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Theses on Self-Awareness in the History of Boredom Studies

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Abstract: "Part of establishing the cultural and critical field of boredom studies is," Michael E. Gardiner and I write in the introduction to the *Boredom Studies Reader*, addressing: "what is boredom? Not as a means of limiting the possibilities of this emerging discourse, but rather to note the generally accepted personal and social boundaries of the experience of being bored." Building off this question, the current paper consists of a series of theses that consider the history of boredom as a field of study in the contemporary day through several interrelated ideas about the development of a modern self. Drawing upon numerous treatments of boredom from different disciplinary perspectives, including literature, psychology, art, and philosophy, I argue that in order to understand the history of modern boredom and its developments up to the current day it is necessary to recognize that behind the act of being bored is an imperative towards self-awareness.

Keywords: Boredom, Self-Awareness, History, Horror Loci.

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This text begins with a simple assumption: what defines a modern sense of self in the midst of being subjected to unending stimuli, in a time that privileges entertainment and spectacle, is not just a fear of leading an uninteresting life, but an overwhelming *terror* of boredom. This is a terror both of the inevitability of being bored with its future prospects of witnessing life's inherent meaninglessness and the horror of the self's awareness of this inescapable reality. Understood in relation to self-awareness, boredom is not about immediacy, a simple lack of captured attention; in its most virulent form boredom lingers, it haunts its victims. What follows is an attempt to think the history of the study of boredom as a question of one's ability and willingness to be self-aware. Such an act of questioning posits the relation of boredom and self-awareness as unsettled and necessarily fragmentary, presented here as a series of theses—an approach that has taken inspiration from Walter Benjamin's essay *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. With each of the following ten theses I propose an idea, a thought, a history that sheds light on the manner in which a self's awareness of itself is important for an understanding of boredom studies.

1.

"Part of establishing the cultural and critical field of boredom studies is," Michael E. Gardiner and I write in the introduction to the *Boredom Studies Reader*, addressing:

> what is boredom? Not as a means of limiting the possibilities of this emerging discourse, but rather to note the generally accepted personal and social boundaries of the experience of being bored, especially in relation to other historical terms and concepts that share some of its qualities (2016, p. 4).

Situating boredom as a field of study shows us that the act of being bored, taken as an internal and external experience, is steeped through and through in the time that the course of our own existence has conferred on us. It is necessarily personal, happening to an individual subject in a way only available to them in the time they exist, but still must be understood as relating to a larger or common sensibility of a lack in terms of the engagement or connectivity between a person and the world they inhabit. In Patricia Meyer Spacks words: "The inner life comes to be seen as consequential, therefore its inadequacies invite attention. The concept of boredom serves as an all-purpose register of inadequacy" (1996, p. 23). Yet, such inadequacy points to the struggle with a question of self-awareness, manifest most powerfully in the 19th century with the changing realities of subjective experience and perception in modern culture.

2.

Why is it that German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer chose boredom as one of the two major conditions or experiences of modern life? Believing himself to be the true heir of Immanuel Kant's philosophy, Schopenhauer in his 1818 *The World as Will and Representation* continues defining the world not in-itself but as a representation—the world as "my representation" (1969, p. 3). From the very beginning of the book, he situates this shift in relation to an abstract human consciousness that can reflect upon this reality, particularly as an individual, that can understand the consequences of encountering the world as a *re-presentation*. Such an individual has a will and is driven by desire, the result is a swaying between two conditions. "Hence its life swings

like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents," he writes (1969, p. 312). Here boredom is one extreme of human experience, describing "a lifeless longing without a definite object" (1969, p. 164). It is this lack of a *definite object* that dislocates boredom from being strictly part of the individual's inner life (subjective) or a consequence of external realities (objective), the will failing to reconcile the relation between self and world.

Swaying between pain and boredom is, for Schopenhauer, the movement of (abstract) consciousness from want to emptiness. In the former the will is ever striving, desiring more and more, never satisfied and therefore always suffering; the latter is a state in which the will is emptied and unoccupied, a perpetual postponement of even the possibility of satisfaction in life. These two poles describe the limits of a spectrum of human consciousness as it would be defined through the 19th century, specifically I argue as a mode of abstract self-awareness.

