe; boredom, a response to the immediate." In comparison to the "grandness of ennui," boredom is considered banal and trivial (Anderson 2004:740). Professor of comparative literature, George Steiner, writes:

> The motif I want to fix on is that of ennui. 'Boredom' is not an adequate translation, nor is *Langeweile* except, perhaps, in Schopenhauer's usage; *la noia* comes much nearer. I have in mind manifold processes of frustration, of cumulative *désoeuvrement*. Energies eroded to routine as entropy increases. Repeated motion or inactivity, sufficiently prolonged, secrete a poison in the blood, an acid torpor. Febrile lethargy; the drowsy nausea…of a man who misses a step in a dark staircase. (1971:9-10)

Sociologist Orrin Klapp suggests that ennui "is more than ordinary boredom, a malaise of meaning that infects the very roots of existence" (1986:26). Both ennui and boredom are listed in English dictionaries with similar definitions although the word ennui did not come into use in English until the late seventeenth century (Spacks 1995). The Latin origin of ennui, from the thirteenth[88] century, is *inodiare*, "to hold in hatred" (Healy 1984:18), from which we now have "annoy." This idea of hatred "of one's life, of one's self – associated with the sin gives some vital clues to the nature of a type of boredom far deeper than mere passing tedium or monotony" (Healy 1984:18)[89]. Religious scholar Michael Raposa describes ennui as "boredom colored by melancholy" (1999:34) and

[88] Spacks (1995:14) says that ennui "belongs to the twelfth century."
[89] In his book, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde writes, "The only horrible thing in the world is ennui Dorian. That is the one sin for which there is no forgiveness" (2003:194).

makes a similar argument as Peters (1975) in terms of the imperfect alignment between *boredom* and ennui. Raposa argues that he is:

> perfectly willing to admit at the outset that acedia, like the French word *ennui*, can be rendered into English as 'boredom' only at the expense of a significant loss in meaning. At the same time, 'boredom' seems a better translation than the typical usage of 'sloth' for this purpose; idleness or laziness, like drowsiness, represents one of the 'daughters' of acedia, but ought not to be identified with its essence. (1999:12)

According to Conrad (1997:466), the word boredom "never shared the kind of rich spiritual or psychological connotations of ennui."

Reinhard Kuhn (1976) traces ennui in western literature from antiquity through the 20th century. In his introduction, Kuhn talks about looking for literary works "devoted to an idea that is crucial in the formation of Western man: the idea of boredom, or ennui" (p.3-4). In Kuhn's attempt to delimit his wide ranging subject, he asserts that ennui is a type of boredom characterized by four principle characteristics (p.12-13):

1. a state that affects both body and soul
2. independent of any external circumstances
3. independent of our own will
4. phenomenon of estrangement; lost sense of the meaning of existence

These characteristics, or criteria, distinguish between the more transient, less significant experiences of boredom, such as feeling bored while waiting for a bus, or listening to someone talk, and the more somber and grim experience of ennui. Kuhn ultimately defines ennui "tentatively" as "the state of emptiness that the soul feels when it is deprived of interest in action, life and the world (be it this world or another), a condition that is the immediate consequence of the encounter with nothingness, and has an immediate effect a disaffection with reality" (1976:13). Goodstein (2005) takes Kuhn to task on his definitions of ennui and boredom. She notes that his examples and analysis more confirm, than prove, his point. In particular, she argues that "the story Kuhn tells depends on a highly contentious reading of early modern thinkers as areligious" (p.39) and that "Kuhn's decontextualized treatment of individual thinkers underestimates the power of the hegemonic religious discourse on subjective experience" (p.42).

Irvine (1999) discusses the concept of chronic ennui – *taedium vitae* -- common in eighteenth century France. The ennui cycle was considered "a cycle of subjective discontent" that progressed through three phases:

> The first stage was one of anxious boredom, of nameless objectless anxiety, which was accompanied by fantasies of release from that anxiety…[The] second stage [was] characterised by bursts of frantic activity designed to defeat or flee from the inner feelings of discontent characteristic of the previous stage. This activity had as its goal the denial of the previous feelings by immersion in various more or less repetitive (sometimes absurd) habits. This flurry of activity gave way to a third stage of psychospiritual numbness which allowed a person to feel temporarily free from the anxieties and impulsive acting out typical of the previous periods. (p.90)

Spacks (1995) is also clear that boredom and ennui are quite different conditions:

> Ennui implies a judgment of the universe; boredom, a response to the immediate. Ennui belongs to those with a sense of sublime potential, those who feel themselves superior to their environment… If only because it seems more dignified, many people would rather suffer ennui than boredom, despite its presumably greater misery (p.12)

Schopenhauer said that *ennui* is the domestic demon (in Teyssot 1996). In his treatise on ennui, Reinhard Kuhn observes that "spiteful domestic bickering arising from ennui sets the acrimonious tone of much modern literature, most notably in the theater of Chekhov, Sartre, Ionesco, and Albee" (1972:274n). In 1914, German-born, British impressionist painter, Walter Richard Sickert, painted *Ennui*, a middle-class, domestic scene in which a man and a woman (husband and wife?) look away from each other, in listless poses. The woman leans on a chest of drawers, looks at a wall, her arms folded under her chin; the man sits at a small table and smokes in (apparent) silence, a half-empty glass of water beside him (see Figure 2, next page)[90]. Modernist notions of the concept of ennui often signify this type of disconnection between the self and the "other" and in this way form a critique of modernity, whereas acedia was not blamed on "society" by the early Christians, but on an individual's spiritual failings. Ennui, and its associated melancholic states, was a contradiction of the Enlightenment ideals of

[90] Sickert typically painted the ordinary lives of ordinary people in a working class area of England and although this painting is titled *Ennui*, numerous paintings throughout the 19th and 20th century depict a sense of boredom, of the emptiness of time, the sheer desperation of endless waiting for unknown or unknowable ends.

scientific and social progress. In this sense, according to Irvine, "*ennui* played gollum to the sturdy hobbit of liberalism" (1999:102).

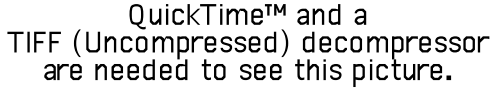

Figure 2 Walter Richard Sickert's *Ennui* circa 1914, oil on canvas
http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/05spring/images/burgin_sickertennui.jpg
Retrieved February 7, 2008

The key to understanding the difference between boredom and ennui is to acknowledge that ennui is not simply a deeper form of boredom. Barbalet (1999) writes clearly of the difference:

> Boredom, but not ennui, is a feeling that expresses a dissatisfaction with the lack of interest in an activity or condition. Boredom, in its irritability and restlessness (conditions not present in ennui), is not a feeling of acceptance of or resignation toward a state of indifference, as ennui is. Boredom, therefore, is not a passive surrender to those conditions that provoke it. The elements of active discomfort are what characterize boredom, and set it apart from ennui… Ennui, but not boredom, is a languid surrender to emptiness… [boredom] is a restless and irritable feeling about an absence of interest. (p.634-635)

As well, sociologically, differences between ennui and boredom can be seen as class and gender specific. Ennui is more the condition of the better-off, who can delegate the obligatory but mundane tasks of their lives to paid help, while they themselves sit around with "the leisure time to dwell on unfulfilled promise" (Moran 2003:169). In 17th, 18th and 19th century Europe, this delegation was most often done to wives and other women servants. Boredom, as described above by Barbalet, is not so much a dissatisfaction with what is, but a lack of interest in what is. Where ennui is the dandy, lazing about morosely upon his divan, giving orders for his meals and such, boredom is the man or woman who roams restlessly, from room to room, picking things up and putting them down again for no apparent reason. There is a bittersweet enjoyment in ennui, through its narcissistic focus on the self; boredom is simply unpleasant and does not offer this respite. Moran (2003) makes the point that, "while the increasing comfort of certain sections of society means that they tend to blame their ennui on mundane details a truly historical understanding of boredom shows it to be the product of much broader and interrelated forces" (p.171).

Langeweile

The German word for boredom is *Langeweile*, literally "long while." This word is itself an attempt at the description of the state where time seems to pass slowly. The German language often uses compound words, such as *Langeweile*, and much longer words, because of native speakers' *Sprachgefühl*. In the case of the descriptive Langeweile, the first part, *lange*, "indicates an adjectival relationship" to the second, *weile* (Hieble 1957:188). It is important to give some consideration to this word and its meaning,

particularly because so much of the nineteenth and twentieth century literature about boredom is written in German by German philosophers and social critics; thus, the word "boredom" is a translation, at best a close approximation. A distinction could be made along the dimension of time; where English speakers most often use boredom to indicate, at the least, disinterest in their current situation, for German speakers, *Langeweile* evokes the sense of both the infinity and the futility of empty time. According to Gabriel (1988:157), "the German word for boredom, Langeweile, reveals most about the term. The word Langeweile means 'a long while' conveying that in boredom, time loses its measure."

An example from Rainer Marie Rilke, the German poet of the early 20th century, serves to make the point that there is always something lost in translation. In the fifth of Rilke's poem series, *Duino Elegies*, Stephen Mitchell, considered one of the most talented of Rilke's translators, makes the following interpretation from the German to English (Rilke 1999:356-357):

> *Ach und um diese*
> *Mitte, die Rose des Zuschauns:*
> *Blüht und entblättert. Um diesen*
> *Stampfer, den Stempel, den von dem eignen*
> *Blühenden Staub getroffnen, zur Scheinfrucht*
> *Wieder der Unlust befruchteten, ihrer*
> *Niemals bewußten, -- glänzend mit dünnster*
> *Oberfläche leicht scheinlächelnden Unlust.*
>
> Ah and around this
> Center: the rose of Onlooking
> Blooms and unblossoms. Around this
> Pestle pounding the carpet,
> This pistil, fertilized by the pollen
> Of its own dust, and producing in turn
> The specious fruit of displeasure: the unconscious
> Gaping faces, their thin
> Surfaces glossy with boredom's specious half-smile.

In another translation, the last three lines of this stanza are translated into English as "to sham-fruit of boredom, their own/ never-realised boredom, gleaming with thinnest/ lightly sham-smiling surface" (Leishman and Spender REF). Mitchell's "the specious fruit of displeasure" is translated by Leishman and Spender as "to sham-fruit of

boredom"; Mitchell's "boredom's specious half-smile" is, according to Leishman and Spender, "lightly sham-smiling." Poetry translations are not necessarily the best example of problems with translations as poems cannot actually be literally translated and still keep a sense both of their meaning and the aesthetic style in which they were composed. However, this example does at least give us pause to consider that the word *Langeweile* is the actual word originally used in 20th century writing about what we read now as "boredom."

A rather dismaying example of poetic license (mis)used in a peer-reviewed academic journal is Kevin Aho's (2007) article about Simmel's supposed ideas about boredom. Aho discusses Simmel's *Metropolis and Mental Life* and the idea that a kind of mental detachment is needed in order to cope with the stimulation of the busy urban life: "The consequence of this type of calculative individualization, is, for Simmel, boredom, a disengaged indifference to our everyday choices and commitments" (2007:451). Further on, Aho writes, "for Simmel boredom emerges insidiously as we are busily occupied with our workaday routines" and then Aho apparently quotes Simmel, "in short, it is modern life itself 'that makes [us bored] because it agitates the nerves to their strongest reactivity for such a long time that they finally cease to react at all'" (p.455). Towards the end of his article, Aho refers to "Simmel's theory of boredom" (p.458). What makes these quotations extraordinary is that Simmel did not actually write about boredom, even using the German equivalent, *Langeweile*. Instead:

> Simmel captured a portion of the mood of boredom and *acedia* in his powerful portrait of the modern metropolis and its mordant mental life. Although he did not employ the terms acedia, boredom, or sloth, Simmel observed that urban life was characterized by what he called a blasé attitude, defined as an 'incapacity… to react to new sensations with the appropriate energy. (Lyman 1989:18)[91]

According to Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen (2005), however, the literal meaning of the compound word *Langeweile* is not necessarily accurate:

[91] Similarly, though not nearly as carelessly, Irvine (1993) cites (and presumably translates) Father Daniel, one of the Desert Fathers, who suggests "the idea of chronic boredom is something through which one passes in order to experience new heights of spiritual oneness with God" (p.98); however, as I have explained, the word boredom did not appear until the mid 18th century and although *acedia* is considered by most boredom scholars to be the progenitor of boredom, it is not its exact equivalent.

> [it] is partly misleading, because time in boredom can just as well be described as extremely shortlived. It depends on whether one imagines the experiencing of time during actual boredom or in the memory. Because time is not filled out in boredom, the boring span of time appears afterwards to be short, while it is experienced as unbearably long during the actual span of time. Life becomes short when time becomes long. In true, profound boredom, the distinction between the brevity and longevity of time no longer applies. It is as if infinity itself has moved into the world from the beyond – and infinity has no duration. (p.55)

Goodstein (2005) agrees and suggests that boredom is an appropriate combination of the German *Langeweile*, which refers to the empty time of this experience, and the French ennui, which better describes the existential dimension. Although it is true that much of the literature I draw on in philosophy is translated from the German, and thus "boredom" is a translation of '*Langeweile*,' I agree with Goodstein (2005) that:

> [because]'boredom' emerged, as it were, out of nowhere precisely at this juncture makes it appropriate to use the English term to signify the Europe-wide discourse…This usage underlines that the focus is not on the vicissitudes of the words themselves but on the way that discourse figures the relationship between subjective experience and the materially palpable transformations of modern culture. (p.107-108)

However, we must keep in mind that the German word *Langeweile*, "long while," differs from the English meaning of the word "boredom" in one important way. A significant part of the experience of being bored is the seemingly slowed passage of time (caused by, and made worse by, the fact that we are not interested). According to Bigelow, "time is, here [in boredom], itself empty duration, the lingering of the implied threat of the voidance of all sense, a lingering that always lasts too long, a *Langeweile*. It is a lasting whiling, indefinite and hidden in a tuck of time, that frustrates what meager attempts there are to dispose of it" (1983:263). Here Bigelow points to the more sinister and existential dimension of boredom – the "lingering that always lasts too long" and itself implies the "threat of the voidance of all sense." That is, in the German word *Langeweile*, we have a more pointedly descriptive connotation regarding not only the subjective experience of the slow passage of time, but also the more difficult to articulate existential experience, where the immediate dragging of time barely hides the shadowy presence of the reminder of the indifference of boredom, where "nothing matters, not even the nothing" (Bigelow 1983:260). In English, the word boredom does not necessarily allude

to this more existential component; in fact, I would argue that the word boredom, in English, is commonly used only to refer to more fleeting experiences of disinterest and is not generally understood to refer to the sense or state of impotent longing. Even a more dramatic example than "I am bored standing in this lineup/watching this movie/performing this task," such as, "I am bored in my marriage" does not necessarily carry with it the full import of the existential torpor that the German word *Langeweile* denotes. I find it quite remarkable that so few writers acknowledge that so much of the historical and academic documents available to us on this topic were originally written in German (i.e., in North America, at least, we read English translations) and thus the subject of the analyses was in fact *Langeweile*.

Other than the words boredom (English), ennui (French and English) and *Langeweile* (German), there are, of course, words in other languages and cultures to describe the experience of disinterest and profound disengagement, each with its own social history. Undoubtedly, these words do not translate exactly as "boredom" the way we understand it in English and another project to interpret and analyze the socio-anthropological linguistic differences would of course cast important light on my own work. Musharbash's (2007) study of boredom amongst the Warlpiri people in an Australian aboriginal settlement briefly addresses the significance of differences in language in culture around "boredom." Musharbash lived for some time in this settlement for her fieldwork on the Warlpiri, and then returned to learn more about the Warlpiri experience of boredom when she noticed the theme emerging in her fieldnotes. It is worth quoting her at length here as this is the only discussion in (English) published academic literature about the nuances in translations of "boredom" in non-English speaking cultures:

> Significantly, there is no Warlpiri word for boredom/bored/boring. A linguist with long Warlpiri experience, David Nash, suggested that the term *jukuru* might cover bored … In the Warlpiri dictionary *jukuru* is translated as 'apathetic, unwilling to enter into secular social activities, not wanting, not desirous, dislike, uninterested, unenthusiastic" (n.d.). Consultation with Warlpiri people confirmed that this term does not denote boredom but rather an active disinterest in a specific activity. The Pitjatjatjara/Yankuntjatjara dictionary for languages spoken to the south translates the adjective *paku* as 'tired, weary, bored'. *Paku* seems to be a synonym of the Warlpiri adjective *mata*, meaning tired, weary, exhausted – always in a physical sense. The lack of indigenous boredom terminology strengthens my conviction

> that parallel to pre-Romanticism times in Europe, boredom in precontact Warlpiri life was experienced less than it is today, if at all. (p.309-310 notes omitted)

Although I do not address these cultural and linguistic differences in the detail they require and deserve, I have compiled a list of translations of "boredom" in various languages. Because this is not the focus of my dissertation, I offer this list in Appendix B. The English expression, "bored to death," exists in other languages and I also list these examples in the appendix. This list should not be considered definitive, but a place from which to start any further investigations. I used English-other language dictionaries and consulted with one or more native speakers of the language in question. Various etymologies of "boredom" in other languages are not my focus here; they would, of course, contribute to a deeper and more complex understanding of the concept as well as the experience. As well, differences in language and the concomitant access to particular meanings and understanding cannot be overstated in terms of social scientists' attempts to understand, interpret and describe the social worlds we do, and do not, inhabit ourselves. It is language, after all, that mediates our interactions with individuals, groups, networks, and larger social structures, including religion, education, health care and government. Indeed, it is language that mediates our relationship with our own selves.

Nuckolls (2007), citing Whitehouse's ethnographic study of Melanesian religious movements, highlights the perils of interpretation when a culture does not use a particular word to describe an experience or condition that the social scientist perceives and wants to interpret and analyze. When Whitehouse assumes that his participants' are bored, "the only evidence presented is the observation that participants' eyes looked 'glazed.' But to whom, the ethnographer or the participants themselves?" (p.34). Nuckolls continues:

> Whitehouse concedes that when asked, participants do not acknowledge that they are bored by their repetitive rituals; in fact, apparently they say just the opposite. To take them at their word, however, would introduce major problems for the theory of ritual modes. Whitehouse therefore carefully hedges their statements and recasts them as evidence, not of what they seem but of their opposite: they are extremely bored, he claims, but cannot admit it because of their great investment in the practices. He does not claim that the participants are lying, only that they cannot admit the truth. (p.34)

As well as pointing to the dangers of conjecture, this example underscores the need for a historical analysis that incorporates a close study of the social and etymological roots of

particular concepts. Historian Reinhart Koselleck makes a compelling argument for just such analyses with his work on the "semantics of historical time" (2004 [1979]). Goodstein's (2005) work is an example of this level and scope of analysis, wherein she traces the history of subjectivity and its connection to the concept and experience of boredom. I turn now to a discussion of the largely speculative beginnings of the word "boredom."

The Birth of "Boredom"

According to Patricia Spacks, the English word boredom "can claim no clear etymology" (1995:13) although it is clear that the word did not appear before the mid 1700s. Indeed, Healy observes that "its arrival is recorded without comment" and English philologist Logan Pearsall Smith suggested that the word "bore" was an 18th century neologism that, like others of its time, cannot be traced to any particular word before it (in Healy 1984:24). Spacks notes that the first citation of the word "bore" is from a letter by the Earl of Carlisle, in 1768, in which he laments, "'Newmarket friends who are to be bored by these Frenchmen'" (1995:13). According to Spacks, the first citation of the noun boredom is not until 1864 (Spacks does not specify where this citation is published). However, Conrad (1997) dates the first use of the word boredom to the 1777 *Dictionnaire* of the French Academy and Tunariu and Reavey (2003:88), in a note, state that boredom first appeared in English in 1832, although they provide no reference for this date. Spacks observes that in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, a novel that "virtually begins with yawns" (p.192), there is a reference to boredom, though not in its noun form. In my own undated copy[92] of this novel, this reference is on page 15 – "My Lady Deadlock says she has been 'bored to death'" – and there is a second[93] one on page 110: "Here, among his many boxes labelled with transcendent names, lives Mr. Tulkinghorn, when not speechlessly at home in country-houses where the great ones of the earth are bored to death." It is possible, therefore, that Dickens was the first to use this expression (i.e., "bored to death"). These various, and inconsistent accounts of the origins of the word boredom, underscore Healy's point that, "considering the inroads it has made in the

[92] This copy is part of a set of Dickens novels first owned by my grandfather and, judging by the paper, it was published in the 1930s or 1940s. Dickens first published the novel in installments, from 1852-1853.
[93] There may be more; my content analysis was not exhaustive.

last two centuries, it is strange how little has been written on the etiology of *any* kind of boredom" (1984:47 italics in original).

Before the word "bored" or "boredom" came into existence, writers used words such as tedium, vacuity and monotony to describe their indifference, disinterest, weariness and the apparently slow passage of time. Spacks cites Johnson's portrayal in the voice of a young woman of the mid 18th century:

> I go out and return; I pluck a flower, and throw it away; I catch an insect, and when I have examined its colours, set it at liberty; I fligh a pebble into the water, and see one circle spread after another. When it chances to rain, I walk in the great hall, and watch the minute-hand upon the dial, or play with a litter of kittens, which the cat happens to have brought in at a lucky time. (in Spacks 1995:38)

Indeed, "in the eighteenth century almost no one spoke directly of boredom, and indirections sound more ambiguous: the concept was new; the word smacked of fashionable jargon; and the person who claimed to endure the condition thereby revealed moral insufficiency" (Spacks 1995: *ix*). Spacks points out that the emergence of the word "boredom" itself, in documented language, does not necessarily mean that the experiences we now associate with the word did not exist before the word was recorded, but that the concept itself "has not always been necessary" (p.25). While some writers point out that some of the emerging concepts from the 18th and early 19th centuries are a signal of the turn to a preoccupation with the self (e.g., concepts such as leisure, interest, anxiety, excitement), and the rise of individualism, the historian of concepts, Reinhart Koselleck, points out that the late eighteenth century was a time of conceptual shifts and included the emergence of such concepts as class, socialism, democracy and revolution (Koselleck 2004[1979]). If we examine the history of "boredom" in this light, we can see that it emerged in the broader social and political context that resulted in more "leisure" for some people, but also more (often repetitive and dull) work for others. According to Gehring (1997:130), "the gestation of boredom requires the womb of leisure." However, in the Victorian Era, a judgment of boredom was still a moral judgment and implied a moral failing on the part of the bored person; it was a man's or woman's own fault if he or she could not find something to do to keep interested or busy: "Boredom was the secret vice of Victorian England" (Campbell 2002:209). The term spleen, used at the time to connote an unhappy lassitude, was examined in a medical book at the time, titled, "The

English Malady," which examined the "generalized gloom" often blamed on the rainy and gray weather of England (Healy 1984:22).

Whereas up to the 19th century boredom was blamed on the individual sufferer and considered not just a personal, but a moral failure, the idea of modernist progress served to move the blame onto the object, and not the subject, of boredom. Now people could be boring (i.e., to others) as could objects and cultural environments. We were now bored *despite* progress, and not just because of it. The idea of the pursuit of happiness and enjoyment as a right contributed to our awareness that we were probably not happy *enough* in our everyday lives (Spacks 1995). The increasing focus on the quality of everyday experiences made boredom "an essential category of experience" (Spacks 1995:23). Goodstein (2005) argues that the changes to labour wrought by the processes of industrialization increased the experience of boredom among the labouring classes, while philosophers of the time were "thoroughly bourgeois" (p.20) in writing about the existential angst they associated with boredom. By the 20th century, the problems of meaning associated with boredom were explained by "appeals to the physiological dimension" (Goodstein 2005:22). I take this up in Chapter Four, in the literature review of psychology studies.

I turn now to a discussion of what philosophers and social theorists have said about boredom, since the 17th century, beginning with French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal. Admittedly, what follows is more of a list of these thinkers and what they thought and wrote about boredom; I did not come across any evidence that they took up the subject with each other (i.e., through reading published material on the subject). It is fair to say that, except for Heidegger and Benjamin, none of the philosophers and theorists below considered boredom to be central to any of their works although clearly some of them had strong feelings about the subject.

400 Years of Boredom:
Philosophers and Social Theorists From the 17th to the 21st Centuries

It is not difficult to understand why philosophers have found boredom so interesting. The enigmatic quality of the concept combined with the felt experience of frustration bordering on despair, has inspired many philosophers to engage with the possible

meanings and implications of boredom. In many ways, boredom is the nexus for the major questions addressed by philosophers: questions about the meaning of existence, the nature of being, the dark side of freedom and possibilities. In this section I briefly consider the ideas of some of the major philosophers from the past four centuries, with regard to the concept of boredom: Pascal, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Simmel, Russell, Adorno, Arendt, Baudrillard, Zizek and, in more detail, Heidegger and Benjamin. With the exception of French philosopher Pascal and French theorist Jean Baudrillard, the Danish-born Kierkegaard, the British Russell and the Slovenian Zizek, the other philosophers are all German-born and wrote in German[94]. This means, of course, that they were writing about *Langeweile*, and not the word boredom, *per se*. Indeed, as I have outlined above, the English word boredom did not even exist until late in the 19th century. Their ideas are presented below in chronological order; this is not to reinforce the notion of linear progress, but rather to present the ideas in a timeline that provides some indication of how the concept was understood at various socio-historical periods. The last two philosopher-thinkers I discuss in this chapter are Heidegger and Benjamin. Both men wrote more about boredom than previous philosophers and for this reason I discuss their work in more detail.

In the 17th century, French mathematician-turned-philosopher, Blaise **Pascal**, addressed boredom (amongst many other topics) in his last, unfinished, posthumously titled work, *Pensées* (1962 [1670]). For Pascal, the experience of boredom is akin to the wretchedness suffered by humankind until, and unless, we experience a spiritual meaning to life (in Pascal's case, a belief in the Christian God). For Pascal, boredom is a manifestation of the feeling of existential despair:

> Nothing is more intolerable to man than a state of complete repose, without desires, without work, without amusements, without occupation. In such a state he becomes aware of his nothingness, his abandonment, his inadequacy, his dependence, his emptiness, his futility. There at once wells up from the depths of his soul weariness ["boredom" in some other translations] gloom, misery, exasperation, frustration, despair. (§160)

[94] American Philosopher Walter Kaufmann wrote: "When we have read Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, Rilke, Kafka, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus, and then look at the prose of English and American philosophers and at the problems they discuss, our first impression may well be that they managed the rare feat of being frivolous and dull at once" (1968:50).

To avoid this despair, according to Pascal, we look to diversions (*divertissements*) to occupy ourselves, to keep us from boredom; but these diversions, ironically, lead to more feelings of boredom: "the only thing that consoles us for our misery is distraction, and yet it is the greatest of our miseries. For it is mainly responsible for preventing us from thinking about ourselves and for our gradual ruin… distractions amuse us and bring us imperceptibly to death" (§128). In order to keep ourselves happy, amused, we find these diversions to occupy our time in order not to have to think about our mortality. According to Pascal, "since they are unable to cure death, misery, ignorance, men imagine that they can find happiness by not thinking about such things" (§267):

> That is how the whole of our life slips away. We seek repose by battling against a few obstacles; and if we overcome them, repose becomes unbearable because of the boredom it generates. We have to get away from it and go round begging for excitement… For we either think of the miseries which are ours, or of those which threaten us. And even if we found ourselves adequately protected all round, boredom would, of its own accord, soon come welling up from the depths of our heart, where it has its natural roots, and fill the mind with its poison./ Thus man is so wretched that, owing to his peculiar disposition, he would still be bored even if he had no cause for boredom; and he is so frivolous that though he has scores of genuine reasons for unhappiness, the smallest thing like a game of billiards or hitting a ball is sufficient to take his mind off them. (§269:178)

Similar to the ancient *acedia*[95], those who confront their own boredom, rather than simply finding shallow diversions from it, are considered by Pascal to have greater self-perception (Svendsen 2005:53). However, as Avramenko (2004:119) notes, Pascal's *divertissements* are innocuous and do not take into consideration some of the more potentially threatening means by which we amuse ourselves: "When existence is understood as boring and burdensome, often a more dangerous, instinctive hatred and rejection of the In-between reality of human existence follows."

In the 18th century, Immanuel **Kant** addressed boredom in his lecture on ethics, "On the Duties in Life, in Relation to States." Because Kant discusses boredom within a moral philosophy, he can be said to be following the *acedia* tradition. He emphasizes the moral, spiritual and, we would now say, psychological importance of work: "In boredom, man feels a detestation or nausea at his own existence. It is a dread of the void, *horror*

[95] Goodstein (2005:37), agrees with Kuhn (1976) when she suggests that "Pascal's ideas paved the way for a de-Christianization of acedia. This discursive evolution, not completed until the nineteenth century, was a crucial step in the secularization of the rhetoric of reflection on human malaise."

vacui, that gives a foretaste of a 'slow death.' The more one is aware of time the emptier it feels. The only cure is work, not pleasures. Man is the only animal that has to work" (in Svendsen, 2005:54). Kant advocated portioning out enjoyment, in controlled measure, so that it could always be accessed and one would not suffer the ills of surfeit. For Kant, enjoyment and pleasure are finite resources. According to Goodstein (2005:91), Kant's "bourgeois attitude toward enjoyment could not be more clearly expressed. While the aristocracy, 'sated with pleasure,' succumbed to *taedium vitae*, the rising class would preserve its appreciation of life by cultivating interiority and focusing desire on the future." For Kant, life was to be "cultivated rather than enjoyed, for it is the possession of laudable purposes that renders it valuable" (Goodstein 2005:91). Thus work was associated with right living, including an awareness of pacing oneself for the future, and boredom was associated with (too much) leisure. Work both prevented and pre-empted the evils of boredom by the very fact that it, work, was geared not only to the successful accomplishment of particular duties and labours, but that it was (and of course still is) the sole means, for most people, of acquiring the monies it takes to survive today and into the hoped-for future (Weber's Protestant work ethic). In this sense, for Kant, boredom is both something to be avoided so that we do not have to fall into the abyss of meaninglessness, but also that we must give our lives value by busily engaging in laudable tasks (§63) and thus avoiding the perils of too much pleasure.

Writing largely in response to the works of Kant, Johann **Fichte**, philosopher and founding figure of German Idealism, outlines a world history in five epochs and critiques his own time as being stuck in the third epoch, one of extreme sinfulness and a crisis of reason. In what could be read as a contemporary critique of western culture, Fichte blamed the individualism of modernity for the excesses of his time and claimed that the empty formalism of science was without genuine ideas. According to Fichte, the emptiness of such an age "reveals itself as an infinite, irremediable and constantly recurring boredom"; in other words, Fichte "emphasized the boredom of modernity" (in Svendsen, 2005:63).

Friedrich **Hegel** critiqued the Romanticism of Kant and Fichte and declared that subjectivism was the illness of his age. In the preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel writes that, "the frivolity and boredom which unsettle the established order, the

vague foreboding of something unknown, these are the heralds of approaching change" (1977:6-7). According to political philosopher Eric Voegelin:

> When the gods are expelled from the cosmos, the world they have left becomes boring. In the seventeenth century, the ennui explored by Pascal was still the mood of a man who had lost his faith and must protect himself from the blackness of anxiety by divertissements; after the French Revolution, the ennui was recognized by Hegel as the syndrome of an age in history. It had taken a century and a half for the lostness in a world without God to develop from a personal malaise of existence to a social disease. (1990:213)

Hegel named this state *die Langeweile der Welt*, the boredom of the world, in a manuscript he was working on (c. 1804-1806, *Ibid*) while he was also writing *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. According to Hegel, there were two historical moments when this state of *Langeweile* prevailed: in antiquity, with the Roman conquest, and in modernity, after the Reformation. In the case of Roman imperialism, "imperial expansion not only destroyed the political structures of the free states of antiquity, it also destroyed the potency of the conquered peoples' gods" (Avramenko 2004:110). With the Protestant Reformation, "'the poetry of sacrality'" was abolished, "by tearing the new fatherland of man asunder into the inwardness (*Innerlichkeit*) of spiritual life and 'an undisturbed engagement (*Versenken*) in the commonness (*Gemeinheit*) of empirical existence and everyday necessity'" (Voegelin 1990:214). Voegelin describes, in great detail, how Hegel tries to free himself from *die Langeweile der Welt*; in particular, as a philosopher, Hegel believed that he could not diagnose the malaise of his age if he, too, suffered from it. Voegelin documents Hegel's divided Self, the "sensitive philosopher and spiritualist… an intellectual force of the first rank" and also the man who "cannot quite gain the stature of his true self as a man under God" (p.216). Ultimately, Voegelin argues that "Hegel resorts to Gnostic 'sorcery' to reconcile not only his, but the age's, diremption from the sacrality of the world" (Avramenko 2004:110).

Arthur **Schopenhaue**r, renowned for his pessimistic worldview that life is "a process of disillusionment" (Schopenhauer 2004[1850]:21), believed that our ultimate life's choice is that between suffering and boredom and, because we are constantly doing what it takes to avoid suffering, life is inevitably boring. If our boredom is lifted, then our suffering returns:

> Life presents itself first and foremost as a task: the task of maintaining itself, *de gagner sa vie*. If this task is accomplished, what has been gained is a burden, and

> there then appears a second task: that of doing something with it so as to ward off boredom, which hovers over every secure life like a bird of prey …… boredom is a direct proof that existence is in itself valueless, for boredom is nothing other than the sensation of the emptiness of existence. For if life, in the desire for which our essence and existence consists, possessed in itself a positive value and real content, there would be no such thing as boredom: mere existence would fulfill and satisfy us. (Schopenhauer 2004[1850]:19)

Schopenhauer's nihilistic worldview called into question the search for meaning through faith-based imperatives. Boredom, then, was something that could be dealt with, if not avoided, through the rational belief that, ultimately, life is indeed meaningless. This acceptance of meaninglessness was itself the "stuff of transcendence" (Goodstein 2005:159) for Schopenhauer who saw boredom as more of an issue for the elite, rather than the masses, and something that required "escape:"

> The striving after existence is what occupies all living things and maintains them in motion. But when existence is assured, then they know not what to do with it; thus the second thing that sets them in motion is the effort to get free from the burden of existence, to make it cease to be felt, 'to kill time,' i.e., to escape from boredom. (2007[c.1818]:404)

But for Schopenhauer, the escape is temporary; even the experience of sudden great pain or joy is only fleeting, a momentary experience that passes and leaves us largely unchanged. According to Schopenhauer, ultimately it is "man's nature" and "his temperament" (i.e., fixed biological processes) that determine how we experience suffering, including boredom.

On the other hand, for Søren **Kierkegaard**, Schopenhauer's contemporary, boredom could only be overcome through belief in God (as Pascal had also believed, 200 years before). Writing from the point of view of a jaded aesthete (Bigelow 1983) in *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard's character, "A," famously states that "boredom is the root of all evil"; however, the rest of this quotation, rarely cited, is the most instructive: "and it is this which must be kept at a distance. Idleness is not an evil; indeed one may say that every human being who lacks a sense for idleness proves that his consciousness has not yet been elevated to the level of the humane" (Kierkegaard 1944 [1843]:285). Kierkegaard therefore distinguishes between boredom and idleness where boredom is the undesirable state that lures us into evil deeds, and idleness, as distinct from boredom, is a necessary experience and one that is evidence of an enlightened mind. According to

Kierkegaard's character, A, "the high minded man… only fears boredom" (p.285). He describes two kinds of boredom: inborn talent and acquired immediacy. In the former, Kierkegaard suggests that the English have a natural talent for boredom (that is, for being boring); in the latter, he blames our efforts at finding diversions for our boredom. Kierkegaard's suggestion for overcoming boredom is his "rotation method." This method, similar to the farmers who change, or rotate, their crops, involves the principle of limitation whereby, "the more you limit yourself, the more fertile you become in invention,"[96] (here he cites the example of the prisoner in solitary confinement who can apparently find hours of amusement in the antics of a spider) and "the more resourceful in changing the mode of cultivation one can be, the better" (p.288). Social status is linked to boredom for Kierkegaard, where "those who bore others are the plebians, the crowd, the endless train of humanity in general; those who bore themselves are the chosen ones, the nobility" (in Svendsen 2005:57). Ultimately, however, boredom cannot be avoided as "boredom depends on the nothingness which pervades reality; it causes a dizziness like that produced by looking down into a yawning chasm, and this dizziness is infinite… for in nothingness not even an echo can be produced" (Kierkegaard 1944 [1843]:287). For Kierkegaard, boredom is not a response to the excesses of modernity; rather, it is a philosophical response to the existential problem of the great abyss of meaning. Goodstein (2005) notes that, like Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard's

> nihilistic vision of human existence underlies the social scientific discourse on subjective experience in modernity as well. Here boredom and, more generally, the subjective perception of meaninglessness, is explained as the consequence of a socio-cultural context in which the collective norms that are necessary to make individual life significant fail to integrate subjects into a social whole. (p.27)

Friedrich **Nietzsche** did not write much about boredom, *per se*, but he did remark upon it in *The Gay Science* (2001[1882]). In a section on "Work and boredom" he writes that most people want to find work for practical reasons; their work is simply the means to an end. However, others, such as artists and writers, would rather risk boredom and an intermittent paycheque than take on work that does not have intrinsic meaning for them. According to Nietzsche, boredom can even be valuable for these people:

[96] In reality, Kierkegaard himself was apparently very inward focused; Adorno said that he was "the flâneur who promenades in his room" (in Teyssot 1996:53).

> For thinkers and all sensitive spirits, boredom is that disagreeable 'windless calm' of the soul that produces a happy voyage and cheerful winds. They have to bear it and must wait for its effects on them. Precisely this is what lesser natures cannot achieve by any means. To ward off boredom at any cost is vulgar, no less than work without pleasure. (§42)

Where boredom was a negative revelation for Schopenhauer, for Nietzsche "boredom is philosophically significant not because it offers proof of the meaninglessness of life but because it points to a need to reconceive questions of meaning" (Goodstein 2005:262). For Nietzsche, people need to find a way to transcend boredom, chiefly by acknowledging that there is in fact no great Meaning "out there" to supersede our feelings of purposelessness. Like Kant, Nietzsche thought that we need to work in order to keep our minds occupied, to keep away the beast of boredom. In *Human, All Too Human* (2007[1878]), Nietzsche writes:

> Necessity compels us to work, with the product of which the necessity is appeased; the ever new awakening of necessity, however, accustoms us to work. But in the intervals in which necessity is appeased, and asleep, as it were, we are attacked by ennui… In order to escape a man either works beyond the extent of his former necessities, or he invents play, that is to say, work that is only intended to appease the general necessity for work. He who has become satiated with play, and has no new necessities impelling him to work, is sometimes attacked by the longing for a third state, which is related to play as gliding is to dancing, as dancing is to walking, a blessed, tranquil movement; it is the artists' and philosophers' vision of happiness. (§611 p.385-6)

In the latter part of this quotation, the so-called third state, it appears that Nietzsche is referring to the dimension of creativity (here, as an extension of play); that is, a person can experience boredom (here ennui) even after work and leisure (play) needs have been satisfied. As Elizabeth Goodstein (2005) points out, philosophers were more likely to make this type of suggestion (i.e., that good things could come of boredom, that boredom could inspire) than everyday workers whose boredom was more attached to their standardized and repetitive jobs and lack of money with which to do much else. This observation points to a bifurcation in the social history of boredom and, at the same time, a kind of democracy of boredom. That is, no one was immune, everyone eventually experienced boredom; but not for the same reasons, and not with the same results.

Georg **Simmel** was "a philosopher of fragmentation" who showed that "fragmentation can be captured reflectively as a mode of connection" (Goodstein 2005:

256, 257). He speculated on the malaise of the early years of the 20th century through his observations of everyday urban life. Simmel does not use the word boredom (in any language) according to my own reading (cf. Goodstein 2005)[97]; however, in terms of subjective malaise he talks about the *blasé* (*Blasiertheit*) attitude that affects the urban flâneur. In his essay, *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), Simmel describes the mental energy it takes for the urban individual to cope with the number of signs and various other forms of stimulation that abound in the city: "The essence of the blasé attitude is an indifference toward the distinctions between things" (p.31). In particular, for Simmel, money, "with its colourlessness and its indifferent quality" is the "frightful leveller" (p.31) which serves only to highlight the indistinguishable values of commodities. The blasé attitude is therefore an adaptive coping strategy in the face of this constant stream of vulgar images and economics whereby "the nerves reveal their final possibility of adjusting themselves to the content and the form of metropolitan life by renouncing the response to them" (p.32). Simmel's concept of the blasé attitude is not equivalent to boredom; the blasé attitude is a response to the exponential technological and capitalist growth of the urban metropolis, a kind of protective shield against the innumerable and increasingly indistinguishable assaults on the senses. However, Goodstein (2005:273) points out that Simmel's detailed phenomenological analysis of the urban lifeworld that causes the blasé attitude, "suggests a way to integrate the materialist and idealist paradigms for interpreting boredom." The blasé attitude is the result of a surfeit of information, not all of which we find meaningful, and in order to cope and keep moving, we withdraw our subjective involvement; we appear indifferent to meaning. This subjective state is similar to boredom, at least in its construction; in boredom, our subjectivity is temporarily unable, or unwilling, to engage meaningfully. The difference, I argue, is that the blasé attitude is an adaptive coping strategy in the face of a plethora of potential meanings, whereas, boredom is not a coping strategy but a reaction to a perceived *lack* of meaning. They are therefore similar in that they are *about* how we cope with meaning; but, while the blasé attitude is a method of coping while still carrying on (indeed, it is a method to cope so that we *can* carry on), the state of boredom is instead a

[97] In his 2007 article, Kevin Aho discusses what he calls Simmel's theory of boredom. However, Aho does not explain anywhere in his article that Simmel neither used the word boredom, nor attempted a theory of boredom. I take up this critique in Chapter Four.

reaction to a *lack* of meaning, and we are stalled, not necessarily carrying on (or, not with any genuine sense of interest, enthusiasm or curiosity). The blasé attitude is a kind of necessary dulling of our senses (to cope with too much meaning), whereas boredom is an unwanted dullness (as a result of not enough meaning).

In her discussion of Simmel, Elizabeth Goodstein writes about "the permanently bored attitude of blaséness" (p.273). However, as I have attempted to explain above, the state of being bored is not equivalent to the blasé attitude; for Goodstein to write about the "bored attitude of blaséness" is an imprecise, if not inaccurate, merging of concepts. She continues: "the loss of meaning that permeates modern life forms appears as indifference to meaning itself" (p.273). But it is not a loss of meaning that results in the blasé attitude; it is an overload (cf. Klapp 1986) of information, almost all of which is patently meaningful (especially to a flâneur such as Simmel) in that it is imbued with meanings, not necessarily that it is personally meaningful to the onlooker. The onlooker responds to this overload by turning down his or her level of attention, perception and interest, which results in the blasé attitude, or, as Goodstein says, the appearance of indifference to meaning itself. But this is not a *bored* attitude, it is more a calculated indifference in the face of undifferentiated meanings. Boredom, on the other hand, is not (usually) calculated and is a response to a lack of meaning in general. Blaséness is more akin to apathy, than boredom. Where the blasé person is indifferent to meaning, the bored person is very interested indeed in meaning but cannot, at that moment, for a variety of reasons, find meaning. Whereas "the blasé subject has adapted to the objectification of the lifeworld by becoming object-like" (Goodstein 2005:273), the bored subject can be seen as rebelling against the perceived lack of meaning in the lifeworld. If the blasé subject is object-like, the bored subject is object-less.

As Goodstein points out, Simmel's argument about the defensive blasé attitude is "extended into the social sphere as reserve [and] is, he argues, the condition of possibility for modern individuality and personal freedom as such" (2005:275). Clearly this marks an important distinction between the blasé attitude and boredom. If reserve, originating in blaséness, is the condition of possibility for modern subjects, then boredom is a form of protest against this condition, as boredom is about an apparent lack of possibilities.

British philosopher Bertrand **Russell** was writing at about the same time as Simmel, in the early years of the 20th century. Russell writes about boredom in his 1930 book, *The Conquest of Happiness*, an early self-help book, written for the lay person. His approach is not intellectual but moralizing, where he cautions his readers against too much boredom, warning them, in the Christian tradition, that boredom is the root of many evils: "Wars, pogroms, and persecutions have all been part of the flight from boredom; even quarrels with neighbours have been found better than nothing. Boredom is therefore a vital problem for the moralist, since at least half the sins of mankind are caused by the fear of it" (Russell 1996:51). However, Russell modifies this position and says that boredom is not always "wholly evil," (p.51) and that "a certain amount of it is wholesome" (p.52). He medicalizes boredom, suggesting that "too little may produce morbid cravings; too much will produce exhaustion" (p.52), as though his readers should aim to manage this experience more consciously and produce a quantitative amount of it in order to live a good life, but not a life based on excess. Russell, like many philosophers before him, believed in the value of being able to tolerate periods of boredom, whereby one did not frantically seek other diversions whether of an amusing or a deviant nature. Russell pontificates that, "a generation that cannot endure boredom will be a generation of little men, of men unduly divorced from the slow processes of nature, of men in whom every vital impulse slowly withers, as though they were cut flowers in a vase" (p.54). Like the early monks who battled *acedia*, for Russell, boredom should not be avoided[98]; rather, boredom should be managed in such a way that we keep ourselves out of (moral) trouble, but do not run from the potential contemplative solitude that it offers. It is worth quoting him at length here, in what appears to be an excerpt from a handbook of etiquette for the 20th century individual:

> The capacity to endure a more or less monotonous life is one which should be acquired in childhood. Modern parents are greatly to blame in this respect; they provide their children with far too many passive amusements, such as shows and good things to eat, and they do not realize the importance to a child of having one day like another, except, of course, for somewhat rare occasions… A child develops best when, like a young plant, he is left undisturbed in the same soil. Too much travel, too much variety of impressions, are not good for the young,

[98] Indeed, Russell makes the connection with the monks who were plagued by acedia in the Egyptian desert when he compares the boredom of modern life with their solitary experiences: "It makes life hot and dusty and thirsty, like a pilgrimage in the desert" (Russell 1996:56).

> and cause them as they grow up to become incapable of enduring fruitful monotony. (Russell 1996:53-54)

The cause of this inevitable boredom, according to Russell, "is intimately bound up with [the] separation from the life of Earth," the argument that post-industrial revolution changes have altered our capabilities for subjective experience[99]. Remarkably, Russell speculates that medieval life was more boring than 20th century life, when all people had at night was a small, cold home and a candle; unable to read or write, or travel any distances, they were bored. In fact, according to Russell, they were so bored that this boredom led to the witch hunts, "as the sole sport by which winter evenings could be enlivened" (p.50). Seemingly contrary to his conviction that it is the changes of modernity that brought on our boredom, he writes that "we are less bored than our ancestors were, but we are more afraid of boredom" (p.50).

