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Sharday C. Mosurinjohn: [The Spiritual Significance of Overload Boredom](#). McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022, pp. 162. ISBN: 9780228011538

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As the philosopher and religious scholar Sharday C. Mosurinjohn notes in *The Spiritual Significance of Overload Boredom* (published 2022) nowadays boredom is often attributed to “having nothing to do” (p. 35), and a popular method of coping with it is to seek out more novelties and distractions. However, the concept of ‘overload boredom’ which Mosurinjohn presents in this book, is borne of the opposite: having too much to do. Mosurinjohn uses this term, which stems largely from the work of Orrin E. Klapp (1986), to refer to what she believes is a new and distinct form of boredom. Unlike the other forms of boredom which preceded it, Mosurinjohn’s ‘overload boredom’ is explicitly borne from the onslaught of information, choice, and technology which characterizes the twenty-first century. In particular, it is a product of the gap between unlimited desire and limited agency, an issue which is neatly summed up in the phrase “tyranny of choice”, borrowed from Renata Salecl (2006). This arises when we are faced with an abundance of content—what Mosurinjohn deems ‘information overload’—and must choose what to consume and what to disregard. This is like, for example, the process of endlessly scrolling through a streaming service when trying to find something to watch. On any such platform, you can easily find hundreds of titles from which to choose, any of which could be interesting. What often happens, though, is that you very quickly grow annoyed with the process of searching, and in the end all of the available titles seem equally boring. Because you have a vast amount of options, any choice you make may feel arbitrary. Mosurinjohn’s concept of ‘overload boredom’ is, essentially, a version of this experience with wider societal implications, which she has applied to situations beyond the problem of streaming services:

This boredom is a mode of existence that wants for meaning, but remains aspirational — an experience of *desiring* meaning, but struggling to perceive meaningful choices within the omnipresent and ephemeral cloud of information that is the atmosphere of data-driven, info-capitalist, late modern culture (p. 3).

As the information overload which Mosurinjohn identifies as a prevalent issue in modern society itself arises largely from our increasing reliance on technology, so too does ‘overload boredom’ connect to technology. This connection lies not only in the content which technology produces, but also in the ways we use technology. Mosurinjohn argues that another factor which contributes to our crisis of meaning is the lack of differentiation between leisure and labour through technology, as well as the fact that the technology we often use to alleviate boredom in fact contributes to its conditions.

‘Overload boredom’ is the result of this information overload and our increasing reliance on technology. However, Mosurinjohn argues that we should not think of this boredom as an affect, as boredom typically is conceived, but rather as a *dis*-affect. By this, she means that the conditions which contribute to ‘overload boredom’ also create an atmosphere of emotional withdrawal. This withdrawal, in turn, causes the “flattening” (p. 34) or numbing of other feelings. ‘Overload boredom’, in other words, produces a kind of apathy. This discussion makes up Chapter 2. But it is in Chapter 6, the conclusion of the book, that Mosurinjohn assembles these observations about information overload, disaffective technology, and digital entropy to suggest ways of coping with ‘overload boredom’. She presents two main ideas. The first idea is that agency—by this, she means taking action rather than just thinking—is the only way to move past boredom. The second idea is that we must attempt to ‘curate’ the information we encounter, as in, we must engage with select information which is meaningful to us. Thus, Mosurinjohn ends

her discussion of ‘overload boredom’ by suggesting methods by which we can engage with boredom in order to get through it.

What of the other chapters of *Overload Boredom*? Chapter 1 looks broadly at some of the most influential theories of—or relating to—‘existential’ boredom from the twentieth century: those of Heidegger, Lefebvre, and Walter Benjamin. Then, Mosurinjohn turns to consider their relation to the experiences of diverse groups—namely in relation to race, class, and gender—and situates her own theory within intersectionality. Chapters 3–5 are comprised of analyses of three art-objects in relation to different aspects of ‘overload boredom’. Mosurinjohn begins by looking at Sophie Le Fraga’s *w8ing* (published 2014) in Chapter 3. In her analysis, Mosurinjohn examines how *w8ing* illustrates the “disaffective” (p. 49) nature of texting as a medium, as it can both alleviate and contribute to the conditions of boredom. Chapter 4 looks at Thomas Claburn and AOL user 23187425’s poem *i feel better after i type to you* (published 2006), which was created from AOL user 23187425’s leaked data. Through the lens of information theory, Mosurinjohn examines how users willingly exchange online privacy for the sake of being witnessed, in an attempt to create meaning out of information overload. In Chapter 5, Mosurinjohn considers how David Foster Wallace’s novel *The Pale King* (published 2011) uses the intentional creation of boredom to encourage engagement with, rather than withdrawal from, boredom.

Overall, Mosurinjohn presents a persuasive and thoughtful argument about the nature and pervasiveness of ‘overload boredom’. Her use of art-objects to illustrate its various aspects is particularly valuable, as she provides concrete examples of a concept which otherwise seems very abstract. However, I do wish Mosurinjohn had engaged with other texts which advocate for forms of boredom very similar to her notion of ‘overload boredom’. I’m thinking primarily here of David Broad’s 2018 article “Hearing Everything at Once and Listening to Nothing: The Acedia of Absence”, which essentially argues, like Mosurinjohn, that twenty-first century boredom is inextricably connected to information overload, as Klapp (1986) argues for the twentieth century. As well, I would have liked to see reference to R. J. Snell’s 2015 book, *Acedia and Its Discontents*, which focuses on boredom as it relates to unlimited desire. Other scholars take a different approach, generally more psychological, but follow Mosurinjohn’s argument that we must engage with boredom rather than withdraw from it, such as Danckert and Eastwood (2020) and Gary (2022). The inclusion of these works would have elevated Mosurinjohn’s argument by demonstrating how it is situated within similar, recent theories, rather than just presenting it as a new alternative to ‘outdated’ twentieth-century theories. If one has only read this book, it would be easy to believe Mosurinjohn stands alone in this understanding of boredom. However, that is not the case, and to present it as such misses the similarly-oriented contributions made by other scholars in the field of boredom studies.

My second concern comes at the end of the book. Though I found Mosurinjohn’s argument interesting and well-conceived, I found the suggestions she presents in her conclusion for coping with ‘overload boredom’ disappointingly vague. From this book, a reader gains no knowledge of how to apply Mosurinjohn’s theories to their own life. What does agency actually entail? How should one go about ‘curating’ information, when information overload is so pervasive and inescapable? Mosurinjohn suggests these are the steps we must take to overcome

boredom, but her argument, and the lack of concrete methods for executing these proposed solutions, left this reader a little confused as to what these steps actually entail. As a result, I wonder what place this work has in the lives of non-academic readers. How will Mosurinjohn's theories impact these readers, for which her book is also meant? Though Mosurinjohn aims to help alleviate the conditions of 'overload boredom' with this book, the lack of wider applicability means that, in the end, the information provided here will only contribute to that overload for the majority of her readers. Despite these concerns, let me conclude by stressing just how stimulating and enjoyable a book Mosurinjohn has produced with her *Overload Boredom*.

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