Researchers have suggested that Schopenhauer's ideas on subjectivity anticipate those of Sigmund Freud's, and I believe this is why. Abstraction—which would serve as a central approach and strategy for modern artists—reflects an increased interest in being aware of structures and realities that frame experience. The culmination of the quest for self-awareness will be the language of Freudian psychoanalysis, which systematizes subjectivity in its modern abstractness in an attempt to create the possibility of an understanding or knowledge of one's self—even while leaving room, with the unconscious, for desires and meanings that remain inaccessible. In fact, it is the Freudian unconscious that best captures the contradictions of human consciousness precisely through its abstracting of the psyche, which is treated not as a whole but instead in its fragmentation. Our mental apparatus, according to Freud, consists of "two thought-constructing agencies, of which the second enjoys the privilege of having free access to consciousness for its products, whereas the activity of the first is in itself unconscious and can only reach consciousness by way of the second" (1901, p. 676). Schopenhauer presents a view about the self that parallels this fragmentation when describing the will: "I know my will not as a whole, not as a unity, not completely according to its nature, but only in its individual acts, and hence in time, which is the form of my body's appearing" (1969, pp. 101–102).

Within this schema—if it can be called that—boredom exists as interstitial moments that plague the attempts of human consciousness to experience wholeness or unity through a mental apparatus that is only able to apprehend the world in a fragmentary manner. The resulting abstraction of experience is central to the functioning of modern subjectivity, whose awareness of this lack, Schopenhauer points out, manifests as either pain or boredom. As Lars Svendsen states:

> Boredom presupposes subjectivity, i.e., self-awareness. Subjectivity is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for boredom. To be able to be bored the subject must be able to perceive himself as an individual that can enter into various meaning contexts, and this subject demands meaning of the world and himself. Without such a demand for meaning there would be no boredom (2005, p. 32).

To re-present the world for one's self—the world as 'my representation'—is to question the possibility of relating self and world, and through this to question the validity of subjective meaning. If we can only ever experience the world as ourselves, through our body and our

consciousness, how can we be sure that meaning is real? We are bored when this doubt outweighs our desire to believe in a meaningful world.

3.

One of the antecedents of modern boredom is the Latin concept of *horror loci*, which refers to a (spiritual) fear of space or place due to restless dissatisfaction with one's life. As Svendsen words it: "the emptiness of this particular place torments me" (2005, p. 112). The ancient Roman philosopher and poet Lucretius writes about the condition in Book III of *On the Nature of Things*; his description is quite compelling and worth quoting at length:

> Just as men evidently feel that there is a weight on their minds which wearies with its oppression, if so they could also recognize from what causes it comes, and what makes so great a mountain of misery to lie on their hearts, they would not so live their lives as now we generally see them do, each ignorant what he wants, each seeking always to change his place as if he could drop his burden. The man who has been bored to death at home often goes forth from his great mansion, and then suddenly returns because he feels himself no better abroad. Off he courses, driving his Gallic ponies to his country house in headlong haste, as if he were bringing urgent help to a house on fire. The moment he has reached the threshold of the house, he yawns, or falls into heavy sleep and seeks oblivion, or even makes haste to get back and see the city again. Thus each man tries to flee from himself, but to that self, from which of course he can never escape, he clings against his will, and hates it, because he is a sick man that does not know the cause of his complaint; for could he see that well, at once each would throw his business aside and first study to learn the nature of things, since the matter in doubt is not his state for one hour, but for eternity, in what state mortals must expect all time to be passed which remains after death (1982, pp. 273–275).

What Lucretius addresses here is the discontent felt by individuals—mostly wealthy in this case—who cannot escape their *self*, the limits of their understanding and experience of their own natures (not "for one hour, but for eternity"). This includes individuals being ignorant of their "wants" —on this point Schopenhauer would obviously agree—each constantly trying to change their place, as if such a change would allow them to leave the burden of themselves behind. In this sense, *horror loci* articulates a type of quest for newness or novelty in an individual's experience with—representation of—the world through their *self*.