Theodor **Adorno** was a German philosopher, as well as a sociologist, and member of the Institute for Social Research. More than all the philosophers discussed thus far, Adorno's analysis of boredom is the most overtly political. In his essay "Free Time" from *The Culture Industry* (2001 [1972]), Adorno writes that "boredom is a function of life which is lived under the compulsion to work, and under the strict division of labour" (p.192). He argues that if people were truly free to choose their work and also what to do in their non-work, or leisure, time, they would not experience boredom. Rather, boredom is the result of the oppressive nature of the division of labour under capitalism. If we were not so caught up in the "realm of the eversame"[100] and had the autonomy to make our own decisions, we would never be bored (p.192). For Adorno, boredom is "objective desperation" (p.192); because of the regimented and routinized mechanisms of capitalism, our imaginations are necessarily dulled. It then follows that during our non-work time, we can no longer imagine truly meaningful activities, or time spent meaningfully, and so we turn to "shallow entertainment" which, he argues, patronizes and humiliates us (p.193). The "ominous hobby" that we might pursue is, according to Adorno, merely an inferior copy of the real thing (e.g., writing a poem, painting),

[99] While Russell, and others, blame boredom on the changes brought on by, and then wrought by, modernism, it is not until Elizabeth Goodstein's (2005) work that this idea is thoroughly explored and theorized. I provide a summary of her work in Chapter Four.

[100] In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) write that "culture today is infecting everything with sameness" (p.94).

inevitably better produced by someone else for pay, and thus the results of our attempts are superfluous; we cannot (re)gain our sense of freedom from these pathetic attempts at "pseudo-activity." Thus our so-called free time becomes "nothing more than a shadowy continuation of labour" (p.194):

> There is good reason to assume that all forms of pseudo-activity contain a pent-up need to change the petrified relations of society. Pseudo-activity is misguided spontaneity. Misguided, but not accidentally so; because people do have a dim suspicion of how hard it would be to throw off the yoke that weighs upon them. They prefer to be distracted by spurious and illusory activities, by institutionalized vicarious satisfactions, than to face up to the awareness of how little access they have to the possibility of change today. Pseudo-activities are fictions and parodies of the same productivity which society on the one hand incessantly calls for, but on the other holds in check and, as far as the individual is concerned, does not really desire at all. (p.194)

The standardized, mechanized processes with which the worker (factory or office) engages during the day, become part of his orientation to his off-work time. In this sense, there is no real escape from work, through so-called leisure, but only a continuation, in an altered form, during non-paid time. Indeed, it is work-time that has structured this non-work/leisure time. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002[1944]) write that "entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism… the off-duty worker can experience nothing but after-images of the work process itself" (p.109). These after-images, in the guise of entertainment, or amusement, require little, if any, imaginative powers and so "amusement congeals into boredom" (p.109).

Boredom, from this Critical Theory perspective, is both a result of, and a reflection of, the oppressive and dulling mechanisms of capitalism, expressed through the division of labour. Our non-labour time can be seen as simply the time before/after we labour, and is thus not actually a break from labour, but a getting-ready-to-labour-again. The things with which we fill our time, during this non-labour time, are emulations of the work of other labourers, thus Adorno concludes that "pseudo-activity is misguided spontaneity" (Adorno 2001[1972]:194) and our "feeling of powerlessness is intimately bound up with boredom: boredom is objective desperation" (p.193).

At about the same time, Erich **Fromm** (1974), a former member of the Institute for Social Research whose formal training in sociology eventually led him to write

humanistic philosophy, wrote that: "To be fully awake is the condition for not being bored, or being boring" (p.108). I can find no evidence that Fromm was responding to Adorno's writing and by this time we know that Fromm and Adorno were no longer on collegial terms; however, they are essentially expressing the same idea: that an individual's sense of aliveness and authentic purposive action (i.e., power for Adorno, and being fully awake, for Fromm) are what prevent, or at least limit, the experience of boredom. In the above quotation, Fromm continues, "indeed, not to be bored or boring is one of the main conditions for loving." It is Adorno, however, who makes the association with the division of labour, one of the main practices of capitalism. However, in his posthumously published *On Being Human*, Fromm (1997:40) writes:

> Most people are bored because they are not interested in what they are doing, and our industrial system is not interested in having them be interested in their work. The hope for more amusement [than the older generation had] is supposed to be the only incentive that is necessary to compensate them for their boring work. But their leisure and amusement time, however, is boring. It is just as much managed by the amusement industry as working time is managed by the industrial plant. People look for pleasure and excitement instead of joy; for power and property, instead of growth. They want to have much, and use much, instead of being much… In spite of all the emphasis on pleasure, our society produces more and more necrophilia and less and less love of life. All this leads to great boredom, which is only superficially compensated by constantly changing stimuli.

Hannah **Arendt**, who preferred to think of herself as a theorist, as opposed to a philosopher[101], did not directly address the subject of boredom; however, in *The Human Condition* (1998[1958]) she writes about *vita activa* (active life), in a phenomenological study of labour, work and action. Labour, according to Arendt (in a critique of Marx), is the effort that is required to maintain and reproduce the body: cooking, eating, shopping for clothes and other 'necessities', etc. Arendt argues that, through the proliferation of mass-produced items for the care of the body, and the technological inventions that make (some) people's daily lives easier (i.e., require less of this labor effort), there is a price to pay. She writes that:

> the easier that life has become in a consumer's or a laborers' society, the more difficult it will be to remain aware of the urges of necessity by which it is driven… The danger is that such a society, dazzled by the abundance of its

[101] Arendt later developed an "acidic contempt for sociology" (Baehr 2007:342).

> growing fertility and caught in the smooth functioning of a never-ending process, would no longer be able to recognize its own futility. (§17:135)

Arendt distinguishes between labour and work. Work, for Arendt, involves our hands (where labour involves our bodies). The activity of work results in the 'man-made' world of things, the things that assist our labour, such as tools and shelter. Finally, action is what goes on between people, "without the intermediary of things or matter" (§1:7). Of these three conditions -- labour, work and action -- Arendt argues that it is action that saves us from meaninglessness. As she subsumes consumption under labour, Arendt includes speech within action. She argues that through speech and action, people "distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct" (§24:176). We can live without labouring (by forcing others to labour for us), and we can use and enjoy the fabricated things in the world without ourselves having to work to make them; but action, according to Arendt, requires initiative, "an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human" (§24:176). Unlike her former teacher, Heidegger, for whom death was the backdrop for his existential philosophizing, in *The Human Condition* Arendt's theme is beginnings, the possibilities for new thought and action to change the political realm: "With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth… To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin… to set something into motion" (§24:176-177).

For Arendt, action "consists in the exercise of human freedom in the world" (Tsao 2002:102) and thus gives meaning to our lives. But this action requires that the person makes herself known, proclaims her intentions as hers, and, secondly, is recognized by others to be doing so. This twofold criterion (standing up, being recognized) is the necessary prerequisite for a vigorous, democratic political life, according to Arendt: "And whoever, for whatever reasons, isolates himself and does not partake in such being together, forfeits power and becomes impotent, no matter how great his strength and how valid his reasons" (§28:201).

As I said, Arendt does not address boredom *per se*. However, the above brief sketch suggests a context in which to further consider the political dimension of boredom, following from the discussion of Adorno. Specifically, meaning, for Arendt, requires action; that is, action gives meaning to life. If we consider that boredom is an experience

of lack of meaning (as I discussed in the introductory chapter, and will continue to address), then boredom is negatively related to action. Quite simply, the bored person is not a man or woman of action. If, through boredom, we are undecided, unfocused, restless and not even sure of what it is we desire, then, according to Arendt's schema, we are in a sense outside the political realm, forfeiting power by our impotence. We are, in this sense, non-social. Adorno suggests that boredom is "in a similar position to political apathy" (2001[1972]:192) whereby citizens believe that their lives will not be altered, or changed only minimally, by changes in politics and politicians they consider to be irrelevant to their everyday lives: "The well-founded or indeed neurotic feeling of powerlessness is intimately bound up with boredom" (p.192). In other words, boredom can result in feelings of powerlessness which in turn result in a lack of action. The problem with this argument is the tautology: boredom leads to a lack of action because to be bored means to be unfocused, without purpose and therefore action. As well, does lack of action cause boredom, or does boredom cause lack of action?

Straddling the 20th and 21st centuries, French poststructural cultural theorist, Jean **Baudrillard**, analyzes the excessive and extreme forms of culture to investigate the changing forms of meaning structures. One of the best examples of his work is his now-famous question, "what are you doing after the orgy?" (1983), which addresses the extremes of sex and pornography and what might lie beyond these borders. Baudrillard inverts, and perverts, mainstream culture and theory with his strategies of negation and radical critique. Although he does not often address boredom directly, his work can be read as a critique of the banality of postmodern culture. For example, Baudrillard (1988) writes that we can be more bored on vacation than in our everyday life:

> [a] boredom intensified by the fact that it contains all the elements of happiness and recreation. The important point is that vacation is predestined to boredom, along with the bitter and triumphant premonition of being unable to escape it. How can one imagine that people would repudiate their everyday life in search of an alternative? On the contrary, they make it their destiny: by intensifying it in the appearances of the contrary; by submerging themselves to the point of ecstasy; and by fixating monotony in an even greater one. Super-banality is the equivalent of fatality. (p.200)

By fatality, Baudrillard does not necessarily (only) mean our physical deaths, but the death of one dimension of limits and, therefore, the potential for transcendence of this

limit which, ultimately, results in our salvation from limits: "I am not joking: people are not looking to amuse themselves, they seek a fatal diversion. No matter how boring, the important thing is to increase boredom; such an increase is salvation, it is ecstasy… this is the only form of liberation: the amplification of negative conditions" (1988:201). That is, by not resisting, but by yielding to, even welcoming and provoking boredom, there exists the possibility of transcending it. Baudrillard, characteristically, does not say what this transcendence brings, but in light of his theoretical project it is likely he is highlighting meaninglessness and suggesting that an effective response is not necessarily the most obvious; that rather than running from the boundaries of apparent (discursively constructed) limits, in this case the banal, we should push them even further.

Adorno also writes about boredom and vacation time:

> The act of dozing in the sun marks the culmination of a crucial element of free time under present conditions – boredom. The miracles which people expect from their holidays or from other special treats in their free time, are subject to endless spiteful ridicule, since even here they never get beyond the threshold of the eversame: distant places are no longer… different places. (2001:191)

Baudrillard and Adorno agree that the banal has extended its reach and, arguably, is most evident where it is least expected: in the exotic, the different, the far-away place we want to go to "get away from it all" and where, of course, we find only the eversame, replications of what is already replicated in our home surroundings. Arguably, the disappointment in this serves to compound our boredom. But Baudrillard is also suggesting that the banal – the endlessly reproduced and ubiquitous in popular culture, the arts and politics, fashioned on clichés and platitudes and resulting in our boredom – is in fact dangerous:

> Existential banality is the perfect crime. And people are fascinated (but terrified at the same time) by this indifferent "nothing-to-say" or "nothing-to-do," by the indifference of their own lives. Contemplating the Perfect Crime --banality as the latest form of fatality-- has become a genuine Olympic contest, the latest version of extreme sports. (2001)

In this context, the banal is the death of the interesting, the novel, the original: the meaningful. We perceive the banal through what we see, feel, hear and otherwise experience in the material world; the banal is 'out there.' Our response is boredom, the subjective experience of dissatisfaction within us. Herein lies the rub: we (i.e., artists,

business people, politicians, everyday consumers, etc.) (re)produce the banal, either through our work or our consumption of other's work, but ultimately we are rendered bored by the process of making, consuming and reproducing it. We are even bored on and by our planned escapes from it (i.e., vacations). Therefore, if, as Arendt argues, action is what gives us meaning, then in an increasingly banal and conservative political discussion, what are the consequences of "the monotony of a society in which synchronization of opinion cunningly finishes off the job of standardization of production?" (Virilio 2005:26).

Yugoslavian-born sociologist and philosopher Slavoj **Zizek**, does not deal with boredom, *per se*, at any length, but his Lacanian-based psychoanalytic approach does address the condition that can lead to boredom. Drawing on Lacan's ideas of *jouissance* (extreme pleasure, on the edge of pain) and the proliferation of cheaply made consumer gadgets, which Lacan calls *objects a*, Zizek writes that:

> Crucial is here the asymmetrical relationship of lack and excess: the proliferation of *objets a* generates the surplus-enjoyment which fills in the lack of *jouissance*, and although these *objets a* never provide 'the thing itself,' although they are semblances which always fall short of the full *jouissance*, they are nonetheless experienced as excessive, as the surplus-enjoyment – in short, in them, the 'not enough,' the falling short, *coincides with the excess*. (2001b:22)

In other words, we (i.e., consumers) seek genuine, deep, pleasure (*jouissance*) in these banal items, themselves the products of excess (i.e., they are, to varying degrees, frivolous or luxury items). However, a new kitchen appliance provides us only with surplus-enjoyment; that is, it does not speak to, nor satisfy, our deeper sense of, and need for, meaning. In terms of boredom, the idea that the not-enough coincides with the excess, speaks to the increasing number of entertainment complexes, mega-malls and casinos where people seek to fill in their time by enjoying themselves in what might be cynically described as outlets of meaninglessness. Zizek argues that the imperative of global capitalism is what he calls the injunction "to enjoy!" (2001a), where "permitted enjoyment turns into ordained enjoyment" (2001a:133) and we experience a pressure to enjoy, rather than a right. Enjoyment becomes a must, where "we must have great sex lives, fulfilling jobs, interesting hobbies, fantastic vacations. If we do not, we have somehow failed. We are guilty, inadequate" (Dean 2004:14).

The above discussion of a number of philosophers and social theorists is not easy to neatly summarize; their ideas on the subject of boredom cover a range of perspectives and, admittedly, not all actually address boredom *per se*. In terms of my own project, however, I will specifically point out the range of, for lack of a better word, degrees of boredom. Where Pascal considered that our trivial, everyday *divertissements* were what kept us from our religious commitment to God, Adorno's and Baudrillard's work suggests that boredom (in the form of the banal) can be dangerous, politically. I address these two poles (trivial and more extreme boredom) in more detail at the beginning of the next chapter. Here I would like to point out that, as many of the above writers suggest, boredom both compels and repels us: out of boredom, we do things, think things we might not have otherwise, and at the same time, the idea of boredom, the experience of the banal, of sameness, of actual boredom, is something that is repulsive to us, something we wish to escape. I suspect that this complexity, of what otherwise does seem a mundane topic, is what drew the interest of Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin. I turn now to a more detailed discussion of their work on boredom, beginning with Heidegger.

Heidegger's Phenomenology of Boredom

Often described as the most influential philosopher of the 20th century, Martin Heidegger's life is at least as controversial as his writings[102]. He is now infamous, at least in academic circles, for joining the Nazi's National Socialist Party in 1933, and thereafter never clearly denouncing the methods and horrors of the Third Reich (sometimes this controversy is referred to rather euphemistically as *the Heidegger affair*). The very fact that such an apparently sensitive and intelligent thinker could involve himself at all, other than to speak out against the fascist ideology and practices, is hard to reconcile. Biographers and historians have elsewhere documented Heidegger's anti-semitic actions and postulated on the interconnections between his writings and political associations (see Joseph G. Kronick's review essay on Derrida, Farias, Fedier, Lacoue-Labarthe and

[102] George Steiner (1978) writes of Heidegger's critics and fans, "How is it possible for witnesses of comparable acuity and integrity to arrive at the antithetical conclusions that Heidegger is a prolix charlatan and poisoner of good sense or, on the contrary, a master of insight, a philosopher-teacher whose works may renew the inward condition of man?" (p.13). According to Steiner, "to 'understand' Heidegger is to accept entry into an alternative order of space of meaning and of being" (p.18).

Lyotard, 1990). One incontrovertible legacy of the man as philosopher, however, is the impact that Heidegger's work has had on some of the other great minds of the 20th century, such as Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Gadamer, Foucault and Derrida, among others (Habermas 1989). For my purposes, Heidegger did write about, and lecture on, the subject of boredom (*Langeweile*) and so I now turn to a discussion of these ideas, bearing in mind American philosopher and theologian Arnold Davidson's codicil: "I take two facts as clear enough starting points. The first is that Heidegger's participation in National Socialism, and especially his remarks and pronouncements after the war, were, and remain, horrifying. The second is that Heidegger remains one of the essential philosophers of our century" (Davidson 1989: 409).

Heidegger was a student of philosopher and "father" of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, in Freiburg, during the early 1900s. Heidegger's masterwork is considered to be his book, *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*, 1962 [1926]), in which he introduced his concept of *Dasein*, which translates directly to "being there" but is a much more complicated concept according to Heidegger[103], and has to do with the very nature of existence. *Sein und Zeit*, "opened the field to a new type of philosophical inquiry… in which it immediately became apparent that Heidegger was the interlocutor and equal of the greatest… founders of European philosophy" (Levinas 1989:485).

Heidegger's philosophical preoccupation with ideas of existence and meaning included a detailed discussion of boredom[104] in lectures he gave at Freiburg, in the winter of 1929-30, for his course *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude (Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt, Endlichkeit, Einsamkeit)*, in which he discussed boredom and animal life, "perhaps the boldest effort of his career" if not the biggest success (Harman 2007:79). According to Canadian philosopher Victor Biceaga,

[103] The difficulty in reading Heidegger's works "is almost legendary" (Kaufmann 1968:207). In the translators' preface to the 1962 edition of *Being and Time*, Macquarrie and Robinson write: "[This] is a very difficult book, even for the German reader, and highly resistant to translation, so much so that it has often been called 'untranslatable'" (p.13). To be fair, the authors continue, "We feel that this is an exaggeration." However, in his critique of Heidegger, Adorno writes, "Heidegger is by no means incomprehensible" (Adorno 1973:93). This particular comment is itself rather incomprehensible as the context in which it is embedded is Adorno's *The Jargon of Authenticity*, a book largely dedicated to his critique of Heidegger's use of language (jargon). I am certainly not alone in judging this to be one of Adorno's weakest books.

[104] The discussion of boredom is approximately 100 pages in the book, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1995).

"Heidegger's account of boredom in *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* is among the most articulate philosophical studies ever written on the topic" (2006:143), and American philosopher Graham Harman says that Heidegger's descriptions of the three levels of boredom "[give] us perhaps the best phenomenological descriptions he ever made" (2007:86). If nothing else, it is at least fascinating that Heidegger "considered the analysis of boredom a necessary preparatory stage to outlining the fundamental questions of metaphysics concerning world, individuation and finitude" (Osborne 2006:40)[105]. Goodstein (2005) argues that "Heidegger undertakes his analysis of boredom in order to evoke in his listeners an encounter with the most fundamental questions of human existence and thereby to initiate them into his new mode of philosophizing" (p. 285).

Heidegger begins with the questions "What *is* boredom?" and "Where does it come from?" He notes that we say that something that bores us, *causes* our boredom, but asks, "How does boredom bore – how is such a thing possible?" (1995[1929]:83). His initial, working definition of boring is something that is "wearisome, tedious; it does not stimulate and excite, it does not give anything, has nothing to say to us, does not concern us in any way" (p.84). In these lectures he meticulously works past this preliminary definition and leads his students (and now his readers) into a deeper, more existential and ontological examination of boredom.

Heidegger argues that boredom is the fundamental attunement, which is translated as a fundamental mood (*Stimmung*), of modernity, though he was clear that this does not make it simply an emotional event, or state. According to Stafford and Gregory (2006:156), Heidegger considered attunement "a fundamental manner and way of our being, of the distinctively human existence (Dasein), which Heidegger defines as a being-there (Da-sein) with one another… Thus, Heidegger is asking how does boredom unfold as boredom, or what is it like for us to be bored?" In order to more fully engage with and understand boredom, Heidegger says that we need to let ourselves be taken by it and not try to avoid it as we are usually wont to do. He says that we are either trying to escape boredom, or we deny its existence, even though, ultimately, it cannot be denied or ignored (because it pesters us continuously). Heidegger calls this willingness to engage

[105] Agamben (2004:63) notes that Heidegger devotes almost 180 pages to his consideration of boredom, but only eight pages, in *Sein und Zeit*, to anxiety.

boredom an awakening, or "releasement," where we put aside our theories of being and consciousness and let boredom show itself to us as it is.

Heidegger distinguished between what he saw as three different types, or levels, of boredom experiences: being bored *by* something (*gelangweilt werden von*…), being bored *with* something (*sich langweilen mit/bei*…), and *profound* boredom (*tiefe Langeweile*). One of his examples of the first type, being bored *by* something, is the experience of being bored by a book. If I find, for whatever reason, that a book does not hold my attention, I say that I am bored *by* the book. Thus the object that is the book is somehow causing or evoking a subjective reaction in me (i.e., boredom): "The characteristic of 'boring' thus *belongs to the object* and is at the same time *related to the subject*" (Heidegger 1995:84 italics in original). Boredom is not an experience that we manifest through some kind of lack in our emotional or psychological life. Indeed, according to Heidegger:

> boredom is not simply an inner spiritual experience, rather something about it, namely *that which bores* and which lets being bored arise, comes toward us precisely *from out of things themselves*. It is much rather the case that boredom is outside, seated in what is boring, and creeps into us from the outside. Strange – ungraspable though this is at first, we must follow what *everyday* speaking, comportment, and judgment actually expresses: that things themselves, people themselves, events and places themselves are *boring*. (1995:83 italics in original)

For Heidegger, "boredom – and thus ultimately every attunement – is a hybrid, partly objective, partly subjective" (1995:88).

His other example of being bored *by* something, is waiting for a train in a small town at a dull station, one that does not, for whatever reason, hold our interest[106]. We try to pass the time by reading the train schedule, walking up and down the platform, walking up and down a nearby road, or counting the nearby trees; but when we check the time, only a few minutes have passed and we still have hours left to wait. We experience time as dragging by slowly and feel the need to speed it up, due to our "earnest engagement with life" (Goodstein 2005:323) and wanting to 'get on' with things. According to Heidegger, we are "in a confrontation with time" (1995:96) where our

[106] Kracauer (1995 [1963]) also uses the example of a train station; however, Kracauer's example suggests that to "hang about in the train station" (p.334) purposefully, would help one surrender to the kind of boredom that can lead to interesting ideas and eventually to an almost zen-like appreciation of small details.

experience of boredom "is a being held in limbo by time as it drags over an interval of time" (1995:100). We do things to force time to pass simply because we are not interested in the situation we find ourselves in; we wish to escape but the train station refuses us this possibility. Biceaga (2006) argues that being bored *by*, "has a certain urgency and oppressiveness to it, which makes it the most intense type of boredom" (p.145). However, Kuhn (1976) argues that this is also the most mundane and least interesting form of boredom, because it disappears as soon as our situation changes: as soon as the train arrives, as soon as we pick up a more interesting book, as soon as we leave a conversation that is boring, etc.

In the second, and deeper, form of boredom, being bored *with* something, Heidegger gives the example of passing a seemingly pleasant evening at a party to which we were invited and for which we had the time and desire to freely attend. We spend the evening amiably chatting, eating, drinking and smoking cigars. However, when we return home we later realize that we had been bored during the party; that is, we are retrospectively bored. There is not a specific person or event or situation which we can recall that was particularly boring and, therefore, the likely cause of our boredom; indeed, it may even have been a well organized party, attended by interesting people, replete with good food and wine. Heidegger even suggests that it is this pleasantness that we find boring. Unlike the first type of boredom, where we are bored by the experience of the apparently too-slow passage of time, we are in this instance bored by the actual situation, even as it is passing along pleasantly. That is, time is not dragging along at this party, holding us in limbo; instead, we enjoy ourselves and "the evening satisfies us" (1995:115). Heidegger describes this experience as stemming from an emptiness that comes from within us (as opposed to the situation that bored us from without, waiting for the train). In this case time is not boring, it is we ourselves who are bored. We have chosen to spend the time that is ours at this party; we have, according to Heidegger, abandoned ourselves (i.e., given ourselves over to the party). It is not that the party guests bore us and cause time to drag on endlessly; it is that an emptiness in us is not fulfilled by the experience of the party. We have chosen to spend our time at this party and yet we find ourselves "being bound to our time. This *not being released from our time*, from our time which impresses itself upon us in the direction of the standing 'now' is our *being*

held in limbo to time in its standing, and is thus the sought-after structural moment of being bored with" (Heidegger 1995:126 italics in original). According to Harman (2007), this type of boredom is "especially relevant to the modern world, in which everyone tries to become involved with everything, leaving no one with enough time for anything. Everyone is too busy for anything essential" (p.87).

Upon my first reading of this type of boredom, and Heidegger's explanation of it, I was suspicious. Here is one of the acknowledged, great philosophical minds of the 20th century suggesting that his time was wasted at a good party, when he could instead have been sitting at his desk working. I was inclined to think of this, initially, as a piece of intellectual elitism, a kind of "I have no time for the little people and mundane events of the everyday; I must spend time writing about Existence!"[107] However, I have also had the experience that Heidegger describes: I have looked forward to a social event that I willingly attended and at which I acted as though I was a satisfied guest. It was not until after I returned home and sat quietly that I realized I had in fact been bored at the party, that all my actions of a guest who appeared to be enjoying herself, were simply efforts to while away the time (though I was not aware of this at the time) and behave as I believe an invited guest should. The realization of this retrospective boredom filled me with a sense of longing (presumably for the experience I did not have, but must have expected) and detachment, even alienation, for there is something akin to despair when one realizes the limits of human company and pleasant entertainment. Heidegger might say I am suffering, in this instance, from emptiness as a result of giving up my authentic self at the party. According to Biceaga, "By giving in to the alluring splendor of petty social rituals one inevitably surrenders one's ownmost possibilities. To make time stand is to fail to get underway those projects that rise up to the bequest of the past" (2006:146).

In the first two types or levels of boredom that Heidegger describes, there is nothing unusual about the examples he relates. We have all experienced annoying boredom while we waited at a bus stop, or airport, or in a doctor's waiting room. Many of us have also passed the time at an apparently pleasant event, and realized, upon later reflection, that we were not really fully engaged and so, in a way, we were bored. But

[107] Elizabeth Goodstein comments that, "Heidegger's analysis belongs to the long tradition that sees boredom as exposing the truth about the inauthenticity of modern life from the perspective of the superior individual" (2005:323).

neither of these observations seems particularly deep or meaningful (though, admittedly, the second form, boredom after a party, is somewhat intriguing) and might even be considered a rather banal critique of the everyday. According to Biceaga, "there is something artificial in the analogies drawn so far. Heidegger's discussion of the first two forms of boredom takes the shape of an irreverent critique, which targets everydayness as the biggest impediment in the pursuit of authentic life" (2006:148). But it is Heidegger's idea of the third form of boredom, to which I now turn, which reveals the deeper ontological meaning of his analysis and shows how "Heidegger understands himself to be engaged in a task of historic import" (Goodstein 2005:330).

For Heidegger, the third type, or level, of boredom is profound boredom. Profound boredom is not necessarily linked to any particular person, thing or event, but can happen to us "out of the blue" (Heidegger 1995:135). With profound boredom, we cannot drive time forward by trying to busy ourselves with a task; instead, we are overwhelmed by it. It is "a boredom that overcomes us in such a way that we can neither struggle against nor evade it by passing the time, for we sense that it tells us something important about ourselves" (Stafford and Gregory 2006:163). We are indifferent to our situation and the people in it but not, according to Heidegger, in the manner of "I, myself, am bored." Rather, we experience a boredom to which we are connected because of our human existence. It (boredom) is a "telling refusal" (Heidegger 1995:139) of the possibilities with which we are not currently engaged, but could be. It is "not an awareness of what I as a particular individual am able to do, but do not do, e.g., change careers, for such personal details are irrelevant when it is boring for one… In profound boredom, then, we are spellbound by time as an undifferentiated whole" (Stafford and Gregory 2006:164), it is "an experience of time that takes us out of time" (Goodstein 2005:325). Philosopher Lars Svendsen gives the example of Andy Warhol's days of drugs and sex at his Factory art studio, where he "just looked on – and felt profoundly bored while doing so" (2005:106)[108]. Here we see how the telling refusal is a "holding back from an engagement with existence" (Bigelow 1983:253).

[108] Svendsen continues on to say that Warhol "gained maximum benefit out of displaying his own boredom, wearing it like an expensive piece of jewellery" (2005:106).

Heidegger's example of profound boredom is the example of walking along a city street on a Sunday[109] afternoon. The streets are empty, there are no shopping distractions and, unlike in the previous two forms of boredom, we are here forced to confront the emptiness of it all. We cannot do anything to attempt to drive the time more quickly or give in to the shallow pleasures of friendly company; instead, "we are explicitly confronted with our own Dasein, its possibilities and our thrownness into the world" (Harman 2007:87-88). Although the three levels of boredom Heidegger describes are increasingly deep, profound boredom is not necessarily debilitating in the way of the other two types. Stafford and Gregory (2006) explain that, "we actively struggle to drive time on in the first form of boredom, less effort is expended in the second form, and the third form exhibits no effort at all, as subjects succumb to the overpowering nature of profound boredom" (p.166). According to Goodstein (2005):

> This third form of boredom is not caused by something boring, nor is it a mode of reflection on our everyday being in the world; it is, in the most palpable form, a way of being into which we are thrown. As a fundamental mood, it does not determine us as subjects, as individuals with identities in the everyday world, but rather exposes us as beings faced with the problem of the meaning of our transient being. (p.325)

For Heidegger, the experience of profound boredom is key to our beginning to understand our authentic existence as humans, our true *Dasein*. Aho (2007) argues that "profound boredom, therefore, is regarded as a structural feature of modern existence itself, a characteristic of our 'situatedness'" (p.31). Heidegger's phenomenology of boredom is thus a critique of modernity and, more specifically, of the various ways in which we are discouraged, if not prevented, from seeing through the "invisible hegemony" (Goodstein 2005:330) of contemporary life. American political scientist Leslie Thiele says that boredom is an anesthetizing mood (1997) and this is true to the extent that we feel either paralyzed by our stuck-in-time-ness (i.e., being bored *by*), or not even consciously aware of our boredom (e.g., being bored *with* something, retrospectively). It is also true that boredom is anesthetizing in the sense that in profound boredom, we are almost literally spellbound by time. But it is this spell that Heidegger wants us to break when he calls for our awakening *to* boredom. Heidegger is not talking

[109] Obviously he is writing at a time when shops and services were closed on Sundays!

about the cures for the first two types of boredom (bored *by*, bored *with*), where a change of scene or other diversion, à la Pascal, often removes the cause of our boredom, and is welcomed; instead, Heidegger wants us to allow profound boredom, to "*let oneself be attuned through and through by it, so as to hear something essential from it*…this profound boredom only becomes awake if we do not counteract it." (1995:160 italics in original). In the deep experience of profound boredom, according to Heidegger, there is an emptying of our concerns with the everyday issues of politics, science, art, religion and social miseries. Profound boredom speaks to us, to our Dasein, "and summons us to action and to being" (p.167). For Heidegger, this experience is much deeper and more profound than that which is offered by contemporary psychological self-awareness strategies and new-age style navel gazing. It is not a looking inward for Answers; it is an emptying of even our mundane questions, so that we can hear our Dasein speak to us, through our "inner terror" (p.164). We keep ourselves busy and we are inclined not to listen[110], deeply, to our Dasein, but instead "we at most manage to complain about the misery of life" (p.165). Ultimately, for Heidegger, this embracing of profound boredom, in order to reveal our Dasein,

> does not mean to further justify and continue the contemporary human traits of man, but to liberate the humanity in man, to liberate the humanity of man, i.e., the *essence* of man, *to let the Dasein in him become essential*. This liberation of the Dasein in man does not mean placing him in some arbitrary position, but loading Dasein upon man as his ownmost burden. Only those who can truly give themselves a burden are free. (p.166)

According to Goodstein, "the historic task of his lectures is to expose the way boredom upholds the ultimately inauthentic understanding of human being that defines modern life" (2005:330). Yet, this is true only for the first two types of boredom he describes (bored *by* and bored *with*). Heidegger asks that the third type of boredom, which he calls profound boredom, be turned into a contemplative state and not used as an

[110] I don't think Heidegger would say "focus" on our *Dasein*, as this would imply that we could, if we only tried hard enough, actually pin it down, make it understandable to ourselves simply through our accusing and quasi-scientific stare. Unfortunately, the word "listen," which I have chosen here, is more reminiscent of the California-style psychologizing for which Heidegger had no time. However, I think that "listen" more closely represents what I think is his intention here; he is talking about emptying ourselves of the mundane concerns of everyday life and therefore allowing our genuine Dasein to reveal itself to us, make itself known, through the experience of undisturbed, profound boredom.

excuse to continue our diversions or to find new ones to keep us amused. By doing this we miss the proverbial boat for the opportunity to see most deeply into our being-ness, from where, according to Heidegger, we can draw on our authentic strength and power (versus the things we are able to learn, the competencies which we can acquire through effort and pedagogical means). Heidegger does not explain where this power and strength come from nor what they represent, only that engaging in boredom-avoidance strategies prevents us from tapping into these qualities.

Benjamin's Literary Montage of Boredom

Where Heidegger's phenomenology of boredom provides us with a detailed analysis of the everyday experiences of boredom (however existentially philosophical it may be construed), Walter Benjamin's literary montage of boredom is quite different. In Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, Konvolut D is titled "Boredom, Eternal Return" (*die Langeweile, ewige Wiederkehr*). Like the style of the rest of the book, this Konvolut is comprised only of citations and a handful of statements written by Benjamin himself. There is no obvious, or even apparent thread that joins the ideas in Konvolut D (unlike Heidegger's logical progression through his ideas on boredom). Nor does Benjamin define boredom. Instead, this Konvolut represents the tension between two kinds of boredom: that of the idle dandy, strolling with his turtle through the Arcades (the fashion of the day, explains Benjamin), and that of a more productive boredom, a consideration of which can help us to discover and uncover "half-buried memories, missed historical opportunities and revolutionary possibilities" (Moran 2003:168). Osborne (2006:42) suggests that, for Benjamin, "boredom functions… as one of a number of threshold or liminal concepts, located on the surface of the boundary between sleeping and waking, between the wishful dreams carried forward from the past and their future actualization."

Many of the items within this Konvolut are either quotations taken from Nietzsche (primarily from his *Will to Power*) or references to or by the German philosopher Karl Löwith (a student of Heidegger's), himself citing or discussing Nietzsche. Indeed, the title of this Konvolut, "eternal return" presumably refers to Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence, the concept of historical time as a cycle of repetition, something Benjamin himself addresses in seven of the items in this

Konvolut[111]. But this reference to the circularity of history (an idea that fit nicely with Benjamin's own anti-historicist convictions) is also a reference to the French socialist revolutionary Louis Auguste Blanqui, whom Benjamin also quotes several times in this Konvolut. Blanqui's 1872 book, *L'éternité Par Les Astres* (Eternity by the Stars), seems to me to be a rather flamboyant version of Nietzsche's metaphorical circular path of history (in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*), though in fact it pre-dates Nietzsche's by ten years. Nietzsche proposed a kind of thought-experiment engendered by his image of the demon who sneaks into our "loneliest loneliness" and tells us that our life as we have lived it, and are living it, will repeat itself, exactly the same way, over and over again. Naturally, this presents the double possibility that this may be either the worst form of torture, or the highest form of bliss. Have we lived a life we would in fact want to duplicate, in every way, over and over, for eternity? Would the pains and torments of our existence, the results of our choices and the forces that fate heaped upon us, weigh more, or much less, than the possibility of reliving moments of profound pleasure (assuming, of course, we have experienced any of these)? This is, at least in part, what Nietzsche's eternal recurrence means. However, for Blanqui, eternal recurrence has more to do with science fictional ideas that each of us and our descendants has a "flesh and bone" double, who is experiencing the past and the future at once. Blanqui explains that his idea "is a rather simple deduction on the basis of spectral analysis and Laplacian cosmogony" (D7, D7a). More likely, his book (written while he was in prison, where he in fact spent half his life due to his commitment to revolutionary ideals and confronting government) was written to prop up his revolutionary ideals and serve as a call to arms.

But what I suspect Benjamin was particularly interested in, in *L'éternité Par Les Astres*, is the section about half-way through the excerpt he includes in this Konvolut:

> Let us not forget: *all that one might have been in this world, one is in another*. In this world, progress is for our descendants alone. They will have more of a chance than we did. All the beautiful things ever seen on our world have, of course, already been seen – are being seen at this instant and will always be seen – by our descendants, and by their doubles who have preceded and will follow them. Scions of a finer humanity, they have already mocked and reviled our existence on dead worlds, while overtaking and succeeding us. They continue to scorn us on

[111] According to Teyssot (1996), Benjamin wrote about two metaphysical principles of repetition in a 1916 essay, "*Trauerspiel und Tragödie*", ideas he later included in his 1928 thesis on the German *Trauerspiel*.

> the living worlds from which we have disappeared, and their contempt for us will have no end on the worlds to come. (D7; D7a italics in Benjamin's excerpt)

Aside from the obvious critique that this reads like the work of a deluded madman[112], it also has the polemical force that would likely have appealed to Benjamin at that time, particularly the italicized line, "*all that one might have been in this world, one is in another.*" In the years immediately preceding the war, Benjamin's "increasingly desperate living situation" (Schwartz 2001) in terms of finances and housing, frustrated him and likely took their toll on his already fragile health. His unfinished manuscript weighed heavily on him (Arendt 1969) and it is not difficult to imagine the resonance this line might have had with Benjamin. With respect to the idea of eternal return, this excerpt, as well as others in this Konvolut, speak quite specifically to the German word *Langeweile*. Although, as Goodstein (2005) points out, boredom (usually) suffices as a translation for *Langeweile*, in this instance, the literal English translation of the German word is more instructive. In this Konvolut, Benjamin speaks to the long while, or the long stretch of time that, in this case, is history. The boredom of Benjamin's Konvolut is not necessarily the same boredom as the phenomenological study of boredom that Heidegger gives us (where he, too, wrote about *Langeweile*, in the original). For Benjamin, boredom, as *Langeweile*, is represented in the images of a recurring history and we are reminded of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (written after the start of WWII), where he wrote of Klee's painting, "Angelus Novus," that the angel's "face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (Benjamin 1969:257). In Konvolut D, Benjamin writes, "the universe is a site of lingering catastrophes" (D5, 7: p.111). He quotes from *L'Eternité par les Astres*, "the universe repeats itself endlessly and paws the ground in place" (D6a, 1). For Benjamin, the very idea of an historical *status quo* which could include fascism (and therefore, presumably, other forms of legitimized oppression and violence), was itself the crime in need of a revolution. The long while of history (in Konvolut D of *Passagenwerk*), is "stuck like a broken record" (Buck-Morss 1989:105).

[112] Benjamin even writes that the opening pages of Blanqui's document are "tasteless and banal" (D5a,6).

Within this Konvolut (i.e., stuck in the broken record of history) are the gambler, the flâneur and "he who waits." According to Benjamin, the gambler gambles to pass the time, to kill time. The flâneur must instead store time, the way a battery stores energy. He-who-waits, stores his time and waits in expectation, where "awaiting transforms time…a transformation in which the future becomes a condition of the present, rather than the present being a series of empty moments awaiting a future" (A. Benjamin 2005:167). Susan Buck-Morss (1989) suggests that he-who-waits is the revolutionary, but, the revolution itself is the victim of eternal recurrence and is never over (because it is condemned to fail): "all but [the French Revolution], temporary interruptions, which left the social relations of class fundamentally unassailed" (p.105). Thus, the revolutionary, the one who waits in expectation, transforms the experience of boredom into possibility and potential (c.f. A. Benjamin 2005). This is perhaps what Benjamin really means when he says that "boredom is the threshold to great deeds" (D2, 7). He does not mean it in the superficial sense that, when one is bored enough, for long enough, one might eventually think of an interesting and meaningful way out of the boredom (e.g., a creative project or an answer to an intellectual puzzle). Instead, he suggests that boredom is itself a condition of possibility, a coiled potential: "Waiting is, in a sense, the lined interior of boredom" (D9a, 4). But this waiting has a dreamlike, surreal quality for Benjamin, and his attempt at an explication is poetic, metaphorical:

> Boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream. We are at home then in the arabesque of its lining. But the sleeper looks bored and gray within his sheath. And when he later wakes and wants to tell of what he dreamed, he communicates by and large only this boredom. For who would be able at one stroke to turn the lining of time to the outside? (D2a, 1)

Andrew Benjamin (2005:167) argues that, for Benjamin, "rather than existing as a discrete entity, [boredom] exists as bound up with its opposite." The gray outside of the material hides -- but also protects -- the colourful lining that, technically, we cannot actually see unless we ourselves are wrapped in it, or the dreamer is awakened and turns out the lining – and why would she do this? This sense of waiting "depends upon the potential actuality of interruption" (A. Benjamin 2005:168), a disruption in the eternal recurrence of history which is a possibility that Benjamin argues against. Instead,

boredom settles everywhere, like dust, a reminder of both the crumbling of history and its antithesis, its potential for rebuilding.

In Konvolut D, I counted the word "dust" 17 times (in a total of 19 pages), where six of these instances are found in Benjamin's own writing and the rest are in the quotations and passages he cites. Both dust and greyness permeate this Konvolut (and others), adding to the overall sense of ruins and residue. Dust, like boredom, penetrates the mood of the Arcades and, for Benjamin, the mood of the 19th century[113]. Both disrupt the notion of perfect, seamless, continuity: boredom by disrupting the sense of time, and dust, by its existence, reminding us of the past and the inevitable dust of the history of the present. The greyness and boredom in this Konvolut can be seen in the dust that "does not cover or protect. Rather, it reveals and exposes, knowing no [class] boundaries" (Stoppani 2007:545). Benjamin makes a connection between talk of the weather, and boredom, in this Konvolut (in that the weather, and talk of the weather, links us all to the same epochal mood of boredom)[114]. He writes that, "as dust, rain takes its revenge on the arcades. – Under Louis Phillippe, dust settled even on the revolutions" (D1a, 1). There are layers of dust: on the street, on fine clothes, in the Arcades, in homes – indiscriminately everywhere. Like dust anywhere, it is made of the small and microscopic particles of the natural world (plants and such), the built world (buildings) and even people. It can be read as the sedimented trace of history; in terms of this Konvolut, and Benjamin's model of eternal recurrence, "indeed, history stands so still, it gathers dust" (Buck-Morss 1989:95).

In this Konvolut, then, we can see that boredom is the inside-out lining of possibility and potential, although, as the dust of eternal recurrence reminds us, an impotent potential, always waiting, in expectation, but not always awakened. Benjamin does make reference to a more mundane, everyday boredom in this Konvolut, although in both cases (as in most of this project) there is no discussion or analysis. In his own words, he writes, in note form, "factory labour as economic infrastructure of the ideological boredom of the upper classes" (D2a, 4). This prefaces a quotation from Engels, about the misery of routine factory work that, for the worker, does not result in a finished product,

[113] Buck-Morss (1989) speculates as to whether dust is a dialectical image for Benjamin.
[114] In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno argues that, "for the sake of humanity talk is restricted to the most obvious, dullest and tritest manners" (2005[1951];183).

just more routinized and meaningless labour[115]. In another section, Benjamin writes: "as life becomes more subject to administrative norms, people must learn to wait more" (D10a,2), a Weberian observation of the apparent cause of (some) boredom, in an increasingly bureaucratized modern life. Here, waiting is forced upon us, but it is an impotent waiting, where the return on the expectation is in no way revolutionary, but, in fact, the opposite: we wait for what we have already been promised. This is a boredom not of expectation, but of dulled resignation, wherein the possibilities offered by the future do not interest, nor engage, the historical subject.

Benjamin poses (but does not answer) the fascinating question: "What is the dialectical antithesis to boredom?" (D2,7). Nineteenth century Paris seems the perfect place in which to ask this question, particularly as "Parisian ennui and idleness were all the more painful because they were linked, paradoxically, to the deceptive agitation of the city's social life" (Higonnet 2002:214). The glass and iron structures that were the Paris arcades (and thus empirical centre of Benjamin's focus), were themselves the product of increasingly sophisticated technology and consumption practices; at the same time, the idle dandy and flâneur strolled through the arcades with no particular purpose, and Baudelaire (1857) wrote about the decadence and vices of the time:

> There is one who is uglier, nastier, more foul!
> Although he makes no grand gestures, no great noise,
> He would willingly reduce the earth to ruins
> And swallow the world in a yawn;
>
> It is Ennui!

Benjamin does at least suggest elitist and class-based connections to boredom, where only those with the time for reflection could claim boredom, thus turning it into a kind of badge, or ornament as Benjamin writes: "Boredom is always the external surface of unconscious events. For this reason it has appeared to the great dandies as a mark of distinction. Ornament and boredom" (D2a, 2). Displaying one's boredom was a signal to others that, despite the remarkable changes wrought in the cities, not everyone was taken in by them, by "progress."

[115] However, as Moran (2003:168) points out, in this Konvolut, Benjamin "focuses primarily on the world of the street rather than the factory."

Boredom and Modernity

Despite an unclear etiology, including its possible historical link to *acedia*, and its unknown etymology, Goodstein (2005) and others (e.g., Klapp 1986; Heidegger 1995; Svendsen 2005) argue that boredom is in fact a condition (or in Heidegger's case, a mood) of modernity; indeed, the philosophers and social theorists discussed above all belong to the modern period. Whether we experience boredom as a temporary discomfort, or as an all-consuming malaise, it seems that this modern experience is linked with increasing secularization, individualism, leisure and bureaucracy (more on this in Chapter Four). I agree with Goodstein that "boredom [is] a phenomenon in which the profound contradictions of progress are lived" (2005:103).

Chapter Four
Literature Review: Boredom in Psychology, Psychoanalysis and Sociology

> The prevalence of boredom as a sociological phenomenon is a symptom of the discontents of modern life and is often experienced as such.
> ~ Goodstein (2005:24)

> Somewhat surprisingly, and in stark contrast to its experiential ubiquity, boredom has rarely been discussed within the social sciences.
> ~ Anderson (2004:739)

Introduction

From the preceding chapters it is clear, I hope, that boredom is complex and requires a patient, comprehensive and meticulous examination – as boring as that may sound. To help organize the information that follows, I begin this chapter with a discussion of typologies of boredom since the early 20th century, which I present in a table. Following this discussion, I present specific research studies and monographs on the subject of boredom, mainly within the fields of psychology, psychoanalysis and sociology, from the past 100 years. Both theoretical and empirical analyses are included in this section, although empirical studies in sociology are rare. The only two studies that discuss boredom in non-mainstream cultures (native American Indians and Australian aboriginals) are included here although they were not undertaken by sociologists. I summarize these literatures together in the section that follows, then I consider, briefly, the issue of the prevalence of boredom. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of contemporary texts on the subject of boredom, none of which was written by a sociologist, followed by a chapter summary.

Typologies of Boredom

Perhaps the most common modernist way of tackling a concept, intellectually, is to first attempt some sort of taxonomy, or typology in the social sciences. While sometimes these can be helpful in terms of organizing and presenting information, Lynch (1991) warns us that two-dimensional models, particularly in sociological theory, are a kind of "'rhetorical mathematics,' modes of representation that act as emblems of a scientific authority" (p.18). Given its etymological and etiological ambiguity, and the challenge to

render its experience accurately into words, it comes as no surprise that writers and researchers have attempted to classify the assumed, observed and imagined qualities of boredom. I present these here in order to help organize for the reader, the vast amount of literature that follows (Figure 2).

