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Boredom: A Lively History [Review]

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PETER TOOHEY (2011) *BOREDOM: A LIVELY HISTORY*. NEW HAVEN & LONDON: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS. ISBN: 9780300172164.

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The study of boredom is an increasingly rich and vital area of contemporary research, one in which our societal propensity for being *bored* is considered not simply a minor personal problem but rather an affective mode of being that represents a fundamental questioning of culture. Why is it that so many individuals consistently find their lives boring? From the perspective of critical and cultural theory boredom represents an important manifestation of the *human condition* – to reference Hannah Arendt’s famous discussion of the state of modern subjectivity – considering this condition not simply as an aberration, which is passed over as trivial, but rather as an integral component in the very fabric of human life and knowledge.

Much of the existing literature on boredom calls attention to the relationship between our current consumer-based culture, which promotes disposable objects and constantly changing interests, and the apparent decrease in peoples’ attention spans, which are satiated only when constantly treated to new forms of stimuli. In many ways we expect to be constantly entertained, with every aspect of daily life being judged mostly in terms of how much it *interests* us, to the point where experiences that do not promise obvious and even immediate engagement are quickly labeled *boring*. Without overstating the matter, I think we can accept the place of boredom within a general psychology of everyday life, seeing this affective state as an indication of a cultural restlessness that is at once something very personal and yet also shared amongst innumerable people. Arthur Schopenhauer articulated this sentiment in the early 19th century when he described life as a pendulum swinging ‘to and fro between pain and boredom,’ between the suffering caused by our inability to accomplish or hold onto our desire and the boredom of lacking any desire (1969: 312). It is our desire or will that is the target of

consumerism, which aims to make us want what we do not have and reciprocally to not want what we already have. It is for this reason that many critical studies on boredom believe the condition to be directly related to and a result of modern culture, which in a very real way cultivates a perpetual drive to seek the new.

In *Boredom: A Lively History* Peter Toohey takes the opposite view, stating unambiguously that ‘people have always had the unfortunate capacity to be bored’ – a statement that he supplements by noting that humans ‘always have had the capacity for this emotion, but not all societies enable or require creatures to experience boredom’ (145-146). This position, which is also taken up in his previous book *Melancholy, Love, and Time: Boundaries of the Self in Ancient Literature*, is based within a more fluid understanding of boredom than is generally accepted. Where most scholars in this area see boredom as modern, ‘as an invention of the Enlightenment’ and, in Toohey’s words, as ‘something that the ancients did not have either the wits or the opportunity to experience,’ he attempts to demonstrate that ‘this is not the case (i.e., that such emotions are not cultural constructs)’ by tracing out occurrences of boredom, or something akin to it, within ancient literature (2004: 106). Throughout *Melancholy, Love, and Time* boredom is approached as an interconnected phenomenon of the self, which is explored most fully in his third chapter ‘Seasickness: Boredom, Nausea, and the Self’ where he posits a correlation between being seasick or nauseated and being bored. Generally speaking, Toohey appears to be driven to locate boredom within the ancient experience of the self, which is more fascinating than convincing. His argument depends wholly on his particular translation of ancient terms as synonyms for the English word ‘boredom’, which comes into use only in the 1800s – one of its first known appearances is in Dickens’ *Bleak House*. The question remains, is boredom just our way of describing a feeling that people have felt throughout history or is it particular to our understanding of the modern world? To my mind Toohey never answers this vital query, but rather assumes a connection between ‘modern’ boredom and previously described conditions in a manner that is neither explicitly demonstrated nor convincingly argued for; in short, he takes as a given that the conditions are the same.

This drive to connect boredom with experiences of discontentment throughout human history is continued in *Boredom: A Lively History*, where we again find Toohey proposing a broad definition of boredom. While initially stating that it is ‘an emotion which produces feelings of being constrained or confined by some

unavoidable and distastefully predictable circumstance and, as a result, a feeling of being distanced from one's surroundings and the normal flow of time,' he supplements this admittedly *cumbersome* definition with the more concise: 'Boredom is a social emotion of mild disgust produced by a temporarily unavoidable and predictable circumstance' (45). Even in its shortened version, Toohey defines boredom as a staggeringly broad condition that speaks of a vast array of potential experiences, clearly not limited to the modern world or a particular area of study. Instead, he frames the act of being bored as an emotional state that could be described as ahistorical, appearing in one way or another throughout various cultures and time periods.