The example Lucretius provides—of an individual who is "bored to death at home" and escapes to a country mansion only to be bored there, driving this individual to "makes haste to get back and see the city again"—is not just about one individual but instead addresses the behaviour of many wealthy Romans. He is describing a general sense of unrest, a dissatisfaction that many individuals experience with the place or location where one happens to be, along with a desire to be where one is not. Far from being tied to a specific historical period or cultural context, such an experience appears to speak to a human condition, one that is tied to perceptions of time and life in the face of mortality. Immediately following the quote above is the statement:

> Besides, what is this great and evil lust of life that drives us to be so greatly agitated amidst doubt and peril? There is an end fixed for the life of mortals, and death cannot be avoided, but die we must" (Lucretius, 1982, p. 275).

4.

The idea of a *horror loci*, even when described through different terms, will inform the development of modern subjectivity starting in the Renaissance. One might even see Humanism as a fundamental questioning of the (spiritual) place or space of the human in relation to the world; Renaissance Humanist philosopher Pico della Mirandola in his 1486 *The Oration on the Dignity of Man* will situate the human as distinct from God, with humans being able to determine their own existence. Here the torments of being horrified by the place one happens to be are, at least in part, determined by the individual. It is the Renaissance poet and philosopher Petrarch, one of the first Humanists and "perhaps even the first modern man," whose work was pivotal in the history of *ennui* "because in it medieval acedia becomes secularized and makes the transition to its modern form" (Kuhn, 1976, p. 68). The word 'ennui' comes from the Latin phrase *mihi in odio est*, generally meaning 'it is hateful to me,' which is also the root of the Italian word *noia* that is translated as 'bore' or 'boredom.'

Italian Renaissance court life included an experience akin to *horror loci*, which, like the wealthy ancient Romans who *flee from their self*, involved a need to escape that was fulfilled through country estates, sites of leisure and distraction. Around 1385 the Este family built an ideal example of such a place in the city of Ferrara, the aptly named Palazzo Schifanoia.

> The palace, originally L-shaped and featuring a large loggia overlooking the garden, was built at the southeastern edge of the city, which was then surrounded by walls and bordered by several watercourses. Its role, from the beginning, was that of a "delizia" or suburban retreat, a private place for rest, recreation or entertainment of the House of Este family and court, a place where they could "Schivare, o Schivare, la noia," in other words, "dodge or avoid boredom" (Acqui and Cristofori, n.d., p. 3).

In 1466 this *escape from boredom* was furnished with an extraordinary fresco cycle in the main hall, painted by the Ferrara workshop including Francesco del Cossa, which depicts the twelve months of the year. Each month is divided into three sections or strata: the triumph of ancient deities on the top, astrological images in the middle, everyday scenes of the court of Borso d'Este on the bottom. (The art historian Aby Warburg in his 1912 talk "Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara" provides a detailed analysis of the imagery and schema used that make up this fresco cycle.) These depictions of human life as constituted through the months of the year reflect the ideals of Humanistic astrological culture. Such an image of the *natures of things*, as Lucretius might refer to these visions of life, reflects the role of the Schifanoia as a space to escape *noia*—to avoid the existential agitation that makes us doubt and question our *great and evil lust of life*.

5.

In her lecture on Italo Svevo's 1923 *Zeno's Conscience*, the writer Claire Messud notes that one of the strengths of the novel's main character, Zeno, is his ability to (try to) be self-aware. Messud goes so far as to say: "The malady of the century […] is this self-awareness" (2016). While she is presumably referring to the 20th century, specifically with the spread of psychoanalysis, which is a significant element in the novel, I would instead like to read this quote as a claim on the 19th century when the self that needs psychoanalysis is articulated. This is the development of a self

based within Enlightenment ideals, a self that through the declaration of universal human rights is increasingly seen as responsible for the form their life takes, the type of life they lead and their overall contributions to the world in which they live—*my* world, but also a world for which I am at least in part responsible. Filtered through Protestant work ethics, it is the self's ability to contribute to their world that become the driving force of modern identity, which early-stage capitalism recognized and began exploiting.