As I described in the previous chapter, Heidegger considered three conditions of boredom. We could be bored *by* something, bored *with* something, and then there is profound boredom, the more existential dilemma onto which he turned his philosophical intellect. Around the same time, psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel (1951[1934]) speculated that there was normal boredom, when we simply do not want to do what we must do, and pathological boredom, the result of the repression of drives which results in generalized aimlessness. In the 1980s, Seán Healy suggested that there were "three mental states commonly subsumed under 'boredom'" (1984:46). Boredom$_{1,}$ as he calls it, refers to the situation in which we are bored and understand that which is the cause of our boredom. Boredom$_2$ refers to the experience where we claim "there's nothing to do" and thus the cause of our boredom is blamed on our inability to engage in something interesting. Healy suggests these two types can be collapsed into one category, "boredom," as they are similar in experience "and pose no conceptual problem" (p.44). He labels his second category "hyperboredom," in which he invokes the more psychological and existential elements of despair about the unknown and to which he turns his attention for the majority of his book. For Healy, hyperboredom is "a deep-seated agony, scarcely realized except by its effects, which is brought on by an all-inclusive, persisting perception of what is taken to be one's existential situation" (1984:28).

Scholar	**Typologies of Boredom**		
Heidegger (1929)	bored *by*	bored *with*	profound boredom
Fenichel (1934)	normal boredom		pathological boredom
Healy (1984)	boredom $_{1\&2}$		hyperboredom
Spacks (1995)	trivial boredom		dignified boredom
Svendsen (2005)	situational boredom		existential boredom

Figure 2 Typologies of Boredom

Spacks (1995) defined trivial boredom as the everyday, mundane experiences the women characters in her literary analysis described. Spacks does not intend to demean these experiences by calling them trivial; indeed the opposite is true. She argues that most writers before her tended to see women's everyday boredom as trivial and therefore not worthy of study. Spacks' project is an examination of these mundane and so-called trivial boredom moments in her character's lives. She notes that the opposite of trivial can be considered dignified boredom, the boredom associated with men in literature, the boredom that is construed as more serious, meaningful and intellectual.

Svendsen's (2005) situative and existential boredom will be described in more detail in the following section but like the other categories, Svendsen's situational boredom refers to the temporary, transient, not-seemingly important boredom of everyday life, whereas existential boredom is, as it sounds, connected to the weightier matters concerning the nature of being and, ultimately, mortality. Musharbash (2007) uses Svendsen's classification in her study of boredom in Australian aboriginal people (discussed below).

Thus, with the exception of Heidegger, who proposes three types of boredom (although his bored *by* and bored *with* are arguably not importantly, empirically, different from each other), scholars tend to describe boredom dichotomously: (1) the everyday, mundane, even expected boredom of waiting for a bus, or being bored by a coworker's conversation, and (2) what feels like a more extreme version of boredom, the kind that is not so easy to explain and can make us question who we are, what we want in life, etc. We could easily call these "simple" and "complex" boredom; however, even "simple" boredom can be seen as complex (as Heidegger clearly shows us). I think that Svendsen's (2005) classification of situational and existential boredom, most accurately and usefully summarizes the literature to date. As well, these words are without the weight of normative judgment that "trivial," "normal" or "pathological" denote. Svendsen's classification also takes into account Heidegger's profound boredom, the most detailed phenomenological account of this kind of boredom. If I were to proffer my own types, based on the above, I am inclined to use Svendsen's "situational" boredom, for the everyday, mundane boredom, and Heidegger's "profound" boredom for the more drawn out experience of angst this kind of boredom causes. Quite pragmatically, I think that

"situational" accurately and simply describes our experience of everyday boredom, and "profound" has the similar quality of immediately rendering the state, or mood, into a concept that most people can easily relate to.

Of course, ultimately, this list of dichotomous categorizations of boredom, while serving its purpose to help focus discussion, creates the problem of limiting the same[116]. Within everyday, situational boredom, we could delimit any number of different categories: situational boredom at home alone/with others; at work due to tasks (or lack thereof)/other people; the boredom of waiting that bureaucracy demands; the boredom with leisure pursuits in/outside the home, and so on. Similarly, existential boredom could be further classified according to the boredom of not knowing what to do with one's entire life, the boredom of enduring a dull marriage, or the boredom that seems to strike inexplicably in the middle of an otherwise normal event and makes us question the nature of existence. But all of these – from the fidgeting boredom we experience reading a dull book, to the despair associated with the sudden perception of one's own mortality – are kinds, or degrees, of boredom. It may be helpful to think of them as existing along a continuum[117] although this runs the risk of privileging the more existential forms, and trivializing those at the "other end" of the spectrum[118]. As well, both situational and existential forms of boredom can exist one within the other. For example, while experiencing profound, existential boredom, it may be more difficult to focus on everyday tasks, such as reading a book or performing a repetitive job. These tasks may become the focus of our frustration and angst and they may, in all likelihood, seem more boring to the existentially bored than they are to the situationally bored persons. Similarly, moments of situational boredom, while waiting for a late bus or attending a long and uninteresting meeting, may remind us, even unconsciously, of the depths to which our current restlessness could actually sink. After all, the expression "bored to death" is more often used to describe situational boredom experiences.

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[116] Even the quantitative psychology research on boredom has recently agreed that boredom should be treated as "a multidimensional construct" (Gana et al. 2004:60).

[117] Rule (1998:328) posits a continuum, where boredom "probably exists somewhere between temporary monotony and ongoing depression."

[118] According to Zijderveld (1979), "one can conceivably construct a boredom-scale, but the results of such a research technique would probably be trivial in the end effect" (p.75). However, Farmer and Sundberg's Boredom Proneness Scale has been in wide use since its publication in 1986.

I now turn to detailed discussions of the literature on boredom in psychology, psychoanalysis and sociology.

Boredom in Psychology

In psychology, boredom is treated as a cognitive and affective state that is a response to levels of external stimulation and internal motivation. Much of the research in this field focuses on subjects' responses to repetitive tasks, whether in the lab, or in the workplace, including tasks requiring heightened awareness for long periods of time (vigilance studies)[119]. Psychologists talk about *arousal levels* in response to *monotonous sensory stimulation*, which in turn "depresses the perceptual and cognitive functions of the cerebral cortex" (O'Hanlon 1981:68). It is the physiological responses to boredom, located in the brain and mapped onto other parts of the body (e.g., heart and blood pressure rates, limb movements and coordination) that are the focus of their interest in the study of boredom.

Smith's (1981) review of the psychological and psychiatric literature on boredom starts in the 1920s. He concludes that only 40 academic papers on the subject of boredom were published between 1926 and 1979, less than one paper per year. He begins the discussion section of his review with the observation that:

> the amount of research devoted to the topic of boredom by psychologists and psychiatrists is astonishingly small when compared to literary treatments and to the acknowledged importance of the topic by individuals concerned with the quality of life, especially in the workplace. This lack of empirical investigating is especially surprising in the realm of psychiatry and clinical psychology where complaints of boredom as a symptom are common. (p.338)

The focus of much of this research is on the workplace, particularly jobs in manufacturing that required the performance of repetitive tasks. Most of the boredom literature in Britain at this time was from industrial psychology, not surprisingly. Indeed, according to Smith, the British literature from the 1920s until the 1940s, was mostly

[119] D'Angiulli and LeBeau (2002) call into question the validity of psychology research results that are based on participants who might have been bored during experiments. They note that boredom itself is a spurious occurrence in these studies and might increase random error and conflate results where boredom was not an independent or dependent variable. These researchers also note that research that involves inducing boredom in participants should take into account the negative effects of this experience for most people, and address this more clearly in ethics protocols.

concerned with the prediction of boredom in the workplace and what relationships there were between work output and subjective experiences (e.g., boredom) of work. This makes sense, historically, in the context of Henry Ford's assembly line factories in the early 1900s and the early days of mass production in the 20th century. Citing a report from the Industrial Health Research Board, an article in the *British Medical Journal* from 1937 ("The Boredom of Repetition Work" author unknown), notes that more intelligent, and more extroverted factory workers were more likely to report boredom. Various experiments to alleviate boredom included the playing of music with a gramophone, every half an hour, which researchers correlated to a six to 11% increase in productivity. The more easily bored preferred challenging work over repetitive manual work. The article concludes with the assertion that if factory employers "apply the suggestions indicated they are likely to benefit not only their workers but themselves, for a reduction of boredom and discontent is almost inevitably reflected in an improved output" (p.925). Much of the boredom research around this time is related to work. An introductory statement in this 1937 article makes transparent the reason for these studies: "The subject is of great practical importance because of the very large and increasing numbers of industrial operatives engaged on (sic) repetition work" (p.924). No critique is offered in any of the studies regarding the rise of these types of jobs and the type of repetitive, tedious work they demanded. Instead, boredom was a symptom to be studied and remedied in order that labour could function more successfully, that is, that production was not impeded and potentially increased in some cases.

Writing at the same time as Smith, O'Hanlon's (1981) review article focuses mainly on the studies of repetitive task effects in the workplace. Interestingly, he points out that some of the results in this area come from the British military, during the Second World War. For example, an anonymous R.A.F. report cited a survey that showed that airborne radarmen reported fewer hostile U-boat and aircraft sightings the longer they were keeping watch. According to O'Hanlon, this finding "astonished authorities" particularly when they calculated that the radarmen were missing up to 50% of their targets (p.58). Other wartime research was conducted in laboratories and included the simulation of instrumental flight conditions while monitoring the subject pilots' physiological reactions in response to coping with the visual displays of information for

two hours. Results from these experiments revealed that performance deteriorated within the first 30 minutes "and progressed rapidly until it reached dramatic proportions. Tracking error increased without the pilot's awareness" (p.60). O'Hanlon's review of the studies on worker boredom is organized around efficiency (mechanical assembly work, inspection and monitoring, and continuous manual control), satisfaction (gender, type of industry) and health (physical and mental). Overall, the results of these studies are inconsistent and depend on whether they were conducted in actual work situations or as laboratory experiments. It is clear that boring, monotonous tasks affected work performance, but the results depended on the type of task, the length of time it took to complete, and break cycles, among other variables. O'Hanlon is concerned with the practical consequences of the human experience of boredom and not simply with the effects on work performance and productivity, which seems to have been the motive of his colleagues in the 50 years before him. He speculates as to the relationship between boredom at work and boredom in other areas of life; does an increasingly bored employee become an increasingly bored individual, spouse and parent? Based on the research O'Hanlon cites, he reflects on the relationship between boredom, stress and disease (p.74), for example: "one can conclude that stress due to chronic boredom is a common problem of enormous proportions" (p.75). O'Hanlon argues that "a comprehensive theory of boredom should relate the eliciting physical factors to the mediating brain process, then to observable behaviors and whole-body physiological reactions, and finally to their practical consequences" (p.69).

Whereas the applied research in Britain from the 1920s to the 1940s focused on the circulatory inadequacies of the body in response to uninteresting tasks, American psychologists were meanwhile conducting laboratory experiments on boredom, using university students. These researchers suggested that boredom was an actual feeling, similar to sleepiness. Consequently, at least one noted psychologist of the time, J.E. Barmack, proposed that stimulants were thus an appropriate remedy for boredom. According to Smith (1981):

> He proposed that since stimulants prevent sleepiness they should also ameliorate boredom and found that 10 or 15 mg of d1-amphetamine, 60 mg of ephedrine, and 2 g of caffeine did indeed produce subjective reports of less fatigue, sleepiness, inattention, irritation, and boredom. (p.330)

So, from the 1920s until the 1950s, there were three strains of boredom research: the industrial research in Britain (in particular, the Industrial Fatigue Research Board) which centered on stimulus factors influencing boredom on the job (Barbalet 1999); the work of the American psychologist Barmack, who defined boredom as an approach-avoidance problem; and that of psychoanalyst Fenichel, who examined the role of boredom in interpersonal relationships.

There is a dearth of research on boredom in the decade between 1950 and 1960, according to Smith (1981), and what research was published concentrated on the personality factors that made people susceptible to boredom. Some of the independent variables from this time were introversion and extroversion and propensity to daydream (most quickly bored were the extroverts and 'high' daydreamers). Throughout this period and into the 1970s, psychology research continued to develop and rely on various self-rating measurement scales, and biological measurement instruments such as EEGs, blood pressure monitoring, skin conductivity and brain alpha wave activity. Some of the stimulants presented to the subjects of these experiments included changing the speed with which images were shown to them, requiring them to print something, e.g., the letters "cd" for 30 minutes, and measuring the areas of many large circles. However, in 1954, a sensory deprivation study was conducted in order to induce boredom in student respondents. Each student was offered $20 a day (a handsome sum at that time) for each day he or she could remain, alone, in a small cubicle. The students wore goggles that prevented them from seeing pattern, and heavy gloves and large cardboard cuffs that impeded their tactile sense. There was no sound in the cubicle except for a constant hum. Berlyne (1960) reports that many quickly fell asleep and some of the students suffered hallucinations and "a deterioration in intellectual abilities" and that no subject could stand more than "a few days" in the cubicle (p.187) [120]. Students showed various signs of emotional distress and engaged in a number of behaviours, presumably for the relief and/or pleasure this stimulation brought (e.g., whistling, tapping, asking to listen to dull

[120] To put this in context, this psychology study was conducted seven years before Stanley Milgram's infamous obedience experiment at Yale.

reports when offered)[121]. Berlyne (1960:188), referring to this and other similar laboratory experiments, notes the often "diabolical ingenuity" with which respondents attempted to stimulate themselves in these purposefully dull, or in some cases, monotonous and repetitive, situations[122].

The majority of this early psychology research on boredom as a drive state, concerned itself with the effects of low arousal. However, Berlyne (1960) suggested that boredom worked through mechanisms of an *increase* in arousal. He is the first (or at least among the first) to touch upon embodied boredom (though he does not call it this, in 1960) -- how the bored body feels and what it experiences. Berlyne notes that a person, "in the throes of agonizing boredom" does not in fact look like a person who is suffering from low arousal (p.189). Instead, the bored person "shows the restlessness, agitation and emotional upset that usually coincide with high arousal" (p.189). He postulates that, in the absence of interesting, and therefore brain stimulating, external events or cues, the body grows anxious and thus the arousal level increases, as the person seeks ways to experience the needed stimulation. Presumably, the longer the need for stimulation is delayed, the more anxious and therefore autonomically aroused we become. This looks and feels like restlessness and anxiousness in the bored person. This is an important insight as much of the research up to that point, and much that followed, focuses on the image of the almost-asleep bored person, a limiting and not necessarily accurate description of the experience of boredom. As Berlyne points out, feeling disinterested and drowsy is not as unpleasant an experience as the nameless frustration we feel when we

[121] In my own experiences working with physically and mentally handicapped children in the 1980s, I have seen these similar behaviours in the children. Behaviours such as rocking, tapping, and humming were not uncommon especially among the children who had spent a great deal of time on their own (e.g., in large institutions). While any one of these "stimming behaviours," as we called them at the time, could have been related to a particular brain disorder, it was clear that many behaviours, particularly the rocking, had developed in those children who had spent much of their time alone or largely unattended. A particularly poignant recent example of this behaviour is in Kate Blewett's documentary, "Bulgaria's Abandoned Children," about a Bulgarian orphanage where there were too many children and not enough appropriate care for them. Many of these children are seen in the documentary sitting and rocking back and forth. This rocking almost always stops when someone interrupts the child and talks to her or otherwise engages her or him. As the film's narrator, Blewett says at one point that the children are, "literally bored out of their minds."

[122] According to an article in the BBC News online, the European Space Agency recently wanted 12 volunteers to live in an isolation tank for 17 months to simulate a space flight during which researchers could assess their behaviours, living in such close quarters with only limited contact with the outside world ("Surviving Boredom," Joe Boyle, 2007).

are either literally, or mentally, pacing the halls, without focus and the reassurance of an endpoint in sight.

In 1975, according to Smith (1981), children 13 to 16 years old were given a new boredom questionnaire and asked to rate their interest in each of 17 subjects. In this study, the results indicated that the children who claimed to be bored with most of their subjects, were also the most bored with school in general and expressed a greater hostility towards school than did the control group of not-bored children; as well, they reported feeling bored when they were not at school. None of this is surprising; however, the parents of these bored children were reported to be unskilled and semi-skilled workers, where the fathers had left school at an early age. The conclusion of this research was that the parents', and particularly the fathers' "negative or indifferent set of attitudes toward education and early withdrawal from school" were transmitted to their children and resulted in the children's reported feelings of boredom (Smith 1981:337)[123]. O'Hanlon (1981) cites a 1977 study of Norwegian students in grade six. The 11 and 12 year olds who reported being dissatisfied with school, also reported feeling bored at school; however, their boredom scores were not related to their level of intelligence. Citing two British school studies from the same time, O'Hanlon notes that the chronically bored students were under-achievers and, like in the Norwegian study, these bored British students were not any less intelligent than their not-so-bored schoolmates. The bored secondary school students had twice the drop-out rates of their classmates and their teachers were more pessimistic about these young people's futures:

> The teachers described the bored students as more hostile and disinterested. So one can reasonably suppose that less understanding teachers reciprocated in kind and thereby further diminished the students' satisfaction with school. Viewed in this manner, the greater truancy and early final departures of the bored students from school appear to be rational avoidance reactions to an unrewarding, irrelevant, punitive, and, in short, stressful environment. (p.64)

In 1985, Perkins and Hill argued that, "although boredom appears a common and important phenomenon it remains poorly understood, perhaps in part because of the assumptions made by the researchers about its nature and origins" (p.221). They point out that in psychology research, monotony was considered the necessary and sufficient

[123] I think that this is one of the first studies involving boredom that addresses class, here in the form of father's occupation. However, no analysis or further discussion of this finding is discussed in the research.

condition for boredom, and that many researchers took this as "an act of faith" (p.221). According to Perkins and Hill, however, there were some psychology researchers in the 1960s who suggested that (lack of) meaning, and not just monotony, was the more significant cause of boredom, and that monotony itself was a subjective perception and could vary significantly. Perkins and Hill conducted four experiments (n=24, n=26, n=18 and n=24, all senior high school, college or undergraduate students) to test three hypotheses that were based on the literature of that time: (1) that boredom arises when stimulation lacks meaning for the individual, (2) that boredom is associated with subjective monotony, and (3) that boredom is associated with a high degree of frustration (p.222). In each of these experiments, respondents were shown pictures, or photographs, and responded to a set of questions about each, or recalled subjects in elementary school and responded to paired opposite statements about their experiences of these subjects. Perkins and Hill, in reference to their three hypotheses, conclude that: (1) boredom was not associated with a lack of meaningful stimulation; (2) boredom is associated with perceived or subjective monotony; (3) boredom is not necessarily associated with frustration. In other words, Perkins and Hill concluded that the main notions about boredom in psychology at the time, were, at most, inconclusive. From a sociological perspective, however, these experimental designs were problematic, given the small number of subjects and their likely homogeneity, as well as the artificial nature of the experiments themselves. But their work does at least suggest that they were looking at boredom as a more complex phenomenological issue than had many psychologists before them. Boredom and monotony were now considered as concepts distinct from one another.

In 1986, Farmer and Sundberg published their 28-item Boredom Proneness Scale. They note that they developed the scale, "in response to the notable disparity between the importance of boredom as an issue in psychology, education, and industry and the dearth of research that addresses this disposition" (p.4). As well, the few scales already in existence at that time relied predominantly on self-ratings or were based on the assumptions made by researchers about what constituted a boring task[124]. Farmer and

[124] According to Farmer and Sundberg (1986) these were: the Boredom Susceptibility Scale (Zuckerman, Eysenck, and Eysenck 1978); the Boredom Scale of the Imaginal Processes Inventory (Singer and Antrobus

Sundberg developed their scale based on a review of the relevant literature, previous scales, and student responses to questions about boring situations. The resulting 28 true/false questions were tested on US college students, and, like the majority of scales in psychology, issues of reliability and validity were tested using the results of these students (who, we can assume, are mostly white and mostly middle class). Here are items 5, 10, 15, 20 and 25 (see Appendix C for all 28 items of this scale). The letter "T" or "F" following each statement indicates the "true" or "false" response that would result in a positive score ("1") for boredom proneness:

5. I am often trapped in situations where I have to do meaningless things. (T)
10. It takes more stimulation to get me going than most people. (T)
15. I am good at waiting patiently. (F)
20. I would like more challenging things to do in life. (T)
25. Unless I am doing something exciting, even dangerous, I feel half-dead and dull (T).

The distribution of the results among the 233 college students showed a positive skew where the young men reported slightly higher mean scores than did the young women (10.44 versus 9.3 respectively)[125]. That is, men were more boredom prone. Tolor (1989) tested the boredom proneness scale (on mostly white, undergraduate students from computer and social science courses) for its covariance with measures of assertiveness and sleep patterns. He found a positive relationship between boredom proneness and alienation (bored people are more likely to report feelings of hopelessness and dissatisfaction) and a negative relationship between boredom and assertiveness (the more boredom prone, the less likely to be assertive): "The bored appear to be dissatisfied with their personal existence and experience a diminished sense of personal well-being combined with a relatively more constricted self-expressiveness" (p.264). The hypothesis that more boredom prone individuals sleep more was not supported. Rupp and Vodanovich (1997) tested the boredom proneness scale along with measures of aggression and anger on 239 undergraduate students (mean age 25 years, 66% female). The researchers changed the measure on the boredom proneness scale from the original true/false, to a seven-item Likert scale for each of the 28 items (1=highly disagree,

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1970); the Boredom Coping Scale (Hamilton, Haier, and Buchsbaum 1984); and a job boredom scale for assembly line auto workers (Grubb 1975).

[125] Strangely enough, Farmer and Sundberg report that there was no statistical significance between these scores, but then say, "there is a suggestion of possible sex differences in boredom proneness" (p.10).

7=highly agree). Their results indicated that, among these students, those that scored higher on boredom proneness also reported higher levels of anger and aggression. They conclude that their findings "suggest that individuals with the tendency to experience boredom may be at an increased risk for feelings of inner anger, as well as having a lowered ability to restrain their anger" (p.933).

Where previous research focused on the conditions under which boredom arose, Damrad-Frye and Laird (1989) began with the assumption that if boredom is an emotion, then what is the process by which this emotion arises? They cite other studies that indicate feeling states can in fact be induced through bodily perceptions; that is, by acting *as if* we are experiencing an emotion, we in fact do begin to experience that emotion. Damrad-Frye and Laird hypothesized that boredom could therefore be induced by manipulating the circumstances of subjects' cognitive perceptions. Their sample of 91 undergraduates was divided into small groups and asked to listen to a taped reading of an article from *Psychology Today* (deemed moderately interesting) after which they answered written questions about the article. Three experimental conditions were applied while each group listened to the taped article: some groups heard a loud, taped, television soap opera program coming from another room; other groups heard the same program, but only at a moderate level; other groups were not exposed to the taped soap-opera. The results were that the students who had to listen to the reading of the journal article while the loud program could be heard from outside their room, were more likely to report having heard this sound than those in the other two groups (moderate tv tape and no tv tape). However, it was the students in the group that heard the moderately loud television tape that most often reported that the journal article they had listened to was boring (twice as often as those in the other groups), what Damrad-Frye and Laird call the misattribution effect:

> When subjects were distracted by an outside noise but did not recognize the role of that noise, they reported feeling bored and did not enjoy the task. Apparently then, their feeling of boredom came from the recognition that they were not attending to what they should have been. Lacking any other explanation for their inattention, they had no alternative except to believe that they were bored with the material. (p.319)

They conclude that the processes that produce feelings of boredom are comparable to those that produce other feeling states: "that is, feelings of boredom are based on self-perception of actions" (p.319) and that the feelings of subjective boredom thus represent metacognitive assessments of one's ability to focus attention.

In what appears to be the first cross-cultural study of boredom, Sundberg et al. (1991) hypothesized that Australian (n= 151) and US (n=245) undergraduate students would report more boredom proneness than undergraduate students from Lebanon (n=83) and Hong Kong (n=95). All the students were from English language introductory psychology courses and the average age was 20 years old. Researchers hypothesized that "cultural influences suggest that industrialized, highly educated more affluent societies are likely to exhibit more boredom" and that "in collective and traditional societies, as compared with individualistic modern ones, people would be presumed to be less likely to expect to have interesting and entertaining lifestyles" (p.211)[126]. However, the results were the opposite of what researchers expected. The students scoring the highest on the boredom proneness scale were from Lebanon and Hong Kong. Australian and US students had similar scores that indicated lower boredom proneness. Sundberg et al. speculate that Asian students experience relative deprivation in that they are exposed to Western lifestyles (movies, television, etc.) yet limited by geography in terms of acquiring and participating in these lifestyles (and, presumably, this is why they report higher boredom proneness). Sundberg et al. further speculate that the Lebanese students, at the time (1983) living amidst civil war, were perhaps more inclined to report boredom proneness while in school because, compared to the social and political situation of their daily lives, undergraduate courses were experienced as much less meaningful to them. This is a curiously western-centred perspective that assumes that the privileges of "the west" are the envy of the world. Unfortunately, this speculation-cum-assumption by Sundberg et al. (and, of course, by many other social science researchers) precludes a more nuanced, if not profound, analysis. Unbelievably, Sundberg et al. conclude that "the

[126] Clearly, this is a western-centered notion and one that Sundberg et al. do not problematize nor make any attempt to explain. This is particularly troubling as previous studies reported high levels of boredom amongst US samples, arguably the most affluent and individualistic of all countries. From a sociological perspective, it is more strange that boredom is experienced in the more affluent countries and not, as Sundberg et al. suggest, that boredom should be experienced by those with less material goods.

findings, if replicated, suggest that universities in Asia have difficulties with boredom in students" (p.220).

Mikulas and Vodanovich (1993) attempted to address cultural differences in the definition of boredom. In their somewhat peculiar article they attempt to define boredom by taking into consideration "world psychologies" perspectives which amount only to "Indian yogic" and Buddhist psychology. They begin by noting that, despite previous theories and research into boredom, "there is not a comprehensive, integrated, functional definition of the construct 'boredom'." Mikulas and Vodanovich take as their starting point their own definition: "Boredom is a state of relatively low arousal and dissatisfaction, which is attributed to an inadequately stimulating situation" and then proceed to explain how and why the various components of their definition (state, low arousal, dissatisfaction, attribution, inadequate stimulation) are apposite. In terms of Indian yogic psychology, Mikulas and Vodanovich note that the second of the seven chakras, "centers of interactions of consciousness, mind, body, and energy," corresponds with western notions of boredom:

> The second chakra (sensation) includes craving for sensory pleasure and greater complexity, sex in the broadest sense, and fleeing from sameness and boredom. Thus, boredom, particularly as defined in this paper, is the central negative aspect of the second chakra. This correspondence allows us to interrelate the Western research on boredom with the massive literature of yogic psychology, eventually leading to a much more comprehensive knowledge of the nature and dynamics of boredom.

In their definition of boredom, above, one of the components is dissatisfaction. Mikulas and Vodanovich connect this with the Buddhist psychology concept of dukkha, which means "unsatisfactoriness or suffering, such as an axle which is off-center or a bone out of joint. In Buddhist psychology, recognizing the pervasiveness and results of dukkha is critical to understanding a person's psychological state, perceptions, motives, and so forth." Mikulas and Vodanovich contend that "boredom is a common manifestation of dukkha" and, therefore, an understanding of this Buddhist concept could inform and enlarge our (western) understanding of the experience of boredom. Although these researchers do not actually contribute anything substantive about cross-cultural experiences and concepts of boredom in this article, their exegesis of their own definition provides a detailed review and discussion of the literature.

Six years later, Vodanovich published an article with Watt (1999) examining cultural differences regarding time use and boredom proneness. Undergraduates from the US (n=154) and Southwestern Ireland (n=184) completed the boredom proneness scale (modified to a 7-point Likert scale for responses) and a time use questionnaire (perceptions of how they structure their time and whether they see it as purposive). Their results are interesting: the Irish students reported lower boredom proneness than their US counterparts, and also scored high on the time use scale, as we might expect (that is, people who feel their time is well organized and purposive are less likely to be prone to boredom). The US students scored higher on boredom proneness than their Irish counterparts; however, the US students also scored higher on time use. That is, the US students were more prone to boredom but also perceived their time as structured and purposive (more so than did the Irish students)[127]. These researchers conclude only that their results suggest that typical intervention therapies that focus on behavioural strategies, or existential therapies, "may be limited to certain cultures" (p.150).

It seems that the field of psychology "progresses" on an add-independent-variable and-stir strategy, to which many of the articles discussed above can attest[128]. While it cannot be denied that constructing a quantifiable measure of a social concept or experience makes it easier and, therefore, more efficient to study, the above studies also clearly show that quantified measures in no way ensure a deeper and broader intellectual approach to a subject. Harris (2000) lists some of the results of similar studies of psychological correlates of the boredom prone person:

> Those who are identified with a propensity toward boredom are likely to be more impulsive… more dogmatic…lower in attributional complexity… lower in need for cognition less vigilant… less sociable… more prone to sexual boredom… less assertive and more alienated… and lacking the traits characteristic of a self-actualizing individual. (p.577)

In her own study, Harris found that undergraduates who more closely monitor and label their moods, are also more boredom prone. Her conclusion sounds more like a list of clichés from a self-help book:

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[127] Gender differences with boredom proneness existed only in the US sample (i.e., men tended to report higher boredom proneness than the women students).

[128] While this is also true in some areas of sociology, the problem is not as widespread as it is in psychology.

> people who wish to avoid boredom might avoid focusing on themselves and their mood, seek out activities with a reasonable degree of challenge, and prepare for possibly boring situations by bringing something to read or something else to do. If all else fails, boredom might be used as an impetus for thinking and reflection. (p.595)

Bargdill (2000) reports on one of the few qualitative psychology studies on boredom. His six participants (not undergraduates but those who responded to flyers, etc.) were asked to write a detailed description of their boredom, how it arose, how it felt and, if relevant, how it might have resolved. After reading these descriptions, researchers asked the participants clarifying questions and the resulting synthesis was interpreted in the phenomenological interpretive tradition. Bargdill reports on the thematic results in some detail in this article. In general, his respondents reported feelings of boredom when significant "life projects" were compromised, for various reasons. One of the more interesting results, and certainly something that has bearing on my own project had to do with issues of identity leading to feelings of emptiness:

> [Participants] had no answers to their identity questions. While their pre-bored sense of identity had burned up, nothing with a sense of vitality had developed to replace it. This left a vacuum. Nothingness. They no longer knew what they wanted or what to do with themselves. They were no longer throwing forward possibilities. (p.199)

According to Bargdill, the most important finding from this qualitative study on boredom is that participants developed emotional ambivalence when goals for less desirable projects were compromised: "This turning away from their own desires would become a repeated pattern of passivity and avoidance" (p.201).

The most detailed, qualitative discussion of boredom is from a study of men's experiences of sexual boredom in long-term relationships (Tunariu and Reavey 2003). Researchers interviewed 12 men, 23 to 41 years old, heterosexual and homosexual, about their sexual experiences in their relationships (married or common-law). Interviewers asked these men about their "attempts to reconcile the conflict between their personal sexual needs and the requirements associated with long-term monogamy" (p.86). The men completed the Sexual Boredom Scale (Watt and Ewing 1996), but interviewers used the men's responses to this scale as jumping-off points for their interview discussions. The transcribed interview tapes were analyzed using discourse analysis, where "language

then is a central focus in understanding people's private and public positions, their identity and their relationship to themselves and others" (p.70). Interviewers noticed that the participants were not so willing to discuss the issue of boredom in their current relationships, as they were to talk about it in previous experiences, with different partners. However, when they did talk about boredom in their current, long-term relationship, the men often relied on a biological discourse, that men, more than women, require novelty in their sexual encounters, and want sex more often than their partners (although this was mostly true for the heterosexual men). But while the men described their sexual needs this way, they also talked about the benefits of being in a long-term, loving relationship that they knew would sometimes mean boring sex. Tunariu and Reavey summarized this main finding:

> i) sexual boredom is construed as a natural progressive feature of all long-term sexuo-romantic relationships;
> ii) sexual boredom is construed as a reasonable trade-off for 'true love' and long-term companionship. (p.79).

Unlike many studies in psychology that suggest that boredom, measured as a discrete variable, is experienced by passive participants as a result of repetitive, monotonous stimulation, Tunariu and Reavey (2003) conclude that sexual boredom can be seen as a discursive practice to evaluate ongoing experiences and anxieties, and managing the actions of self and other (p.87).

In 2003, Stephen Vodanovich conducted a literature review of the psychometric measures of boredom from the previous 25 years, including Farmer and Sundberg's (1986) boredom proneness scale. Vodanovich critiques boredom scales for their atheoretical foundations and, in some cases, their low reliability. He may be the first to suggest that measures of boredom should include overt behavioural measures, and not just survey-style self-report attitude measures. Ultimately, he calls for "an integrated theory and definition of boredom" (p.589). I write this only three years after Vodanovich's review; despite the apparent significance that many academics (and others, as I detailed in Chapter One) attribute to boredom, it is nothing short of remarkable that the field in which this subject has inspired the most published research, is still relying on inadequate quantitative measures and, more importantly, has not developed a sophisticated theoretical approach to ground studies in boredom.

Summarizing this literature, which appears vast in comparison to the dearth of boredom studies in sociology, it appears that we can say that people (or, more accurately, undergraduates) who are both prone to boredom (Farmer and Sundberg 1986), and susceptible to boredom (Zuckerman 1979) experience more negative than positive affect. That is, boredom proneness can be seen as a gateway for "unpleasant emotions and cognitions" (von Gemmingen et al. 2003:917). Significantly, none of these articles, the majority of which are quantitative, addresses the direction of the relationship, that is, whether boredom causes, or is caused by, the independent variables in question. As well, almost all of the studies (conservatively, 90%) rely on US undergraduate students, often from psychology courses, most of whom are young, white, women. Thus, all the results presented in the above section may be suggestive, but they are by far neither representative nor generalizable and may, in some cases, even be misleading and incorrect. Further, these studies consider boredom as a single independent variable, usually measured as "high" or "low." As non-psychology researchers (Department of Recreation), Barnett and Wolf Klitzing (2006:235) point out, most of the psychology studies have framed boredom as an individual, contextual response and not considered the endogenous nature of boredom; as well, these researchers write that psychology studies "follow the admonition that conceptualizing boredom as a unitary construct is misleading and the term should be pluralized." As recently as 2005, Danckert and Allman write, "as yet, very little is known about the cognitive or neural bases of the subjective experience of boredom." It is clear, however, that "the ultimate objective is certainly to prevent and provide an efficacious psychological healing to reduce boredom" (Gana, Deletang and Metais 2000:503). That is, boredom is conceptualized as a negative individual experience, one that is in need of "healing," thus emphasizing the victim status of the bored person (Rule 1998), while also reminiscent of the early moral inclinations to cast the bored person as somehow failing his or her social responsibilities.

Boredom in Psychoanalysis

Freud, the "Father" of psychoanalysis, did not have much to say about boredom. It does not appear as a concept or theme, either directly or indirectly, in his work. The concepts of the unconscious, repressed desire, sublimation and a number of other key ideas of

Freud's spawned a growing literature in psychoanalysis in the early years of the 20th century. Those that did publish on boredom, namely Otto Fenichel (1934), Ralph Greenson (1952) and Edward Bibring (1953), described how patients repressed their desires and in combination with suppressed "instinctual tension," this lead to boredom. The objects of these repressed desires were not necessarily known, consciously, to the patient; thus, boredom was considered to be a defense mechanism against knowing what the object of desire clearly was. Otto Fenichel was an early member of the Viennese Psychoanalytic Association and was the first to write about boredom as a complex problem. In the 1930s, he was the first to write about clinical boredom (Gabriel 1988). According to Fenichel, there were two types of boredom: innocent and pathological. Innocent boredom was considered to be a response to a particular situation, it was transient and normal. Pathological boredom, on the other hand, was a result of something expected *not* happening, because we repress our instinctual desire for gratification for reasons of anxiety. Fenichel also distinguished between monotony (lack of novel stimulation, leading to disinterest and then to sleep) and pathological boredom (e.g., having to do what we do not want to do). He concluded that "boredom occurs when a desire exists for which the object that would satisfy the desire has been repressed" (in Nuckolls 2007:39).

People with "strong oral fixations" were considered to be particularly prone to boredom (Greenson 1952) and the existential experience of emptiness associated with boredom was linked to issues of absent mothers or breastfeeding. Edward Bibring argued that boredom was a condition of depersonalization, of "not having any feelings, of being blocked emotionally, being frozen, of feeling the self to be unreal, in a word, apathy" (1953:28). In contrast, the depressed person is passive, not over goal conflicts, but because the ego has suffered a narcissistic injury.

According to Greenson (1952:7), "in boredom there is self-administered deprivation, loss of thoughts and fantasies which would lead to satisfaction." However, Greenson also admitted that "boredom is a phenomenon which is easier to describe than to define" (1952:7). He defined boredom as an ego state and listed five coexisting conditions: (1) unspecific longing; (2) a disinclination to action; (3) a passive expectant attitude that the external world will provide gratification; (4) a distorted sense of time

wherein time stops or is moving very slowly; and (5) absence of fantasy (Greenson 1953). Even 30 years ago, Esman (1979), writing in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, also considered boredom to be a deficit, or fault, of the sufferer[129]:

> The paucity of fantasy in the bored person may reflect a developmental ego defect as well as, or instead of, the commonly-cited impulse-defense conflicts. The need for externally-supplied stimulation characteristic of persons with a field-dependent cognitive style, and/or characterological passivity may be among the significant predisposing factors for the development of boredom. (p. 423)

Thus, in the psychoanalytic literature, similar to the results of psychology research, boredom was constructed as a personal flaw, something inherently wrong with the sufferer that must be fixed through psychoanalytic therapy. In the particular case of psychoanalytic studies, boredom was the result of not knowing the cause of one's repressed desires; that is, the experience of the nothingness of boredom was due to a kind of blockage in meaning. The links made between boredom, oral fixations and depression, further suggest that boredom is a pathological condition the cause of which lies deep in unconscious meaning structures.

Depression and Anxiety, Boredom's Close Cousins?

Quantitative studies in psychology have generally shown that boredom proneness is positively correlated with depression, hopelessness, and loneliness (e.g., Farmer and Sundberg 1986). One place the psychology and psychoanalytic literature on boredom could be said to overlap, is on the issue of boredom and depression[130]. Specifically, psychologists and psychoanalysts ask if these conditions are the same, similar, and/or does one lead to the other? Nuckolls (2007) provides an insightful discussion of the differences between these two affective states:

> In depression, so much energy is required to inhibit the aggressive (but forbidden) impulse that the person is drained of vitality. Boredom is the opposite side of the same coin. In boredom the impulse remains energetic – hence the feeling that one

[129] Rule (1998) quotes the definition of boredom from a 1996 psychiatric dictionary, which similarly implies the victim status of the bored person: boredom is "a feeling of unpleasantness due to a need for more activity, or a lack of meaningful stimuli, or an inability to become stimulated" (in Rule, p.329).
[130] Befitting a sociological analysis of boredom, Barbalet (1999) notes that depression is an inwardly directed state, whereas boredom is "more typically outwardly directed to activity, engagements, and environment" (p.635).

> should be 'doing something' – but it cannot be satisfied because its real object, being forbidden, eludes identification. (p.42-43)

Boredom and depression are therefore similar in that the person suffering from either appears to be listless; however, the impulse behind each condition is quite different. In depression we do *not* (usually) have the desire to do anything; in boredom, however, the discomfort of this experience lies in the very fact that we *do* have the desire to do something, but do not know what that is (psychoanalysts would say this is because we have long repressed the actual object of desire). According to Gabriel (1988:157), when we are depressed, "we are usually overburdened by feelings and fantasy of a self-depreciating quality… the depressed person is not passive because of conflict over goals, but rather because the ego is overwhelmed by narcissistic injury." According to Gabriel (1988), for both boredom and depression, "unconscious goals are maintained. However in boredom the goals appear repressed and there appear to be no suitable substitutes… the result of boredom is an inability to bring about goal directed behaviors in spite of many attempts" (p.162-163).

Long (2004) makes the point that, at least in the English language, we may be limited by the words we have to most accurately describe our feelings and cognitive states. A quotation from a respondent in Gabriel's study helps to make this point when she says that:

> When I am bored I feel nothing. Nothing moves me at all. I feel like I am existing and doing nothing but waiting for time to pass, to go by. I just want to finish whatever I have to do. I have had this feeling for years. I don't feel sad, but I am not happy. I just feel a sort of nothingness. Nothing interests me. (1988: 160)

With only this quotation to analyze, we can see that what some people would call boredom, others might call depression or apathy. In this particular case, that fact that this woman says she has been bored "for years" could well indicate that she is in fact suffering from depression; experiences of boredom tend to be either fleeting, or at least temporary, whereas part of the definition of depression is that a person has suffered for a lengthier period of time. In this particular example, it is clear that the two states share similarities in terms of the felt experience. However, Perkins and Hill (1985) argue that we can distinguish between dislike and boredom, and, inexplicably, Mikulas and Vodanovich (1993:4) "assume people can distinguish boredom from other states of

dissatisfaction, including frustration and restlessness which are often confounded with boredom."

Anxiety has also been compared to boredom. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1975), boredom and anxiety both result from the mismatch between a person's abilities and environmental challenges; boredom results when a person's competencies exceed the situation, and anxiety occurs when more is demanded than a person is capable of doing, or expressing. In response to the work of Anthony Giddens, who argues that we live in an age of anxiety, and Ulrich Beck, who writes about the anxiety of living in a risk-oriented society, Wilkinson (1999) argues that we cannot actually know this, empirically (that is, we cannot establish the prevalence of anxiety), and nor can we discern whether the social life of earlier periods was qualitatively different than it is today.

Wilkinson argues that the "reasons for anxiety do not necessarily arouse feelings of anxiety" (1999:446). Different people respond to potentially anxiety-making situations, differently, including not feeling anxious at all. Similarly for boredom, apparently justifiable reasons for experiencing boredom (for example, a dull lecture, delivered in a monotone voice, late on a hot afternoon) do not necessarily result in boredom for all present, or even the same degree of boredom in two people. Citing Freud, Wilkinson notes that anxiety is considered to be a defensive reaction, in response to a known or expected danger. When this anxiety can be channeled into a specific fear, the sufferer can summon the courage to deal with the source of the fear: "Fear, unlike anxiety, clearly directs us towards its source, and on that basis may be faced and endured" (p.451). In contrast, remaining in a state of anxiety, "keeps us locked in the dark, struggling even to glimpse an opportunity for courage" (p.451). Similar to anxiety, boredom lacks a definite object of focus; the thing to confront, in boredom, is meaninglessness. As with anxiety, there is no known, specific, fear; rather, an amorphous state of dissatisfaction. But one important distinction between anxiety and boredom is that in the case of anxiety, we are unaware, or ignorant, of *future* events about which we feel threatened, whereas with boredom, we are uninterested in the *current* situation. Where "anxiety entails being emotionally disturbed and psychologically traumatized by the knowledge of our ignorance of future events" (p.452), boredom lacks this emotional component. The hazardous future of anxiety does not exist in boredom. Temporally, then,

anxiety is about the future of being, whereas boredom is about the present, the now. Anxiety "appears to thrive upon our capacity to look towards the future and anticipate potentially threatening situations" (p.452), and boredom thrives upon the absence of perceived meaning in the moment. While prolonged boredom may result in feelings of anxiety, this anxiety is qualitatively different than the initial boredom. The anxiety, in this case, is as a result of the worry that the boredom will not end, that there may be future hazards related to a long-term boredom. On the other hand, anxiety itself is not boring; even though the state of anxiety is unpleasant, it has meaning and holds our interest, whether the anxiety is based on a real or imagined (irrational) fear, still unnamed.

Boredom in Sociology

Interestingly enough, it is a geographer (Anderson 2004) and an anthropologist (Musharbash 2007) who concisely summarize the more sociological literature on boredom. In order to help explain the apparent "contemporary over-abundant presence of boredom under modernity/post-modernity," Anderson (2004:741) lists four neo-Weberian explanations commonly attributed to the rise of boredom, through the theory of disenchantment:

1. processes of secularization, linked to feelings of a metaphysical void
2. modern forms of individuation that led to a calculated individualism
3. changing conditions of leisure and concurrent right to happiness
4. rise of standardized, standardizing, organizations of time-space

Musharbash (2007:314) sums up this literature on boredom succinctly: "the interdisciplinary literature colocates the emergence of boredom with that of modernity, linking boredom to secularization, an increased focus on the self, the belief in one's entitlement to happiness, the work-leisure distinction, overload, and standardizations of time organization." In other words, the usual sociological suspects are considered the culprits for the so-called rise in boredom: secularization, individualism, leisure and bureaucracy. However, as Anderson notes, "boredom, once explained, has therefore become a symptom of the 'imprint of meaninglessness' that characterizes the disenchantment of the material world. It insists in a rationalized, intellectualized, world in which the nature of matter is dulled" (p.741).

Although Smith (1981) laments the fact that, within the field of psychology, only 40 academic articles on the subject of boredom were published in the 50 years preceding his review article, this seems a plethora of articles compared to the sociological literature on the subject. A review of the sociological literature specifically addressing the concept of boredom (i.e., not just "boredom" as a variable in quantitative analysis) results in only a handful of peer reviewed articles published in the past 30 years (Charlton and Hertz 1989; Brisset and Snow 1993; Conrad 1997; Barbalet 1999; Darden and Marks 1999; Bracke et al., 2006), and one book title (Klapp 1986)[131]. Of course, going back further, Goffman detailed the boredom of living in total institutions (1961), Veblen described the bored, conspicuous consumption of the leisure class (1899), Weber talked about the disenchantment of the world, and Durkheim's concept of anomie is arguably similar to boredom. Perhaps most famously, Marx theorized the alienation workers experience in the tedious, broken-down labour they perform for bourgeois owners. However, none of these writers specifically discusses boredom, *per se* (in either English or German) at any length, except, briefly, Erving Goffman, whom I discuss below.

However, Marx's concept of alienation differs from ideas of boredom in at least two important ways. First, alienation was, for Marx, tied to labour, specifically, the application of capitalist principles, whereas boredom has not been associated, theoretically or otherwise, with the *specific* perils of capitalism[132]; however, boredom has been studied in the context of paid work. Secondly, because of Marx's historical, materialist analysis of the concept, alienation is not an ambiguous term. The word boredom, on the other hand, has more ambiguous connotations and is not generally associated with the weightier political matters to which alienation belongs. In the third of his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx writes that, "the mystical feeling which drives the philosopher from abstract thinking to intuition is boredom, the longing

[131] This sociological literature search was defined by articles with the word "boredom" in their titles, that are published in peer-reviewed sociology journals. I acknowledge that other sociologists may address the issue of boredom in their articles, and also that articles dealing with the concept of boredom may be treated sociologically and be published in non-sociology journals. In his book on boredom, sociologist Orrin Klapp (1986) acknowledges that his own research draws on literature from a variety of fields. My point, however, is that the concept "boredom" has not been given the same consideration in sociology as it has in other fields, notably psychology.

[132] Boredom has been discussed in terms of the boredom of the upper classes, whose boredom was, ironically, a sign of their financial success and excess.

for a content" (1975:344). In this example, we see that Marx uses the concept of boredom in a productive sense, which is quite opposite to the deadening of feeling and motivation implied by alienation. Also, here Marx treats boredom in an idealist, not materialist, sense, where boredom is a kind of mental pathway between abstract thinking and intuition. Higonnet (2002:214) speculates that, "to be bored, for the Marxist, must be the fate in this world of those alienated souls who are lucid enough to understand the emptiness of the society of spectacle but are unable to embrace the only true remedy, namely a dialectical conception of revolution, politics, and community." In this sense, boredom is a kind of impotent political condition, where entropy increases and conditions worsen (as in the second law of thermodynamics).

Where Marx's concept of alienation ultimately results, he famously argued, in a revolution to overthrow capitalism, Durkheim's (1964:1966) anomie does not suggest the power of political mobilization; rather, it suggests the kind of chaos that could result, psychologically for the individual, in suicide, and socially, in lawless disorder and rampant deviance. Again, unlike boredom's more ambivalent, albeit generally negative connotations, anomie is more definitely and dramatically associated with the collapse of the principles governing human interaction. It would seem then that boredom may not belong in this weight class. Yet, the meaninglessness of the labour experience described – and politicized -- by Marx, is very similar to the experience of boredom (Barbalet 1999); I would suggest that boredom may in fact be a condition of alienation. Similarly, the lack of focus, the restlessness and agitation that often accompanies boredom, may lead to anomie through, for example, potentially destructive choices we make in order to escape boredom (Zijderveld 1979). If we define boredom, provisionally, as a sense of lack of meaning, accompanied by feelings of restlessness and frustration (because we cannot say exactly what it is we desire, cannot name the thing that would be meaningful), then Weber's (1946) disenchantment comes closest in meaning. Weber famously theorized that increasing processes of rationality – the hyper-efficient means-to-ends ethos, that all problems could be mastered by rational calculation – lead to disenchantment, at both the personal and social level. Although there are similarities between Marx's alienation and Weber's rationalization-leading-to disenchantment, for Marx, alienation was not the last chapter, but a transitional episode in history. Weber was more of a pessimist and saw

disenchantment as the ineluctable and permanent result of bureaucratization. However, boredom may be more a case of lack of enchantment, rather than disenchantment: we are not so much unhappy with what we have, but we do not know what we want. We have the sense, the urge, of desire, but no focus for it; it is an impotent desire. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter Five.

Moving from the classical sociologists to the traditional sociologists of the 20th century, Robert Merton did not write about boredom, but in 1957 he wrote about retreatism, "a state of psychic passivity in response to some discernible extent of anomie" (1966 [1957]:188). He suggested that retreatism was a deviant form of withdrawal from "normal" life, and, like crime and delinquency, it was difficult to know its true extent and prevalence. Likely as a result of this, he speculates, "it has tended to be neglected as a subject for study by sociologists" (p.189). He links the "syndrome" of retreatism to the historical *acedia*, or *accidie*, and with the concomitant apathy, melancholy and anhedonia (the inability to feel pleasure). Oddly, although he seems to come close, conceptually at least, he does not mention boredom and notes, for a second time, that "sociologists have accorded the syndrome [retreatism] singularly little attention" (p.189). He speculates, but goes no further, on the possible connection between retreatism and political apathy.

In his 1967 book, *Interaction Ritual*, Goffman devotes one and a half pages to a discussion of boredom in his essay "Alienation from Interaction." He gives the example of the person who is not interested in a particular conversation. This person, for either reasons of instrumentality (i.e., ulterior motives, something they want from those involved in the conversation) or reasons of genuine care for the others, puts on a show of being interested, in order to hide genuine disinterest. Goffman points out that we all have subtle ways of feigning interest in such a way as to indicate to our fellow conversationalists that we are not really interested, but making an heroic effort to appear to be so[133]. Goffman suggests that this is a form of rebellion usually used by those without much power. According to him, our demonstration of boredom, even (or particularly) if subtle, is a form of insubordination:

> The ways of not quite concealing tactfully concealed misinvolvement constitute, then, the symptoms of boredom. Some symptoms of boredom suggest that the

[133] According to Spacks (1989:589), "self-presentation as bored implies a stance of superiority to a world unable to rise to one's demands" (cf. Goodstein 2005).

> individual will make no effort to terminate the encounter or his official participation in it but that he will no longer give as much to it. The initiation of side-involvements, such as leafing through a magazine or lighting a cigarette, are instances. Other symptoms of boredom suggest that the individual is about to terminate official participation and function as a tactful warning of this. (p.127)

Although Goffman lists, in a footnote, several academic journal sources for the study of boredom, and even says that J.D. Salinger's 1951 novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, deals with boredom in adolescence, he does not address the subject himself at any length. What he does say, continued from the above, is worth quoting at length here as it represents, to my knowledge, the only description of the act of being bored, within the sociological literature. It is pure Goffman, in the dramaturgical style that few have since been able to emulate:

> To manifest signs of boredom is an inconsiderate thing. But in a certain way he who does so assures the others that he is not affecting something that is not felt; they at least know where they stand with him. To suppress these signs completely is suspect, for this prevents others from obtaining the benefit of feed-back cues that might tell them what the situation really is. Thus, while there is one obligation to affect involvement, there is another one inducing the individual not to affect it too well. It is an interesting fact that when the self of the boring individual is deeply committed to the proceedings, as it may be, for example, during leave-takings and avowals of affection, then the bored individual is likely to feel a strong compunction to conceal signs of alienation and thoroughly affect involvement. It is thus at the most poignant and crucial moments of life that the individual is often forced to be the most contriving; these, too, will be the times when the boring individual will be in greatest need of candor from others and least able to bear receiving it. (p.128)

For Goffman, as is true for much of his work, social actors contrive to hide their genuine responses, in this case boredom, in an effort to maintain an acceptable presentation of self, a socially accepted persona that is always strategizing to maintain the civil bonds of social interaction. In the above excerpt, the onus for maintaining this civil interaction also falls to the acquaintances of the boring person, who must somehow tactfully convey this unbearable information.

The first published study of boredom by a sociologist is a book written by Orrin Klapp (1986). In *Overload and Boredom*, Klapp skips the question of *what* is boredom, and instead starts with the question of *where* is boredom? Unusually poetic for a

sociologist, he comments on the social nature of boredom in a passage where the first line echoes the famous "a specter is haunting Europe" (Marx and Engels 1989 [1848]:8):

> A strange cloud hangs over modern life. At first it was not noticed; now it is thicker than ever. It embarrasses claims that the quality of life is getting better. It reduces commitment to work. It is thickest in cities where there are the most varieties, pleasures, and opportunities. Like smog, it spreads to all sorts of places it is not supposed to be. The most common name for this cloud is boredom. (p.11-12)

Where much of the research in psychology argues that boredom is the result of a *lack* of stimulation, Klapp's thesis is that there is *too much* information for us to cope with meaningfully and it is this information overload that is the cause of our boredom. According to Klapp, "the result for our information society is that we suffer a lag in which the slow horse of meaning is unable to keep up with the fast horse of mere information" (1986:2)[134]. However, Klapp says that boredom is just a symptom of the "degradation of information increasing entropy of modern society in spite – and to some extent on account – of its large information load" (p.3). He suggests two categories of information overload: too much redundancy (e.g., boring sameness) and too much variety of information (e.g., irrelevant, trivial, noise). Klapp argues that "boredom is a social problem… some of its causes are systemic – structural, cultural, or communicational" (1986:27) and that "Capitalism and socialism both have their share of it. It seems to be a pervasive problem of modern social systems in any part of the world" (p.31). These are, however, speculative statements that Klapp does not support with other research.

The tone of this book of essays is that of a mournful, the-sky-is-falling lament. Although Klapp includes a wide variety of research sources and much of what he writes is interesting, it is often nostalgic, romantic and over-earnest. Boredom, based on information overload (whether through the banal or excessive variety) is used to explain many of the world's problems, from disappearing indigenous languages and rituals, to fast food, shallow fashion trends, Disney-like entertainment complexes and television control of the media. The cultural homogenization he describes is now explained more often (more than 20 years after Klapp's book was published) through processes of so-

[134] Commenting on Klapp, Gehring (1997:136) adds: "It is not just that the horse is faster, but that entirely new breeds of horse have been introduced in the twentieth century," and "the slow horse of meaning has nothing but the tail of the quickly receding fast horse of information in view" (p.138).

called globalization. These politically and economically based arguments are more sophisticated than Klapp's, although, depending of course on the socio-political view of the writer, they are making the same kinds of arguments as he is. Klapp proposes a metaphorical model[135], using four paired concepts to help understand variety and redundancy in terms of information overload. I reproduce his model here below (Figure 3).

[135] Klapp's is the only model of boredom in the sociology literature which is the main reason I reproduce it here.

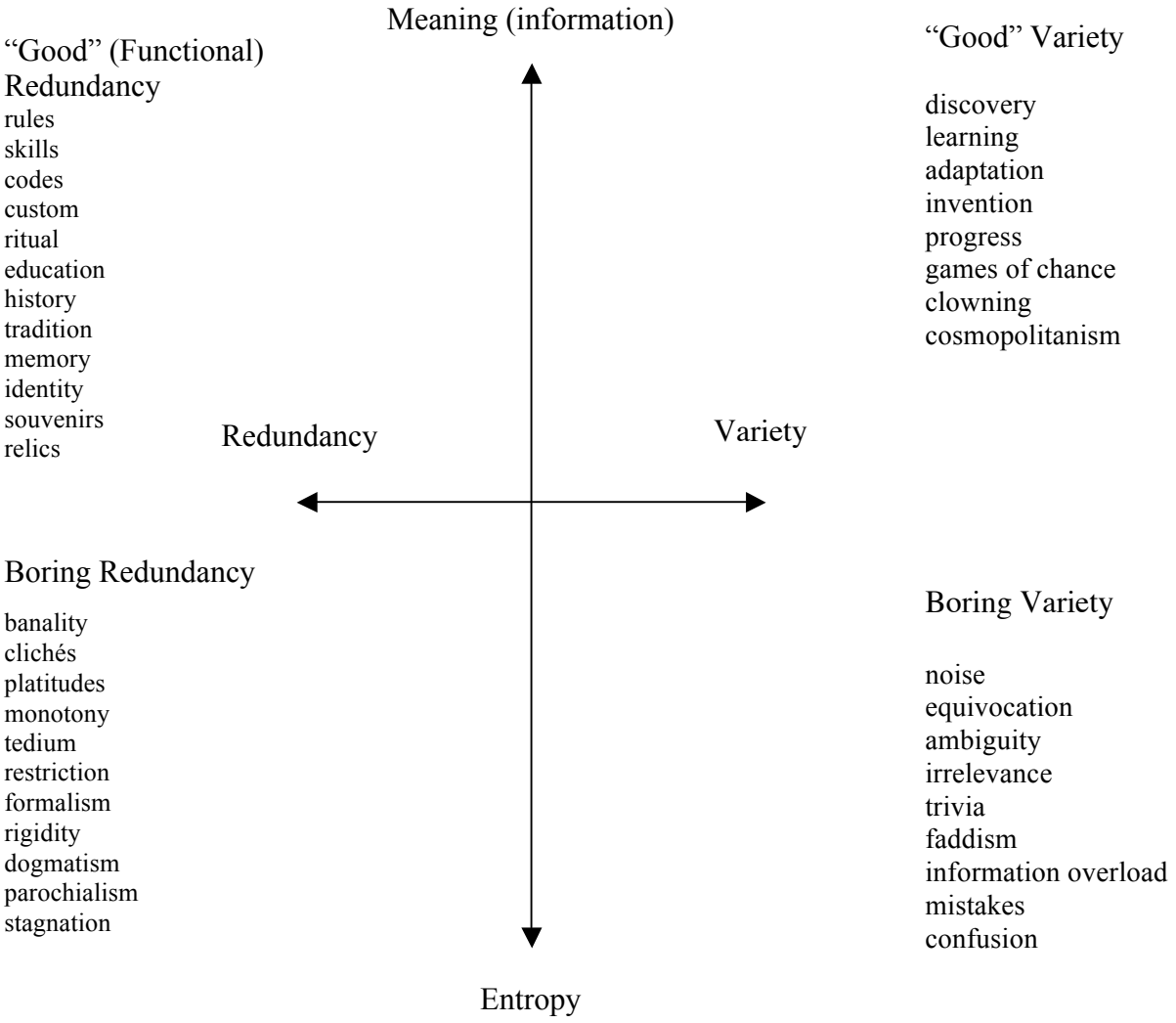

Figure 3 Four Sectors of Information Search (Klapp 1986:119)

In the first parameter, Meaning (information)/Entropy, entropy is considered to be the negative of information, the confusion and randomness opposing information. This pair of concepts represents the ends of a continuum: "in general, information means progress and entropy a step backward" (p.118). Here boredom is meant to be an indicator of a lack in meaning/information; when information does not arouse our interest, boredom is the result. The other paired concepts, redundancy and variety, also represent ways in which we can experience boredom, according to Klapp. Redundancy and variety each represent continuums; that is, for Klapp there is "good" redundancy (e.g., familiar and comforting rituals) and "boring" redundancy (e.g., nothing new and nothing

interesting), and there is "good" variety (e.g., discovery that leads to invention) and "boring" variety (e.g., trivia, irrelevance). Klapp contends that "everyone awake is in one of these quadrants, for the simple reason that there is no place else to go" (p.120).

Really?

This means that we can (only) ever be happily, meaningfully engaged with information when it is familiar and supportive, or interesting enough to arouse our interest. Alternatively, we can only ever be bored with information if it is banal or operating like background noise. Where then is the quadrant for critical thinking? That is, in which quadrant was Klapp when he developed this schema? We would have to assume he was interested by his research and discoveries, and by the very act of adapting this knowledge to fit a schema ("good" variety). He would likely also be comfortable with the rules, codes, customs of intellectual thinking and writing ("good" redundancy). Presumably he was not experiencing his task as banal ("boring" redundancy) or trivial ("boring" variety), even though he would have had to wade through quite a number of banal and trivial ideas contained in the articles and books he had to read in order to produce his paired concept schema. My point here is twofold: everyone awake, as Klapp puts it, can be in more than one quadrant at a time, and, secondly, these four quadrants do not necessarily cover all the bases of meaning versus boredom. Obviously, Klapp's schema is unapologetically modernist.

It seems reasonable to assume that if we are enjoying engaging in a particular sport, with its attendant rules, codes and traditions ("good" redundancy), that we would at the same time enjoy the twists and turns of the competition, how our own competencies have to be adapted and redirected as the game progresses ("good" variety). Indeed, games of sport particularly, are enjoyable *because* there are rules to give the event structure and thus impart meaning to the players who work with, and even against, the rules. If we look at the lists of indicators in Klapp's schema, above the redundancy/variety line, it is difficult to imagine a situation wherein elements from only one list are in effect. Even if we take quadrants that are diagonal to one another, such as boring redundancy and good variety, we can imagine a situation where we experience elements from both lists. For example, the process of research itself involves collecting and reading a number of documents, many of which researchers perceive as banal and tedious (boring redundancy

quadrant); however, the overall process of research may prove quite interesting, including the discovery of tedious articles and how they might fit into the researcher's overall project (good variety quadrant). Similarly, as we participate in a traditional religious event (good redundancy), we may experience parts of it as irrelevant, trivial and ambiguous (boring variety). We can generally countenance a certain amount, or degree, of what Klapp calls boring redundancy, or boring variety, while we are, overall, experiencing good redundancy or good variety. We might even make the argument that part of what makes an event or situation interesting (i.e., not boring), is that there is a continual tradeoff between the two poles: a sudden discovery amongst a list of banal items, for example, can make that discovery seem more exciting, more of an actual find.

All sociological journal articles about boredom have been published within the last 20 years. In 1989, Charlton and Hertz conducted 90 interviews with 44 married couples and two single men, where all of the young, working-class men worked for the American Military as security specialists who guard nuclear weaponry, on two US air force bases. The purpose of the interviews was to see how it was that these couples coped with the shift work of the men, and also, to examine how the men handled the long hours of boredom in their jobs. These men find themselves in a most unusual occupational situation:

> Since they are charged with the awesome responsibility of denying others access to the most destructive of human creations, failure to perform that duty could have the gravest consequences for society. In recognition of these facts, the Air Force has established explicit rules and very severe penalties for neglect of duty… this form of contingent work puts guards in an unenviable situation: mind-numbing boredom and monotony on one side and continuous testing, rigid hierarchy, and the specter of severe penalties on the other. (p.312)

These men can only define a successful work shift as a day wherein nothing happens (that is, there was no attempt at intrusion) and indeed they are paid to ensure that nothing happens.

Charlton and Hertz categorized the men's boredom coping behaviour based on a continuum of risk (i.e., behaviour potentially punishable by their superiors): no risk/low risk (e.g., talking to themselves, washing already clean vehicles, reading manuals, thinking about what they will do the next day on the job; much like Roy's (1959) "banana

time" idea[136]) and high risk methods (e.g., listening to contraband radios, reading textbooks, novels, pornographic magazines, etc., watching small-screen televisions and playing makeshift games of basketball or baseball). Despite the threat to their jobs, the guards judged their behaviours as worth the risk -- in a system that rewards supervisors for detecting and reporting these unauthorized behaviours -- to relieve the intense boredom of their work; however, these risks, and the associated behaviours of trying to hide their risky behaviour, also add a level of stress to their jobs. Charlton and Hertz conclude that: "giving meaning to boring work is neither an easy task nor one simply intended to pass the time. Boredom, monotony, and loneliness can etch deeply into the individual and social identities of the guards" (p.321).

Brisset and Snow (1993) consider the cultural conditions that facilitate the experience of boredom in contemporary America and point to "a growing cultural arrhythmia" (p.244) which results in our feeling less involved and in control of our own lives. They argue that, due in large part to the various inventions of the modern era which have made our lives easier (e.g., in food production, medicine and household machinery), we no longer experience much sense of contrast. Risks are more calculable than they were, for example, 100 years ago, and thus we lack the "zest of momentum" (p.245). For Brisset and Snow, the experience of boredom does not mean that we have nothing going on in our lives at a particular time, but that whatever is going on does not appear to lead to a viable future and we feel "disengaged from the ebb and flow of human interaction" (p.241).

According to Brisset and Snow, the change from an agricultural to an industrial economy means that we are now "obsessed with speed and [have lost] a sense of rhythm"

[136] In the 1950s, sociologist Donald Roy conducted an ethnographic study of factory machine operators, a job he also assumed for the research. He noticed that in order to cope with "the beast of monotony" (1959:158) and "the beast of boredom" (p.164), workers in his area invented rituals that were enacted throughout the day. "Banana time," the title of his resulting article, refers to these made-up games, where co-workers tacitly agree to make use of otherwise innocuous daily events (sharing peaches, offering to share a banana) in order to help pass the time. Interestingly, Whyte and Whyte (1984) inaccurately describe "banana time" in their book about the experience of ethnography. They erroneously explain that banana time involved "a brief break in which all the workers peeled and ate their bananas" (p.26); however, in Roy's original study, one of the workers announces every day that it is "banana time" and then proceeds to open his lunch box in order to bring out his banana to share with his fellow workers. Meanwhile, a fellow worker (the same one each day) has already stolen the banana from the lunch box and eaten it himself, and much jocular banter ensues. Whyte and Whyte's inaccurate retelling masks the underlying processes Roy was trying to shed light on, in terms of the ingenious strategies bored workers use to help them pass the time and keep up their morale.

(p.245). They classify boredom as an interactional phenomenon and define it as "an experience of the absence of momentum or flow in a person's life…a situation where an individual experiences being out of synch with the ongoing rhythms of social life" (p.238-239). This rhythm, like the musical meaning of the word, implies that a social event or experience anticipates future events and experiences (like the beat in a song). There is, then, a time dimension to boredom, where either we cannot or do not anticipate future events, or that the anticipated events are so well mapped that we do not anticipate them. In the latter, according to Brisset and Snow, we feel that we have little or no control over our lives and thus lack the momentum to continue with any enthusiasm; that is, anticipated events are implicated in our current boredom: "In fact, it is only in anticipating a future in which one senses some personal participation and authorship in the emerging drama, that a person's present behavior becomes implicative" (p.240).

Brisset and Snow propose a nostalgic argument, that the more gritty and hard-edged everyday life of the past offered us more opportunities to find meaning in the rhythms and contrasts of pre-industrial social life[137]. It is an appealing argument in the sense that we can blame our present experiences of boredom, or disinterest, on structures that pre-date us, and hearken back to a romanticized vision of the ever illusive past. However, the experience of finding life meaningless, whether for an hour or for years, has long been the discussion of philosophers and theologians as I have discussed in the previous chapter. It may be true that more people experience this, and more often, than in the past – although we will never actually know whether this is true – but leaning on nostalgic reasoning does not lend itself to a gritty analysis of a phenomenon. As well, Brisset and Snow's analysis of boredom in the US assumes a homogeneous social landscape, where issues of class and social inequality are simply absent. They argue that the certainty people feel about their riskless futures contributes to boredom: yet, surely such certainty exists more for those with the financial and educational resources to plan such a future, those that can draw from past experiences that suggest their decisions will benefit them and not risk their lifestyles unnecessarily.

[137] cf Zygmunt Bauman's (2001) nostalgic comparison of community life pre- and post industrial revolution in *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*.

Peter Conrad's (1997) sociological contribution is to stress the subjective interpretation of boredom. According to him, "boredom is not a characteristic of an object, event or person, but exists in the relationship between individuals and their interpretation of their experience" (p.468). He emphasizes the idea that boredom is therefore relational and "not intrinsic to any event or object" (p.469). This seems a rather obvious observation to make; however, his point is that boredom itself is not an adequate explanation in terms of a response, but that it is "a gloss" that "describes only the endpoint, the interpretation of the situation" (p.469). To examine this idea, he asked 35 of his university students to write about a recent boring experience they'd had. The analysis of their responses indicated that understimulation ("nothing to do") was a common response. He concludes (as much of the psychology research does) that, "understimulation is a situation that people frequently call boredom" (p.471). However, he notes that what was likely more accurate is that "there was nothing they wanted to do or that aroused their interest" (p.470). This in itself is hardly newsworthy. What *is* remarkable, even extraordinary, is that in the US, students could say they have nothing to do and can think of nothing that interests them. Surely this is the more interesting finding: how is this possible? That is, how can a group of reasonably well-off young people, living in the wealthiest country, with access to such a wide variety of consumer items and sophisticated entertainment options, say that they have nothing to do? Surely this response, too, is a gloss, albeit one that Conrad does not pursue. He simply concludes that, "understimulation is a situation that people frequently call boredom" (p.471). The other theme that Conrad notes is that feelings of disconnection can be the cause of boredom, such as a "bad fit" between an individual and the situation she is in, and lack of sufficient knowledge to appreciate or maintain interest in a situation. These findings confirm his thesis that it is our interpretation, through our experience, of external situations, that determines whether or not we say we are bored.

Conrad does, however, suggest an interesting idea: that boredom may be "contingent on the social organization of time" (p.473). Unfortunately, however, this is mentioned only briefly in his conclusion. As well, he notes that waiting, often the beginning of the experience of boredom, is interpreted differently in different cultures (his personal anecdote compares his own impatient waiting in bank lineups, as an

American, versus the experience of Indonesians who regularly had to wait much longer in their own bank queues). Probably the most theoretically interesting point he makes is his assertion that "boredom is a failure of expectation" (p.474); however, he does not elaborate on this except to say that this expectation is based on our subjective interpretation of a situation which lends further confirmation to his thesis that boredom is relational, and interpreted.

Barbalet (1999) set out to tackle issues of social meaning through boredom, which, he argues, is about meaninglessness. In this way, his research is the most similar to my own project. According to Barbalet, "social life – indeed human life – simply is not possible without the quality of meaningfulness" (1999:631) and "yet, at times, persons do feel that their actions or circumstances are without purpose of meaning… [they experience] boredom" (p.632). Barbalet's analysis suggests that boredom serves a critical function against meaninglessness, particularly in the work place. He cites numerous studies about work and the problems of repetition and monotony with which some workers have to contend. His interpretation of these study results is hardly critical. For example, he cites a study from the 1920s in which factory workers were surveyed. He quotes this result without remark: "'there was not only a real interest in the work … but also a desire to win the approval of the authorities and interest in many social activities binding one to another'" (in Barbalet 1999:639). Of course, without knowing more about the work conditions and the precise nature of the study myself, it is unwise to offer a detailed critique. We can at least ask the question, what kind of work did these workers apparently find so interesting, and yet at the same time were being surveyed about issues of boredom and monotony? Why did they want to please their superiors beyond performing to the level required by their job description in order to receive their pay? In the absence of other information, I would at least speculate that this particular study was perhaps funded by the company itself. However, Barbalet does cite more recent research that suggests that positive interpersonal relationships at work can reduce the reported feelings of boredom there. In emphasizing the point "that repetition does not lead to boredom if the activities involved retain meaning for those performing them" (p.640), Barbalet gives the example of a large science study that involved tedious work for many months. He notes that a principle researcher (his words) did not report any experience of

boredom, despite the long hours and tedium; Barbalet points out that the puzzle-solving nature of science likely kept this, and other, researchers engaged and interested in the project, thus preventing their boredom. This may be true – but what about the research assistants, those who were not at the level of the "principle researchers," those who knew their own reputations and paycheques would not be positively affected by all their hard work? Barbalet here misses the critique that interest can be linked to social structure – those with an interest in something may have a particular stake in it (in this case, scientific reputations and the potential spinoffs from this in terms of job prestige and salary).

Barbalet raises more points than he can adequately address in this article and so it is difficult to say what his research contributes, overall, to the sociological literature on boredom. He does treat boredom as an emotion, however, and in his conclusion asserts that it can, therefore, "serve as an explanatory variable in a variety of social processes without putting at risk the sociological quality of the account" (p.644). This positivistic conclusion is disappointing in an article that tries to deal with issues of meaning, something that, as Barbalet points out, is not often done well in sociology, and is left to psychologists. However, his own conclusion suggests that, as Darden and Marks (1999 below) warned, some sociologists consider boredom only as a variable to add to their quantitative analyses. Barbalet's attempt to understand how boredom is constructed, through meaning processes, comes up short of the mark and we are left none the wiser.

Darden and Marks (1999) critique sociological thinking about boredom and assert that:

> these approaches generally reflect the commonsense, largely ignored, and taken-for-granted treatment of our sort of boredom as an individual problem, the result of someone's 'letting go,' and giving in, or failure to stockpile 'adequate resources.' American sociology has taken the same approach: boredom is one's own fault; it is not important (p.15).

They draw their data from several sources: random sample telephone interviews of Americans in one state[138], 400 convenience-drawn written responses to the statement, "Please describe the last time you were bored and what you did about it," and "about 50"

[138] These telephone respondents were asked how much they agreed with the statement "Most people live interesting lives" and how frequently they found themselves bored: frequently, occasionally, seldom or never (Darden and Marks 1999:17).

informal, unstructured interviews from a "serendipitous sample" of people interested in their topic. They conclude that boredom "is not a social-level phenomenon, except insofar as we learn the socially-constructed meaning of the term from others. Boredom is a micro-level phenomenon, fleeting, motivating, and certainly not always either pathological or even negative in its outcomes" (p.30). It is likely, however, that the wording of their questions for respondents led to such a conclusion; that is, "please describe the last time *you* were bored…" is hardly likely to evoke anything other than a personal feeling response, and one that is already limited by the lack of common discourse on the subject. In this sense, then, these authors are reproducing the critique with which they began their article: that boredom is often considered a moral failing on the part of individuals. Darden and Marks, who write from a symbolic interactionist perspective, present an oddly shallow analysis of boredom, skirting deeper questions of meaning. They do begin their analysis by asserting that they are interested in boredom "*not* [as] a malaise symptomatic of something serious, but a relatively fleeting emotional experience…not ennui on any level" (p.17 italics in original). It is this limited focus which likely leads to their almost cheerful conclusion, that:

> boredom can… provide people with a respite at times. It serves to give people a chance to do less desirable activities…It gives people a chance to be contemplative… boredom, like the addict's occasional temporary withdrawal, may serve to reduce the tolerance level so that we again find interest in what have become less stimulating situations(p.33).

This type of conclusion reads more like a corrective, or solution, to a "social problem" that is neither compelling nor appropriately problematized in the first instance[139]. Certainly, it stands in stark contrast to their introductory statement that "the question of boredom, especially in contemporary American society, which many see as particularly prone to producing boredom, may be crucial to our future" (p.14).

In 2006, Bracke et al. published their empirical analysis of boredom as a variable in the experiences of people with chronic mental health problems. The results from their sample (N=646) of clients in 53 rehabilitation centres (in Belgium), indicate that there

[139] Similarly, sociologist Peter Conrad (1997:474) ends his article with the cliché that the experience of boredom "reminds us that the best we can do is endeavor to make our lives interesting." Apart from the obvious critique that this is a shallow rendering of a sociological analysis, it does indicate that there is something about the experience of boredom that elicits these types of ameliorative responses.

was less boredom experienced during participation in rehabilitation programs, than at other times of the day (moderate effect). As well, tasks in these programs that provided clients with intrinsic rewards, reduced boredom, although task complexity, extrinsic rewards and freedom from supervision did not affect clients' boredom. Interestingly, and clearly related to studies of boredom in occupations, these mental health clients report less boredom when task completion is emphasized. Bracke et al.'s unexpected finding is that clients in smaller organizations, with fewer staff, report less boredom than do clients in larger rehabilitation organizations. This social-structural empirical finding is the only one, to my knowledge, that links boredom with institutional/organizational size. However, this quantitative research, according to Bracke et al., "did not explicitly allow for study of the social processes generating boredom in clients" (p.207) and ultimately only two, four-item Likert scale indicators of boredom were included in their analysis.

Other than the boredom studies by sociologists Darden and Marks (1993), Charlton and Hertz (1989), and Bracke et al. (2006), there are two other empirical studies, though not undertaken by sociologists. However, I include them in this section as they are both social science studies and so their approaches use the same strategies and techniques that we use in sociology. The study by Jervis et al. (2003) began as a psychiatric epidemiological study, not originally about boredom *per se*; similarly, Musharbash's (1997) anthropological study of Australian aborigines was the result of the researcher's observation that boredom was clearly present as a potential theme in the data, even though it was not originally part of the research agenda.

In a rare piece of qualitative research examining the everyday experience of boredom among people living outside of a laboratory, a team of health and social science researchers conducted 44 ethnographic interviews with American Indians living on a reservation in north Central US (Jervis *et al*., 2003). Although the original purpose of the research was a community-based psychiatric epidemiological study, and researchers did not ask specific questions about boredom, about a third of respondents spontaneously brought up the subject of their own boredom, enough for researchers to categorize it as an explicit theme in these 44 interviews. Researchers analyzed the interview transcripts of the "bored" respondents, and compared these with the transcripts of the other respondents, those who had not explicitly brought up the topic. On a reservation where

unemployment and poverty rates neared 50%, it is not surprising that the "bored" respondents said that they had nothing to do. Jervis et al. linked these experiences to three characteristics of life on the reservation: (1) scarce employment, (2) few recreational options, and (3) transportation difficulties (p.45). The respondents linked their own drinking and drug use, and, in some cases, particularly with the younger men, "trouble" with the law (e.g., getting into fights, breaking and entering, theft), to their experience of prolonged boredom. According to one of the young men,

> 'Sometimes it's fun. It's really fun when everybody else—you wake up real bright and early and you just—I walk to my friend's house, go out there [and] that morning air is real, seems real clean. The sun's just now coming up. I don't know, it's like—man, it feels real, real good like that. When you just see the sun come up—just to see that sun come up, it's like *another day*. But then after that, it all wears off and I'm like, "What am I going to do? What am I going to do for the rest of the day?' (p.45)

The non-bored respondents, by comparison, reported being busy with either their paid jobs, or their work at home with family and children and hobbies:

> On the whole, participants' descriptions of reservation youth conveyed the impression that they were increasingly identifying with dominant American cultural values, such as the notion that individual happiness is an entitlement, that pleasure is to be derived from without, and that boredom should be blamed on the external world's inadequacy… (p.49).

Unlike Klapp's (1986) theory that boredom is caused by overload, this research indicates that it can clearly also be caused by underload, and, in particular, an underload that is exacerbated by the knowledge of "missing pleasures" that are conveyed through various popular culture media[140]. Jervis et al. draw a connection between postcolonialism and boredom; pre-reservation culture has been eroded and under/unemployment, alcohol abuse and poverty now seriously impact the community. The effects of colonialism are such that meaning structures have been changed and there is no longer a fit between the people and their culture. Instead, a sense of relative deprivation ("missing pleasures") affects the young people in particular and "trouble" becomes one of their outlets for making meaning in the absence of other opportunities.

[140] Klapp (1986) does also say that boredom is caused by underload; however, he argues that it is the overload of information that causes much of late modern boredom and thus overload is the focus of his book.

Jervis et al. conclude that boredom on the reservation is increased by unemployment, few recreational options and lack of transportation. They point to the entrenched poverty on this reservation and argue that, unlike other studies that blame boredom on the excesses of conspicuous consumption, the poor can also be bored, perhaps more profoundly bored than the middle and wealthy classes. This conclusion serves to underscore the connection between boredom and meaning in a way that most other literature does not address. While it is true that work is often the source and cause of everyday boredom for many, and a number of studies examine this phenomenon, work does provide us with a sense of purpose and meaning, however small in some cases. It is something we do that fills most of our days, and engages us mentally and socially. Again, the range here is wide, but my point is that work is something to *do*, and this doing gives us a *raison d'être*, even if just to gain the paycheque. As well as the many hours spent at our jobs, this paycheque can provide us with the financial resources to engage in more desirable activities outside of work time, whether it is a $500 concert ticket, or a $5 movie rental fee. Thus Jervis et al. are the first researchers of boredom who suggest that much of the existing literature on the topic can be turned on its head: it is *un*employment and *lack* of consumer goods that can bring on and heighten the experience of boredom[141]. However, this does not mean that previous research (i.e., that which examines boredom on the job, or blames the excesses of consumer society) is negated by Jervis et al. Rather, it points to two things: (1) research that examines only the mostly middle class, will result in less than the full picture; while this has already been articulated by many other writers and academics, it remains the peril of social science that much of our research is based on the middle of mainstream culture; (2) boredom is complex and does not fit neatly, in ways we might expect, into our standard sociological categories of analysis (e.g., race/class/gender etc.).

The only other published work in the social sciences that specifically addresses the cultural aspects of boredom, is an article by anthropologist Yasmine Musharbash (2007) who examined boredom in the lives of aboriginal people in an Australian aboriginal settlement. Musharbash argues "for anthropological investigation of the

[141] Cf Brisset and Snow (1993:246): "When survival is no longer problematic, when work is no longer instrumental, when leisure is plentiful and affordable, boredom is often engendered."

phenomenon as a means of exploring socioculturally specific engagements with locally distinct forms of modernity" (p.308) and points out that, "most anthropological considerations of boredom are hidden in ethnographies, where boredom is mentioned in passing and seldom explicated upon" (p.309). Musharbash draws on the work of Jervis et al., to examine whether or not the experience of boredom amongst a particular group of Australian aboriginals reflects processes of "Westernization."

Musharbash uses Svendsen's (2005) "situational boredom" and "existential boredom" classifications to examine the experience of boredom amongst the Warlpiri people. In terms of situational boredom, the boredom that accompanies everyday experiences such as waiting, conversations with others, and participating in particular activities, Musharbash observed that the Warlpiri people do not label an entire person or event as "boring"; instead, they zoom in on particular qualities, qualifying boredom: "Essentialized reductions to one quality, one label, are intrinsically impossible in a social context that values indeterminacy… Such indeterminacy contrasts starkly with, for example, mainstream English, where a statement such as 'Ed is boring' unambiguously condemns Ed" (p.311). According to Musharbash, the Warlpiri people appear to have a high level of agreement on exactly what is boring and the range of things labeled as "boring" is "remarkably small" (p.311). Situations and places in which there are few people are most often described as boring, underscoring the relational aspects of this culture, according to Musharbash[142].

In terms of existential boredom, where the experience of boredom does not appear to be linked to any particular person, place or event, Musharbash explored the Warlpiri's experience of time. Few of these people, she notes, wear watches or have clocks in their homes. They rely on a school siren that rings seven times a day: wake up, start of school and business, beginning/end of tea break, beginning/end of lunch, and end of school day. But rather than this being construed as strictly a postcolonial hangover, where mainstream culture tried to impose clock time on the Warlpiri, Musharbash argues that the siren represents a blend of the colonial and the Warlpiri's experience of the "idiosyncratic, temporal jumble" that is "settlement time" (p.313). For the largely

[142] Nuckolls (2007), citing Whitehouse's ethnographic study of Melanesian religious movements, points to the perils of interpretation when a culture does not have the same word for what it is the researcher is studying.

unemployed Warlpiri, "killing time" often involves what we might call the complete exploitation of time: teenagers sit for days watching television, uninterrupted, people drive around aimlessly, going from town to town, and women gamble with cards for days in a row. On the one hand, this can be seen as similar to many people's choices for "killing time"; but the difference is that the Warlpiri people appear to take these to extremes: not an evening of watching television, but several days in a row; not an afternoon of card playing, but a week's worth, etc[143]. But what Musharbash notes, significantly, is that the Warlpiri indulge in these "killing time" behaviours *communally*.

Musharbash concludes that further studies of boredom should address the specific regional and local differences of this experience, "to examine it comparatively as a socioculturally and historically specific phenomenon above and beyond a universal sentiment, and to analyze its qualities as a response to rather than a by-product of modernity" (p.315). This is an important observation as much of the literature on boredom assumes an unproblematic cause-effect relationship with modernity and boredom, while also assuming a universal response. Given the (continued) unevenness of development, this is an untenable assumption.

More than the psychology studies, the sociological literature on boredom stresses processes of meaning and meaning making, though not to any great extent nor in any great detail. As Darden and Marks (1999) note, sociologists, like psychologists, tend to think of boredom as an unproblematic variable and treat it this way in their analyses.

Summary of Boredom Literature Findings from Psychology and Sociology

A summary of the results of the above literatures suggests that a number of personality traits are associated (either negatively or positively) with boredom. Not surprisingly, those who are intrinsically motivated are less boredom prone (than those who require external rewards). Feelings of depression, loneliness, hostility, anger and aggression are positively correlated with boredom. It appears that men are more prone to boredom as are people with more education. People experience boredom differently in different cultures,

[143] However, like some of the people in Jervis et al.'s Grass Creek, some of the Warlpiri people also indulge in "trouble," exacerbated by drugs and alcohol. In this article, however, Musharbash does not elaborate on the extent of these behaviours.

perhaps more obviously so on the margins of a society, which in turn may be related to greater socio-political forces.

Boredom and meaning are connected. In particular, experiencing meaning in one's life is negatively associated with boredom (i.e., more meaning, less boredom). Boredom is considered a subjective interpretation of a situation and in this way it is understood by many researchers to be an interactive phenomena; however, sometimes the sufferer is blamed for her/his "condition" of boredom. We tend to think of boredom as either situational (trivial and transient) or more serious (a profound mood) and yet it appears that prolonged boredom, even of the situational, transient kind, is associated with mental health problems.

Boredom holds a few surprises. Both overload *and* understimulation can result in boredom. Whereas we commonly think of the bored person as someone immobile, physiologically, boredom actually results in an *increase* of arousal and bodily feelings of frustration and restlessness. As well, we picture the bored factory worker, in the quintessentially boring situation, due to the repetition and monotony of the work: not so. Repetitive and monotonous work is not necessarily experienced as boring and factory workers do not report more boredom than other people.

Relating these Results to My Project

Clearly, my project is not a quantitative study; I am neither measuring boredom nor analyzing how it correlates to other psycho-social variables. However, the empirical studies in the psychology of boredom, contribute a broad understanding that boredom is in fact organized differentially by gender, culture and class (for the latter, I am thinking mostly of the studies on occupations). Although the majority of the literature sees that boredom is somehow a problem of meaning (whether through pathways of drive states and physiological arousal, or through a cognitive and affective feeling response), it is not the situation alone that determines whether or not we experience boredom; in fact, repetitive, monotonous work situations are not always experienced as boring if the worker uses this time to instead think about other things, or simply "zone out" in a meditative state. So, although boredom is experienced differently by different categories of people (e.g., gender, culture, amount of education), it is, subjectively, an interactive

phenomenon. While boredom is often construed as a rather trivial epiphenomenon (e.g., Conrad 1997), clearly it also has a more profound and existential register. However, even the trivial aspects of boredom (i.e., the everyday, situational, transient boredom) can have a serious negative impact on our mental health if they are experienced too often or for too long.

There is a dialectical element to boredom. Rather than analyzing it as a dichotomous variable, which the typology at the beginning of this chapter implies, we can, and, I argue, should, think of the dialectical tensions within boredom. It is caused both by information/stimulation overload *and* underload; it is experienced bodily as a kind of listlessness, and yet we pace with restlessness in a state of arousal; there is a laundry list of negative personality traits and emotional states associated with its presence, yet it is also considered to be an incubator for productive, creative ideas and work; repetitive, monotonous work, the epitome of situational boredom, does not necessarily induce boredom, or rather, to avoid the boredom it might induce, we instead use the time to think of other things. Finally, particularly in "western," wealthy nations, the availability and accessibility of entertainment and amusement possibilities to serve as distractions from what might otherwise bore us, as well as the glut of information proffered by various print and internet media, makes our boredom appear all the more improbable. It is the dialectic inherent within these tensions that I will continue to explore in Chapter Five, in the eleven storeys of boredom.

Empirical Prevalence of Boredom

Writers, philosophers and social scientists have long speculated on the increase in experiences (as well as the perils) of boredom. In a philosophy journal from the early 20th century, one author writes that, "the effect of boredom on a large scale in history is underestimated. It is a main cause of revolutions" (Inge 1940:386). Lewis Mumford compares the ancient Egyptians' "colossal capacity for enduring monotony" and concludes that the "peak of universal boredom [is] achieved in our own day" (Mumford 1967:202). Walter Benjamin wrote that, "boredom began to be experienced in epidemic proportions during 1840s" (2002:109). In 2005, a subtitle in the Times Online (UK) announced, "The quantity of boredom in the world, unlike joy or fear, has dramatically

increased" (MacIntyre, "You will not be bored"). Philosopher Lars Svendsen (2005) suggests that "the amount of boredom seems to have increased dramatically. The world has apparently become more boring" (p.21). However, he also acknowledges that, "there are no completely reliable studies of how large a percentage of the population is bored, the figures varying considerably for the different studies, for the phenomenon is difficult to diagnose in any objective way"[144] (p.23). Healy's working assumption is "[boredom's] great increase in recent times" (1984:58). In the mid-1980s, sociologist Orrin Klapp conceded that there was insufficient evidence to indicate the prevalence of boredom, "to show that there is more boredom now than ever, or that there is more or less boredom in various countries, modern and less developed. A baseline is lacking from which one could compare levels of boredom in various places and eras" (1986:32). Barbalet (1999), however, cites Klapp to claim the "high incidence of boredom in late-modern societies" (p.633). Given the problems defining the concept empirically, it is not difficult to imagine the problems facing us if we tried to measure boredom in a population. However, some researchers have tried.

In 1981, a study in West Germany found that the number of respondents that reported boredom to be a "a great problem" in filling their leisure time, increased from 26% to 38% between 1952 and 1978 (Iso-Ahola and Weissinger 1987:357). A Gallup Poll taken in the US in 1969, asked the question "Do you find life exciting – or dull?" Half of the respondents answered "dull" or "pretty routine" (in Klapp 1986:19-20). Spacks cites the results of a French survey in which researchers report "that twenty-three per cent of Frenchmen and thirty-one per cent of Frenchwomen now acknowledge being bored when they make love" (Brubach, in Spacks 1995:3)[145]. Sociologists Darden and Marks' (1999) "suggest" that American society "seems more boring" but do not provide any empirical evidence other than their own non-generalizable study of boredom, as detailed in the section above. Popular culture media are adamant that boredom is increasing. In 1976, for example, a *Reader's Digest* magazine asserted that "AMERICA

[144] Similarly, in Wilkinson's discussion of anxiety, he asks, "how is it possible to inquire into qualitative differences in the experience of anxiety across the years?" (1999:452).
[145] The punchline of an old joke now stands in for the suggestion of boredom itself, particularly during sex: "Beige, I think I'll paint the ceiling beige."

IS BORED… boredom has become *the disease of our time*" (in Healy 1984:36 italics in original).

Methodologically, measuring the prevalence of boredom, even within one culture (which, of course, is not in itself a coherent, homogenous, finite entity) is problematic, if not impossible, when we consider the challenges of defining the concept and then assigning appropriate indicators. Because boredom is such an everyday experience and one that is not often discussed in the way, for example, happiness, sadness, or frustration, might be, in daily conversation and popular culture media, respondents of such a survey cannot be assumed to have access to the same kinds of common understandings of the concept. Boredom has generally been something we suffer in silence, or, alternatively, over-romanticize. The moral quality, still associated with boredom from its early days as *acedia* and the sin of sloth, has kept us from talking too much about it, other than using the term to castigate others ("he's so boring," "you're boring me") or announce to whomever is near us our singular disinterest with life in general and thus our failure to engage with it ("I'm bored"). Wilkinson (1999) argues that the evidence social theorists and opinion leaders hold up as "proof" that the world has become a more anxiety-ridden place in which to live, does not serve as adequate evidence for their contention that individuals do in fact experience increased anxiety. In terms of empirical study, he notes that:

> anxiety expressed as forms of psychological distress can be studied as an object of empirical investigation, but such methods are poorly equipped to establish a link between the 'diffuse anxieties' [Giddens] of the public sphere and the prevalence of the condition of anxiety in society as a whole. (p.459)

The same could be said for boredom: the observation – even empirical measurement – of, for example, a decrease in religious participation, increasingly bureaucratized government and corporate structures, increased leisure time, *et cetera*, cannot on its own establish a causal link with the prevalence of individual boredom. What we assume are the causes of boredom are not necessarily the actual causes; and, even if some are, then we cannot assume that they will in fact cause the same degree of boredom in everyone, or even in a similar group of people (for example, white men, single mothers, immigrant labourers, *et cetera*).

In terms of recent interest in the subject of boredom within academe, five comprehensive books on the subject, originally written and published in three different languages, were published within six years of each other[146]. In 1999, Lars Svendsen (philosophy) published *A Philosophy of Boredom* (originally published in Norwegian; the English translation was published in 2005); also in 1999, Michael Raposa (religion) published *Boredom and the Religious Imagination* (US); Friedhelm Decher (philosophy) published *Besuch vom Mittagsdämon: Philosophie der Langeweile* in 2000; in 2001, Martina Kessel (history) published *Langeweile*, and in 2005, Elizabeth Goodstein's *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* was published in the US (Goodstein's PhD is in rhetoric). Goodstein says in her *Acknowledgments* that she took "more than a decade" to think about and write her book; thus, all five authors were clearly thinking about and writing their books at around the same time (i.e., they were writing independently of one another and not because they were inspired by one another[147]). Rothlin and Werder, Swiss business consultants, recently published *Boreout!: Overcoming Workplace Demotivation*, in which they estimate that 15% of office workers suffer as a result of emotional burnout due to boredom in their jobs (2008[2007]).