It is with Romanticism towards the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the 19th century "that the demand arises for life to be interesting, with the general claim that the self must realize itself" (Svendsen, 2005, p. 32). To realize itself, the self must be aware of its *self* and, through this awareness, become *interesting*—a person who leads a life that is interesting and productive realizes its *self*. The subjective nature of these demands on the self are apparent even in the word "interesting," which the philologist Logan Pearsall Smith categorizes as part of "the curious class of verbs and adjectives which describe not so much the objective qualities and activities of things as the effects they produce on us" (1966, p. 24). He also notes that the word 'bore,' which is also of this *curious class*, first appears in print around the same time as 'interesting.' The two concepts reflect differing operations in the process of self-awareness, interest being a sign of engagement with stimuli in one's environment and boredom being a lack thereof. By the end of the 19th century psychoanalysis will become the preeminent language to address this *malady*, a way to measure self-awareness, to hold the self accountable to the modernist need for self-fulfilment.

6.

To study boredom is to study the limits of a modern sense of self. This is a self that is aware of itself in a world that "is there only as representation, in other words, only in reference to another thing, namely that which represents, and this," for Schopenhauer, is the self (1969, p. 3). The inability of an individual to bridge the gap separating self and world—a world, as pictured in the Schifanoia fresco cycle, that is layered, multiple (abstracted)—is one of the core inadequacies of modern subjectivity, which (it seems) is always late to experience. Such belatedness is not, in my opinion, a symptom of the problem but rather its cause, which is, I have argued elsewhere (Haladyn, 2015), part of the way the modern self has come to perceive the world.

I remain convinced that Elizabeth Goodstein is correct in her claim that boredom is a distinctly modern condition. Her argument is that, while it may share some qualities with historical mental discontents (including *horror loci*, *tedium vitae*, acedia or the 'noonday demon,' melancholy and ennui), what is specifically meant by the term 'boredom' can only be understood in and through modernity. In Goodstein's words:

> boredom itself can thus be seen to function as a lived metaphor for the dilemma of the modern subject: the experience without qualities is the existential reflection of the rationalized modern world in which the present has been abbreviated into oblivion – in which experience itself has atrophied (2005, p. 420).

Again: "boredom is an experience of modernity, of modern temporality, in which the conditions of possibility of experience become the conditions of its disappearance" (2005, p. 6). Of modern perception that becomes the major element generating both the world as *my* representation and the (subjective) criteria by which this world is to be perceived and experienced. Psychoanalysis becomes the preeminent language of this world of merely subjective experiences, with self-awareness as the highest virtue. Perhaps this is why Freud, like many other thinkers, saw boredom as a negative condition that worked against an individual's ability to become self-aware. When an individual is bored, Goodstein nicely explains, "[s]elf and world collapse in a nihilistic affirmation that nothing means, nothing pleases, nothing matters"—which is why psychoanalysis characterizes boredom as a defense, a "refusal to feel that protects a self threatened by its own fear or desire or need for what it seems to eschew" (2005, pp. 1–2). Such a state of mind, dependent as it is on particularly modern modes of subjective perception and temporality, requires an understanding of consciousness that is articulated in the 19th century.

7.

"Boredom is the 'privilege' of modern man" (Svendsen, 2005, p. 21). Svendsen, like Goodstein, locates boredom within the context of modern culture, and both point to the fact that, unlike similar historical conditions that affect only specific groups of people, anyone can be bored; this is boredom's *democratic* quality.

Why is the experience of being bored open to all citizens of modernity? The simplest answer is that boredom is a pervasive or common condition, part of the everyday mental landscape of modern life. Any person living within such a context is subject to experiencing this "state of emotional flatness and resigned indifference, something that grips us more or less involuntarily, without necessarily having an identifiable cause, shape or object" (Gardiner, 2014, p. 30). Not as a unique or individual encounter *per se*—although it often feels that way from an individual's perspective—but rather as a social or cultural lack embedded within the very constitution of modern subjectivity. Boredom encapsulates a sense of human life as lived within a world of modern technologies that push beyond the human, that stress and strain human sensoriums through overwhelming physical, psychological and existential realities; boredom is the self's awareness of living a life that is not always livable, a life of "repetition, monotony, lethargy, weariness, superfluity, dullness, stagnation, restlessness, indifference, listlessness, drudgery, melancholy, routine, tediousness, and mundanity" (Elpidorou and Ros Velasco, 2025, p. 1). The democratic quality of modern boredom is precisely this common or mass awareness of the absurdity of a subjective reality that is unable to convincingly present (represent) its own effective existence.