We can take this apparent *Zeitgeist* as an indication that interest in the subject, at least within academia, has recently seen an increase although I cannot even speculate at this point as to why this might be the case. My own interest in the subject arose independently of my knowledge of the existence of these five books. Indeed, my own idea to write about boredom, from a sociological perspective, was first clearly articulated in the spring of 2005, a few weeks after Goodstein's comprehensive intellectual treatise was published, though I did not yet know about it.

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[146] Though not a book, Andrew Benjamin published an essay, "Boredom and Distraction: The Moods of Modernity" in his edited volume on Walter Benjamin, in 2005.

[147] Goodstein (2005) cites Kessel (2001) in only three footnotes, in the first 90 pages of her 461 page book, and cites Decher (2000) briefly in one note; however, she does not cite Svendsen's Danish (1999) or English (2005) book, likely for reasons of language and time of publication, respectively. In other words, these authors did not have the benefit of reading and responding to one another's work, with the exception of Goodstein on Kessel and Decher. Given the lag between the submission of a completed book manuscript and date of publication release, it is possible that Goodstein only had access to Kessel's book, *Langeweile*, for a brief time before her own book was completed and submitted for publication.

Other (Contemporary) Literature

In 1984, Seán Healy published *Boredom, Self and Culture*. Healy divided boredom into simple boredom and the more serious hyperboredom, which he deals with for the rest of his book. Healy, like other writers on boredom (e.g., Goodstein 2005; Spacks 1995; Svendsen 2005), refers to literature for his examples, while addressing the possible social history of the concept. He argues that the largely psychological research, which attributes boredom to repression, or to a so-called natural (i.e., biological) tendency in people, does not adequately explain what he calls a "great increase" in boredom (p.58). He argues that, in the case of hyperboredom, sufferers experience the *world* as insufficient (and not their own selves) and therefore the causes "extend out into the entire culture" (p.61). For Healy, the discrediting of the self and culture as "satisfying organizing principle[s]" from which to derive personal meaning, have resulted in hyperboredom: the collapse of meaning (p.99). Healy's answer to this crisis is not clear other than what amounts to a plea for a return to the contemplation of meaning, not as social actors, with only rationalized Goffmanesque roles, but "that Man has now to try to grow his roots – such as survive – back into Being, that is to recover contact with the source of all that he is" (p.111).

Patricia Meyer Spacks (1995) provides us with a comprehensive, intellectual investigation of boredom, which she does through a series of essays on 19th century British literature. She suggests four reasons for the arrival of "boredom" in the late 18th century:

1. that boredom is closely related to the rise of capitalism, specifically through the new condition of leisure;
2. the decline of orthodox Christianity, where boredom can be construed as the opposite of faith;
3. the emerging notion of individual rights;
4. the rise of individualism and the ensuing focus on a personal sense of entitlement

Spacks treats boredom as an interpretive category for her literary analysis. She argues that "it reflects a state of affairs in which the individual is assigned ever more importance and ever less power" (1995:13). She points out that writers on the subject before her, notably Kuhn (1976), usually choose to deal with the supposedly more weighty and

existential aspects of boredom (which she labels dignified boredom), and ignore the more mundane, everyday boredom. Spacks refers to the latter as trivial boredom and takes this as her subject, particularly as the previous research on forms of so-called dignified boredom tended to leave out the experiences of women and their everyday concerns. Spacks notes that women writers of the 19th century wrote about women characters' belief that they could overcome the boredom of their lives by resolute use of their imagination and concentrated effort.

Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen (2005[1999]) tackles boredom as a philosophical problem. He traces the history of the term boredom and analyzes its treatment by modern philosophers, social scientists and theologians, as well as 20th century writers and artists. Svendsen distinguishes between situative and existential boredom: "A way of distinguishing between situative and existential boredom would be to say that while situative boredom contains a longing for something that is desired, existential boredom contains a longing for any desire at all" (p.42). Existential boredom has no object and reflects a crisis of meaning (Musharbash 2007). Whereas situative boredom refers to the common experience of feeling bored by a particular circumstance or situation, existential boredom "stands out as being a phenomenon of modernity" (p.21). In both types of boredom, however, the common element is lack of meaning; we are bored because we do not, or cannot, find meaning and, therefore, experience a situation in particular, or our lives in general, as uncomfortably or profoundly unsatisfying. But for Svendsen, and indeed for my own project, it is important to understand that, although the vast majority of the literature on boredom comes from psychology, where the affective state of being bored is examined through the psychologies of individuals as meaning-makers, "boredom is not just a phenomenon that afflicts individuals; it is, to just as great an extent, a social and cultural phenomenon" (p.52).

In 2005, Elizabeth Goodstein published *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity*. It is difficult to summarize this intellectually far-reaching, 460 page book, and do it justice: it is a history of the subjective rhetoric of reflection. In her own words, Goodstein writes:

> My argument therefore focuses on the historical vicissitudes of the experience – on the way the evolution of the discourse on boredom maps onto structural transformations in the post-Enlightenment discourse of reflection on subjective experience as such… this study provides a model for experientially grounded, historical inquiry into the discursive constitution of modern subjectivity. (p.13)

Her work is a conceptual history of the word, and the experience of, boredom. It is, in her words, an historical analysis grounded in empirical evidence. This empirical evidence is taken largely from literature. Goodstein argues that there is a modern rhetoric of reflection and that analyzing this helps us to understand the relationship between history and subjectivity. Specifically, the discourse on boredom links "socio-historical transformations to questions of meaning by representing the ambiguity of this experience as exemplary for the contemporary experience of self" (p.20-21). She postulates that "the discourse on boredom exemplifies the tensions between materialist and idealist explanation basic to the modern rhetoric of reflection on subjective experience" (p.24):

> The discourse on boredom can therefore function as a lens to examine the global transformation in modes of reflection upon subjective experience that accompanied secularization, urbanization, and rationalization – to examine how cultural modernization facilitated the democratization of skepticism. Through the language of boredom, religious and philosophical questions about human existence were reformulated in a modern, disenchanted idiom. (p.25)

Goodstein's book is the first book on boredom to address, in detail, the historicity of boredom. Like philosophers before her (e.g., Hegel), she argues that the experience of boredom is a product of our struggle to find meaning in a world without God and is thus "the fate of the desiring subject in the aftermath of Enlightenment" (p.156).

Summary

Many researchers describe two aspects, or degrees, of boredom, where one is the short-term, everyday kind of boredom we experience while waiting in a line, and the other is longer-term and profoundly more disturbing to us. The first, short-term, situational boredom, is often considered to be trivial whereas long-term boredom is considered to be related to existential angst. I have argued above that the two ends of this register are not necessarily mutually exclusive and thus a dichotomous categorizing may prevent more complex analyses.

Early boredom studies were conducted by psychologists who defined boredom as a problem of physical and mental arousal and stimulation. Until the 1940s, the focus of these studies was largely boredom in the workplace and its effects on worker morale and production. In the 1940s, boredom in military jobs was the focus of many British studies. Psychologists continued to develop psychometric measures of boredom, including the widely used boredom proneness scale (Farmer and Sundberg 1986) and to measure various personality factors associated with boredom.

There are few mentions of boredom in classical sociological literature and far fewer academic articles published compared to psychology. The definition of boredom has not been discussed within sociological literature and as a result there are numerous attempts at defining it, some more helpful than others. Sociologists, unlike psychologists, tend to see boredom as a condition that is affected by the speeding up of culture through technology, information over/underload, and the increase in leisure time for some. However, as Darden and Marks (1999) point out, sociologists also tend to blame the sufferer for his or her condition of boredom. More recently, interesting work has been done by Jervis et al. (2003) on the boredom experienced by Native American Indians living on a reservation, where their actions are attributed to the relative deprivation of "missing pleasures," and the work of Musharbash (2007) on the communal boredom experience of the Warlpiri aborigines of Australia.

Some writers link boredom to broader historical and political forces, including the decline of religion, the rise of capitalism, the industrial revolution and the historical evolution of subjectivity over many centuries.

There is a tendency in the literature to talk about the increasing prevalence of boredom. This assumption is more evident in popular culture sources, though a number of academic researchers also assume that boredom is becoming more widespread. There are no data to support these assumptions. And yet, there does appear to be at least a small swell of interest in the subject, recently, at least among academics from various intellectual traditions.

I turn now to the empirical cases, the 11 storeys of boredom that form the empirical core of my project, based on the foundation laid by these preceding chapters of history and research.

Chapter Five
Boredom: A Cultural Collage in Eleven Storeys

> Boredom, acedia and distinctions between vice and virtue, all point to qualities or properties of looking. They signify questions of the quality of sight, the seeking of relief from vacuity and the worries of seeing blankly and without significance… Acts of looking, and the culpability they can entail, have become replete with implications.
> ~ Flanagan (2004:121)

> It is the reading that counts. What counts in reading, to be sure, is not the image given, but the image found. It may come in a poem (perhaps the most natural place), or it may come in a picture.
> ~ Haverkamp 1992:77

Introduction

In her book on the history of both the discourse on, and the language of, boredom, Elizabeth Goodstein (2005) employs literary texts for her empirical focus. She does this because, she argues, the topic of boredom is most often written about from either the point of view of more philosophical traditions, or more social scientific. According to Goodstein, the reliance on literary texts, "therefore plays a crucial role, for in representing boredom, they depict its sociological and philosophical significance as intertwined" (2005:15). Although some of my own empirical cases are taken from literature, most of them are images, for the same reason that Goodstein (and others) chose her cases from literature: interpreting and analyzing images (and imagery, in the literary cases I use) demands a multi-disciplinary approach, one that combines a philosophical enquiry with an astute sociological sensibility.

Largely in response to Adorno's critique of Benjamin's method of literary montage, in particular, that Benjamin proffered an unmediated text which did not in fact speak for itself (as Benjamin thought it would, or should), I have laid the groundwork for my own cultural collage in the preceding chapters. In particular, the reviews in Chapters Three and Four help to situate the concept and experience of boredom through historical, but also philosophical and social scientific lenses.

Together, the following eleven storeys of boredom form a cultural collage, the empirical focus of my dissertation. Like a collage in art or film, each storey (image)

could stand alone, but its interest and intellectual (aesthetic) value is increased when seen in the context of the other items in the collage. That is, each storey here speaks to each of the other storeys, although not necessarily directly or obviously. The power of a collage is that the reader/viewer is free to interpret, but must first grapple with the images and attempt to make some sense of their proximity to one another. While each image in a collage appears as a separate entity, in many cases clearly bounded from the others by way of media type, or shape or substantive content, it is the gestalt effect of all the images taken together that provides the reader/viewer with the experience of the whole, often before the individual items have been decoded. For these reasons, I do not attempt an intellectual segue between each storey; this would undermine the purpose of the collage: to be jarred by differences, offended by odd shapes, perplexed by things that do not, at first, appear to belong. At the same time, I should, however, make it clear that it is not my intention to confuse the reader by artful cleverness or pretense. Instead, I hope the fragments in this collage serve to illuminate the "variegated ontological status" (Gottdiener 1985:991) of boredom.

First Storey
Dodging the Villain, Boredom

The first two storeys of boredom take their starting place in car advertisements. A few words about the sociological significance of the car is therefore apt.

We could say that the automobile, or car as we now call it, is the preeminent symbol of modernity, both because of its technological aspirations of progress, and its relatively recently acknowledged limits and even dangers. Cars were one of the first mass-produced consumer goods, put together piece-by-piece on the first assembly lines, the same way they are made 100 years later. The sheer size of cars (especially the early ones) made them one of the largest items a person could own (and be seen to own). As well as its size, the new car was fast (relatively speaking, and of course much faster today). The speed with which they could move people introduced dramatic social change. If cars, and then trucks, could move people, they could also transport other consumer goods more efficiently across great distances. People could, for the first time, live in one place and work in another. Roads became highways and involved a complex infrastructure that relied on engineers, labourers and administrators, as well as policing. Numerous bureaucracies sprang up alongside cars: insurance, driving tests and licensing, emissions testing (belatedly), safety protocols, particularly involving children, and so on. In 1968, Jean Baudrillard said that "the car epitomizes the object" (1996[1968]:65) and John Urry writes about the car as manufactured object, object of consumption. and the dominant discourse of mobility that has forever changed our conceptions of space and time (2000).

On the other hand, the degradation of the earth's air and natural environment from car exhaust and the irremediable harm (physically, but also politically) caused by the oil and gas industry necessary to sustain our cars, clearly represents the darker side of modernity and progress. Economically, cars take up a good portion of our incomes; not just the initial cost of the car, but also the insurance, gas, maintenance and repairs. Thousands of people are injured or die in car accidents every year[148], drunk and sober, with and without seatbelts. There is even a history of cars used as bombs, notably in

[148] According to Transport Canada, in 2006 (most recent data), 199,337 people were injured and 2,889 were killed in a vehicle accident in Canada (www.tc.gc.ca/roadsafety/tp/tp3322/2006/page1.htm).

Belfast[149] starting in the 1970s, but before that in Saigon, Algiers and Palermo (Davis 2008). The dream of mobility comes with a high price.

Yet, despite the darker side, we love our cars. The inside of our car is one of the last private spaces we have available to us[150] and, judging by our reluctance to give up our cars and take public transit more often, we value this space highly. According to Hankiss (2006), "the car is a world in itself – a closed and complete universe, well protected against the dangers of the outside world. It is a microcosm moving around in a chaotic world" (p.82). We can be ourselves in our cars and often, of course, our cars quite accurately (and purposefully) represent our selves:

> Cars are our alter egos. We identify ourselves with them; we live in a kind of coexistence with them. Their strength is our strength, their speed is our speed, their flashy beauty is our beauty, their streamlining is the streamlining of our lives, their elegance is our elegance, their mystery is our mystery. When they are OK, we feel OK; when they break down, we have a fit of existential panic. When we get in our new car for the first time, we feel as if we have been reborn and are young. When they have sex appeal, we have sex appeal. Their personality is our personality. It is true that there are many fewer brands and types of cars than there are human beings, and so it is certainly a self-delusion to think that they express our selves. (Hankiss 2006:82)

If in boredom there is a physical sense of incapacity, a lethargy that coexists with a restlessness, a mental state of, "I don't know what to do or how to get there," expressed in our physical bodies as frustration, surely the car provides a kind of antidote. A car can take us most places we might want to go; it can get us there quickly and, if it's a new car, with a number of gadgets meant for the purposes of our entertainment. According to Hankiss:

> We simply have to touch the accelerator and this minimal effort triggers a huge amount of energy, which carries us smoothly and swiftly forward… It is an almost metaphysical experience because it makes us believe that we have defeated the laws of physics, the law of the conservation of energy. We proceed without effort; we do not need to defeat gravity at each of our steps. This is the

[149] Car bombs in Belfast led to security measures that affected not only drivers, but also regular pedestrians and shoppers as particular roads were closed to car traffic and turnstiles were installed where pedestrians were subjected to physical checks by armed security. As well, concrete blocks were laid several feet in front of storefronts to prevent potential car bombers from getting too close to shoppers (personal experience/ observation). Cars parked in unauthorized areas were purposefully exploded by security forces.
[150] However, even this is changing, given the increasing number of traffic surveillance cameras mounted above roads.

> magic of the wheel as well. It rolls easily and smoothly as if it needed no energy. (2006:83)

Automobile companies have long relied on anti-boredom themes in their advertisements. Until the 1920s, most car advertisements were simple depictions of the car and a few lines of ad copy about the marvels of its technological prowess. However, in 1923, the Jordan Motor Car Company placed a new kind of advertisement in the popular weekly American magazine, *Saturday Evening Post*. The ad copy tells a story, titled, "Somewhere West of Laramie," evoking romantic cowboy images of horsepower and young women with tanned faces. The penultimate line of the story in this full-page ad asks us to, "Step into the Playboy when the hour grows dull with things gone dead and stale" (Laird 1996:808). Although the word "boredom" does not appear in the advertisement, words like "dull" and "things gone dead and stale" are indirect references to, if not synonymous in this case, with boredom. In the intervening years of car advertisements, images of attractive, young women draped over sports cars come to mind, from the not-so-long-ago days when it was assumed that the driver was always a (straight) man who could, presumably, find one of these attractive young women if he but had the right car. The right vehicle could not only take us somewhere more interesting and provide us with an exciting traveling experience at the same time, it could also make *us* more interesting as well. The ideology behind owning and driving a particular model of car, was – and still is -- intimately bound up with class practices and status hierarchy (Marcuse 1966; Gartman 2004)[151]. Baudrillard suggests that owning a driver's license is a kind of privileged passport, "a letter of credit from an aristocracy whose domain is the very latest in engine compression and speed" (1996[1968]:66).

In 2007, American car companies Dodge and Ford each produced elaborate websites to advertise their newest vehicles for 2008. The website[152] that advertises the Dodge Avenger, states, "BOREDOM IS THE VILLAIN." The Dodge site is interactive;

[151] In his critique of the ways negative (i.e., critical) thinking has been absorbed by what he calls the technological society, and its enforcement of positive (i.e., *status quo*) thinking, Marcuse gives the example of driving a new car: "I experience its beauty, shininess, power, convenience, but then I become aware of the fact that in a relatively short time it will deteriorate and need repair; that its beauty and surface are cheap, its power unnecessary, its size idiotic; and that I will not find a parking place. I come to think of *my* car as a product of one of the Big Three automobile corporations… In a way, I feel cheated" (1966:226).
[152] Website no longer available.

as the cursor is passed over the image of the car, new images and information about the vehicle appear on the screen. The ad copy promises that this car will "save you from the sinister sameness" of other four-door cars. As well as the website, Dodge advertisers produced an outdoor advertising poster, called a wallscape, with the same "BOREDOM IS THE VILLAIN" message in the foreground. In Toronto, near a busy downtown intersection, this poster spanned eleven storeys of the side of a residential apartment building in the summer of 2007 (see Figure 4, below).

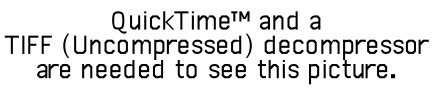

Figure 4 Dodge wallscape, downtown Toronto (photo by author)

As is often the case with urban images, their geographical placement and context can add layers of unintended meaning. Although this particular wall had previously hosted wallscapes that featured women's lingerie, men's winter coats and cell phones, the actual

building itself suddenly becomes a participant in the "Boredom is the Villain" theme. The building's architectural style presents a boring façade; in the utilitarian, no frills, modernist style there are no balconies, no interesting windows or stonework. There are off-white curtains in most of the windows, and many suites have an air conditioner propped outside a window, where the water from years of use stains the cement directly below. It is a building that we could say is, "sinister in its sameness" (See Figure 5, below)[153].

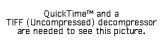

Figure 5 Residential building, downtown Toronto (photo by author)

[153] In yet another possible layer of analysis, though not particularly relevant here, I should also say that this building was once the site of much interest and social upheaval. In the late 1960s, it was called Rochdale College, and was the first North American "Free University", where students lived and studied with teachers of their choice, without classroom lectures or exams. This experiment in communal living and learning was declared a failure shortly after police discovered the extent of the drug use within its walls.

Ironically, the advertising wallscape becomes the only item of ornamentation and interest on the building while at the same time its message warns us of the evils of boredom. In the wallscape image itself, there are similar modernist buildings looming behind the new car, highlighting the boring sameness of modernity that this car will help us avenge. The symbol in the beam of the searchlight (presumably the letter "A" for Avenger), is reminiscent of the Batman insignia for the masked avenger. If we are avenging something, then a harm has been committed against us in the first instance; to avenge means to retaliate, in heroic fashion, after we (or someone we know) have been injured. If, as the wallscape proclaims, boredom is "the villain," then who has it harmed? How?

The image itself and the fact that this is an advertisement for a car, signifies that boredom in this case is the undesirable experience of the mundane in daily life; owning this new car holds the promise of a more interesting and exciting life. Like most advertising, the promise of a new life, a better life, is inherent in the product for sale; it offers more than ownership, but also entrance into a particular lifestyle. Who can say no to such an offer when most of us, at any given time, are involved in the more mundane, everyday matters of raising children, working at jobs we may not particularly enjoy, and worrying about our finances and personal relationships. So what is the harm here? How does boredom harm us?

The pre-modern roots of the experience of boredom are traced by some researchers to the 4th century monastics who lived largely solitary lives, fully engaged in their efforts to commune with God, attempting to transcend the material world in the hopes of gaining access to the spiritual world of their religion (Raposa 1999). Their ensuing battle with the spiritual lethargy that overcame them, was a personal struggle against the sin of refusing God; this *acedia* was something to be conquered in order to gain God's grace, and redemption. Historically, then, boredom is linked to a refusal, the physical body's refusal to allow the love of God to fill the hermit with the spiritual joy that Christianity promised. Refusing this spiritual joy (i.e., by failing to consistently ward off *acedia*) became one of the most serious of the cardinal sins.

Perhaps the harm to be avenged, the one we are warned about in the Dodge wallscape ad, is the harm caused by this refusal of joy; that is, the harm boredom causes us is that it robs us of the experience of vitality, of *jouissance*. Zizek argues that the

imperative of global capitalism is that we must enjoy; it is indeed an injunction "to enjoy!" (2001a). A failure to enjoy is, therefore, considered to be our own fault, a personal inadequacy (Dean 2004), particularly given the apparently limitless choices offered us in the manner of consumer goods and services. Because these things are available, we must therefore make use of them to maintain our happiness, our enjoyment. We must enjoy (things, people, experiences) the fruits of global capitalism. Therefore, to avenge the villain boredom, it is our duty, in effect, to enjoy, through our uncritical consumption of things, relationships, events. The irony here is that the things themselves, the temporary and banal amusement they offer, often lead to our boredom, while at the same time we seek relief – we avenge – our boredom in their consumption. This is a rather villainous circle indeed.

Our refusal of joy is not the refusal to fully enjoy the fruits of consumer capitalism; rather, it is our belief that this participation will, one day, bring us meaning, satisfaction, even redemption as "our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption" (Benjamin 1969[1955]:254). Magazine advertisement copy for the Dodge Avenger says that the "Avenger leaves ordinary in the dust" (*Avenger* 2007:22). Here ordinary refers to our routinized, rather banal everyday existences. Yet, it is not simply the banal in everyday life that causes our boredom, but the use of the banal that we ourselves use to construct this life. We submit to the injunction to enjoy!, which further implicates us in the process of existential boredom. As Marcuse asked, 40 years ago:

> the question is no longer: how can the individual satisfy his own needs without hurting others, but rather: how can he satisfy his needs without hurting himself, without reproducing, through his aspirations and satisfactions, his dependence on an exploitative apparatus which, in satisfying his needs, perpetuates his servitude? (1969:4)

The eleven storey wallscape looming over the city street announcing "BOREDOM IS THE VILLAIN," on a pragmatic level, suggests that boredom is not something we should tolerate; it is a kind of modern social evil that we must therefore avoid, just as the 4th century monks tried to do. Boredom is the (temporary or prolonged) experience of lack of meaning; the idea that this is still a social evil, or sin, suggests that sufferers of boredom are themselves inadequate and their discontent lies not without, in

the socio-political arena, but within, a personal, moral failure. The suggestion that the villain of boredom can (and should) be avenged by our heroic consumption of things (in this particular case, the purchase of a specific new car), is itself sinister; it suggests that our redemption rests on our continued, even increased faith, in the practices of global consumer capitalism. The sinister aspect comes from our everyday experiences of actual enjoyment from our things, whether fleeting or longer lasting – we do derive pleasure, if not actual *jouissance*, from many of our things. This is a Zizek-inspired observation, that "what secures the consistency of an ideological construct is always its (more or less clandestine) reliance on a kernel of obscene enjoyment" (Vighi and Feldner 2007:147).

Second Storey
Escaping Boredom (in a "guilt-free" SUV)

The automobile, long the symbol of freedom and independence, and, arguably, the quintessential icon of the promise of progress inherent in the project of modernism, extends to us the promise of relief from ordinary, unremarkable daily life; metaphorically, as well as literally, a getaway car.

On a Ford website[154], a picture of a black, Ford Escape, a "guilt-free SUV," is shown beside the words, "THE END OF BOREDOM IS HERE." The site is an elaborate microsite where we can, "Get the latest news on the Boredom epidemic sweeping the nation"; embedded within it are what appear to be additional mini-sites. The microsite is called "boredomhurts" and appears to be the site of one Colin Padden, a twenty-something, educated, white male, whose personal blog is part of the site. As well, there are six videos that incorporate the late night American television talk show program, *Craig Ferguson*, and a link to a page that encourages viewers to upload pictures of their own most boring moments[155]. There are links to three television commercials for the vehicle, where the voice in each story-style ad tells us that, "It happens every five seconds in this country. It strikes one in four Americans. Boredom. There is an antidote however, the 2008 Ford Escape…Fight boredom with the Ford Escape. Check out boredomhurts.com." In other words, this is an unusually elaborate website[156].

The sheer complexity of this site, as well as the comedic videos and participatory features, increase its viral possibilities; that is, the chances that a visitor to the site will then forward the link to friends, "for your interest," thus increasing the number of

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[154] www.fordvehicles.com/boredomhurts/escape/

[155] The advertiser's idea to include components whereby visitors to the site are encouraged to upload their own pictures and videos, related to boredom, not only involves potential consumers in the advertising narrative, but also implicates them in the process of transmitting ideas about the product. The videos, each a maximum of two minutes, are uploaded to a YouTube channel called boredomhurts, where they are presented as "Evidence of Boredom." None of the submitted photographs or videos has any apparent connection to the Ford Escape SUV vehicle, or the Ford company; that is, if someone sitting at her computer came across this YouTube boredomhurts site, she would not necessarily know that it was linked to, indeed generated by, the Ford company advertisers.

[156] I contacted Terry O'Reilly, long-time advertising executive, who hosted *O'Reilly on Advertising* (until December 2005) and then *O'Reilly on the Age of Persuasion* (2006-2009), CBC radio programs about the success and failure of various advertisements. In answer to my question, Mr. O'Reilly said that there is no term to describe these new elaborate website advertisements. He also said, "Personally, I think it's just Ford trying to put together a fun website that engages people. Playing off 'Boredom' is their strategy to highlight the Escape's perceived 'fun' quotient" (email, *Re: Boredom hurts* November 4, 2008).

potential buyers for this vehicle[157]. When visitors click on "Evidence of Boredom," they are taken to a web page where numerous videos depict people doing silly things, presumably due to their bored state. A woman uses adhesive tape to distort her facial features; another woman attaches more than a dozen clothespins to her face; a man has hair removed from his leg using duct tape; two women have a breath-holding contest, and several other similarly mundane and ridiculous short clips. The photographic "evidence of boredom" includes pictures of pets, people looking bored in a classroom, outside or in a hotel room, and various pictures of people and urban scenes that could be in anyone's photograph album. The videos and photographs appear to have been uploaded by visitors to the site and don't have any direct relationship to Ford or the vehicle they are selling except, of course, that by their very participation they are increasing the visibility of the product and in fact answering Ford's request (spoken by the Colin Padden persona, whose hometown is Boring, Oregon), that "I need help in my quest to crush boredom…the second most debilitating evil enemy of our times" (the first is, in a parody of egotistical Hollywood directors, his "PA" – personal assistant – whom he complains will not bring him his water). Standing on a balcony or rooftop of a downtown city building, Colin, a doctoral student in Environmental Engineering at Oregon A&M University[158], says:

> I used to be a really kinda fun-loving and exciting guy. I had a lot of energy and I was really into being active and doing things. This bug came over me and it drained all that away. It took away my will to do anything, all my energy. Turns out that I didn't have the flu… I was bored. Although that doesn't sound like a virus, it actually is, I've done a lot of research, and it's spreading… My mission is to find boredom wherever it is and seek it out and destroy it, to end boredom as we know it… make it history. But I can't do it alone, I need your help. Together we can cure boredom.

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[157] In the summer of 2008, the US-based thrift store chain, Value Village, promoted a "FIGHT BORING" campaign in posters and on their website (www.valuevillage.com/). Customers were asked to submit a photograph or video to show how they use Value Village to "fight boring." Six winners were chosen (three each from Canada and the US): "Because of smart, creative shoppers like you – the world will never be boring!" (http://www.valuevillage.com/ instore/saledates.php Retrieved August 24, 2008). It seems likely that these interactive advertising sites will become increasingly prevalent and rely on viewer/user participation via video and photographic uploads.

[158] Although there are Environmental Engineering programs for graduate students, and there is a University of Oregon, this Oregon A&M University is a made up name. Ironically, for a car advertisement (though of course chosen purposefully), the study of environmental engineering involves learning how to improve various aspects of the natural environment using engineering principles. The vehicle in this case, an SUV, is currently synonymous with flagrant disregard for environmental issues.

In this last line, Colin invokes the phrase often used in fundraising literature for diseases such as cancer. On the "Meet Colin" page, his apparent biography begins with a medicalized interpretation of boredom:

> In the 14th century, the Black Plague swept through Europe striking 75 million people and causing a global panic. At the end of the 19th century, a new disease began to take root… And I believe it started right here in my own backyard… I was happy… I was content… I missed all the warning signs…. I was told I suffered from the 'Boring Bug' a devastating disorder to which the cure remains unknown.

In his blogs, Colin writes (that is, the Ford advertisers write) about having "contracted the big B" and that "boredom is transferable." The medical language of *cure*, *epidemic*, *spread*, *debilitation*, *plague*, *disorder*, *contracted*, and *transferable* invokes a discourse of disease and the concomitant fears of spread (who is susceptible?) and infection (can we immunize ourselves against it?). Here boredom is something that must be wiped out, eradicated, 'made history,' presumably because it is harmful if not actually dangerous. In the context of an advertisement for a car this all seems rather ludicrous, of course. We can see the attempt at humour and perhaps even appreciate the sophistication of this multi-faceted website. The overall site is part of an advertising genre that acknowledges the sophistication of its consumers. Rather than using traditional techniques of simply boasting of the item's features and demonstrating its potential uses for the consumer, this advertisement draws the consumer into the multi-layered narratives, supported by flash animations, videos and photography, all linked to what we know is the not-real character of Colin Padden, the bland-looking guy in the gray shirt and gray coat, telling us he wants to wipe out boredom. With our help.

The sound of the chirping birds on the website evokes memories of quiet holidays and summer gardens, and the image of the SUV perched on a rocky plateau, amidst tall trees and mountains, against a blue sky, reminds us of the power of nature as well as the freedom and peace in solitude. As Thrift (2000) notes, automobile companies are increasingly focused on the response of our senses (e.g., making car doors close with a particular sound) and "advertising which is meant to tug at bare life by emphasizing kinesthetic qualities" (p.50). As we move the cursor across the screen, the SUV rotates in

a complete 360 degrees and as it does, we see the reflection of the trees and sky in the polished black paint and the shining front grill. Indeed, the reflections suggest the vehicle is a legitimate part of this scenic, natural spot (though of course both are creations of the computer graphics department). We spin the vehicle around, hear the birds, admire the scenery, which, though appealing, always takes a second seat to the rather intimidating looking SUV with its dark, tinted windows and no apparent human passengers or clear idea of how it got there. Its presence seems to affirm that it belongs there as much as the trees the rocks and the mountains; yet, unlike these natural wonders, which have 'only' the power to move us emotionally, the SUV has the power to move us physically, geographically; indeed, to help us escape.

Of course we never really lose sight of the fact that this is indeed an advertisement; the type and cost of the vehicle itself reassures the advertisers that if we are exploring the site at all, we are likely Colin's kind of people: white, middle-class, well-educated and looking for that certain, yet ineffable, *je ne sais quoi* that our otherwise privileged life does not provide. We are also the kind of people who would consider spending over $40,000 on a vehicle. This underscores the idea that those who are wealthy enough to have the things they need and want (i.e., luxury items), are more likely to fall prey to the scourges of boredom, reticent of the ennui of the 19th century flâneur, and Baudelaire's dandy. This is a particularly modern form of boredom, where it is no longer interpreted necessarily as a sin, associated with sloth, nor as a failure of character. This more modern boredom is something to which the wealthier classes are more susceptible (to use the medical language of the website), as if it were in fact a disease that could spread amongst them. The message here is that it is not your fault that the promises of modernity have disappointed you; you must simply keep consuming. It is, after all, a "guilt-free" SUV.

In this case, the luxury vehicle is the quintessential example of how the threat of boredom, as an affliction that threatens our immune systems, can be outpaced, literally. If "travel is a necessity, [then] speed is a pleasure" (Baudrillard 1996[1968]:66). Inside a car, especially one such as this SUV, we are hermetically sealed from the outside/outdoor world, although we still have access to entertainment and other luxuries within the vehicle. We press the accelerator and we are literally taken away from the everyday

demands and stresses of our typically mundane lives where we are not always in control of the outcomes. In the SUV, we are promised the return of this sense of lost control, our power over our immediate environment is restored, even increased, while at the same time our responsibilities are diminished. According to Baudrillard:

> Movement alone is the basis of a sort of happiness, but the mechanical euphoria associated with speed is something else altogether, grounded for the imagination in the miracle of motion. Effortless mobility entails a kind of pleasure that is unrealistic, a kind of suspension of existence, a kind of absence of responsibility. The effect of speed's integration of space-time is to reduce the world to two-dimensionality, to an image, stripping away its relief and its historicity and in a way ushering one into a state of sublime immobility and contemplation. (1996[1968]:66)

Thus the speeding SUV is the modern day solitary hut of the 4th century monastics who had to fight off the demon of boredom (*acedia*) in their efforts to contemplate God. But what kind of contemplation is possible, even desirable, in a speeding black SUV? Baudrillard suggests that speed integrates space-time and renders the world into a two-dimensional image. In this geometrical world, there is literally no room, no space or time for boredom; at the same time, there is no dimension for real contemplation either. While the vehicle itself does offer a private space for reflection, the very fact that we can effect an effortless speed in the SUV, creates the two-dimensional image of the world that we drive by, drive into; therefore, we are not in fact equipped to reflect meaningfully upon it. That is, the speed at which we are traveling, while it literally puts a distance between us and the everyday places where we experience our boredom (e.g., work, home), hurtles us toward an imagined, other place (where we will not be bored), thus collapsing the dimension of time. We simply do not have the time, in our cars, for extended meditative reflection. We may be alone in there, but we are not at rest; we must conduct the vehicle with regard to our safety and that of the other drivers on the road, as well as the pedestrians, cyclists and numerous other "obstacles" that are between us and the other place. As well, within the vehicle itself, there are a number of technological "features" that promise to take up our time, while we put the miles behind us (e.g., radio, CD and

DVD players, and a variety of gadgets made to plug into cigarette lighters). We are in fact quite busy in our cars[159].

With cell phones and satellite radios, we are in no real way cut off from the world we are trying to escape; however, we are in some sense outside of time, having left one known place (e.g., home) and traveling towards another either known, or unknown place. Although of course we may drive by familiar places and people, we are alone in our car and we are protected against the outside weather, but also from the social gaze and interactions with others (Hankiss 2006:82-83). While we may find the time alone in our car restful, we are indeed alone in our attempted escape. German-born American philosopher, Eric Voegelin, writes about the movement between boredom and escape, drawing on Pascal's writings. Voegelin argues that, "in such a state of rest man becomes aware of 'his nothingness, his forsakenness, his insufficiency, his dependence, his impotence, his emptiness.' Incontinently there springs from the depth of his soul 'the ennui, the blackness, the *tristesse*, the chagrin, the spite, the despair'" (in Avramenko 2004:118). In other words, there is in fact no escaping boredom and we are always "fugitives ready to flee from the world" (Bigelow 1983:257).

Said less metaphysically, the experience of boredom, situative and existential, can happen to anyone at any time because it is a kind of crisis of meaning, or rather, lack thereof. Driving away from our everyday lives, in an expensive SUV, 'fully loaded' with luxury options and physically capable of taking us away, transporting us, literally and metaphysically, does not guarantee that we will not experience at least the echo of boredom. Indeed, the temporary nature of this attempted break with our mundane everyday lives (and the same can be said for our trips to casinos, movies, faraway places, etc.), only serves to underscore that we will (must) always wrestle with meaning.

But there is a more materialist analysis of the attempt to escape boredom. Boredom is not always a sign, or symptom, of the excesses of luxury, of the bourgeois life of the dandy. People who work at repetitive, monotonous and poorly paid jobs; people who are unemployed; people who live under political regimes where they are afforded little everyday choice and certainly no political voice of dissent; all these people

[159] Laurier (2004) points out that we now work inside our cars, answering emails, scheduling appointments, making work-related phonecalls, etc.

also experience boredom, a kind of situative-turned-existential boredom, and for them there is no apparent escape, no relief from either the monotony or the dulling effects of widespread social control. Theirs is not the leave-your-cares behind type of escape, promised by advertisements such as the Ford Escape ad. Here the implication of escape is not one that calls to mind contemplative, restorative leisure; rather, it is a boredom borne of lack of feasible alternatives and thus there is in fact no escape in sight, not even through the type of everyday *divertissements* that Pascal wrote about, the distractions that give comparatively much less bored people at least temporary pleasure or relief.

What is interesting here is the fact that in the same year, two of the biggest North American car companies independently chose anti-boredom themes to sell their newest vehicles. Inherent in their respective messages of "boredom is the villain" and "boredom hurts" is that boredom is a recognized contemporary problem, one that must be *avenged* (the Dodge Avenger) and from which one must seek *escape* (Ford Escape). Yet neither advertising campaign really spells out what it is that is making us bored or exactly what they mean by "boredom"; they just seem to "know" that we are suffering this experience, and know in the same way that we will understand their message (to avenge or to escape). It is a kind of perverse intimacy between car manufacturer and (potential) car buyer: 'We know from what you suffer and we have the answer – it is a shiny new car with plenty of buttons and gadgetry. Once inside this shininess, oh the (nonboring) places you will go[160]!' Yet, at the same time, we know the hollowness of this message, this promise, because the only places we really drive our cars are to and from work, and the occasional weekend outing, if the weather is good and the kids are not sick and we can get someone to look after the dog.

So what do the advertisers think is so powerful about their anti-boredom message that it could induce us to pay half a year's salary or more[161] for an item that becomes devalued the moment it is driven off the company's car lot? We can presume, at least, that the anti-boredom message is considered by the Ford advertisers to be at least as powerful as the

[160] With apologies to Dr. Seuss. Funnily enough, for the context here, his book, "Oh The Places You'll Go" does contain the lines: "You won't lag behind, because you'll have the speed. You'll pass the whole gang and you'll soon take the lead."

[161] This is based on Statistics Canada data for 2005 which indicate that in a two-earner family with children, the average total income was $73,700. This number falls dramatically for single men ($29,900) and again for single women ($25,200) (http://www40.statcan.ca/l01/cst01/famil21a.htm Retrieved March 5, 2008).

ubiquitous sexual themes of other car advertisements. Sex has notoriously been used to sell everything from shoes to sheets; can boredom possibly have such a wide consumer appeal? Sex appeals to our sense of youth, power, seduction, play and sexual desire. We are drawn to sexual themes as consumers. But the boredom message is different: it is telling us we can *get away from* something. It appeals not to our sense of desire, but to our longing to have desires, to know what they are. According to Henri Lefebvre:

> boredom is pregnant with desires, frustrated frenzies, unrealized possibilities. A magnificent life is waiting just around the corner, and far, far away. It is waiting like the cake is waiting when there's butter, milk, flour and sugar. This is the realm of freedom. It is an empty realm. Here man's magnificent power over nature has left him alone with himself, powerless. (1995:124)

The shiny black SUV, perched miraculously on the rocky ledge, embodies our desire for power, and the power to escape. The interactive features of the website allow us to "see" inside the vehicle, even move it around, godlike, with our finger. But it is not our own face we see in the reflection; the Ford Escape promises us an escape before we even know what it is we desire.

Third Storey
The Weight of Meaning: Escaping from the Escape from Boredom

Boredom can be experienced in the most unlikely of places. A 20-something, white, middle-class Canadian university student participated in an overseas "international development" co-op experience, where she lived, studied and learned from local villagers in three different regions in India. She and her classmates finished their school day in the early afternoon and often found that they had several hours into the evening when there were no structured activities. This particular young woman, whom I will call "Margaret," [162] decided she would take up journal writing to help fill her late afternoons and evenings. What began as a straightforward exercise in writing about her daily experiences in India, became so intense for her that she decided to give it up about a month after she began.

Admittedly not the athletic type, Margaret said she "always liked the idea of writing in a journal… [In India] it was very helpful, it was such an overwhelming experience at first." She began to write to fill her time in the afternoons and evenings, for something to do; as well, Margaret wrote to help herself understand the physical and political conditions she faced. Working in the villages, away from her classmates, she was the only white person. Villagers sometimes gathered to stare at her blonde, white figure. She was starkly aware of her North American middle-class position and although she says that, "confronting my whiteness" was a difficult experience for her, she says that it was class differences, more than race, which upset her deeply and caused her to rethink her own career direction. These social and political differences were what Margaret wrote about in her journal, to help pass her time. She wrote about what she saw and her responses to it; she wrote because she didn't understand and wanted to. Although Kuhn (1976:4) surely exaggerates when he argues that, "if there is one trait that most victims of boredom have in common, it is the desire to express in writing their state of mind," it was certainly true for Margaret.

> When she began to keep a personal journal, Margaret said that, at first, she wrote:
>
> a ridiculous amount in my journal, pages and pages. It was too much – I was just a bit too much in touch with myself, too aware of what I was feeling… I felt too in touch and this ended up being too stressful… I became too aware of issues that

[162] As well as using a pseudonym, I have changed some of the details of her story, for her privacy.

> I couldn't take action on…. and I just got too emotionally distraught, I became too fragile. (personal communication)

Margaret said she wrote a "ridiculous amount" in her journal, "too much." As a result of this writing she became "too much in touch" with herself, "too aware" of her feelings and local socio-political issues, which became "too stressful" for her to bear. She became "too emotionally distraught" and eventually "too fragile" and so she stopped writing in her journal: too much writing, too much in touch, too stressful, too emotional and too fragile. The adverb *too* connotes a degree of excess, an undesirable amount, a plethora, in this case, of meaning. In her self-reflexive response to keep a personal journal, Margaret's experience resulted in a confrontation with deep, existential issues of meaning, made more salient and profound by the conspicuous poverty in the villages where she studied and worked. Margaret initially started writing in her journal to *escape* boredom; the type of writing she chose to do was reflexive and thus forced her to confront issues of meaning. Finally, this meaning became too much for her and she stopped writing as often, and as reflexively. Svendsen says that, "boredom is connected to reflection, and in all reflection there is a tendency towards a loss of world" (2005:33). But for Margaret, the loss of one world (the boring afternoons), led to the profound analysis of another, where issues of class inequality, including extreme poverty, lead to a close examination of her own life and values and the intractable juxtaposition her presence in India represented in terms of broader existential questions.

According to Raposa, "boredom itself represents the death of meaning, of interest. It is an experience (however dimly understood as such) of the emptiness that lurks at the heart of human existence, an emptiness into which each moment fades, into which all finite things pass away" (1999:60). This emptiness prompted Margaret to begin writing; ultimately, the act of writing revealed "too much" meaning. We might wonder why this meaning was not satisfying, why Margaret did not continue with her writing, particularly because she *was* finding meaning. Instead, Margaret[163] stopped because she "felt too fragile." The meaning she uncovered, through reflection and writing, made it too difficult

[163] If it is not already obvious to the reader, I should point out here that "Margaret" is an unusually sensitive, aware and intelligent young woman. Her chosen career, many years after her time in India, forces her to confront socio-political issues on a daily basis. In no way do I want to give the impression that she lacked the courage it takes to work through existential issues; indeed, I hope I convey the opposite, that she is remarkable in her insight and commitment to social justice.

for her to continue her regulated participation in what was, after all, just a university course, with limited goals and resources with which to undertake "international development." She became "too aware of issues that I couldn't take action on… pulling back from that writing made it easier to deal with, repress." Instead, Margaret began reading "an incredible number" of novels to fill the many unstructured hours. Novel reading is a classic mode of escape, where we focus our attention on the lives of fictional characters and their personal dramas; that is, we shift our focus to the meaning in the lives of imagined people and places, where we watch in fascination and even horror, but are not ourselves implicated in any actions, and thus bear no responsibility.

Margaret's classmates also experienced the long hours of boredom in the afternoons; however, she says that they did not often talk about it with each other because, "it would have made the whole process harder to deal with if we used the word everyday to each other." Drawing attention to boredom, particularly when there are no apparent alternatives to the situation, serves to magnify the sense of the slow passage of time. Bored employees do not usually complain of their boredom all day, every day; there is a kind of understood code that the solitary experience of boredom is difficult enough to bear. Continued reminders of it highlight our powerlessness over it and the ways that it can be used as a measure of social control. Sometimes it is easier, at least in the short term, to try to ignore boredom.

Margaret says that, although she and her classmates did not talk about their boredom *per se*, "to talk about your day meant talking about what you did to avoid boredom everyday." This highlights the quality of absence inherent in boredom; a quality that makes it a difficult experience, but also difficult to write about and analyze. When we are experiencing boredom we are doing *something* in that moment: we might only sit still, chin in hand, or we might pace a room, or even disinterestedly perform the functions of our work. Eventually, our experience of boredom prompts us (in that it gnaws and nags at us) to consider alternative behaviours, activities and actions. This is what is considered by some to be the "positive" side of boredom; that is, the experience of being bored can sometimes lead us to think of and do things we might not normally do (think here of Benjamin's "boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience," 1969:91). There is even a tendency amongst philosophers to romanticize this aspect of

boredom and suggest that it can lead to laudable acts of creativity[164]. Regardless of this imagined possibility, boredom itself, the in-the-moment experience of boredom, is one of absence: we are not interested; we lack a sense of meaning; we lack desire; we are not purposively motivated. While we may feel frustrated, and generally dissatisfied, we do not feel in the way we experience emotions, such as happiness, sadness or anger. It is, rather, a sense of not-feeling. The discomfort increases as we become increasingly aware of the passage of time. Without purpose, meaning and desire, time is empty and yet weighs heavily upon us. In terms of Bergson's concept of empty, homogeneous time, when we experience boredom, "time… is nothing but the ghost of space haunting the reflective consciousness" (Bergson 1996[1913]:99). The ghost of space refers to the extensiveness of space and place, whereas boredom lacks this dimension of extension. It is a kind of ontological no-man's-land.

Margaret's peers do not talk about their boredom *qua* boredom; instead, they talk about the things they do to fill the empty time of boredom. Where boredom is an ontological absence, it seems that the social world also abhors a vacuum and we are compelled to "fill" time in order to distract us from our boredom. In this way, to describe boredom, we can only refer to what we do to avoid or escape boredom; its ontological status of discomfiting meaninglessness, means that thoughts and experiences of boredom are necessarily accompanied with thoughts and behaviours that seek to end (avoid, escape) the experience of boredom. We know boredom by the epiphenomena that represent it. For the investigator of boredom, we can see only a para-reflection of the experience. Margaret's experience, in one sense, led her into the heart of boredom; that is, she faced the meaninglessness she experienced in her afternoon time and wrote about this in a journal. This writing lead to contemplative reflections on the complex relationship she had to the people and places where she was working, and to a broader and more problematic investigation of general existential questions. While she was able to fill the empty time of her boredom and create meaning for herself through her journal writing, the meaning she created proved to be at least as uncomfortable as the initial experience of boredom that was the impetus to write at all.