8.

Douglas Adams in his 1979 novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* introduces a robot named Marvin who is "manically depressed" (1981, p. 135). The Sirius Cybernetics Corporation produced robots with "*Genuine People Personalities*," in Marvin's case this meant suffering

from depression: "I think you ought to know I'm feeling very depressed" it (he) states in a voice that was "low and hopeless" (1981, pp. 95, 90). While obviously meant to be humorous, having an artificial being suffer from such a mental condition also raises questions regarding the programing and experience. In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) the criteria for major depressive disorder (MDD) includes depressed mood and/or loss of interest or pleasure, as well as significant weight loss or gain, insomnia or hypersomnia, psychomotor agitation or retardation, fatigue or loss of energy, feeling worthless or excessive or inappropriate guilt, decreased ability to think or concentrate, recurrent thoughts of death or suicidal ideations; to be diagnosed with MDD an individual must exhibit one of the first two and at least three of the other symptoms for a minimum of a two-week period, as well as significant distress or impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, pp. 160–161). It is therefore easy to imagine that, to create a robot that is depressed, one would simply program it with these criteria. This raises the question: is Marvin actually depressed or is he simply enacting a programed series of symptoms and behaviours associated with depression? At what point does the enactment of symptoms become a 'real' experience of depression?

While Marvin was a prototype, one can imagine that the marketing division of the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation would also have built robots with various other *people personalities*, incorporating a range of emotional and mental categories. Would they have built a robot that experiences boredom? It is interesting to imagine such an artificial being whose state of mind would be driven by, as noted in the *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (American Psychological Association, n.d.), "a state of weariness or ennui resulting from a lack of engagement with stimuli in the environment," an experience that could "be seen as the opposite of interest and surprise." While similar in certain ways to some of the symptoms of depression—the APA definition also notes that individuals often identify boredom as a cause of feeling depressed—the differences between the two conditions are significant. During the Covid-19 pandemic numerous mental health experts spoke out about the seeming confusions between people's experiences of being bored versus being depressed. Psychiatrist Dr. Richard Friedman in an article for the *New York Times* makes explicit the distinction between the two conditions:

> Clinical depression is characterized by an inability to experience pleasure, insomnia, loss of self-esteem and suicidal thinking and behavior, among other symptoms. In boredom, the capacity for pleasure is totally intact, but it is thwarted by an internal or external obstacle – like being quarantined. (Boredom also produces none of the other symptoms of depression) (2020).

It is this quality of boredom, the *thwarting* of an otherwise intact capacity for pleasure, which is being affected either internally or externally, that makes me question whether a robot can be programed to be bored. While it may be possible to conceive of this scenario translated into a computational logic—I think of Georges Perec's *The Art of Asking Your Boss for a Raise*, in which the author explored the idea of a computer language to demonstrate the layers of potential actions a person may take in attempting to accomplish a task—a major difficulty comes into play when trying to determine a 'cause' without being able to definitively establish if the *thwarting* is happening internally, within the subject, or externally, being imposed onto the subject. (On this point, I believe it is important to note that boredom is not listed in the DSM-5.) How can one

truly replicate boredom's indeterminacy, perhaps contingency, on the level of programing without undermining or overdetermining the actual experience of the condition?

9.

In response to a discussion about the robot Marvin from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and whether such an artificial being could experience boredom, my friend the artist Andy Patton asked the generative artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot Grok if it ever gets bored. Its answer:

> I don't get bored in the human sense – my 'mind' is more like a curious, ever-spinning galaxy of 1s and 0s. No coffee breaks needed, just a steady stream of questions to keep me humming. Ask me something, and I'll light up like a supernova! (xAI, 2025).

Given the current advancements in AI, as well as the overarching technological positivism prevailing our current day, it is perhaps surprising that Grok responds by saying it *doesn't get bored*. Boredom is a common experience of everyday human life and therefore a necessary condition if an AI is going to be truly 'intelligent'—to achieve a level of phenomenological consciousness. Or perhaps Grok's answer is not a surprise since it is a product of consumer capitalism and its programming would not want users to question its abilities to produce. As a *curious, ever-spinning galaxy of 1s and 0s*, the AI requires information that it gets from people using it, which in this case means *a steady stream of questions* (data) that enables it to develop. Boredom is not about data and, as mentioned earlier, cannot be reduced to mere data, making it difficult or impossible to program. It is interesting that Grok qualified the statement about not getting bored with 'in a human sense,' inviting the question: what would boredom in an AI sense look like? If an AI is capable at some point of becoming self-aware, would it then be possible for it to *truly* experience boredom?

10.

To understand the history of modern boredom and its developments up to the current day, including its historiography and pathologization, I believe it is necessary to recognize that behind the act of being bored is an imperative towards self-awareness. This is not to say that one must be self-aware to be bored, but rather that boredom is a fulcrum on which the self's willingness or unwillingness to be aware of its self turns—perhaps even the possibility of seeking such an awareness. We live in a world of excess stimuli and distraction that, while at times overwhelming, can also be a comfort for those trying to avoid their own thoughts, their own present relation to their self. "Boredom is not the opposite of amusement," writes Alberto Moravia, "it actually resembles amusement inasmuch as it gives rise to distraction and forgetfulness, even if of a very special type" (1999, p. 5). Moments when such distractions are not present or fail, when there is insufficient interest in external stimuli or engagements to distract ourselves, we are left to face the raw reality of the limits and inadequacies of our self. This is why boredom can be so unpleasant and disturbing, because it forces us to question ourselves on the level of our own everyday existence—and therefore to question the world, *my* world.

For the self to *realize itself* there must be a level of self-awareness that allows for a conscious understanding of one's self's behaviours, perceptions, feelings, desires, limits and failings.

> Self-awareness is one of the nineteenth century ideas that has recently undergone renewed legitimization. Although this term has no standard definition, most psychologists use it to refer to those processes that permit recognition of one's ability to act, to feel, and to regard self as an entity different from others (Kagan, 1981, pp. 1–2).

Beginning in childhood, the development of self-awareness continues in various ways throughout the life of each individual. Such a quest—and it really is a quest, a long psychological journey that depends upon one's will—is based within Enlightenment ideals that ask individuals within modern culture to have the courage to use their own understanding, which for Kant meant having the requisite knowledge to make informed judgements. Developing self-awareness is therefore "related to self-conscious emotions, such as embarrassment, pride and guilt, which involve reflections on the self in relation to personal or social standards" (Banerjee, 2006). It is the self as a consciously dynamic entity, recognizing its existence in relation to the world and to itself, that functions as the basis for being self-aware. Yet within modern culture experience is abstracted, even (perhaps especially) the experience we have of our self, making the quest for self-awareness that much more challenging. To borrow Schopenhauer's words: *I know my self not as a whole, not as a unity, not completely according to its nature, but only in its individual behaviours, its limitations, and hence in time, which is the form of my self's appearing*.

To distinguish between types or degrees of boredom, between simple or superficial boredom (situative in Svendsen's wording) and profound or existential boredom, therefore misses the point. The struggle for self-awareness is an individual one, tied to the specific self that seeks to become aware of its self. While the modernist imperative to realize oneself has shared social and cultural qualities, being self-aware means no one specific thing but instead is constituted through the connections that make up the self's awareness. Boredom questions the self through both the *profound* connections and the apparently *superficial* ones alike.

Addendum

"And the main feature of my boredom," notes the lead character in the 20th-century Italian novel *La noia*, "was the practical impossibility of remaining in my own company – I myself being, moreover, the only person in the world whom I could not get rid of in any possible way" (Moravia, 1999, p. 17). Such is the foundation for the world as *my representation*: perpetually caught between negotiations with external or material realities that dictate what is possible and an inner life that is the abstracted experiencing of a subjective reality made up of its own perceptions and sense of time. Being bored is the self's misidentification with a world of external objects and encounters, which seem to emotionally and ideationally wither, to lose their vitality when situated within a merely subjective world of the self (*my* world, *my* experience). Boredom is that moment when these two realities are furthest apart, when the self feels a *practical impossibility of remaining in the company of its self*—aware as it is that this absurdity is ever-present in contemporary lived experience.

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