[164] With less hyperbole, Spacks (1989:591) states that, "although empty time holds terrors for everyone, it contains the potential for discovery."

So, while boredom is an experience of lack of meaning in the moment, it seems that the answer, or antidote to boredom, is not necessarily to pursue existential questions of meaning. Yet, this seems counterintuitive. If boredom is about a *lack* of interest and meaning, then what does Margaret's experience tell us about boredom? That is, why is the purposeful, thoughtful pursuit of meaning, fraught with ontological despair? It would appear that the meaning we are missing in boredom is not necessarily the same kind of meaning that turns "the lining of time to the outside" (Benjamin 2002 D2a, 1). While situational boredom may be assuaged by various *divertissements*, either ones we ourselves can take up (e.g., reading a book, going for a walk, watching a movie) or similar distractions offered to us by others. In Margaret's situation, she and her peers were bored, for long periods, and for weeks at a time. Thus the situative boredom took on an existential element. In this particular example, *where* Margaret experienced the boredom (i.e., poor villages in India) served to intensify and compound her reaction. She found herself in a socio-political situation where the (Indian) people around her led poverty stricken lives and were the intended focus of her international development programme; but, at the same time, given the structure of the academic course itself, Margaret's afternoons were unstructured, and students had to remain in their own compound during this time. Margaret's initial situational boredom was thus put under a microscope of meaning when she turned to journal writing to cope with her afternoon boredom. Ultimately, she found herself writing about a seemingly untenable situation (widespread poverty and its concomitant social problems), from the position of very limited capacity to intervene. Margaret tried to escape her boredom by trying to *find* meaning, a choice most people do not make. But the weight of the meaning she reflected upon in her writing proved too much for her to bear and in the end she needed to escape from the meaning itself.

Fourth Storey
Representing Boredom

In the winter of 2007-2008, the job/career-finding company, monster.ca, created a billboard that emphasized the idea that a different job could be a better, and therefore, less boring job. A handful of pencils, apparently tossed towards the stereotypically acoustic-tiled ceiling of an office, is the background image for the words, "Boredom Tenders its resignation" (see Figures 6 and 7 below).

Because pencils are seldom used anymore, in the era of the keyboard and cell phone or other mobile device touchpad, these pencils suggest the image of the traditional pencil pusher, the bored office clerk performing her largely bureaucratic function for a company in which she has no emotional or intellectual investment. The acoustic-tiled ceiling suggests the temporary and thus unstable nature of many of these jobs, set up in cheaply built and furnished office spaces, where each worker sits in a makeshift cubicle made of portable fabric half-walls. Overall, this advertisement is dull and colourless, underscoring the grayness of boring jobs and suggesting, by the words, that another, more interesting job, awaits. The movement of the pencils in the air does suggest a sense of gleeful abandon, presumably gained when boredom tenders its resignation (i.e., when the worker finds a more interesting job).

Interestingly, however, the overall image is not actually successful in terms of attracting attention. It is one of several billboards on this street, all at about the same level above the road, but it stands out the least in terms of its visual appeal. Had I not actually been stuck in traffic and looking around, and of course, been more sensitive than most people to finding the word "boredom" in unusual places, it is unlikely I would have noticed this large sign. Although the words are legible from a distance, the image is not; that is, the pencils appear only as oddly placed lines until one is quite close to the sign. Depicting boredom by actually using boring images and colours, then, is not effective in grabbing our attention, particularly in a world where dozens or even hundreds of signs compete for our attention on every street, especially in urban areas. We can imagine an image that *represents* boredom, but can there be an image about boredom (i.e., it purposefully represents boredom) that actually *evokes* boredom in us?

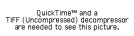

Figure 6 billboard advertisement, Toronto, Ontario 2007 (author photo)

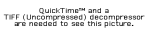

Figure 7 billboard in context (author photo)

We could look at an image and declare that it is uninteresting; after looking at the image for a period of time, we could then say with some certainty that the image is boring to us. That is, a particular image, for example, a painting of a mountain, may not be interesting to someone; he may even say he finds the painting boring and that after looking at it for a few seconds or minutes, he could say he is indeed bored, and bored specifically because of the painting at which he is looking. The painting may produce a state of (eventual) boredom in someone, but it is a boredom that is a response to the specific image and the appraiser's intellectual and emotional response to it. That is, the boredom experienced by the appraiser is the direct response of seeing the painting, becoming disinterested in it, and interpreting this lack of interest as boredom. But the image itself is not about boredom and is certainly not intended to produce boredom in those who look at it. As Colpitt reminds us, "what works of art do not do, at least ought not to do, is bore us" (1985:361). It is not an image of boredom, but, for some people, a boring image. We can imagine an image that well represents boredom, such as the Walter

Sickert painting, *Ennui*, of the apparently bored couple (Figure 1, Chapter 3), or an image of a bored child slouching at his school desk, or a bored employee sitting with chin in hands, etc. But these are representations of boredom; they do not necessarily make us feel bored by looking at them. Quite the opposite, I argue: images of boredom are interesting. We take a second look to see if we recognize the feeling in ourselves, to see if we have been, or are, like the person in the image, or if we can relate to the imagery and symbols; we are intrigued by images of boredom. Images of boredom are interesting because of the very enigmatic nature of boredom; it is difficult to explain how the experience feels, and almost impossible to accurately define its parametres academically. I am not just reiterating Magritte's point, from his painting "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*." Of course an image is never itself the thing to which it can only ever refer; however, an image of a laughing child can evoke a feeling of happiness in us, and an image of a recently-bombed public market evokes feelings of horror, anger, compassion. But images about boredom itself, that is, images that purposefully represent boredom, cannot evoke boredom in us when we look at them. In the billboard announcing that "boredom tenders its resignation," the image is about the satisfaction, even joy, of being released from a boring situation. It serves to remind us of boredom, but it does not evoke boredom in us[165]; rather, boredom lurks, as a villainous threat, but is not itself in evidence, not in plain sight.

If, as I have tried to explain above, the actual experience of boredom cannot be purposefully evoked by an image (largely because we find images themselves interesting and intriguing), then what are the types of images that we find boring? Although the actual subjective experience of boredom may be quite similar from one person to the next, what actually bores us, what we find boring, varies greatly, both among different people, and even for each person. I might experience boredom in one situation, at one time, but not in that situation another time. This is not a discussion of taste, *per se*, where one person might find an image of a symmetrical flower appealing, and another person would find it uninteresting and boring. These are differences in aesthetic sensibilities and,

[165] That this particular image, of the pencils thrown toward a tiled office ceiling, is neither particularly interesting nor apparently meaningful (dull colours, image not clear from a distance required for looking at a billboard while in a moving vehicle), is useful here for my discussion but in reality is probably just the fault of the art department who designed the image.

as Bourdieu (1984) detailed at length, these differences are largely structured by class. Instead, what I want to consider here is the idea of boring images; images that either purposefully present boring situations or try to capture the experience of boredom.

In the spring of 2007, Vancouver, B.C. artist, Lorna Brown, and Berlin-based artist, David Zink Yi, mounted an installation piece, "The Structure of Boredom (After Oden)" at Artspeak Gallery in Vancouver, B.C., for an exhibition called "The Chatter of Culture". The installation involved audio, text and image. According to the gallery's website description[166] of part of this installation:

> Brown has covered the windows of the gallery with a white material upon which a 1970s pop-psychology diagram is mirrored and rotated to form a lacy, endlessly repeating pattern that looks like wallpaper. This diagram, which is an exterior mapping of an interior process, is applied to the surface of the building as a kind of barrier between the outside chatter of the street and the inner, contemplative space of the gallery… In order [to] decipher this content, which maps the stages leading to demonic boredom, the viewer must slow down and focus their attention on the diagram, which effectively counteracts a state of boredom. This papering of the windows also acts as a visual metaphor in that it signifies a kind of vacancy or cessation of activity that is usually a precursor to boredom.

[166] http://artspeak.ca/exhibitions/text_detail.html?text_id=144 written by Rebecca Marks (Retrieved January 5, 2008).

Figure 8 "The Structure of Boredom (After Oden)" by artist Lorna Brown; on display here at Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver,B.C, April-May 2007, for the exhibition "The Chatter of Culture" (photograph with permission of Lorna Brown)

Although the diagram itself is about boredom, and is reproduced endlessly by the artist in an attempt to be itself an experience in boredom, the viewer is instead drawn in by the words and pattern and so it "effectively counteracts a state of boredom." As these viewers in the image above suggest, studying boredom (visually) is in fact interesting.

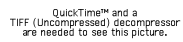

Figure 9 detail, "The Structure of Boredom (After Oden)" by artist Lorna Brown

Inside the gallery, Brown's second piece, "*Threshold (cont.)*", is a projection of 27 different quotations, taken from various authors, about boredom. The quotations "materialize legibly within the bottom two feet of the wall and then quietly disappear. Interspersed between these passages on the subject of boredom is a small graphic of two arrows rotating in a circular pattern, a visual indicator of the time that it takes to process information being received" (Marks 2007). But this waiting is also meant to induce boredom through waiting for the next image (i.e., quotation). This in-between-quotations waiting is more effective at actually inducing boredom in the onlooker than any of the quotations themselves. But its effect is particularly heightened when we begin to wonder just how many times will we have to wait like this? Will each quotation be worth the wait? The waiting introduces an element of extended time, *Langeweile*, but also the sense that there is no foreseeable end to our experience; if we continue to stand here watching and waiting, we may end up being trapped, caught up in the endless loop of the projection. According to Brown, her inspiration came from reading Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* while she was in Paris:

> … I was looking (after Benjamin) for a form that was seemingly endless, could conform to different exhibition or dissemination situations and that could shift scale and occupy space in different ways…With the video work, I was playing with the expectation that video will 'do' something - the anticipation that it will have action. The video is extremely slow and creeps along the floor, coming into focus just before disappearing at the bottom of the wall. The experience of watching the flickering light is conducive to a kind of spaced-out watching, a lapse that mimics boredom[167].

Artist David Zink Yi's contribution to this installation is a video piece, "Ahumm", in which a hand is seen writing this expression endlessly across a piece of paper, accompanied by a voice saying the word in a variety of intonations. Like Brown's projection, "Ahumm" is shown in an endless loop although here the hand performs in real time, with no pauses or demands to wait. Yet, we still think about waiting, as we wait for the hand to write something else, for the voice to change and announce the thought or idea that the "ahumm" precedes. We are kept "on the brink of illumination" (http://artspeak.ca/exhibitions/event_detail.html? event_id=181). Benjamin writes, "boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience" (1969:91), and Nietzsche's idea that "boredom is that disagreeable 'windless calm' of the soul that produces a happy voyage and cheerful winds" (2001[1882] §42) both suggest that the experience of boredom can precede illumination and even that boredom is necessary as an incubation period for such illumination.

Where 19th and early 20th century art (literary and visual) tends toward portrayals and descriptions of boredom, directly and indirectly, more contemporary artists, such as the above examples of Brown and Zink Yi, try to actually produce boredom in the viewer. Although there is an inherent critique in their work, of the role of modernity in boredom, their work also forces us to participate in the (re)construction of boredom. Particularly in these installation pieces, we are (at least at first) interested in participating in this production; we are fascinated by their attempt to deconstruct such a mundane, though often paralyzing, everyday experience. And yet, in Brown and Zink Yi's installation, we do eventually actually become bored – by the tedious repetition, the waiting for "something" to happen. We begin to experience what in fact is being deconstructed (by being reproduced) in front of our eyes. There is a certain physicality to

[167] Personal correspondence with artist, January 28, 2008 (with permission to reproduce here).

these installation pieces that implicates the body and thus the very physical nature of boredom. The boredom diagram covers the windows of the art gallery and viewers must walk up to it, inspect it, read it, and then walk along the window wall to take in the repeating pattern, to get caught up in the repetition that is commonly associated with boredom. Both of the looping videos demand physical attention by drawing the eye to various parts of the projection that hold out promise, but (purposefully) fail to deliver. In the case of Zink-Yi's projection, there is an actual human hand moving repetitively across the page, and a human voice making the "Ahumm" sound. This is an example of an embodied boredom; the body moving repetitively, seemingly without purpose, and the mind trying to come to terms with this monotony (evidenced by the sound). These examples are suggestive of the energy inherent in boredom. While it is something that we most often recognize as an experience of inertia and lassitude, boredom begets a restless agitation: there is an edge in boredom, an anticipation that circumstances will change combined with a fear they might not.

In the conclusion of his philosophical article about the ontology of boredom, Bigelow (1983) makes a similar point when he argues:

> It would have been necessary, if this were to have been a study of boredom, to be a study in boredom. It would have been necessary to evince boredom; but this is impossible to do. A commentary on boredom needs to be an exercise in boredom; but not even this can be said, not even this can be shown – boredom can only be performed and performed in an act of defiant despair. Boredom cannot be confirmed by its commentary. (p.264)

Although strongly felt in our bodies, one of the main qualities of boredom is its elusiveness, evident in our inability to purposefully produce it in others through visual means. Although we cannot escape boredom, it seems we cannot (consistently) capture it either. In the next storey, I begin with a consideration of one of the ways boredom can most effectively be "captured" and represented.

Fifth Storey
Performing Boredom

In the winter of 1958, a young student nurse stands watching a play. The red-velvet covered wooden seats in front of her are filled with full-price ticket payers, but in the back, for less than half the cost of a regular ticket, the young woman stands with about a dozen others, watching a play. She, like the others standing with her, is thrilled to be there, to be in the theatre, to be watching this play in this small, downtown Belfast theatre. The play is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, first performed only a few years previously, in Paris. Its strange plotless plot and do-nothing characters, not to mention its infamous playwright, have made it famous, though not everyone can say exactly why. The young nurse stands expectantly. She has paid the equivalent of her uniform shoe allowance to be here, and she is sure she will not regret it.

At first she blames her flagging interest on the long shifts at the hospital, the stress of the boot-camp-like training imposed on the young student nurses. As the play continues, she starts to wish she had a seat, one she could put her head back on from time to time, take the weight off her feet. What is the point of all that talking about nothing, and waiting for someone who is evidently not going to appear? She shifts from one foot to the other, the calf muscles in her legs tensing up after a long shift on night duty, walking for 12 hours across the hard, ward floors. In the end, she feels glad it is over, glad to be let out into the cool rainy night where she catches a bus back to her small digs at the hospital.

Fifty years later, long retired from her nursing, the woman is sitting now, under a large gray machine at a cancer clinic in Canada. She is talking to the young technician beside her. The technician exclaims, "my, you sure are a very philosophical person," and the woman flashes back to that night at the theatre, where Samuel Beckett's play had bored her almost to tears. I tell her she was just too young at the time to cope with the big ideas Beckett had in mind, "but *now* you understand them." My mother nods, yes, now she understands, sitting there with an intravenous tube in her arm, in a room where non-patients walk around wearing full-length lead aprons. In this environment, I wonder if Samuel Beckett himself would need a seat, would not understand, would not have the patience for this.

Considered by many critics to be one of the best plays of the 20th century, *Waiting for Godot* is, in terms of plotline, a play about waiting. Main characters Vladimir and Estragon, two apparently down-and-outs, wait for a man named Godot who never does come. As I wrote in Chapter One, I saw this play, performed in a Federal Penitentiary by actor inmates, 50 years after my mother first saw it[168]. I had to drive a distance out of town, could bring nothing in to the performance with me (no purse or bag) and had to walk through a metal detector after showing my ticket. Small vans drove audience members the short drive to the building being used as a theatre, a small gymnasium with a modest stage and folding chairs for the audience. It is not a short play. Vladimir and Estragon talk and wait, and talk and wait some more, for more than two hours. Like my mother, years before me, I am excited to be here, to be seeing the play as Beckett most wanted it seen: in a prison, performed by inmates. The waiting of their own lives, as a result of the punishment meted out to them through the criminal justice system, underscores whatever words of Beckett's they performed. The idea of boredom as a punitive measure of social control was not simply metaphorical there, it was palpable; the inmate actors on stage had spent years incarcerated. Then, without much warning, I found myself bored too. And, like the inmates, I could not leave at the intermission, or sneak out the back and wander around on my own; I could not escape. Suddenly, the character Estragon looked out at the audience, at me, when he exclaimed the line, "does any of you deny being bored?" My complex response was no doubt intended by the master playwright, Beckett, and was artfully portrayed by the actors. The play was indeed a "celebration of stasis" (Healy 1984:35). Boredom performed can evoke boredom in the watcher, even in this case, where the circumstances were unusually interesting in other ways.

This storey is a consideration of the ways we perform boredom in our everyday lives. How do we respond to boring people? Boring situations? Boring events? How do we signal our boredom, or hide it? Or, how do we pretend to hide our boredom so that we are in fact signaling it? I will look here at the many ways we perform our boredom, and

[168] *Waiting for Godot* was staged at William Head Penitentiary in Victoria, BC, May 2- June 7, 2008, directed by Ian Case

respond to boredom in others. This storey is thus a Beckett-inspired, Goffman-esque analysis of boredom in social situations.

Goffman's dramaturgical approach to the study of social interactions, famously put the social person on the stage, an actor, sometimes skillfully and sometimes hesitantly acting the parts of the many overlapping and interrelated roles that his or her social world demands. The social actor works to manage her presentation of self both in front of others (onstage) and privately, or with intimates (backstage) (Goffman 1959). On the whole, Goffman's social actors act with tact, in an effort to maintain civil social relations. There are any number of unexpected social situations that might arise and cause any one or more social actors varying degrees of shame or embarrassment; therefore, it is the presumption that other actors will treat us tactfully, that enables us to proceed with any sense of trust in each known and unknown social situation. We even strive to maintain civility when we do not in fact want to engage with others in a particular circumstance; instead, we briefly nod and smile slightly, then turn our attention elsewhere, indicating that our civil inattention (Goffman 1963) is the cue that we wish to be left alone, yet wish no ill feelings toward anyone else present.

The numerous examples of expressions of boredom listed or discussed in the preceding chapters, though they may vary widely in exact interpretation, all point in the same general direction: boredom is not a desirable state or experience[169]. We do not purposefully seek out boredom (as we might occasionally seek out melancholy, sadness, even anger and fear, emotions otherwise considered to be negative and undesirable); instead, "it pursues us: like the celebrated inevitabilities of death and taxes it'll be along soon enough" (Brooker 2001:30). For organizational clarity, I will say here that there are two main types of boredom behaviour: our efforts to avoid boredom before it happens, and our efforts to escape boredom, once we find ourselves in its clutches.

Few of us have had the experience of waking up with the most interesting, and therefore very meaningful, predicament of discovering we are in fact a bug, as Kafka's (1983[1924]) Gregor Samsa discovered; we are, therefore, faced with the situation of

[169] The exceptions to this are the more artistic and philosophical writers who suggest that boredom can serve as an incubator for creative and productive thoughts and actions. However, even these writers (e.g., Benjamin, Kant, Heidegger), ultimately write more about the negative aspects of boredom. It seems it is difficult to maintain a Pollyanna mindset about this experience for too long, and likely only in between bouts of it.

trying to make meaning in our lives, take an interest in the events of each unfolding day. Part of this involves the active avoidance of situations we believe we will find boring.

Clearly some situations are easy to avoid and we think nothing of these. If a bus is late, we might walk to the next bus stop; if a book is boring, we put it down and pick up another; if a shopping expedition becomes boring, we return home, or treat ourselves to a coffee. But none of these examples involves the close-up interaction with another person. That is, our social skills, *per se*, are neither required nor engaged. As well, in these examples, it is not important to us that anybody know that we are experiencing boredom. But as soon as we either experience boredom in the presence of others, or wish either to signal our boredom or hide it, then the social actor must draw on her store of intricate social repertoires to successfully negotiate the situation.

Accusations of Boredom

As Goffman points out, we generally go to great lengths to conceal our negative feelings and extreme emotions from people other than our close intimates, and boredom is certainly no exception. While we may, on occasion, give in to the temptation to tell someone exactly the extent of our anger, disappointment, or fear, we are unlikely to express to someone that he or she is the very cause of our boredom. I would go so far as to argue that we are more likely to tell someone they have gained weight, or that their new pants are ugly, than we are to say calmly, "you are boring me."

In fact, the lengths we will go to hide the boredom we experience in the presence of others suggests that the expression of it in these situations is a social taboo. To accuse someone of being boring carries with it the weight of a great insult and one that is not easy – for either side -- from which to recover. It is the diffuse and generalized nature of this comment that makes it so insulting; it is a comment on a person's entire being, including his or her personality, intellect and any and all wit and charm he or she may bring to bear in a social circumstance. It is akin to accusing someone of being intolerable, of being somehow socially unfit and unacceptable at the same time. Saying that someone is boring, has the crushing effect of rendering that person unimportant, even insignificant; someone (or something) from whom others want to escape. Hannah Arendt said that she found the question of her Jewishness "boring" (1998[1958]), and, writing in the 1980s, Jean Baudrillard (2002) hoped that the entire last decade of the 20th century could be

skipped over because he was sure it would be boring. These comments were intended to belittle and thus somehow negate (Jewishness/*fin de siècle* discussions); in a sense, they damn by feint critique. According to Spacks (1995:10), boring is an "all-purpose term of disapproval." I would argue that it is much more than this. To accuse someone of being boring is a dismissive gesture: it is like saying, "your presence and social contribution here don't meet the bar" and "you are irrelevant." As I have discussed in previous chapters, boredom is about meaning, or the lack thereof. So, to say that a person who is causing boredom is somehow themselves also (socially) meaningless, is an affront of the highest order. Saying it would certainly risk the equilibrium of the social situation by forcing the accused to feel enough shame that he leaves the situation, simply walks away. Anybody else present at the time would likely feel the lurch of sudden sympathy, as they watch the obviously uncomfortable and flustered response of the accused.

Interestingly, there is not much any of these other participants could actually do to regain the social stability. If one were to reach out in sympathy and defend the person accused of being boring, this would surely add to the awkwardness of the moment and only highlight what may be this person's boring qualities. To berate the person who actually said, "you are boring," would similarly draw attention to the pathetic situation the boring person now finds himself in. It is one of those rare social situations where perhaps nothing can be said at the time to bring the situation back to at least the appearance of a level and trustworthy playing field. Once someone has been publicly accused of being boring (i.e., causing boredom in others present), he or she would most likely want to leave frontstage in order to regain composure backstage. When someone tells you that your presence and social contributions are without (enough) meaning, you are in a sense rendered (at least temporarily) non-social. The effect of breaking this taboo (i.e., of accusing someone of being boring, in public), has repercussions on other members of the group as well, as they struggle to think of what they might say or do to restore order. We can only speculate on the reaction of the accuser. Presumably such a person felt either extremely annoyed and frustrated and perhaps uncharacteristically blurted out the charge in the first place, or she is a person who has both the confidence to speak her mind but also the temerity to risk the approval of others. Because of the taboo nature of being accused of being boring, in most instances it would take a person who felt

pushed to the extreme (outer) limits of civil social behaviour to make the accusation. The fact that we very rarely accuse someone of being boring tells us that, for the most part, we are indeed very civil about our boring interactions; despite our own boredom, discomfort and frustration, we will go to great lengths to avoid making the accusation.

When someone has been rendered non-social, by the seemingly merciless expression, "you are boring," this is no longer a social situation in which the rules are known. It is not just the accused who wants to walk away.

Signaling Boredom

Because of the taboo nature of boredom (i.e., of being accused of being boring), most of us begrudgingly, if not unwillingly, endure boring situations and boring people. We know that in most cases, it is temporary: the meeting will eventually end, the boring person will eventually stop talking or the arrival of a bus will rescue us. And we do need rescuing. One of the most difficult social situations to negotiate is that situation where we feel trapped, but by an apparently benign, or even friendly, person. This neighbour, or family member, or colleague, or stranger at the bus stop, continues to talk to us (at us), about things we do not find at all interesting. But we feign at least a minimal degree of interest (smile, nod, make listening sounds) and grow increasingly resentful.

Eventually, when our patience is running out and we do not necessarily trust that help is on the way (in the form of another person arriving or a welcome distraction for the speaker), we begin the subtle forms of signaling our boredom, a kind of *purposive incivility*. The first social contract we break is eye contact. We stop looking in the eyes, or at least upon the face, of the boring speaker; but not for too long, as this risks introducing an uncivil element. We merely glance away for a moment or two before slowly returning our gaze. This effort is difficult to describe (what is the name for the speed at which eyeballs move?), and yet we can all recognize it. We take our time returning our eyes and gaze to the speaker and, significantly, we do not try to hide this. Instead, we want the speaker to notice that our attention has at least waned. It is our way of regaining a sense of control in what is beginning to feel like a social trap. This eye contact break is their cue to quickly wrap things up and either move on to another topic,

or leave the scene. At this point, many people do just that and the situation is changed and both people are spared the situation where one person loses face.

However, occasionally (and more often than we would like), the person who is boring us does not immediately respond to our furtive eye gestures and they continue their boring talk. We then start to break eye contact more frequently, for barely perceptibly longer periods of time and we introduce the element of *failure to react*. Whereas before we were occasionally nodding, politely, in the appropriate places, and sometimes uttering an "mmhmm" sound, to indicate we were still actively listening, and therefore apparently still interested, now, when we return our gaze, slowly, to the speaker's face, we appear to miss our next cue to signal our interest. The speaker ends his sentence with a chuckle and looks at us for a similar reaction, but instead we stare blankly: but only for a brief moment. Then we make a bit of a show of making the effort to participate, and we might also chuckle, although it sounds a bit hollow. As Goffman writes, we engage in "not quite concealing tactfully" (1967:127). This shift, from appearing to enjoy our participation in the interaction, to having to make a *conscious, studied effort* to continue to do so, marks a significant moment in the boring interaction. This is the pivotal moment that determines whether or not the interaction will continue towards a potentially uncivil (i.e., awkward, uncomfortable) end, or, a more tactful end, where no one loses face. Writing about the coordination of work tasks, Goffman writes: "while no word of direction or sociability may be spoken, it will be understood that lack of attention or coordinated response constitutes a breach in the mutual commitment of the participants" (1963:90). In the situation of an increasingly bored listener, he or she begins to breach the mutual commitment in the face-to-face interaction by breaking the tacit rules of this engagement and engaging in the unspoken "vocabulary of discontent" (Conrad 1997:132).

Once the commitment starts to erode, the onus is on the (boring) speaker to observe the cues he is given by the listener, and adjust his behaviour accordingly (change the topic, stop talking, ask the listener a question, etc.)[170]. If he fails to do so, the

[170] I have called them "the speaker" and "the listener" although of course in a social encounter both people are potentially speakers and listeners, by turn. However, in the case of boredom, one person is usually speaking more than the other person(s) and this is the reason the other person is in fact bored. It is of course possible that both speakers are talking the same amount and both are subjectively experiencing the

listener's efforts at breaching the interaction escalate. Clearly different people are socialized with varying levels of social sensitivities and for some people, the first step in this breach is often sufficient to stop the speaker. For example, a common strategy is to look at one's watch and declare that one is late and really must get going. Regardless of how brusque and early on in the interaction, this occurs, this is still an attempt at maintaining the trust and tact of the situation. Here, time (looking at one's watch) is to blame: I have to leave you, but only because time is forcing me to do so, otherwise I would remain and listen to you some more. Again, it is now up to the speaker to recognize this cue and respond with an appropriate, "oh I shouldn't keep you," thus officially releasing the listener from the situation.

As well as breaking eye contact and slowing or omitting the expected reactions we might normally make (smiling, nodding, etc), another strategy for ending the boring interaction is to hurry the speaker to his or her conclusion more rapidly than it appears he is willing to travel himself. Where normally we would politely wait for the end of a story or sentence, now we fill it in ourselves, speak the words of our speaker before he has spoken them; in effect, taking the wind out of his sails. This message conveys "I know where you are going with this, I can get there myself and therefore it's not as interesting as you might think." We do this subtly at first, not wanting to sound rude. However, if the speaker still does not pick up on our cue, we grow more anxious, we feel more trapped. What is left to do that will maintain this order of everyday interaction, the level of social structure that affects us most often and has the greatest impact on our psychological and emotional lives? We try to vary our strategy – first we look away, then we look at our watch (this time without a claim of having to be somewhere else), then we pause too long in our response. Finally, the speaker says to us, "Well, I must be on my way, I've talked your ear off." Amazingly, our reply is often something like, "Not at all, I've enjoyed the chat, see you soon!"

However, we don't always want to be polite, to maintain tact at any cost and work to prop up the ongoing flow of the interaction. Sometimes we want to communicate our boredom quite clearly, with the intent to wound; yet, even in this case, we are not

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boredom of the situation; however, for the sake of analysis, I am assuming here a boring person (the speaker) and a person feeling bored (the listener).

straightforward about it and mask our behaviour. In situations where our participation is not voluntary, as in the above example of meeting someone on the street or talking to a neighbour, friend or family member, we resort to *passive aggressive measures* to communicate the agony of our boredom. A good example here is the office meeting. Employees are there because they have to be, their attendance is required and not optional. People commonly complain about the boredom of office meetings: they last too long, the information is uninteresting, the speakers are dull, etc. As our boredom increases, so does our frustration and eventually our anger. We feel trapped and at the same time we know there is no actual (socially acceptable) escape, without repercussions. Our physical boredom often shows itself unconsciously at first, with a bouncing leg, hands fidgeting with a loose thread, moving our papers around, or doodling. Then, with more purpose, we stop the pretense that we are listening, and break eye contact with the speaker for long periods of time. We might look out a window, look at the clock, at our watch, all of which clearly signal, "I don't want to be here and have better things to do." We stop nodding and laughing on cue, and generally participating as part of the group. Yet, because we are in fact in a group, our unsocial behaviour is partly masked by the presence of the others, some of whom are also engaging in various boredom defense strategies. We know that we will not be singled out in a group and yet the fear lurks that we might be, we might in fact carry our behaviour too far and be spotted and called to task for our petulant behaviour. We may then return to making occasional eye contact, nodding or laughing on cue, or otherwise making the appearance we are engaged and interested in the proceedings. Sometimes this can be performed in such a way as to communicate to the speaker/presenter that we are in effect politely putting up with their talk and making a great effort to do so; this *performance of patronizing behaviour* is intended to communicate to the speaker that they are indeed boring us, their performance is not interesting nor meaningful to us, but we are, temporarily, being civil. The assumption is that the speaker, picking up on this cue, must then change or stop their boring talk and be grateful to the civil listener for not being publicly accused of being boring. It is more likely that in a group situation someone present will indicate their boredom to the others present, for example, by catching someone's attention and rolling their eyes or pretending to yawn. We generally do this when we assume the boring person

is not looking, both as a distraction and amusement for ourselves but also to signal to others present that we are uninterested in what is being said or presented. Public signals of boredom can be used in this way to indicate that we are somehow better than, smarter than, or otherwise removed from the present conversation, or situation. Gehring (1997:127) suggests that "being blasé is simply publicly affecting boredom. One need not actually *be* bored… blasé is the proclamation in word or gesture that life's spectacles no longer provide the amusement others seem to derive from the parade before their eyes." Thus performing boredom, whether in a meeting or at a public event, is a way of signaling not simply our dissatisfaction, but our general disaffection with what we are experiencing; it is a public display of refusal.

One particular social situation provides a unique opportunity for us to be not only conscious of our boredom, but also of our performance of boredom. When we are talking to someone on the telephone, and thus they are not present (in the era of cell phones this must now be made clear), we may become bored by the conversation. We become bored for the same reasons we would during a face-to-face conversation (e.g., the other person talks too much about something that does not interest us), but our boredom during a phone call is heightened because we lack any other potentially interesting stimulation that an in-person interaction includes: we do not see the speaker's facial movements, body language, or more clearly hear the nuances of their speech. Eventually, we begin to signal our boredom, either to ourselves or to any others present. In the case of a telephone conversation, this can be done quite obviously, yet without the caller being made aware. We can roll our eyes, or make a gesture with our hands that the person is talking too much, or we use our face to make mocking expressions of feigned interest, enthusiasm, or sympathy; all the while we continue to talk to the caller in a polite voice. But we must be careful because a change in our facial muscles affects the sound of our speech and we do not actually want to be caught by the listener. Being at the end of a telephone, and thus not visible to the caller, gives us a sense of social power we would not otherwise have in person and we are more willing to risk the social etiquette of polite interaction.

There are particular situations where expressing our boredom can in fact cause us more boredom. Children soon learn not to complain that they are bored, lest their parents

put them to work with household chores, or homework[171], a holdover from the belief that "the devil makes work of idle hands." Similarly, employees do not complain (to their employers) of their boredom. Such a complaint would communicate that they are unsatisfied with their job (and thus risk being fired), but also that they are unable to find tasks to perform so that they at least appear to be working, if not actually being enterprising, on behalf of their employer. We fear both being fired, but also being given more of the same mundane tasks to perform; as well, expressing our boredom risks surveillance of our future job performance. In some job situations, where other employees appear to be engaged and not bored, expressing our boredom to a colleague could be interpreted as a sign that we are not able to find meaning in the work and thus we lack the intellect or skill to perform the tasks that our colleagues ably execute. This may be interpreted as a form of elitism on our part (we are too smart, too interesting, to find this work meaningful), or as a lack of imagination and ability. Either way, we run the risk of alienating ourselves from our fellow employees.

Although we may go to great lengths to conceal our boredom from another person, for the reasons described above, there is an exception to this. When our boredom is caused by institutional structure, bureaucracy in particular, we may feel just as trapped (e.g., waiting too long in a bank lineup) as we do in a one-to-one situation, but we are more likely to express our boredom as annoyance, out loud. We may complain to the people beside us, but we might also eventually call out a protest, request that more help be provided in order that our wait is lessened, etc. The difference in this situation is that there is no one single person who is at risk of losing face for being the cause of our boredom and, importantly, this boredom is the boredom of waiting, of spending our time in ways other than we would like and thus there is no one person whose boringness is to blame for the situation. No one person will lose face in this sense. The problem is understood to be one of structure: it is the bank's fault, or even the bank manager, but she herself is not considered to be boring us; rather, it is the structure of the line and the wait and the lack of quick service. In situations where we must wait, the other way we signal both our displeasure but also the value of our personal time, is to "make a show of the

[171] This comment may already refer to "another time," although certainly that of my own youth.

value of [our] time by fishing out reading material from satchels, jotting notes, and so on" (Gehring 1997:131).

The Bore

I have said that there are two main types of boredom behaviour, that of avoiding boredom before it happens, and that of trying to escape it when it does. But there is a third type of boredom behaviour: that which involves the performance of boredom itself by the person who bores. In most cases, it is unlikely that we ourselves know we are in fact being perceived as boring. Unless we are attempting to bore purposefully, which is rare, we often cannot know we are boring until we observe in our fellow conversationalist/listener one of the social cues described above. Interestingly, we do know what bores us in other speakers. As Kant (2006:129) pointed out, "conversations that contain little exchange of ideas are called boring, and just because of this also arduous." When one person speaks significantly more than another, this can cause boredom in the second person. But boredom is not just a case of lack of reciprocity; it has to do with content as well. This is clear in the example of listening to an interesting lecture for an hour and not experiencing boredom. In the quotation above, Kant suggests that there needs to be an "exchange of ideas," whereby each speaker is contributing to the subject of the conversation in such a way as to build on what the other speaker has said. In this sense, the structure of a non-boring conversation is such that both people contribute meaning but also construct it, together. A largely one-sided conversation lacks this co-construction of meaning and thus at least one person is left feeling bored.

Boring talk has a very narrow repertoire of conversational stories (minute details about a holiday, genius children, complaints about a job or spouse) and the conversational style is such that the speaker engages in a monologue, with either little knowledge of how to involve others (and therefore keep them more interested), or with no particular interest in involving the other person as anything other than a listener. These people seem unaware of the social cues involved in the rituals of conversation; they do not leave adequate pauses in their monologues, pauses that invite the listener to begin speaking. Or, when the pauses that they inadvertently create are filled by the former-listener, turned new speaker, the bore ignores this and continues speaking as though the listener had not herself started to speak.

It is likely, however, that when we are ourselves boring other people, we are not necessarily experiencing boredom ourselves. The reason for the social sanction against alleged bores is that we assume bores do not know they are boring others and thus do not even realize that they are losing face, frontstage, in terms of their presentation of self, while backstage, others are rolling their eyes in derision. Thus, every bore we meet reminds us that we too could become a victim of backstage eye-rolling and demeaning gossip. Most of us therefore make an effort not to be, or appear to be, boring.

There is one infamous exception to this: the cocktail party. Any situation (e.g., a company networking event, a formal dinner party with unknown guests, a neighbourhood barbeque, etc.) where people from varying social networks are brought together (i.e., feel compelled to attend) for reasons other than their own, has the known potential for boring interactions, commonly referred to as "cocktail chatter." By definition, this is the largely superficial conversation we feel forced to make with people we do not know. Because there is no assumed common ground these conversations must necessarily at least begin with rather mundane topics. In his Konvolut on boredom, Benjamin (2002) observes that:

> nothing is more characteristic than that precisely this most intimate and mysterious affair, the working of the weather on humans, should have become the theme of their emptiest chatter. Nothing bores the ordinary man more than the cosmos. Hence, for him, the deepest connection between weather and boredom. (D1, 3)

Perhaps this explains our anxiety at having to attend these kinds of events: we know that not only will we be inevitably bored by the conversation of others, we also know that we ourselves will, in all probability, be boring in order to participate civilly. That is, we will have to think of mundane conversation starters which might not lead to more interesting conversations, and we will have to perform this ritual repeatedly as we meet each new person. In this situation, we feel trapped both by the boredom of someone else's cocktail chatter, but also by our own. It is therefore not uncommon to actually be socially rescued in these situations if a friend recognizes our boredom, from across the room, and makes a pretense that we are needed somewhere else, or otherwise interrupts the boring conversation in which we are apparently willingly engaged. Of course, the consumption of alcohol serves to make us feel less socially restricted and is considered a "social lubricant" for this reason. Alcohol serves as a mechanism to loosen the strictures of socially acceptable polite conversation (i.e., small talk) and we are therefore more likely

to say something more candid or otherwise outside the perceived limits of so-called small-talk, thus potentially opening up a wider and more interesting and meaningful social interaction.

As I have described above, being accused of being boring, that is, causing boredom in others, is akin to being rendered non-social. It is thus one of the most socially (and also personally) devastating indictments and as such is a form of public denunciation (Garfinkel 1956). Boredom has no redeeming social qualities. But boredom in cocktail-type situations (i.e., social situations where those in attendance do not know that they have any common interests and whose attendance is in someway perfunctory and therefore not wholehearted), can also be used as a weapon, a defense against those with whom we do not wish to engage. Our own use of superficial, polite small-talk, serves to maintain an impersonal distance with others (cf Horkheimer 1978:100). This requires a skilful construction of conversation that, while appearing to engage the other person, civilly, also communicates our desire to keep the conversation at this same level and, importantly, not wanting to be rejected because we are perceived as, and therefore socially dismissed for, being boring. There are exceptions to this when, for example, we actually purposefully perform boredom, in order to engender it in our listener, so that the conversation ends and the other person exits; or we can even use it purposefully as a weapon, to intentionally annoy the other person by making him or her feel the discomfort of being trapped in a boring situation. Now we are the ones doing the trapping and it is the other(s) who desperately want to escape. Because of the damning nature of being thought of, or accused of, being boring, we most often perform boringness (i.e., to purposefully bore others) for those whom we consider to be of little value to us. Therefore, our successful attempts to make them bored, will not result in any repercussions in our own lives; we don't care what they think or might say about us (largely because we don't care much about them).

Bored Alone

We are not always with other people when we experience boredom. Often we are alone. However, this does not preclude a private performance of the experience, where the actor is also the audience. While inwardly boredom is experienced as a kind of restless frustration, outwardly our bodies manifest the feeling of *Langeweile*, the slow and

meaningless passage of time. This dialectic of embodied boredom (inner restlessness, outward lassitude) reflects the complex nature of the experience.

When we are alone, and bored, our bodies may be still, our chin in the palm of our hand, or we may lie prone on the couch, or gaze blankly into space. Sometimes there is movement that reflects our inner restlessness: we might tap our fingers, bounce our knee or fidget with something small at hand. It is as though our frustration is expressed in these small but insistent gestures. Sometimes we might even sigh loudly, as though signaling to our own selves that we are nearing, or have reached, an unacceptable level of boredom. Whereas we are more likely to express our boredom in subtle, if passive aggressive ways, in public, when we are alone we are more free to express our boredom loudly and clearly, as Zijderveld (1979) observes:

> speech becomes gross and hyperbolic, music loud and nervous, ideas giddy and fantastic, emotions limitless and shameless, actions bizarre and foolish, whenever boredom reigns. A bored individual needs these irritants of body, psyche and mind because he his not behaviourally stimulated in any other way. (p.84)

In the case of situative boredom, we have developed our own rituals for easing the discomfort. We commonly attempt to assuage our boredom through oral means: we eat, we drink, we smoke, we pick up the phone and talk. The experience of boredom, felt in our bodies as discomfort, agitation and discontent, seems to demand a sensual response, a kind of soothing to calm our restlessness. Often we take up such an activity simply to help pass the time, or "kill time" as we say[172]. If the situational boredom drags on too long, we may begin to pace aimlessly, looking for inspiration for a new way to pass the time. This is most clearly evident in children when we see them wander from room to room, or toy to toy, until their interest is peaked once again. As adults, we have more control over our activities particularly if we work and can afford paid amusement. There seems to be no end to the number of activities we might engage in if we have the money, from an everyday trip to the mall, or a mega mall, casino, multiplex theatres and so on. Others have noted how ironic it is that we are "still bored in a culture of entertainment" (Winter 2002).

[172] There is a popular joke that when there is an extended power failure in a region, it is followed by a spike in the birthrate nine months later, implying that when there is not much else to do (no lights, no heat etc.) we pass the time by having sex.

In the case of existential boredom, however, we are not looking to "kill time," by filling up our time with busywork, something that helps to get us through to the next, more interesting or meaningful time. In existential boredom we have no sense that the boredom will end, no faith that we will not indeed always feel this way. It is not hard to understand that this kind of boredom can lead to depression, as some researchers have noted. A key quality of existential boredom is a lack of trust that the experience will pass. Therefore we may be more likely to avoid social situations which we fear will serve only to intensify our feelings of existential boredom by forcing us to interact in "normal" and acceptable ways. As well, we know that there is a certain shame inherent in experiencing this level of boredom; what right do we have, if our basic needs and many luxury ones as well, have been met, to feel such a level of boredom? In an era where many people complain that there are not enough hours in the day to get things accomplished, it seems hollow to complain of boredom: I am not busy enough.

We are therefore not necessarily sympathetic to our own plight which serves only to increase our agitation and sense of poignant longing. Without a focus, or outlet, and with the knowledge that our experience is not one that would necessarily garner sympathy from others, we feel the despair of being rendered non-social. We know not what we desire, and yet we also feel we do not have a legitimate right to a despair that lacks any particular tragedy. It is a crisis without meaning.

Boredom and Social Control

We understand the power of boredom because we use it as a measure of social control. We send our naughty children to their rooms, or to sit silently on a chair, or we remove their various entertainment privileges for a time. On the other end of the spectrum, we torture people by locking them in small spaces, alone, for extended periods of time. When I conducted ethnographic research in a youth detention centre in the late 1990s, the most common complaint by the teenage boys and girls was the hours of boredom they endured, without benefit of television, books and sometimes even school classes. Their punishment for breaking the rules of the institution was segregation, spending a few hours or even days in a cell on their own, without visitors. The sobs or raging screams of some of these segregated youth were audible in the adjacent corridor. The literature about

survivors of war details these experiences of those who, in some instances, were left alone, or with emotionally impoverished fellow survivors, with no meaningful work or distractions, sometimes for years. In a well-known example, the published diary of Anne Frank chronicles the enforced focus on the minutia of everyday life among the few people with whom she was, effectively, imprisoned. With few external distractions, including the lack of new experiences to think about and discuss with others, the tedium of the everyday was the source of much tension and anxiety (Frank et al. 1995).

In everyday situations, however, the most widespread use of boredom as social control is in the workplace, particularly, though not only, factory work, whereby the division of labour is the most extreme: "Most factory labor involves boredom, repetition, and mindless work. More important, the motive behind both the detail division of labor and the increase in mechanization is as much to control an unwilling labor force as it is to increase 'production'" (Kreplin 1979:13). Terkel (1974) detailed the boredom (among other things) of various other types of jobs and in other empirical research on occupations, boredom is considered a common problem (for employees as well as employers) even in white collar office jobs (e.g., Rothlin and Werder 2008). Thirty years ago, Edwards (1978) made the point that "bureaucratic control has created among American workers vast discontent, dissatisfaction, resentment, frustration, and boredom with their work" (p.123). This body of work makes clear the connection between seemingly innocuous forms of personal boredom, and the macro-structural consequences it can have in labour, production and economic outcomes.

Sixth Storey
Representing a Boring City: the Political Economy of Boredom

In April of 2005, Hallmark, the American greeting card company, produced a card with the heading "CSI:Topeka" (see Figure 10, below)[173]. Below this title is a cartoon of two people, one holding a camera, and both wearing suits and white protective gloves. They are looking at the prone body of someone on a sidewalk. One of the onlookers is pointing at the body and the word bubble over his head says, "Looks like he was bored to death." Inside the card the greeting says, "Hope your birthday is anything but dull." This card engendered hostility from some residents of Topeka, Kansas, including Mayor Bill Bunten, who called the card offensive and said that the city was being unfairly maligned by the message of boredom (Hrenchir 2005)[174].

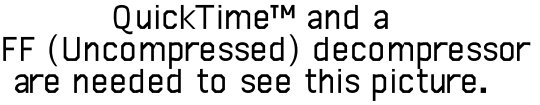

Figure 10 2005 Hallmark greeting card (inside: "Hope your birthday is anything but dull.")

[173] The "CSI" here is a reference to the popular American CBS television program, "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" (first aired in 2000), and its two successful spinoff programs "CSI:Miami" and "CSI:New York."

[174] On the November 12, 2008 episode of the parody news program, "The Colbert Report," mayor-elect of Sacramento, Kevin Johnson, visibly flinched and tried to defend his city when host Stephen Colbert called Sacramento boring, feigning sleep (and a snore) while saying the word "Sacramento."

We might want to tell the Mayor, as some people did, to relax and take the joke in a spirit of good fun; it is, after all, just a silly greeting card. However, the 20th century shift from manufacturing to service-based 'flexible' economies has radically altered the social, political and economic landscapes of cities (Sassen 1991, 2000; Zukin 1991) and the Mayor of Topeka is likely well aware of this shift in political economy. Whether in response to, or as part of so-called globalization processes, city leaders (civic and corporate) compete to put their cities on a new kind of map. Part of what the growing service industry manufactures is the production and management of imagery and symbols, both to draw long-term investment capital to the city, and to attract more visitors. As urban centres compete for the designation "world class city" or "global city," the production (and infinite reproduction) of images has become so powerful that researchers now refer to the "symbolic economy" (Zukin 1991). A city that is considered to be so boring that anyone reading the Hallmark card would "get" the joke, would have to compete both to change this label as well as to promote a more positive one. Such a promotion would likely be very expensive for the taxpayers of Topeka.

Changes in global economic processes, due in large part to the hypermobility of capital and deregulated markets (Sassen 1991), result in changes in urban politics. City politics are increasingly run on a business model, with outward focused policies (versus local services, provision of welfare, etc). This entrepreneurial model, which combines boosterism and pro-growth strategies, appeals both to the left (cooperation, promoting identity) and the right (promoting enterprise) (Hall and Hubbard 1998). Image production is no longer seen as marginal to economic and political processes, but as an active part of the political arena: "Changing the image of a locality is thus seen as a central component of entrepreneurial governance, and, as such, it is perhaps best to consider the entrepreneurial city as an imaginary city, constituted through a plethora of images and representations" (Hall and Hubbard 1998:7). Where modernist ideas of how to run a city included the development of infrastructure that supported municipal social services (e.g., public health, transportation, schools) and publicly accessible city spaces (e.g., parks) (Hannigan 1995; Zukin 1998; Eisinger 2000), the city of the 21st century appears more concerned with visitors than residents, and expenditures to attract visitors are taking up more and more of city budgets. Like the old adage warning salespeople to "sell the sizzle,

not the steak," city leaders are looking for effective ways to brand and sell themselves, often through profligate configurations of entertainment complexes and hotel amenities.

> Zukin and colleagues compare the growth of Las Vegas to the decline of Coney Island, as public spaces of amusement (Zukin et al. 1998). In particular, they compare the rise/fall trajectories through an examination of images: the images produced for the commercial purposes of attracting visitors, and the images that visitors themselves come to associate with each place, are the material for their analysis. Zukin et al. treat the images as discursive texts in order to understand if and how they have an impact on growth and decline. She and her colleagues ask, "Can the meanings of place [in images] have as 'real' an impact on growth and decline as material factors?" (p. 628). The answer is a resounding "Yes."

Most tourists are looking for adventure in a riskless environment (Hannigan 1998). They want the excitement involved with risk, but only a calculated, managed or even manicured, edge; that is, tourists want the image of adventure, but the actual experience of a well-managed guided tour. In his consideration of "the visitor class," Peter Eisinger argues that, "today, the city as a place to play is manifestly built for the middle classes, who can afford to attend professional sporting events, eat in the new outdoor cafes, attend trade and professional conventions, shop in the festival malls, and patronize the high- and middlebrow arts" (2000:317). We might argue that these places to play are all rather banal; we certainly know from experience that they are highly managed, virtually risk-free environments (for those who can afford to patronize them). Some might even say they are boring as they serve only to replicate the experiences we have in our own home towns and cities, or in other places we have visited. Adorno's point that, "even here [vacationers] never get beyond the threshold of the eversame: distant places are no longer… different places" (2001:191), and Baudrillard's observation, "that vacation is predestined to boredom" (1988:200), remind us that there really is no getting away, no escape, from the banal of the everyday.

However, as much as many people want to be reassured that the time and money they invest in a vacation will be rewarded with an enjoyably safe experience, or series of riskless adventures, nobody wants a boring vacation. We might say, jokingly, that we are looking forwards to a boring two weeks lying on a beach somewhere, but what we actually mean is that we would like a break from the fast pace of our busy, routinized lives. Here, "bored" signifies a desire to spend unscripted, unscheduled time – *Langeweile*, but in a positive, desirable sense. Here we are not actually wanting

meaningless time, but the experience where time might prove to have its own meanings, and not those we have come to expect in the repetitive routines of our lives at work and at home. Nobody actually wants the experience of boredom on their vacation and clearly no city or town would benefit from the image of being a boring destination. After all, we want to escape boredom, not make it our destination.

Thus we can see that the label "boring," even in a joke, could result in the loss of both tourist and new resident dollars. In this context, the Mayor of Topeka no longer seems to be suffering from a simple case of a poor sense of humour. We can now see his response as restrained[175].

[175] Perhaps due in part to the fact that, ironically, Hallmark maintains a manufacturing plant in Topeka.

Seventh Storey
Langeweile: the Poetry of Time and Nothingness

Serbian-born American poet, Charles Simic, America's 15th (2007-2008) Poet Laureate[176], published his poem, "To Boredom," in *The New Yorker* in December, 2007. With his permission (personal correspondence), I reproduce it here in full and then discuss the possible themes and meanings of this poem as it relates to the themes and meanings of boredom. This analysis and discussion is not offered as a formal literary exegesis of the poem as a work of art, with the requisite literary strategies of formal critique. Instead, I analyze the poem as a social text, paying attention to the literal words as well as to the metaphorical images; I consider how these contribute to this study of boredom. In his own work, Benjamin draws on the work of French poet, Charles Baudelaire, quite extensively. According to Jennings (1987:19), "by the mid-1930s the discussion of Charles Baudelaire's poetry had become the central organizing device of *Das Passagen-Werk.*" In this storey, however, I discuss only one poem, not as an organizing device, but for the intellectual purchase it provides. The very qualities that make boredom interesting make it difficult to describe and interpret. A discussion and analysis of a poem about boredom, therefore, affords me the poetic license to go beyond the bounds of traditional social scientific rhetoric.

[176] This position is modeled after the English one of the same name. The full title in the US is "Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress."

To Boredom

I'm the child of your rainy Sundays.
I watched time crawl
Over the ceiling
Like a wounded fly.

A day would last forever,
Making pellets of bread,
Waiting for a branch
On a bare tree to move.

The silence would deepen,
The sky would darken,
As Grandmother knitted
With a ball of black yarn.

I know Heaven's like that.
In eternity's classrooms,
The angels sit like bored children
With their heads bowed.

~ Charles Simic

The imagery in this four-stanza poem is as clear as a series of black and white documentary photographs: a child watching a fly crawl slowly across a ceiling, while outside (an imagined window) it rains; the child sitting at a table, or a window sill, playing with bread, watching unmoving tree branches; the sky darkening and the child watching his grandmother knit with black wool; a row of angels, sitting at desks in heaven, looking bored, like the child. These images, sparely wrought, evoke the memory of boredom in us; they remind us of the psychological and physical experience of boredom. But there is something darker in these images, something that points not to the everyday "ho hum" waiting-for-a-bus situational boredom, but to the more existential boredom, not just of youth, but of living itself. In Heideggerian terms, they point to the confrontation with the nothing.

The metaphorical fly of time in the first stanza does not just crawl across the ceiling; it is a *wounded* fly, it has somehow been injured, and so we picture a tiny insect crawling slowly, in pain (has someone already hit it?), dragging its body across the ceiling. In the second stanza, the child makes *pellets* of bread, reminding us of bullets.

Perhaps these pellets are lined up on the windowsill as he stares out at the bare branches of the unmoving tree. I find this image particularly dark -- is this the calm before the storm? Why is the child lining up his ammunition, waiting for a sign? The tree is bare, bleak, without leaf or flower: impotent. Is this child preparing his pellets for a future that seems never to come, a future that is represented by the grandmother and her black knitting?

In the third stanza, there is the image of the sky getting even darker as the room grows *more* silent. How long has it been this way? There is a heavy sense of a gathering gloom. The grandmother sits knitting her black yarn; where are the child's parents? Is the black wool symbolic of the pessimism of this old woman? Perhaps she is in mourning, the black skeins a tangible reminder of what she has lost, what she still could lose, what the child will eventually lose. In the final stanza, the poet (as the child) speculates that, even in heaven, angels sit around like bored children, their heads bowed, not in prayer, but because they have lost their sense of anticipation; they know they wait for nothing, but that they will wait for eternity in heaven's classroom. Indeed, time is one of the major motifs of this poem; in every stanza there is an image metaphorically representing the concept that time is virtually standing still: "watched time crawl," "forever," "waiting," "eternity." Time has somehow been stilled and this child's perception carries with it a sense of foreboding (wounded fly, bread pellets, bare branches, black yarn). This is more than empty time; it is an experience of time dragging that includes an awareness that at the edge of this waiting, of this impotent anticipation, is the possibility that… there are no possibilities. The angels' heads are bowed not in a state of grace, in prayer, but because they sense the futility of their eternal wait. This inverts the idea that boredom is a response to too many possibilities, too many choices. Instead, here boredom is represented as a state of limbo, where a forestalled future does not necessarily look promising and thus does not invite hope; rather, if it invites anything, it is vigilance, a lining up of bread pellets against a darkening sky. The eternal wait of the angels reminds us of Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return.

While there is the sense of waiting, of the relentlessness of eternity, the image of the bare tree complicates this mood. According to Shanks (1992:22), "Trees signify. As much as a material resource, trees provide a rich symbolism. Noble, solid, upstanding,

stable, deep-rooted, aged, trees have evocative ideological power." Yet the tree in this poem is bare, appearing neither fertile nor, necessarily, solid. We cannot tell (and are thus left to wonder) if the tree is bare simply because of seasonal change, or because the tree is dead, which would make it dry inside, less solid. As well, "trees are genealogical. Family trees, lines of descent, roots and ancestors" (Shanks 1992:24). If the tree in the poem's images is bare because it is dead, this carries a very different meaning than if the tree were simply barren of leaves because it is winter and thus spring will come again. Again, where are the child's parents? Has something sinister happened to them? Are they dead? If so, does the child know (for surely the grandmother does)?

I suggested above that there is an imagined window in this poem – one through which the child sees the rainy Sundays, watches the sky darken and the bare, unmoving tree. He is confined, looking out a window for signs of … life? As he looks out the window the grandmother knits her dark work; does she no longer even look out the window? Similarly, the child's imagined bored angels in heaven's classroom sit with their heads bowed, not looking out the classroom window as a real child might do when bored. Have these angels, too, given up looking out the window to a presumed future? Surely a bored angel, though perhaps a comical image when understood to be the figment of a bored child's imagination, is also a poignant image. As the immortal messengers of God, angels represent hope and grace. Bored angels with heads bowed in listless disinterest, signify a tragic meaning as well: hope defeated.

The proverbial "window of opportunity" comes to mind here. The imagined window in this poem does not appear to be the window of opportunity at all. While it does separate the child from the darkening sky and the rain and deepening silence, it does not actually prevent him from experiencing these things, for surely it is also dark and silent in the room where he sits. It is not a window of opportunity but neither is it a window that adequately shields; instead, it could be seen as a window onto something. Russian-born US poet Joseph Brodsky[177] suggests that boredom is "a window on time's infinity" (1995:109).

[177] Brodsky was also a US Poet Laureate, from 1991-92. In his book of essays, *Less Than One* (1986), he writes that "boredom, after all, is the most frequent feature of existence" (p.30).

The mood of this poem is set in the first line, "I am the child of your rainy Sundays." Benjamin writes about rain and its connection to boredom in Konvolut D ("Boredom, Eternal Return") of *Passagenwerk*:

> Only someone who has grown up in the big city can appreciate its rainy weather, which altogether slyly sets one dreaming back to early childhood. Rain makes everything more hidden, makes days not only gray but uniform. From morning until evening, one can do the same thing – play chess, read, engage in argument – whereas sunshine, by contrast, shades the hours and discountenances the dreamer. (p.104)

With rain, Benjamin reminds us, comes dust (2002:102). There is a sense of dust in Simic's poem in the way he constructs his images; it is as though we are seeing them on old, grainy film stock. There is not much movement in the poem itself. The grandmother sits, the child waits, silence deepens. These are the conditions for dust to settle, for the past to seep in – "history stands so still it gathers dust" (Buck-Morss 1989:95) -- and, as in Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence, for history to begin already to repeat itself. The black ball of wool on the child's grandmother's lap is perhaps tied to this past; it is a metaphor for the dialectic of creation, destruction (a lot of knitting is in fact ripping out and re-knitting), and re-creation, and more destruction, and so on. In this metaphysical sense, the child's future has already happened, the bare tree has already bloomed, and now may or may not bloom again. The bread pellets are the child's soft ammunition against a future that may bring only a repetition of the past.

There is religious imagery in this poem. It is a rainy *Sunday*, the day set aside traditionally, in the Christian tradition, to attend church and put aside the demands of work for the day, a day to spend with family and friends. As well, there are angels in this poem, in heaven, sitting with their heads bowed. It is not clear, from the child's point of view, if these angelic heads are bowed in a state of grace and humility, or because of the weight of the futility of their eternal waiting. Simic thus reminds us that, whereas religion is often constructed as the answer to life's questions of meaning, maybe the questions themselves are too much for the angels. Like Benjamin's famous Angel of History (based on Klee's painting, *Angelus Novus*), who stares open-mouthed and despairing at the piled-up wreckage of the past that appears as one incessant catastrophe (Benjamin 1969 [1955]), the angels in Simic's imagined heaven are not engaged. They too have turned

their heads away (in this case, they are bowed). But where the Angel of History despairs, Simic's angels appear resigned, no longer even interested; disenchanted.

Martin Heidegger's lectures on boredom (1929-30) were given two years after the publication of *Being and Time*, his philosophical treatise on the nature of existence, or *Dasein*. Heidegger's extended phenomenological treatment of boredom (bored by, bored with and profound boredom) thus draws attention to the significance of this seemingly insignificant experience. In his introductory remarks to *Being and Time*, Heidegger considers "time as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of Being" (§1). In boredom, of course, the passage of time seems to slow, even stop; within this *Langeweile* we can only wait for the next moment to come, to pass, and so on, until the *Langeweile* itself has passed. This waiting, the heightened sense of time itself (because nothing is distracting us, we can, metaphorically, hear the ticking of the clock; we are aware even of the long spaces in between each tick), is what makes us uncomfortable, frustrated, and leads to our feelings and behaviours of restlessness. We do not like to *feel* time. And yet we know, from our entire life-to-date experiences, that time will eventually resume its regular course (i.e., our perception will shift and we will no longer be consciously aware of the passing of each moment, as we are in boredom), and we will once again be caught up in the flow and rhythm of experience (Brisset and Snow 1993).

But while time seems to have stopped, while we are inside boredom itself, we reluctantly make pellets of bread and wait for a branch on a bare tree to move. Legions of philosophers and popular psychology writers have written about our fear of death; Ernest Becker (1973) goes so far as to argue that everything we do is a denial of our own death, an avoidance of the knowledge that we are not immortal and will die. It is possible then that the experience of boredom, particularly extended periods of boredom, and existential boredom, prick at our sense of the uninterrupted flow of our life experiences, suggest to us two disturbing ideas: that the happiness that is our (apparent) right, is at risk, even tragically imperiled, and, secondly, that whether or not we find or regain our happiness (or at least semblance of contented equilibrium), we will always be at risk of losing it again, perhaps permanently, through either our boredom-caused-weariness or death. Time slowed, is, after all, the next thing to time stilled.

This very anti-social nature of boredom (i.e., it is an intensely personal experience and is often experienced when alone, or serves to increase our sense of aloneness) may help to explain why sociology has not paid it much attention. However, if boredom was a postindustrial concept, an invention or result of modernism, surely by now it can be seen to inhere in social structures. A great deal of our lives is spent waiting for any number of services or goods or answers. The bureaucratization of education, work, government, religion, etc., means that we must endure extended periods of boredom while we wait, often confined in a small space, with other restless people, none of whom chooses to be with the others. While this is nothing new, what has changed is our willingness to wait for too long and also our options to avoid waiting. Much of the labour of our lives (Arendt 1998[1958]) can now be conducted from a computer terminal at home, or even a mobile device such as a Blackberry. These devices all but eliminate the waiting in banks and retail stores. In fact, we now conduct the administrative, as well as entertainment, business of our lives, in moments when we begin to feel the preliminary pangs of boredom, a kind of pre-emptive strike against the nothingness.

These so-called micro-boredom moments are being exploited by advertisers who know they only have seconds of our time between bus stops to send us a text message on our cell phones. One ambulance company in the US has decided to make use of the waiting time that ambulance drivers experience between calls, and with mobile technology and wireless networking capabilities, these drivers are transformed into "mobile learners," which "can help increase their motivation and job satisfaction as well as enhance their knowledge. Moreover, precious time is not lost in sending these staff away on classroom-delivered courses" (Waller 2006:14). This is a level of (potential) information overload that even Klapp (1986) did not predict. Here again, the time we might otherwise spend experiencing boredom, is taken up, colonized, exploited, by institutions who want us to *do* something for them (buy more, work harder, etc.). Ironically, if (when) we no longer find these distractions interesting or meaningful, they will in themselves become part of our boredom. Thus, boredom can engender more boredom.

Heidegger asked, metaphysically, why there is something, rather than nothing. A mundane response, in the context of this discussion, is that we are compelled to create

something to prevent the nothing. We are not just busy with the business of working and living, we are busy with what we have made the business of filling our time, sometimes months in advance, in the ahead-time of our holidays or work functions. We are so busy, so very busy; yet, according to some researchers, we have never been so bored.

Simic's poem is an imagistic ode to boredom, and serves here as the inspiration for a metaphysical consideration of the character and nature of time in boredom (*Langeweile*). In the poem, we get the sense that time is suspended, imbued with a (possibly dark) history, and crawling toward an unknown future that may require more from us than the stamina of youth.

Eighth Storey
Impotence and Boredom: Incapacities of Desire

In my 40s now, I am too old to be shocked and yet, secretly, I am. Posters on the buses and subway cars that advertise medical remedies for "erectile dysfunction" are meant to grab our attention, of course, as they compete with the thousands of other advertising images we see each day. I am not shocked by the details of "E.D.", but I am uncomfortable with such a public display of what is a most intimate problem. Yes, it is probably a good thing that sexual impotence take its place amongst the list of physical ailments that have become normalized, due in large part to their having been medicalized. Better to seek treatment than suffer in silence, and so on. But, at the same time, those ads make me cringe and look away. It's not the sex or relevant body parts that make me so uncomfortable: it's about desire.

Barbalet, a sociologist, writes that, "ennui, but not boredom, is a languid surrender to emptiness… [boredom] is a restless and irritable feeling about an absence of interest" (1999:634-635). There is an energy inherent in boredom; the very fact of its being stifled is what we experience as boredom. We want to be doing something, we are not satisfied languishing. This is perhaps one of the most interesting things about boredom, in a sociological sense: that is, we typically think of the bored person, whether ourselves or someone else, as someone who is sitting still, or perhaps moving aimlessly from task to task, appearing unmoved and disinterested. Yet, the sensation within the bored person is actually one of energy, albeit suppressed. Boredom is a kind of coiled, yet frustrated, anticipation. The obvious analogy to sexual impotence is apposite: we are at once willing, and yet impotent, "the spirit is indeed willing but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). Like sexual impotence, boredom is both physically unsettling (we feel restless, not at ease) and mentally frustrating (we want to be doing something but we can't do what we'd prefer to do, or, in the case of boredom, we don't know what we'd rather do). According to Spacks (1989:583), "in its nature boredom opposes desire… it constitutes desire's antithesis."

As well, boredom (like impotence) can feel like personal failure, even if it no longer carries the moral charge it once did. We might also say the same for impotence when we say that, "the problem of boredom then becomes to understand it, or to

remediate it, or to deny it" (Spacks 1995:6). The major difference, and thus limiting aspect of this metaphor, is that men are deemed sexually impotent (by themselves or others) because they are physically unable to perform the act of sexual intercourse. That is, they are unable to do that which they know they would like to do. Boredom, on the other hand, is an impotence without a specific goal in mind; the frustration comes not from being unable to do something, but from not knowing what that something is in the first place. Sexual impotence, now readily helped, if not prevented, through the use of medical intervention, is arguably the lesser of the two incapacities[178].

The inability to have sexual intercourse, and the experience of boredom, are both experiences of powerlessness: the former over the body's inability to perform desire, and the latter, our mind's inability to determine the desire to which we would respond in our "longing for any desire at all" (Svendsen 2005:42). Spacks observes that boredom, as an interpretive category, "implies an embracing sense of irritation and unease. It reflects a state of affairs in which the individual is assigned ever more importance and ever less power" (1995:13). In both instances then, impotence and boredom, the body has the effect of rendering us powerless over our desires by its inability to follow through and deliver on the heightened sense of anticipation.

Spacks notes that early psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel said that "'we have *the right to expect'* [his italics] helpful stimulation from our environment" (1995:5). Both sex and boredom require some sort of stimulation; mental but particularly physical in the case of sex, and physical but particularly mental in the case of boredom. The resulting tension of this, in boredom, can be described as a kind of sensual, if not necessarily sexual, tension. We are restless and frustrated, perhaps pacing, perhaps unmoving; but either way, we are aware of a coiled energy, an urge to "do something" if only we knew what.

Quite often the only responses we have for our boredom (other than pacing, or sitting still) are oral, sensual pleasures. Many of us eat more when we are bored, or drink more, or smoke more, or all three. Some people pick up the telephone and call someone, "just to talk." These oral, sensual pleasures are our temporary -- if inadequate – answers to boredom, an attempt to appease the wordless aggravation, feed the nameless beast that simultaneously eats at us. Yet, like sexual impotence, these temporary diversions do not

[178] That is, over the course of a lifetime, not necessarily at any one particular time.

really provide us with the relief we need. Each cigarette is followed by another, each bite of food requires more; but we are never really satisfied. Indeed, as with sexual impotence, all attempts at satisfaction other than the one "true" need/desire, are just delaying the ultimate desired experience.

Television commercials for various impotence medications are humourous and clever. The specific details of the problem are never discussed nor described and so no one can say they are offended by the content[179]. The 50-something business-suited man kisses his wife goodbye at the door and then practically skips his way to work, jumping over a fire hydrant and performing various other well-choreographed actions to imply sexual competence. In the last scene of this commercial, he manages to get into the elevator on time, to squeeze in beside another woman. In other commercials, two men, or two women, are seen talking in hushed though earnest voices. They are in fact talking gibberish, and yet we understand the suggestion: the drug being advertised has improved their sex lives with their partners. The single most common spam, or unwanted and unsolicited emails, are from sources who are advertising Viagra or one of the other similar drugs, and the unfortunate subject lines can make reading one's "inbox" seem like reading pornography. Indeed, it seems that, at least in North America, print, television and radio advertising for the drugs to prevent "erectile dysfunction" are ubiquitous.

I could argue that advertisements for the prevention of boredom are also ubiquitous if we consider gambling (Benjamin 2002; Klapp 1986), entertainment complexes (including movie theatres and amusement rides), various sports events, fantasy-land themed parks, all travel advertising, resorts and spas, and any and all other modes of entertainment. Surely these entertainments are meant to interest us, to add meaning where none, or not enough, exists. Like the ads for impotence drugs, these entertainment ads hold out a promise: the impotence drugs promise to help men *perform* their desire, and the entertainment ads tell us *what* we (should) desire and promise we will in fact find it interesting (i.e., not boring). Of course, all advertising is, arguably, about desire – selling us on the idea of wanting things, and having things; convincing us

[179] There was an exception to this when a television ad for Levitra depicted a woman explaining in explicit detail what her partner was once again capable of performing. The ad stirred controversy and was only aired after 9 pm (CBS News, April 16, 2004: http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/04/18/health/main612445.shtml).

that through our consumption there is even the hope of redemption (McKinnon 2005). Advertisers play on our existential, as well as more trivial fears that we don't have enough things, or the right things, that we are just one dishwasher away from being genuinely happy[180]. The very purpose of advertising is to make us want something we don't already have (or make us want a newer version of what we already have) and so the mystique of desire must be created and recreated. In terms of boredom, it is the lack of specific desire (and thus the concomitant sense of meaninglessness) that plagues us; thus advertising offers us ready-made answers, a panacea for our ineffable state of frustrated desire. In effect, the ads proclaim, "it's all out here!" It would seem our frustration can be bought off, at least for awhile.

Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, sociologist Slavoj Zizek writes about the injunction to enjoy! in high modernism; that is, where previously enjoyment was a right, now it becomes a must, wherein we must enjoy our jobs, our relationships, sex, the things we buy, etc[181]. Noting that, in the 19th century there was a shift from perceiving boredom as a moral failure, to a social failure, Spacks (1995:20) argues that, "the inability to enjoy becomes equivalent to a failure of usefulness." Thus when we experience boredom, particularly extended periods of either situative or existential boredom, we have become, in a sense, impotent (in terms of our desire) and useless. In our powerlessness to enjoy!, we no longer fulfill this dominant ideological imperative and thus, at the least, our use-value is compromised, weakened. We can become sources of pity, rather than censure (Spacks 1995).

I argue here that the largest group of use-less people[182], sociologically, are those without paid work. Most people have, at one time or another, experienced unemployment, or have at least been "in-between-jobs"; but at any given time there are tens or hundreds of thousands of people in a country or region who do not have paid

[180] This happens to be true in my current situation.
[181] Zizek in fact also writes about impotence and the injunction to enjoy!, though not in relation to boredom: "Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of the unfortunate Viagra, the potency pill that promises to restore the capacity of male erection in a purely biochemical way, bypassing all problems with psychological inhibitions: now that Viagra takes care of the erection, there is no excuse: you should enjoy sex; if you don't it's your fault!" (Zizek 2001a:133).
[182] I use this term advisedly and mean it in the literal sense that people can be without a use, without a purpose. Thus "use-less" makes this point but at the same time keeps the pejorative social meaning that is the actual experience of people who are without use: that is, they indeed feel useless and are often treated as such.

work. While employment is often a means-to-an-end, for the paycheque that buys food and shelter as well as luxury items, the work itself provides us with a sense of purpose, if not initially, sometimes eventually. Although literature in work and occupations reports on the boredom commonly experienced by workers on the job, some research points out that at least the job gives us some sense of meaning and purpose, even if it is monotonous, repetitive and otherwise boring work. We can see this clearly in the example of the retiree who, after years of having a place to go and particular things to do each day, suddenly finds him or herself without this routine, without purpose. For people who are either chronically, or suddenly, unemployed, the boredom that was at the least contained to work hours, now fills the days. People who have nothing meaningful to do with their time, are by definition bored, situationally and existentially. The same can be said for people enduring long hospital stays, and nursing home residents (Slama and Bergman-Evans 2000). In a study of men's leisure time, Australian researchers report that, "men who experience episodes of boredom and loneliness during free time are at a higher risk of mortality regardless of their levels of alcohol and tobacco use or their inactive leisure lifestyles" (Bloomfield and Kennedy 2006:16).

Extended periods of boredom can lead to depression (Farmer and Sundberg 1986), withdrawal and alienation (Tolor 1989). Arendt comments on the risk posed to civil society by this withdrawal: "And whoever, for whatever reasons, isolates himself and does not partake in such being together, forfeits power and becomes impotent, no matter how great his strength and how valid his reasons" (1998[1958]:201). Politically then, we can see how boredom is similar to apathy. However, in boredom there is restlessness, the desire for desire, the urge to have power (over one's interests etc.), whereas apathy is impotence without even the desire. As with sexual impotence, the experience of boredom is considered, and hoped to be, a temporary, if frustrating, experience. Like sexual impotence, however, when boredom (situational and/or existential) becomes a chronic condition, this frustrated, negative energy, can turn to indifference and apathy, in part, as a way to cope with the "condition." Goodstein (2005:96) argues that, in the nineteenth century, "an attitude of ennui was an aesthetic affirmation of the impotence of the subject in the face of the arbitrariness of modern

existence." Similarly, we can consider boredom to be, not necessarily an affirmation of the impotence of the subject in modernity, but a sign and reflection of it.

Ninth Storey
Heidegger's Dinner Party: Boredom and Hope[183]

Let me return to that well-organized, well-attended dinner party that Heidegger attended and where he apparently enjoyed himself, his cigar and the conversation around him. According to his post-party sober reflections, he claims he had been bored the while. So now when we zoom in with our imaginary camera lens, we see indeed that his smile is a bit stiff, the corners of his mouth moving no more than politeness demands. We see him sitting in that dark walnut armchair. His legs are crossed, one arm is lying across the arm of the chair. But look at his fingers there; they are not casually resting upon the worn upholstery, they are almost (though not quite) clutching the end of the armrest. That crossed leg is not dangling nonchalantly either; it is perched atop the other leg, quite stiff and still. When he pulls on his Austrian cigar his eyes almost furtively scan the room through the smoke, as though he were looking for something. Yet, he continues to talk and apparently to listen to those near him. Occasionally, he even gives a small, though controlled, laugh. Yes, through this zoom lens, we can see that later Herr Heidegger will report he had been bored at that party[184].

Let us assume for a moment that Heidegger was not really as obtuse as he claims and that he did indeed recognize his own boredom during the actual event of the dinner party. It may be true, at least stereotypically, that academics, particularly more traditional academics from the 19th and early 20th century, tend to be preoccupied with the intellectual issues of their disciplines and not necessarily particularly interested or even consciously aware of their own mental states and bodily reactions *in situ*. However, given that Heidegger's intellectual preoccupation was existence itself, we will give him the benefit of the doubt here and assume he knew well enough that he was bored at that apparently pleasant dinner party. Most of the rest of us know we are bored, while we are bored.

Why, then, do we stay at a boring party? Or, why do we stay as long as we do? Norbert Elias and Erving Goffman would likely say that we stay because of the

[183] I am indebted to Melissa McLean for the interesting conversation that inspired this storey.
[184] Though George Steiner does not take the imaginative liberties I have here, he does write (though not in connection to boredom) that Heidegger's "pursed mouth and small eyes seem to peer at the questioner out of a millenial legacy of adroit reticence" (1978:19).

intricacies of civilizing social pressures, *et cetera*, but I would like to explore another reason: we stay because the party has some potential and we worry that if we leave, it might improve and we would thus miss out on an interesting evening. We have attended parties like this before where things did in fact improve with time, with wine, with different guests coming and going, and so this party might also change. The boredom we experience could, at any moment, be replaced by the experience of keen interest, even excitement, a breaking in of possibilities. Indeed, "it would be difficult to experience boredom unless we anticipated the possibility of something else" (Conrad 1997:468). We stay because of hope.

How can we compare boredom with hope? Boredom seems in many ways like the death of hope. Where hope is historically intertwined with Christian virtues (faith, hope and love), boredom has often been associated with the sin of sloth. Boredom is also experienced as a kind of mental suffering, a state of purposeless anguish, whereas hope is considered the antidote to despair, or at least the path out of suffering and dread. The coiled anticipation, the impotent desire, discussed in previous storeys, could actually not exist without hope: boredom means that we anticipate something else, something different, something more. Because we cannot name what this something else/more/different *is*, we experience a kind of frustration, a physical as well as mental restlessness. But there is energy in this restlessness, boredom is not a giving in, nor a giving up; the presence of boredom does not represent the absence of hope. Instead, the experience of boredom means that we are hopeful, we have hope that our situation will change and improve. Our frustration lies in the fact that it is an unfocused hope; we are not hoping for anything specific other than to be rescued from our boredom. Hope may therefore be the mechanism by which our boredom is prevented from sliding into depression (Farmer and Sundberg 1986; Gabriel 1988).

In his lectures on boredom, Heidegger argues that profound boredom is actually the feeling of possibility (1995[1929]). Possibility is future oriented and therefore involves hope, where hope is the sense, or feeling, that something anticipated will happen in the future. In this sense, the bored person embodies hope; his or her dissatisfaction signals the belief that something else exists, must exist, to change the dissatisfaction, rupture the frustration and invite the potential for a more satisfying experience (whether

better, or simply different). Apathy, indifference and depression, although arguably related, qualitatively, to boredom, are significantly different in this way: the restlessness, frustration and discontent of boredom are evidence that we believe something else is possible. That is, we have not given up nor given in; in boredom, we feel the prickle of vitality. According to Osborne (2006:37), "there is a utopian function to boredom in modernity as the basis of a distinctive experience of possibility." This is a radical concept in the context of the discourse on boredom (however limited). Boredom is most often theorized as an epiphenomenon of modernity, an individual response to the exponential increase in messages of consumption and leisure, as well as changing modes of individualism and reflexivity. From this perspective, the experience of boredom epitomizes the overwhelmed and dissatisfied consumer-citizen, a kind of victim of progress, powerless and indecisive, discontent despite the apparent plethora of options. To suggest, as Osborne does, a utopian function to boredom, radicalizes an otherwise rather mainstream and homogeneous interpretation of this apparently modern experience.

The question is, then, what is the hope that is embedded, or inherent, in boredom? Is it, as Osborne suggests, a form of utopia? In an everyday, pragmatic sense, it is the hope that our situation will change; we assume this change will at least be a release, and a relief, from our present circumstances. From a psychological, biophysical perspective, a change will at least serve to break our habituation, offer new and therefore interesting stimulation. Translated sociologically, this change in our circumstances means that we have in a sense been offered the opportunity to pursue an alternative path (social, individual, materialist, idealist or some combination thereof). This rupture in our trajectory therefore highlights the opportunities for change and underscores the possibilities for a future utopia. At its most basic, anything (currently unknown) in the future could be an improvement on the current situation. While the present in some ways serves to write the future, the exact events are not yet inscribed and thus lie waiting; a potential utopia.

I must therefore disagree with Spacks (1989:583) who argues that boredom "assur[es] its victim of the utter impossibility of wishing for anything at all." While it does seem true that boredom is a state whereby we do not, and seemingly cannot, know what we desire, it does not cancel out the possibility of wishing "for anything at all." Our

frustration is symbolic of our hope (i.e., for change); this hope is a generalized sense of desire, even though it lacks a particular object, or focus. After all, we cannot desire without having hope. While the experience of boredom is one of frustrated desire (i.e., unknown and seemingly unknowable focus for our desire and therefore we feel "at a loss" as to our motivations and actions), I argue that its central impetus is that of hope.

Hope itself refers to an improved (at the least) state of affairs, circumstances wherein we are afforded the opportunity for something we perceive as being better, more desirable, than what we currently have. The spectrum of possibilities here is, of course, very wide, if not endless, bounded only by our imagination (itself based on our experiences and how we are able to reconstruct them for use in an imaginary future). This suggests that boredom is not only pregnant with desires and possibilities (Lefebvre 1995:124), but also with the potential for utopian vision. We are discontent and frustrated with the now, and this boredom shows itself in our bodies in restlessness and frustration, the ineffable desire for desires. Any one possible future could be a better future; indeed, the restlessness inherent in our boredom can be read as a signal that not only are we not satisfied with the now, the present circumstances, but we are potentially unsatisfied with the future and wish (desire) that it would unfold in a desirable way.

This argument, that hope, even a utopian vision, is inherent in boredom, represents a radical break from much of the thinking on boredom. Some of the literature associates boredom with, for example, apathy, and makes links to political apathy (e.g., people who are bored and apathetic don't vote). The idea that there is hope in boredom, however buried or dormant, reflects more closely Hannah Arendt's thesis in *The Human Condition* (1998[1958]), wherein she emphasizes the possibilities in beginnings, the hope that there can always be an unexpected turn of events, a beginning of something not predicted, yet desired. Most recently, US presidential candidate (now president elect) Barack Obama, reinvigorated previously disenchanted voters (particularly younger, and Black voters) who turned out in record numbers to vote during the presidential election. His campaign message of "change" was supported by the message of "hope," printed prominently on stylized posters below Obama's face. While I cannot say that the message of hope, alone, rallied American citizens to vote, where previously they had not, clearly it played a part in the mobilization of millions of disenchanted citizens, bored with a system

that held no apparent meaning for them and did not speak to their current interests, or expectations for their futures.

Tenth Storey
Boredom in Nirvana

In 1991, the Seattle-based grunge band, Nirvana, released their second album, *Nevermind,* to critical and popular acclaim. The album climbed to the top of the music charts with the aid of the hit single "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and the accompanying video that was played on MTV[185] (Much Music Television). The success of this song led to its being dubbed the anthem of a generation of bored and apathetic teenagers. The lyrics of the song were a much debated topic in the early 1990s, as fans and radio DJs alike could not make out the precise words. The band eventually included the words of the song in the liner notes of their next album. Here are the entire lyrics of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" although I mostly focus on the chorus in this analysis (in bold, below):

"Smells Like Teen Spirit"

Load up on guns and
Bring your friends
It's fun to lose and to pretend
She's over bored and self-assured
Oh no, I know a dirty word

Hello, hello, hello, how low? (3X)
Hello, hello, hello.

[Chorus]
With the lights out, it's less dangerous
Here we are now, entertain us
I feel stupid and contagious
Here we are now, entertain us
A mullato
An Albino
A mosquito
My Libido
Yeah!

Yay! yay!

I'm worse at what I do best
And for this gift I feel blessed
Our little group has always been
And always will until the end

[185] This video is available on YouTube, at http://ca.youtube.com/watch?v=kPQR-OsH0RQ

Hello, hello, hello, how low? (3X)
Hello, hello, hello.

[Chorus]

And I forget just why I taste
Oh yeah, I guess it makes me smile
I found it hard, it's hard to find
Oh well, whatever, nevermind

Hello, hello, hello, how low? (3X)
Hello, hello, hello.

[Chorus]

It is the chorus of the song, in particular the lines, "I feel stupid and contagious/ Here we are now, entertain us" that I am particularly interested in, although of course it cannot be completely extracted from its context within the rest of the lyrics and the music itself[186]. The verse/chorus/verse/chorus style is typical of pop songs and their commercial appeal and success is often attributed, at least in part, to this format because listeners can more easily learn and anticipate the lyrics, as well as the liturgical sense of the repetition. In an article in *Rolling Stone* magazine (May 1999), Greil Marcus, American music journalist and cultural critic, describes this:

> the chill of the slow, transparent, chiming notes that are the repeated signature of 'Smells Like Teen spirit.' You hear all that is lucid, simple and unrushed – a between-past-and future suspension of time lovely enough to convince you that the world itself has paused to listen – pulling against the desperation and hurry of everything else in the performance, the everything else that finally sucks up those brief prophecies of clarity and wipes them out. (p.47)

Two and a half years after the song became a hit, songwriter and lead singer, Kurt Cobain, committed suicide, thus adding a pathos to the song that, in some terrible way, made sense. Marcus writes:

> Still, those silken notes hang in the air, a mourning for the failures of the past, the suggestion of a future to be made or lost, a sense of starting over stopped in its tracks, remaining as an echo that rebukes you for your own failures. The song is big, loud, ambitious, thrilling, definitively unsettling and a definite release, with

[186] In a biography of Kurt Cobain, Charles Cross (2001) notes that, "'Teen Spirit' was a song influenced by many things – his anger at his parents, his boredom, his eternal cynicism" (p.169).

> the singer as sure of what he means as he is that it's a waste of time to try to explain it to anyone who might hear him. (Marcus 1999:47)

The attribution of "anthem for a generation," is enough reason to prompt an analysis; however, in this case, I am particularly interested in how these lyrics speak to the condition of profound boredom, meaning and meaninglessness.

The chorus brings to my mind the image of a young person sitting mutely in a dark room, in front of a blaring television[187]. In an almost cartoonish effect, there is a jagged white halo emanating from the television screen, and yet the young face, watching, remains impassive, unmoved. But it is not just one person; the lyrics state, "here *we* are now" –a generation of youth? A particularly disenfranchised group of youth? We assume youth because of the tone of the phrase "here we are now/Entertain us"; it is petulant, taunting. It seems to be a response, "here we are *now*." In this sense we can imagine that what preceded it was the voice of a nagging parent, or unrelenting yet nonspecific authority, repeating only the refrain "don't do that, come here! Come here, don't do that!" The sullen and cynical teenager must oblige, however unwillingly ("here we are now"), but retorts, "Entertain us." In other words, "Now that you have me where *you* want me, now that I've obliged *you*, it's your responsibility to find a way to entertain *me*, to keep me here." The youth demands of the adult, of authority, "Find meaning for me. Make me interested and keep me interested."

There is a certain kind of refusal in this tone, in these words; a refusal to entertain the self, meaningfully, to find enjoyment, satisfaction. I refuse to engage in such a way as to enjoy this moment/this life. The following line, "I feel stupid and contagious" gives us a glimmer of insight into the stubborn refusal. The words "stupid" and "contagious" are ingenious in terms of describing the feelings of unhappy, disenfranchised, youth. They are not living up to the expectations of either their parents or their teachers; they have no specific skills and their talents are as yet unmined. Their lives are about making mistakes,

[187] None of the lyrics in this song refer to a television; it is the image that the lyrics conjure up for me that I analyze here. Although this obviously involves some poetic license (e.g., conjuring the television), when treated as literature, song lyrics can be grouped with other forms such as poetry and short stories. In this sense, the image created by the words of the artist will be received differently by each listener/reader. Artists typically do not have one specific "message" they wish to impart at the risk of preventing any alternative interpretations by their listeners/readers. Although I am a few years older than the generation to which this particular Nirvana song appealed in the 1990s, and even though I was never a fan of grunge music, when I first heard these lyrics the image was so clear in my head, and the chorus still has a haunting quality for me whenever I hear it, more than 15 years later.

about pulling away from parents, experimenting or seriously indulging in drugs, alcohol and sex. They are unremorsefully full of remorse and unable to express any of their thoughts and feelings articulately. Their newly matured bodies are delighting and betraying them at the same time, yet the people to whom they turn for understanding and support are other teenagers, similarly unable to communicate and engage meaningfully. With impatient and annoyed elders and incapable peers, they eventually become annoying even to themselves: recall that the Latin origin of ennui is *inodiare*, "to hold in hatred" from which we now have "annoy" (Healy 1984:18). Without meaningful outlet, this self-hatred festers and so we can appreciate the lyrics "I feel stupid and contagious" to mean something deeper than easily dismissed teenage angst. It can be read not just as a call of distress, but a call of warning: "I could infect you too." Bigelow writes that boredom is "the *existential demand* that the world reduced by trivialization and fetishization become once again enchanting. But this is a demand that defiantly refuses the world as it is and that defiantly and disdainfully disowns the world" (1983:260 italics in original). In other words, it is an unmeetable demand.

We can read in these lyrics a refusal to participate in what Zizek calls the injunction to enjoy! Where it is true that the social pressures combined with individual insecurities of youth make them vulnerable to conformist ideologies, they are also the least likely to want to conform. Their anger, resentment and idealism can be seen as the perfect combination for such a pure refusal to be expressed. That is, angry youth have the energy, the impetus, and the tacit approval to protest the mainstream culture of older adults; their rebellion against the injunction to enjoy! has the raw energy of those not yet burdened by the social and psychological wear and tear of adult responsibilities (Harré 1979). The refusal to enjoy!, expressed here in the lyrics "I feel stupid and contagious/ Here we are now, entertain us," nevertheless articulates a sense of expectation, and therefore hope (Koselleck 2004[1979]). It is a kind of resistance-confirms-existence mantra, the idea of "I resist therefore I am." I can refuse to participate because, in part, I know it is always there, (the thing to do, to participate in, etc); my refusing is an acknowledgment that I can, at another time, choose to participate, to *not* refuse. In this sense, my refusing confirms my existence. It is a kind of cavalier and luxurious squandering of opportunity, with the tacit knowledge, or bargain with the devil, that I

will, at a later date, change my mind and engage. In fact, in this way we can see boredom as a luxury; we are forestalling the future because we have the faith and confidence that it will still be there for us (i.e., our own imagined future) when we decide we are ready to take it, to face it, to pursue it. Being bored, declaring boredom is, in this sense, a kind of wastefulness: I will spend my energies and passions later, where 'later' is always vague, non-committal. It is arrogant because we are assuming that these energies and passions will still be there, as vital, *later*. There is an existential connection here to mortality, to death itself: when we put something off until "later," for whatever reason, we are clearly not factoring in or considering our own death. Boredom is then a forestalling of death; if there is always "later," there is never "never" (i.e., death). Hankiss (2006) argues that:

> The collapse of the eternal framework of transcendence has increased the value of time in a dramatic way. If human life is ephemeral, then we have to find the fullness and meaning of life quickly and immediately. This speed, this urgency has become one of the dominant elements in the existential experience of people living in contemporary Western civilization. Time and space, history and society, life and the world have shrunk into one single brief moment. HIC ET NUNC [here and now] could be the emblem of contemporary civilization – the emblem of a humankind without transcendence. (p.213)

The band's name is instructive here: *Nirvana* is a Buddhist concept, referring to a transcendent state, beyond all suffering and desire. The refusal to enjoy! suggests here that there is a potential transcendental quality to the refusal itself; that is, by refusing to participate in the injunction to enjoy!, a space for unknown possibilities is opened. While the refusal (of youth in this case) is partly an act of aggression, it is also an act of autonomy, a gesture of self-assertion that transcends (or at least attempts to), the social, legal and developmental limits of the teenage years. The passion in the music of this song tells us that the lyrics of stubborn refusal in fact belie a strong desire, a vigorous impulse towards meaning.

Eleventh Storey
The Hunger for Meaning

Some time in my late teens, or early 20s, I read Franz Kafka's *A Hunger Artist*[188]. One line in particular from this short story has stayed with me and it is this quotation that is the focus for the 11th storey of boredom. First, a synopsis of the short story itself.

The main character of the story is a hunger artist, a man who earns his money by publicly fasting inside a small cage; a side-show spectacle. The only things in the cage with the hunger artist are the straw he lays upon, and a clock. The hunger artist, wearing only black tights, is always watched over carefully by a chosen few, to make sure he does not cheat by eating, although in reality there is no danger of this as "the honour of his profession forbade it" (1983:269). When, sometimes, his watchers turn their backs on him, purposely, in order to let him eat from a presumed stash of food, the hunger artist is so annoyed by their lack of belief in his unscrupulous fasting that he sings continuously, in order to prove that no food ever enters his mouth. He prefers the more openly suspicious spectators who shine bright flashlights on him even during the night. He entertains them with stories of his nomadic past and listens to their stories; he wants to keep them awake as long he can, so that they will know that he never cheats, never swallows a bite. To underscore his own fasting prowess, he has a lavish breakfast brought to the tired spectators, at his own expense, and the hunger artist relishes watching them break their fast, while he stalwartly continues his. The emaciated hunger artist can get no one to believe his claim that it is in fact quite easy for him to fast.

After 40 days, the maximum number of days for which the impressario noticed he could hold the attention of a town at such an event, the hunger artist is dramatically removed from his cage and his thin and weak body shown off to the waiting crowds: "Yet… he was never satisfied…For he alone knew, what no other initiate knew, how easy it was to fast. It was the easiest thing in the world" (p.270). He becomes more and more depressed because it appears to him that no one takes him seriously at his art. Finally the day comes where his cage no longer draws the attention of the public and the hunger artist leaves the impressario and joins a circus where he feels free to promise his

[188] *A Hunger Artist* was the title story of a volume of short stories that was published in 1924, two years after Kafka's death (Pawel 1984:441).

employers that this time he will really impress onlookers with a fasting feat he has never before been allowed to attempt. His cage is placed in such a way that the hunger artist becomes an obstacle for circus goers who are more interested in looking at the animals, and eventually no one even stops on their way to the animals to see how the hunger artist is doing. The signage around his cage, declaring the number of days he has gone without food, is no longer kept up to date and eventually he is completely forgotten about.

One day some circus workers come across the cage and wonder why a perfectly good cage is sitting empty but for the rotting straw. They stick in a pole and move the straw around, only to discover the skeletal form of the hunger artist who begs their forgiveness and says that he should not have been admired for his fasting because he could not have done anything else:

> "Because I have to fast, I can't help it," said the hunger artist. "What a fellow you are," said the overseer, "and why can't you help it?" "Because," said the hunger artist, lifting his head a little and speaking, with his lips pursed, as if for a kiss, right into the overseer's ear, so that no syllable might be lost, "*because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else."* (p.277, italics mine).

These are the hunger artist's last words and after his death a young black panther is put in his cage, "his noble body… seemed to carry freedom around with it… and the joy of life streamed with such ardent passion from his throat that for the onlookers it was not easy to stand the shock of it" (p.277).

I will focus specifically on the hunger artist's last words, upon being discovered in the forgotten cage: "*because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else*." Many other interpretations and analyses of Kafka's work have involved links with the author's biographical details to help explain the often dark and alienated worlds about which Kafka writes[189]. However, I would like to take the hunger artist's last words in the context only of the story for my analysis.

The hunger artist, with his final breath, admits that his life's work, his extreme fasting, has not, after all, been such a difficult thing to do. In fact, he admits, it has been

[189] Susan Sontag complained that Kafka's work "has been subjected to a mass ravishment by no less than three armies of interpreters. Those who read Kafka as a social allegory… as a psychoanalytic allegory…[and] those who read Kafka as a religious allegory" (1967:8).

rather easy for him and thus he has not really deserved the awe and admiration that spectators heaped upon him, at least in his earlier performances. Although he had toyed with his ticket-bearing watchers, buying them elaborate breakfasts just to underscore his own suffering, his last words are an admission that he was not, after all, suffering; at least, he was not suffering because he was hungry. He was, instead, only doing something he was good at and wanted to do. But this is not the fascinating thing, morbidly strange as it is. The hunger artist's most stunning admission is that his love for fasting need not be applauded because it was not that he was actually fasting on purpose; that is, he was not calling upon great strength of willpower to avoid eating. Rather, the hunger artist simply fasted because he felt he had no alternative: there was nothing he *wanted* to eat. All those years he apparently laboured as an artist, making a public event of his talent for emaciation, willingly caging himself for effect and drama, were inspired only by the fact that he could not find anything he wanted to eat. He admits that had he found something, he would certainly not have made a spectacle of himself. Instead, he "would have eaten to [his] heart's content." Suddenly, at the end of this dark story which we almost instinctively feel is playing on unconscious archetypes (the locked cage, staring eyes, etc.), and pulling on our deepest feelings of despair and hopelessness (the rotting straw, the emaciated body), the hunger artist insinuates another (absent) picture: one of him eating away to his heart's content, perhaps at a feast, or in a noisy restaurant with friends and clinking glasses of wine.

Naturally we ask, what does he mean? Why did he say this? He did not have to die an ignominious death after all, how tragic! But it is not the artist's death that is the tragedy of this story, for, after uttering his last words, we are told that, "in his dimming eyes remained the firm, though no longer proud, conviction that he was continuing to fast" (p.277). Rather, the tragedy was the hunger artist's life: he was unable to find anything he could eat. Thus we have the metaphor of someone who is a kind of existential anorexic, whose pathology lies not in an illness which prevents him from eating, but is instead manifested in a refusal to ingest anything he does not care about; and he declares that he could never find such things. Greenson (1952, in Nuckolls 2007) suggests that the feeling of tension that comes from our repression of instincts and objectives, results in feelings of emptiness, "as a kind of hunger… since the individual

does not know for what he is hungry, he now turns to the external world with the hope that it will provide the missing aim and/or object…it is this state of affairs which is characteristic for all boredom" (p.43). The external world for the hunger artist consists of the spectators who come to watch him fast, look for signs he might be cheating. His is a performance of hunger, of his refusal to eat and, as we find out from his last words, it is a performance of meaninglessness (i.e., that he could not find anything that he was interested in eating).

The hunger artist (we never learn his given names and only know him by this stage name, the one that turns out to be ironic) willingly lives in his cage during his hunger performances. The cage is locked by his manager and the hunger artist is thus trapped inside, even though it is a prison of his own choosing. According to Klapp (1986):

> psychologists find that constraint is a major factor in boredom, including vigilance required for tasks from which attention is not allowed to wander… In other words, all boredom is trapped in some way, whether it be a classroom, required reading, a concert hall, endless committees, a chore, a long church service, a banquet, a dull party which it is impolite to leave, a conversation which one can neither escape nor get a word in edgewise. (p.37)

We can be trapped into meaninglessness and held there, seemingly against our own will. This becomes an endurance test when we find ourselves physically confined, but also emotionally frustrated and mentally drained. In the case of the hunger artist, however, he *chooses* to live in this cage (we learn nothing of any life he might have outside the cage) and thus his is not an experience of enforced constraint, leading to meaninglessness and boredom. Rather, the hunger artist feels the constraint in his out-of-cage life, generally, and chooses to enter the cage, to be locked in it, as a response to his inability to find meaning elsewhere. Inside the cage he willfully performs his existential dilemma; his performance can be understood, in this sense, as his (temporary) release from being trapped by social expectations or those of his own limitations. According to Klapp (1986), "all boredom is trapped, in some way… one who is stuck in a situation that promises no interesting information, feedback, or meaning will feel bored as soon as the lack of promise becomes evident" (p.36-37).

But even here, in the cage, where he freely and willingly performs his meaninglessness, the hunger artist is trapped, particularly by the limit imposed on him by his manager, the rule that he cannot fast for more than 40 days. The 40-day fast has Biblical symbolism in both the Old and New Testaments. In the New Testament (Matthew 4:2, Luke 4:2 KJV), Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights in the desert, during which time he was tempted by the devil and won. In the Old Testament (Exodus 34:28 KJV), Moses fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, during which time he is said to have been given the 10 commandments. In both cases, the fasting resulted in a triumph of spirit, an enlightened vision. The hunger artist is removed from his cage on the fortieth day of his fast and brought out by beautiful young women who faint at the sight of his emaciated body. But his victory is hollow and short lived because he believes he could have fasted for longer; for the hunger artist, his spiritual quest is thus foreshortened, his personal statement (that in fact he can find nothing to eat and therefore could fast forever), a protest, suppressed. Pascal suggested that, "we do not grow tired of eating and sleeping day after day, because hunger and fatigue return; without them we should be bored. It would be the same without hunger for spiritual things: we should be bored. Hunger for justice: eighth beatitude"[190] (Pascal 1962:§725).

Historically, there is a political dimension to actual hunger strikes. In the early 20th century, Gandhi staged hunger strikes to protest British rule in India. In 1981, members of the paramilitary Provisional Irish Republican Army, went on strike in the Maze Prison in Belfast, claiming that they were political prisoners in the civil war in Northern Ireland and should be treated as such and not as common criminals. The first man to die, after 66 days without food, was 27 year old Bobby Sands who became a martyr for the pro-Irish (i.e., anti-British) side of "the troubles." More recently, prisoners held in the US military prison in Guantánamo Bay, started hunger strikes. Toobin (2008) reports that in 2006 there were as many as 200 prisoners on hunger strikes, but by 2008 this number was "only" 10. However, hunger strikes are only political if they can garner the attention of others, particularly those who might feel guilty, or might be pressured by those who feel guilty. Kafka's hunger artist is not protesting his (nor anyone else's)

[190] It is actually the 4th beatitude that says this, in Matthew 5:6 (KJV).

treatment by others. His is not a political hunger strike as such, with the specific demands of better food, clothing, living conditions or socio-political reform. The hunger artist is not so much protesting as he is refusing. He does in fact want people to know he is not eating (this is why he tries to keep singing and talking, so that the watchers know he cannot also be eating), but not, as is the case with a political hunger striker, so that they can do anything about it. In fact, he does not want to be let out of the cage, does not want to eat. He orders elaborate breakfasts for his watchers to eat in front of him, to help underscore the difficulty of his own predicament; he expects that they will eat in the knowledge that this is some kind of torture for him, to watch them eat while his fast continues even as the smells of their food snake round his cage. But, at the end of the story, the hunger artist's last words inform us that none of this was in fact a torment; not the not-eating and not the actions of his watchers and keepers. His not-eating, while apparently a torture, was in fact his own self-imposed refusal, in this case, an art of refusal.

The hunger artist wants to live a meaningful life. His efforts are focused around this singular purpose. But he cannot find meaning; certainly not in the usual places a person might look, so he begins his refusal. He refuses to take in any physical nourishment. He willingly makes a show of himself and turns his suffering into a spectacle in the traveling circus cage show. Was he bitter? Did he want to flaunt his suffering, in an attempt to make the point that it was partly the fault of his ticket-paying watchers, themselves looking for meaning in strange places? We get the sense that he does get some kind of enjoyment out of suffering, but not his own; rather, he takes pleasure in the horror of his watchers, of the pretty young girls who drag him out of his cage and then faint at the sight of his thin, wasting body. It is as though the meaning he cannot find is reflected in their hungry eyes although they do not realize that they are hungry in the same way he is. They eat the lavish breakfasts the hunger artist orders for them, filling their stomachs; yet they continue to stare at him, he who symbolizes the end of meaning. They are mesmerized by – but at the same time doubtful of – his success. How could he do what none of them could imagine doing, and do it in front of other people whose surveillance prevents him from doing the human thing and cheating when

no one is looking his way? Spacks comments on the analogy between refusing food, and boredom:

> The anorectic cannot allow herself to be nourished, nor can boredom's victim. Outside observers of the sufferer from anorexia frequently feel that she willfully refuses food; those doomed to the company of sufferers from boredom may believe that such persons could interest themselves in something if only they really *tried*. But the malady, which often descends without warning, feels to its victim incurable by personal effort. (1995:14)

Like the experience of the Australian aborigines in Musharbash's study, for the hunger artist, "the present becomes oppressive, like a cage in which one is caught, in which one experiences the same thing over and over again without any possibility of escape" (Musharbash 2007:313). It is not, as it would appear, that the iron cage of the hunger artist is one of his own making, his own choice; it is the place where he seeks refuge by performing his refusal, trapped by what he considers is a lack of worthy alternatives. His refusal to eat is a sign of the revulsion he feels at the choices he has. Healy (1984) comments that:

> On the analogy of interest in food (hunger), boredom is the equivalent not of nonhunger, but of antihunger, indeed of a revulsion against the very idea of eating, a psychic anorexia…However, just as an involuntary distaste for all food whatsoever is a certain sign of disorder, since appetite is a natural and obviously essential aspect of being human (or even animal), so would boredom with things in general, for to seek out and to attribute meaning to people, objects, relationships, processes, and states are human characteristics, all the more remarkable for being largely limited to the species. (p. 60-61)

Thus the hunger artist's existence in his cage isolates him from (much of) the social world and renders him non-social, almost non-human in the extremes to which he is willing to go. In the conclusion of Kafka's story, we have the juxtaposition of the pacing, black panther, muscular, alive, bursting to get out of the cage; dangerous, ferocious, unpredictable, all the things the hunger artist was not: "his noble body… seemed to carry freedom around with it… and the joy of life streamed with such ardent passion from his throat that for the onlookers it was not easy to stand the shock of it" (p.277). This dumb beast, magnificent in his size and imagined ferocity, does what wild animals do: everything it can to survive. The hunger artist, with the intelligence and reflexivity of a man, refuses to do what it takes even to subsist. The ticket-paying watchers of the hunger artist are fascinated by his refusal to perform the very task that keeps bodies alive. The

hunger artist's emaciated body is indeed the ultimate spectacle for human onlookers: literally, a man dying in front of their eyes, needlessly, yet purposively. The panther's body, on the other hand, is doing what a caged body should: pacing, looking for a way out, looking for food, mating opportunities, the things that make a body live and feel alive. The hunger artist manages to stay alive, just barely, by refusing all these things, by refusing any possibilities of joy. Indeed, his great refusal is based on a negation of the existence of these joys; he has turned his back on meaning because he can find none. We are reminded of Kierkegaard's jaded aesthete who says, "my eyes are surfeited and bored with everything and yet I hunger" (Kierkegaard 1959: 1:25) but also Aquinas' definition of *acedia* as the refusal of joy.

Boredom: Dialectic of Absurd Refusal

From the vantage point of this 11th storey, supported by the foundation of the historical, philosophical and empirical literature reviews, and the 10 previous storeys, each one a fragment of my cultural collage, each one constructed to support the next, I can now argue that: *boredom is a dialectic of absurd refusal*.

Boredom is not so much an organizing experience, as it is a protest *against* experience. It is a protest against the most apparently mundane and everyday experiences (waiting for a bus, etc.) as they remind us that interest and meaning are not always and everywhere available to us, despite dominant political and pop-psychology discourses to the contrary. While boredom is initially a response to monotonous, repetitive and uninteresting work, typically limited (in its most intensely unpleasant forms) to those with thinner paycheques and repetitive job tasks, and those who have few, if any, real alternatives, boredom can also be seen as a protest against the banal in all its cultural forms (including work), but particularly against increasingly mass-produced lifestyles for sale. The dialectic here is in the tension between the do-nothing, listless, discontent of boredom (from the mundane to the profound, or situational to existential) and its restless, frustrated desire; between the nothingness of boredom and the possibilities for everything, if only desire could be mobilized. Boredom is a state, an experience, of the Now-Nothing, but also (or, because of this), a state and experience of the sensual anticipation of the future, of what might change, what might be possible. Boredom is an

experience of both the too much (recall Margaret's words about her overseas experience), and the too little.

Each of these three moments of boredom – the everyday, the occupational and the banal – is also absurd[191]. Everyday boredom is absurd (i.e., ridiculous and incredible) if we consider that we might otherwise read, or think, or write about what we read and think, or talk to others, or walk, or express ourselves creatively, etc. When faced with these (and many other) options, how is it we can still say we are bored (i.e., uninterested), why is it we are uncomfortably aware of each moment and feel the need to "fill" it, to "spend" our time; that is, why do we see this as empty and meaningless time? Occupational boredom is absurd from the point of view that it is absurd that so many people (according to what surveys we do have) are bored at work, that technological and bureaucratic practices now almost ensure a certain amount of boredom (a byproduct of alienation, in the way Marx meant it), while at the same time understand that this boredom is a problem for productivity and worker absenteeism. Banal boredom, the third moment, is absurd for the reason that we got what we asked for: unfettered progress that resulted in the apparently limitless number of things and services for sale, to make our lives "easier" and "happier," modernisms great prize for the disenchantment of Enlightenment. Yet we profess to be bored, much like the 19th century dandy strolling through the Paris arcades, claiming he is already bored with the physical artifacts of modernity. However, unlike the dandy, whose claim served to set him above the fray of progress, thus carving out a social place for him that both exceeded and limited his capacity to contribute, we are bored because we have not actually found any meaning of lasting value, more than 150 years later. We are not above-it-all bored; rather, banal boredom is very much on the ground, an expression of great disappointment with the promises of modernism, and now high-, or post-, modernism. We have many choices, yet seemingly few alternatives. This too is part of the absurdity. As Horkheimer and Adorno

[191] Lyman and Scott (1970) proposed a Sociology of the Absurd, which, "on the basis of its debt to phenomenology and existentialism" (p.2) would study "existential man, the creature who strives after sense in a senseless world" (p.12). This framework works for my project with respect to its ties to phenomenology, and the existential aspects of boredom. However, I take here only Lyman and Scott's definition of absurd for use in sociology; otherwise, the program they laid out in 1970 is, in my opinion, anti-political, and overly rational.

declare in the preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002:xvii), "the flood of precise information and brand-new amusements make people smarter and more stupid at once."

There is another aspect to the absurd nature of boredom, one that is relevant to each of the three moments of boredom (the everyday, the occupational and the banal). The experience of boredom has a non-social quality. The bored person, regardless of the cause, feels disengaged from others and from self, withdrawn, even anti-social. The hunger artist provides us with an extreme case example. However, we (sometimes) seek out the company of others when we are bored even though this does not guarantee that our boredom will cease, that our discomfort or even suffering will end, just as the hunger artist's did not end when he was paraded out of his cage. We can also bore others and cause them to want to get away, to escape, from us.

Marcuse (1966) proposed the Great Refusal, a revolutionary subjectivity focused on liberation from affluent (mechanized, bureaucratized, consumption-driven) society. The great refusal is "an existential lure towards a realm of transcendent possibilities: infinitely suggestive of the not yet… a posture in the face of being" (Moore 2007:89-90). That is, the subjectivity of the great refusal is not that of apathy or indifference; these are forms of resignation, without room for possibility or hope. Instead, the great refusal is a subjectivity that can open up the space for possibilities (ultimately, for Marcuse, revolutionary possibilities), while at the same time denying (protesting) discourses of domination and oppression. The hunger artist's refusal is both an "ascetic refusal of the life instinct" (Satz and Ozsvath 1978:202) but can also be seen, I argue, as a practice of the Great Refusal. His refusal contains the dialectic of hope and despair: his fasting is a protest of existential proportions, (while also a performance he enjoys, if in a sadomasochistic way), and is thus about the hope for change, even transcendence; and, as a result of the limits put on him by his managers, and the distrust and disbelief of his spectators, he despairs that he cannot take his art (his fasting) to its limit.

The hunger artist represents, especially at the beginning of the 20th century, the notion that there is nothing of value to be found amidst the mountain of extant options; and Cobain's lyrics at the end of the 20th century[192] shows that this disillusionment

[192] Laclau and Mouffe (2001[1985]) argue that the twentieth century "ended at some point in the early 1990s" (p.vii).

(arguably with the entire enlightenment *and* modernist projects) has turned to anger, an inner seething that demands redress. But where must this redress come from? It cannot come from the existing hegemonic discourses (which have lead to the material situations in which we find ourselves bored). I argue that inherent in refusal is the question of possibilities: if I am refusing, it means I have hope that there are indeed alternatives, other, more desirable options. Boredom, as a dialectic of absurd refusal, suggests that our frustration, our coiled and impotent desire, is a protest that anticipates a future we will be able to find and make more meaningful.

Chapter Six
The Future of Boredom

> Is it possible that despite our discoveries and advances, despite our culture, religion, and science, we have remained on the surface of life? Is it possible that even this surface, which might still have been something, has been covered with an incredibly tedious material, which makes it look like living-room furniture during the summer vacation?
>
> ~ Rilke (1985[1910]:22-23)

The ubiquitous and banal nature of boredom "has long rendered it comparatively immaterial" (Anderson 2004:739). At the same time, philosophers, artists and, more recently, social scientists, have attempted to understand it by examining both its negative and productive qualities. Goodstein (2005) notes that it is in fact an experience without qualities. It seems not to fit neatly into existing typologies of emotions, mood or feeling and can affect anyone at anytime. Its "variegated ontological status" (Gottdiener 1985:991) is closely tied to issues of being and, for these reasons, some say that boredom "precludes its own intelligibility" (Bigelow 1983:256). Nonetheless, I have argued that the intellectually elusive nature of boredom, combined with its apparently universal experience, are compelling reasons for a sociological analysis.

In this dissertation I examined the concept of boredom from a variety of academic, literary and popular culture perspectives in order to call attention to its importance as a subject of study for sociology. This research was prompted, in part, by my discovery that sociology has not contributed much to our understanding of the concept and lived experience of boredom. My introductory chapter is an extended discussion of the fact of this lacuna, in which I point out that it seems that everyone *but* sociologists has taken an interest in boredom. The brief literature review in the introductory chapter is intended to underscore this fact and highlights the variety of disciplines and types of studies that have investigated boredom.

In Chapters Three and Four I provided comprehensive etiological, socio-historical and traditional academic literature reviews of the concept and experience of boredom. These reviews help to ground the empirical section, the eleven storeys of boredom in Chapter Five, which I presented here as a cultural collage, inspired by Walter Benjamin's

method of literary collage in his *Passagenwerk*. The themes that emerged from the reviews were carried through the storeys that, in turn, were used, heuristically, to discuss and analyze various dimensions of boredom from a sociological point of view.

The eleven storeys of boredom in Chapter Five, make up the cultural collage that is the empirical focus of this work. The analysis in each of these storeys is grounded in the historical and literature reviews in the preceding chapters. As well, I have attempted to construct the edifice that is Chapter Five in such a way that each of the storeys builds upon the previous one(s). The eleven storeys each take up an aspect, or quality of boredom. These aspects are: boredom as a villain; escaping boredom; meaning and boredom; representations of boredom; the political economy of boredom; performing boredom; boredom and time; boredom and desire; boredom and hope; boredom and refusal. Some of these storeys are based on more traditional modes of sociological enquiry, in particular the Fifth Storey (*Performing Boredom*), and the Sixth (*Representing a Boring City*), where I draw on a symbolic interaction and political economy approach, respectively. As well, the first two storeys (*Dodging the Villain*, *Escaping Boredom*) draw on a critical analysis of media and the semiotics of images. Other storeys, (e.g., *Boredom and Time* and *Boredom in Nirvana*) are less traditional in their sociological approach and analysis.

The storeys that comprise Chapter Five were chosen largely based on a mode of inspiration and not by traditional processes of selection. Benjamin's idea of *profane illumination* best describes my mode of inspiration. According to Benjamin, profane illumination is "a materialistic, anthropological inspiration" (Benjamin 2005[1929]:209). This mode of discovery complements the lyrical stance I took toward this project (described in Chapter Two), which allowed me to write about my "intense reaction to some portion of the social process seen in a moment" (Abbott 2006:76). To varying degrees, the storeys I chose all proved to be rather challenging, analytically, long after the enthusiasm of the initial eureka had worn off. However, the epistemological and methodological choice I made to write from a lyrical impulse facilitated the process. The

work of Georg Simmel, and Walter Benjamin, are the non-traditional traditions which inform this dissertation[193].

While other sociologists have written intriguing, non-traditional sociological work, there is, by definition, no canon upon which to draw when doubt creeps in, and doubt did creep in: particularly the not-still and not-small voice that often nagged me, "but what is the *sociology* here? How is this *sociological*?" These questions could not be ignored and yet often they seemed to hamper rather than help me. While I recognize that the ambiguous, existential nature of my topic itself represents a challenge for sociological analysis, my methods served to focus my analysis and deepen the problematic. As the introductory chapter makes clear, sociology has paid scant attention to boredom, therefore my project is clearly exploratory and, at the very least, my own struggles to grasp it intellectually help to explain why the subject has received so little sociological treatment.

One of the great difficulties in thinking and writing about boredom is that it appears related to any number of affective, social and existential states. At a certain point in these investigations, it seemed to me that boredom is indeed everywhere, and both the cause and result of modernist progress. Ferrell (2004:290) suggests that, "the many trajectories of modernism seem to coalesce quite clearly into a vast machinery of boredom." This dissertation is my attempt to wrestle an existential subject, employing a largely sociological focus, while keeping an empirical foot on the floor. More than 40 years ago, in an article in the *American Sociological Review*, Edward Tiryakian (1965) noted that:

> At present sociological theory is not doing justice to this unexplored realm of social existence… Sociological theory can remain true to itself and yet renovate its formulations by focusing on the existential horizon of social life… an existential awareness translated into empirical research will enable sociology better to appreciate and thereby cope with the seemingly 'irrational' discontinuities and large-scale upheavals of modern society. (p. 687-688)

The wide range of kinds and degrees of boredom is evident when we consider the everyday, mundane, situative boredom of waiting for a bus, compared to the serious political, financial and social consequences of the label "boring" as applied to an entire

[193] Coetzee and Wood (2007) note that both Simmel and Benjamin's work was "shunned by the sociological mainstream of their day" (p.123).

region (*Fourth Storey: Representing a Boring City*) or used as a method of social control and even torture (*Fifth Storey: Performing Boredom*). Yet, these apparent extremes are not completely separate experiences. It is in fact because we can all relate to the boringness of waiting, and any number of other boring experiences (whether at work or in a relationship, or the more existential variety), that we would want to avoid spending our time (and money) in a city that has the reputation of being an entirely boring place, which could only, we presume, lead to boring experiences. We might not judge the everyday, situational boredom of waiting (for the bus, for the traffic to clear, for the store clerk to help us, for the bank lineup to move, for the colleague to stop talking, for the meeting to be over, for our children to finish their dinner), to be as severe or debilitating as the more existential boredom of the dissatisfaction with our own life, or growing disaffection with the social institutions upon which we must rely. However, these are not different beasts of boredom; they are inextricably and ineluctably tied to each other. The significant difference between the two, however, is that we expect (even if we do not enjoy) situative boredom; we do not necessarily expect existential boredom, at least not as an everyday occurrence. As the many studies and experiments in psychology can attest, we are ingenious when it comes to inventing ways to lessen the discomfort of our situative boredom. Thanks to my grandfather, I have whiled away many hours at bus stops and airports counting the number of smaller words I can construct out of larger ones, found on nearby posters and signs. When we find the situation oppressively boring, we can often plan and execute an escape, either literally, by leaving the situation, or in our imagination or through writing or other forms of creative expression. But existential boredom is not something that most people expect or have much experience in managing. Because, by definition, existential boredom taps into the big questions of meaning in our lives, we are not much different from the philosophers who experienced and wrote about this boredom 200 years ago. It can eventually result in our feeling apathetic, depressed, despairing and even, for some, suicidal (Zijderveld 1979). We cannot really know why the young Curt Kobain (who wrote the song "Smells Like Teen Spirit") killed himself; but we can reasonably assume it was not in response to situative boredom.

The numerous psychology experiments in boredom and the neglected orphans of Bulgaria suggest that we can quite literally be bored out of our minds if we are deprived

of even the most fundamental of human stimulation and contact. Similarly, as the real and fictional deaths of Kobain and the Hunger Artist suggest, we can also be bored to death. Each type of boredom, situative and existential, carries within it the weight of its own extremes.

The result of my analyses of the 11 storeys, or meditations, on boredom, is a theoretically and empirically informed analytic of boredom; it is not a traditional, operational definition that specifically denotes and delimits various qualities. Instead, it is an analytic that suggests ways in which we might think about boredom, including, but also beyond, the accepted ideas of "boredom is a lack of meaning," or "boredom is the experience of a lack of flow/momentum/rhythm," and so on. Below is the annotated analytic that boredom is a dialectic of absurd refusal.

Boredom is:

a dialectic

(1) we have too much (time, things) and too little (both cause boredom)

(2) a state of do-nothing, listless discontent, and also restless, frustrated desire

(3) impotence of the Now-nothing and the sensual anticipation of possibilities

of absurd

(1) does not make sense that in an affluent society we could be bored

(2) increasingly built-in to institutional structures (e.g., work) yet has detrimental effects on productivity (through lowered morale, increased absenteeism, etc).

(3) there is a non-social quality to the experience wherein we withdraw when we know not what we desire, or can no longer find meaning in what we are doing

refusal

(1) protest (against the injunction to enjoy! ??)

(2) refusal is potentially political, as in the refusal to accept the *status quo*

(3) refusing itself opens up the question of "What else is there?" – therefore opens up space for possibilities

A Note on Methods

My qualitative research methods were varied. After some preliminary reading and writing I knew I would need to cast a wide net in order to first "find" boredom and then bring a sociological perspective to bear on this enigmatic subject. I decided to combine a number of methods to fulfill my methodological assumption that, if boredom is everywhere, and possibly a response to modernism itself, I need not confine myself to one textbook method. I did not sit down and make a list of all the methods I would employ; rather, I determined what I deemed most appropriate as I decided on each new case. Ultimately, this research employed a number of qualitative strategies, wherein I: scrutinized and analyzed commercial websites; conducted a telephone interview; searched through the archives of a city council's minutes; contacted by phone and email artists and writers; analyzed participant observations; attended a poetry reading by a visiting academic and renown poet; consulted Statistics Canada data; patronized an art gallery exhibit; photographed and analyzed urban signs; analyzed a poem, a short story and a popular hit song; consulted with a music expert and numerous native speakers of various non-English languages; and read a wide variety of literature on the subject of boredom itself, as well as concomitant subjects. Most of the academic reading for this project comes from sociology, psychology, and philosophy. Ultimately, however, the academic literature that informs this dissertation also includes that from: addictions, anthropology, art history and theory, business, criminology, cultural studies, education, geography, health/medicine, history, leisure, lifecourse, literary critique, occupational therapy, occupations, psychoanalytic theory, sexuality, and social work. As well, I read relevant popular culture magazine and newspaper articles. In other words, if boredom is ubiquitous, if it is indeed everywhere, I made a concerted effort to leave no stone unturned.

The use of a cultural collage worked well for me in two particular ways. As a methodological device, it allowed me the freedom to choose empirical cases that were inspired by what I had come to learn about boredom, but it also gave me a structure that was flexible enough to focus my discussion and analysis, yet also yielding to multiple analytic approaches. The idea of storeys provided me with the metaphorical but also actual structure for this dissertation. The challenge I set myself was thus to construct a

project whereby each storey built, substantively, on the previous storeys, and, together, all the storeys were grounded by the literature reviews which form the foundation of the entire edifice. This, undoubtedly, proved to be the most challenging component of the project.

Whereas Adorno criticized the literary montage Benjamin used for his *Passagenwerk*, because Benjamin presented the items in his montage without any apparent critique, or even discussion, I have used each of the items (storeys) in my collage in order to examine boredom both as a phenomenon of modernism and as a critique of modernism.

Where Benjamin claimed that he "needn't *say* anything. Merely show" (2002:460), I have attempted a theoretically informed, critical sociological analysis of the themes each of my storeys represents. Coetzee and Wood (2007) note that, "Benjamin's approach is that of the wanderer, selecting intriguing aspects of social reality, rather than constructing a model of the whole; it is up to the reader to do the latter" (p.123). While I make no claim that my own work culminates in a "model of the whole," I have attempted to knit the fragments, the storeys of my cultural collage, into a broader analytic. The cumulative micro-sociological focus on each of the storeys ultimately, I hope, tells a story of boredom. I have attempted to strengthen the collage approach by grounding it in a multi-layered and historical context.

Project Limitations

My research is clearly "Western" focused. Most of the social theorists and philosophers upon whom I draw are German, and much of the academic literature review (though not all), is North American, and, in particular, American. I am limited by my own language restrictions to access any literature on this subject that may exist in other languages (particularly German), within other cultures. However, it is the various practices of Western culture with which I am most familiar and thus it makes good sense to start my project here.

Musharbash's (2007) research about the experiences of boredom amongst the Warlpiri aboriginal people in Australia, and the work of Jervis et al. (2003), with Native American Indians living on a reservation, are excellent examples of why boredom should

in fact be studied anthropologically as well as sociologically, in other cultures. If boredom is indeed a response to the processes of modernity, it is possible that an analysis of the experience of boredom in a variety of cultures (and classes within those cultures), could serve to exemplify the continued effects of uneven "progress" and "development." Some of the examples I discuss in this project – e.g., boring cocktail party chatter, greeting cards, expensive vehicles – are only directly relevant to a more middle-class and western sensibility. The image I draw of the bored person at a cocktail party, balancing her glass of wine in one hand, and her small napkin of food in the other (fifth storey), stands in stark contrast to the image of the group of Warlpiri young people, sitting together watching television for days on end; or the chronically unemployed Native Americans, waking up and wondering how they will fill the many hours that lie ahead of them, each and every day.

The metaphorical, but also actual structure of the empirical chapter, where each storey of boredom is connected to the one previous, presented the greatest challenge of the dissertation. While I did provide an analysis in each of the storeys, some are clearly stronger than others. Wrestling existential subjects of time and being demands more time and space than this project permitted. As well as the limits of my own intellectual skill and insight, the more I thought and wrote about boredom, the more I felt limited by language itself, particularly a *sociological* language. This limitation has proven to be one of the most intriguing (and frustrating) results of this project for me as a sociologist and writer and is something I hope to explore in future research.

My method of using a cultural collage to represent my empirical data has its weaknesses. While I make no claims to so-called subjectivity, a positivist-style critique would question the choice of some or even all of the individual fragments. For example, did I make my choices to support an existing hypothesis? What other conclusions could be drawn by the use of different empirical cases? I would like to respond here to this potential critique as it is something to which I gave a great deal of thought. In short, no, none of these storeys was chosen to help me make an argument, reach a foregone conclusion. Although, in retrospect, both from reading the dissertation chapters, but also from my research notes, I can see that the conclusion I reached was in fact visible to me long before I was conscious of it. However, it was not until the writing of the eleventh

and last storey of boredom, about Kafka's hunger artist, that I began to clearly formulate and articulate my conclusion. The intellectual invigoration of this entire process was matched only by the sheer terror of proceeding strictly on intellectual curiosity and a sustained interest in the subject.

I acknowledge that I might be accused of providing a laundry list, a catalogue of ideas and research about boredom. In fact, this was a necessary part of my project, and very much inspired by Benjamin, who, infamously, kept his copious notes on index cards which he compiled for what eventually became *Passagenwerk*. I share with Benjamin the collector's impulse and the curator's desire to organize things in ways that both make sense, but also disrupt common sense.

The Future of Boredom

Strictly speaking, my dissertation does not consistently or specifically address the important sociological issues of class, gender and race/ethnicity. However, I hope that what I have here drawn together could support and inform more traditional empirical research. For example, what is the experience of boredom like for those on the margins of an increasingly unequal division of wealth? When does boredom become an accepted (if resented) part of the structure of a particular group (e.g., the Native Americans in Jervis et al.'s study)? I acknowledge that because I chose a qualitative, exploratory analysis of boredom, using a non-traditional method, the research lacks a more sustained materialist analysis. Future research could extend what I have started here in terms of a discussion of boredom and politics. Apathy is about indifference, a complete lack of caring wherein processes of alienation and disenfranchisement successfully render a person bereft, not simply unwilling to participate socially, but unable. Apathy does not *want* to engage, nor does it even care about this lack of wanting. However, boredom is restless, it *agitates*. It is an uncomfortable state, a kind of between-times, where we are dissatisfied with the present, yet cannot adequately imagine a more profitable (immediate) future. In this sense then, boredom is dissent, the refusal to accept -- or, at the very least, a dissatisfaction with -- the *status quo*; boredom can be understood to be a socio-psychological site of *potential* political struggle. As William James noted more than 100 years ago, "the sensation of taedium is a protest… against the entire present" (1950[1890]:626). Indeed, boredom

might be the stage before apathy, wherein there is no longer any hope; if this is true then, politically, boredom has potential.

While I in no way kept track, methodically, of the number and type of internet websites about boredom, there was clearly a notable increase during the three years I was thinking and writing about the subject. There are both more anti-boredom websites (i.e., those that offer games and things to do to keep oneself from becoming bored, or to alleviate boredom), and more websites (e.g., blogs) discussing the everyday experience of boredom (some sites more philosophical than others). Based on the apparent international academic *Zeitgeist* on the topic, however modest (Chapter Four), my own research and my observation of the increase of boredom awareness on the internet, I will say that I do think we are becoming more aware of our boredom and more interested in it. While we have for years tried to escape boredom, we are now beginning to look at it, find it interesting; we are asking boredom what it has to say to us, we who are bored (Bigelow 1983). Perhaps, in a still largely metaphysical and philosophical sense, we are beginning to orient ourselves towards the future, but not so much in terms of ideas of progress; rather, a future against which we feel both impotent and yet hopeful at the same time. Andrew Benjamin (2005) speculates that:

> It may be therefore – though this is still a conjecture – that what counters boredom as a mood is not just action but the possibility of a counter-mood; a mood not just as a disposition, but as that which organizes experience. Awaiting and expectation – as necessitating the transformation of time – a transformation in which the future becomes a condition of the present, rather than the present being a series of empty moments awaiting a future, would mean that there is another mood. This possibility does more than tie moods and time together. They become linked to a possibility and thus to a form of potentiality. (p.167)

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Heidegger, who wrote the most detailed phenomenological analysis of boredom to date, once asked, "can even boredom be boring in the end?" (1995:82). After an extended investigation and analysis of the etiological, social and philosophical history of boredom, all of which served to inform a series of detailed sociological meditations on the subject, I am pleased to answer him with an emphatic "No!" Boredom is astonishingly interesting. Drawing on a wide variety of social scientists and philosophers, I have incorporated ideas from some of the most critical, intellectual and independent

thinkers of the 20th century (e.g., Benjamin, Heidegger, Arendt, Marcuse, Baudrillard, Zizek). As well, I have considered works of art and poetry as serious empirical sources of insight. Of course, at the end of this research, it is more clear to me now than it ever could have been before that all of these writers-thinkers-creators were writing about aspects of the same topic: our need to make sense of our lives, whoever we are, wherever we are. That "meaninglessness" is possibly the rational answer is simply not acceptable for the vast majority of us. That we passionately hunger for something, or try to rebel against the restraining force of our boredom, our coiled and impotent desire, is perhaps a sign we are still hopeful. We are hopeful despite signs worldwide that inequalities of every kind are increasing and the insidious role of fear-as-social-control has apparently eclipsed the power of critical thinking.

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Appendix A
Table of Psychology Studies Measuring Boredom, in Chronological Order 1981-2007

Except where noted, all studies were conducted in the US. Due to the convenience sampling (e.g., undergraduate students) and other non-random sampling techniques, none of the results of these studies is generalizable. Most of the samples include more women than men, and more Whites than Black, Hispanic, Asian or other race/ethnic groups. As well, it should be noted that some of the students who participated in these studies were required to do so for course credit. This meta-analytic table is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather representative of this kind of boredom research in psychology.

Author(s) & Year	Variables	Sample	Results
Smith (1981)	lit review		extroverts are more susceptible to boredom (than introverts)
Thackray (1981)	stress lit review		boredom does not contribute to stress
Hamilton, Haier & Buchsbaum (1984)	intrinsic enjoyment	N= 160 high school, college & freshmen students; 104 men	"intrinsic enjoyment and boredom coping are traits reflecting the capacity for good attentional control across a variety of situations" (p.191)
Perkins & Hill (1985)	monotony, frustration (and others)	N= total of 160 British school-age, college and university students	subjective experience of monotony & frustration are associated with boredom
Farmer & Sundberg (1986)	depression, hopelessness & loneliness	undergrads, mostly women	positively correlated with boredom proneness
Iso-Ahola and Weissinger (1987)	Perception of leisure as boredom	N=134 community residents; 56% female; 82% white; avg age 44	men & those with higher incomes more likely to perceive leisure as boredom; leisure boredom not related to life satisfaction; neg correlation btw intrinsic motivation and boredom susceptibility
Damrad-Frye & Laird (1989)	self-perception of attention	N= 94 undergrads; 64 women	feelings of boredom based on self-perceptions of

			actions; unaccounted for distraction most often resulted in response of boredom

Tolor (1989)	alienation	N=76 grad students in human services & special ed; 65 women; 82% White	boredom proneness covaries significantly (but modestly) with feelings of alienation
Arnett (1990)	drunk driving, sensation seeking, & egocentrism	N=181 male high school students (17-18 yrs), 162 white	drunk driving motivated in part by boredom susceptibility (subscale of sensation seeking)
Bornstein, Kale & Cornell (1990)	mere exposure effect	N= 100 psych 101 students; 55 women	boredom a limiting condition on the mere exposure effect
Sundberg, Latkin, Farmer & Saoud (1991)	culture	undergrads in psych classes in Australia, US, Honk Kong and Beirut (N not given); avg age 20	men more BP than women; Asian women more BP than Western women; Lebanese students scored highest and US scored lowest on BP scale
Watt (1991)	time perception	N= 110 undergrads	high boredom prone more likely to perceive time passing slowly during a tedious task
Vodanovich, Verner & Gilbride (1991)	positive & negative affect	N=170 undergrads	signif neg. relationships found btw BP & negative affect scores (i.e., Depression, Hostility, Anxiety); signif positive correlations btw BP and positive affect (i.e., Positive Affect, Sensation Seeking)
Watt and Vodanovich (1992)	impulsivity	N=381 undergrads	impulsive behaviours are positively correlated with BP
Leong & Schneller (1993)	cognitive flexibility & temperament	N= 132 psych undergrads, 81 women	cognitively rigid are more boredom prone; so are the more dogmatic, less sociable, with low-level persistence, tempo and probs with inhibitory

			control of impulses

Watt & Blanchard (1994)	need for cognition	N=214 psych & business undergrads, 135 women	those who derive little enjoyment from thinking or from increasing their understanding of events around them were signif more prone to boredom
Sawin & Scerbo (1995)	work vigilance		lower boredom prone outperformed higher BP and reported less boredom
Rupp & Vodanovich (1997)	hostility, anger & aggression	N=239 undergrads, 66% women	all positively and significantly correlated with BP
Vodanovich, Weddle & Piotrowski (1997)	internal and external work values	N=111 undergrads	high BP positively correlated to external work values
Wink & Donahue (1997)	overt & covert narcissism	N=106 women, elite psych undergrads; 61% White, 25% Asian, 4% Black	overt & covert narcissism both positively correlated with boredom
Seib & Vodanovich (1998)	private self-consciousness	N= university students	awareness of one's internal state correlated with lower BP
Vodanovich and Rupp (1999)	procrastination	N=146 undergrads, 52% women	procrastinators are at risk for BP
Vodanovich & Watt (1999)	time structure	US N=154 undergrads (79 women); Ireland N=184 undergrads (135 women)	US students higher BP scores than Irish students; men higher BP than women only in US; Irish students reporting more structured time, scored lower BP, but the opposite for US (more structured time, more BP)
Watt & Vodanovish (1999)	psychosocial development	N=142 undergrad psych and educ students; 91% white	signif. relationship btw BP and psychosocial development
Harris (2000)	mood monitoring, mood labeling,	N=170 univ students; 75% undergrads; 78% women, 61%white	BP positively correlated with mood monitoring; BP negatively correlated with mood labeling

Sommers & Vodanovich (2000)	health symptom reporting	N=200 undergrads	BP positively correlated with obsessive-compulsive, somatization, anxiety, interpersonal sensitivity, and depression
Gana, Deletang & Metais (2000)	introspectiveness	N=154 French adults (France), 82 men	high BP are also prone to increased introspectiveness
Kass, Vodanovich & Callender (2001)	Job satisfaction, tenure and absenteeism	N=292 manufacturing plant workers; 56% men; 53% white	high levels of job boredom and BP significantly negatively correlated to job satisfaction scores; job boredom assoc. w/ longer organizational tenure and absenteeism
MacDonald & Holland (2002)	spirituality	N=296 psych undergrads in Ontario, 214 women	spirituality linked to lower levels of BP for women
Kelly (2002)	non/pathological worry	N=157 psych undergrads, 74% white	BP positively correlated w/ nonpath worry
Wallace, Vodanovich & Restino (2003)	cognitive failure & daytime sleepiness	N=263 126 US Military (more men, 63%) 137 US undergrads (more women, 55%)	daytime sleepiness and BP scores predict cognitive failure in both groups; BP same across gender and groups; more military with higher cognitive failure scores, and higher scores on BP subscales
von Gemmingen (2003)	paranoia & self consciousness	N=107 undergrads, 74% women, 85% white	BP counted for more paranoia variance (29%) than the other independent vars.
Kass, Wallace & Vodanovich (2003)	attention (deficit)	N=148 undergrads	BP predicts hyperactivity
Dahlen et al. (2004)	anger & aggression	N=224 psych and rehab services undergrads, 70% women, 59% White	boredom positively correlated with aggression and dysfunctional anger expression

Danckert & Allman (2005)	temporal perception		high-boredom-prone individuals demonstrated higher error values when estimating time

Chaney & Blalock (2006)	social connectedness & sexual addiction	N=517 US male internet users; 83% white; avg age 40	those (online) sexually addicted who reported child sex abuse, also scored higher BP and decreased social connectedness
Culp (2006)	major dimensions of personality & 2 facets of BP	N=316 undergrads 215 women	BP associated with undersocialized, irresponsible tendencies
McIntosh (2006)	gender	N= 146 undergrads, 80 women	men more boredom prone than women
Eastwood, Cavaliere, Fahlman and Eastwood (2007)	emotional awareness and external orientation	N=204 Ontario undergrads, 158 women	bored people are unaware of emotions and are externally-oriented
Melton & Shulenberg (2007)	meaning in life	N=279 undergrads, 179 women	negative correlation with BP

Appendix B

Translations of the English word "boredom" and, where relevant, the translation of "bored to death," in 27 languages.

Language	**"Boredom"**	***"Bored to death"***
Croatian	Dosada, Nezadovoljstvo	Dosadan kao stjenica (boring as a bed bug)
Czech	nuda, dlouhá chvíle	
Danish	Kedsomhed	at kede sig ihjel (to bore oneself to death)
Dutch	verveling	Ik verveel me dood (it bores me dead)
Estonian	tüdimus	
Finnish	ikävystyneisyys	Olen kuolettavan ikävystynyt. (I am deadly bored)
German	Langeweile	(sich) zu Tode langweilen (to bore oneself to death); tödliche langeweile (deathly boring)
Greek	Plixi, ania	variemai mehri thanatou
Hungarian	unalom	
Icelandic	leiðindi	
Indonesian	kebosanan	
Italian	noia	Annoiato a morte, seccato a morte
Japanese		Taikutsu-de-shiniso
Latvian	garlaicība	
Lithuanian	nuobodulys	
Maltese	Imxabba (bored)	mxabba mill-ahhar
Norwegian	kjedsomhet	
Polish	nudno	zanudzona na smierc
Portuguese (Brazil)	aborrecimento	
Portuguese (Portugal)	tédio	
Romanian	plictiseala (there is a "u" over the last "a")	ma plictisesc de moarte (there is a "u" over the "a" in "ma")
Russian	skuka	skuchat' do smerti (bore oneself to death); skuka smertel'naja (deathly boring)

Slovak	nuda	
Spanish	aburrimiento	
Swedish	leda	
Turkish	can sıkıntısı, sıkıntı	
Slovenian	dolgCas	

Appendix C

Boredom Proneness Scale (Farmer and Sundberg 1986)

1. It is easy for me to concentrate on my activities. (F)
2. Frequently when I am working I find myself worrying about other things. (T)
3. Time always seems to be passing slowly. (T)
4. I often find myself at "loose ends," not knowing what to do. (T)
6. I am often trapped in situations where I have to do meaningless things. (T)
7. Having to look at someone's home movies or travel slides bores me tremendously. (T)
8. I have projects in mind all the time, things to do. (F)
9. I find it easy to entertain myself. (F)
10. Many things I have to do are repetitive and monotonous. (T)
11. It takes more stimulation to get me going than most people. (T)
12. I get a kick out of most things I do. (F)
13. I am seldom excited about my work. (T)
14. In any situation I can usually find something to do or see to keep me interested. (F)
15. Much of the time I just sit around doing nothing. (T)
16. I am good at waiting patiently. (F)
17. I often find myself with nothing to do – time on my hands. (T)
18. In situations where I have to wait, such as a line or queue, I get very restless. (T)
19. I often wake up with a new idea. (F)
20. It would be very hard for me to find a job that is exciting enough. (T)
21. I would like more challenging things to do in life. (T)
22. I feel that I am working below my abilities most of the time. (T)
23. Many people would say that I am a creative or imaginative person. (F)
24. I have so many interests, I don't have time to do everything. (F)
25. Among my friends, I am the one who keeps doing something the longest. (F)
26. Unless I am doing something exciting, even dangerous, I feel half-dead and dull (T).
27. It takes a lot of change and variety to keep me really happy. (T)
28. It seems that the same things are on television or the movies all the time; it's getting old. (T)
29. When I was young, I was often in monotonous and tiresome situations. (T)