His study reflects this broadness, with Toohey not limiting his approach to any one field of inquiry. Instead, he argues for a view of boredom that seemingly spans as many areas of potential interest and information as possible. On the page following the definitions quoted above, for example, he switches from a theoretical or critical investigation concerning the possibility of defining boredom to the idea that 'boredom-prone individuals may have a naturally lower level of dopamine' (46). Another key reference is to the occurrence of visual symbols of boredom as specifically found in works of art, with a considerable portion of the beginning of this book puts 'boredom firmly in its place – visually' by claiming a series of gestures or images as indications of boredom; these include elbows that rest on surfaces, 'hands that support heavy heads,' hands on hips, yawning, eyes staring off, necks that droop, and the appearance of *no bodies* within images (35-41). As someone whose primary field of research is the history and theory of art and visual culture, I find Toohey's analyses of artworks troubling due in no small part to the superficiality of his readings, which in most cases show no evidence of understanding the history of the particular artwork, artist or the tradition in which the work was created. Although I generally applaud the attempt to incorporate visual arts material into the study of boredom, which has been lacking in previous studies, in *Boredom: A Lively History* the art is little more than an illustration without proper analysis. Too much of the material that is brought up in the book remains undeveloped, resulting in a collection of arguments and positions that a previous reviewer accurately described as a 'scattershot survey' (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2011). It is obvious that Toohey intended to write an accessible account of boredom, a quality of the book that has received favorable responses from many of the reviews it has engendered, but in my opinion his generalizations undermine his goal to demonstrate boredom's existence before modern times.

Elizabeth Goodstein in *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* adamantly argues that boredom embodies ‘a specifically modern crisis of meaning,’ presenting a thorough history of the emergence and development of a condition that is at once almost impossible to define and yet never far from experience (2005: 5). As one of the key texts of contemporary boredom studies, Goodstein’s book is necessarily in the background of *Boredom: A Lively History*. Toohey only mentions the author sporadically but her influence can be felt throughout his book. I say this not to undermine the important studies done by among others Patricia Meyer Spacks and Lars Svendsen, or the more recent collection *Essays on Boredom and Modernity* edited by Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani, but rather to emphasize the considerable contribution that Goodstein has brought to the study of boredom by giving it a history. It is this historicization that Toohey actively combats in his approach, asking boldly in the title of his fifth chapter: *Does boredom have a history?* ‘To ask whether boredom has a history is to ask two things,’ Toohey tells us ‘[F]irst, has boredom always been felt in the same way by humans? And second, has boredom always been a part of human life?’ (145). Such questions are at the heart of this study, which again at all times seems to want to make boredom something more than simply a modern malaise. Toohey sees more in the act of being bored than is accorded the condition by writers like Goodstein and his *lively* understanding of it represents an attempt to communicate his perspective. Toohey’s referral to ‘instinctive’ responses produces his point of view as obvious: ‘yes, people have always had the unfortunate capacity to be bored. So, if boredom has always been felt the same way and if the nature of boredom has never changed then, no, it has no history’ (145).

Although he waters down this claim in the remainder of the paragraph, this ahistoricity permeates the book. Even Toohey’s insistence on a division between ‘simple boredom and existential boredom,’ which he (somewhat superciliously) posits as the reason for the exaggerated ‘historicity of boredom’ argued by writers like Goodstein, presupposes a lack of change within the self’s response to un-stimulating encounters (146). It should be noted that this splitting of boredom into two qualities is not uncommon, especially in earlier studies of the condition. On one hand, there is a profound boredom that typically has been reserved for thinkers and persons of importance, whose experience of being bored is perceived to have an ‘existential’ quality; on the other hand, the boredom of an ordinary person is passed off as ‘simple’ because it is not tied to any higher purpose. The basic elements of this divide are presented in Reinhard

Kuhn's well-known *The Demon of Noontide*, where he highlights the historical importance of a philosopher's boredom as a challenge while passing off the boredom of a housewife or worker as superficial. Goodstein does away with this separation, arguing for what she calls the democratization of boredom within modern culture in which worker, thinker, housewife/-husband, and politician all have the ability to share in its experience. Yet, whereas previous studies such as Kuhn's propose this dual sense of boredom in order to highlight the profound implications of the condition, which are necessarily lessened when considered alongside something as pedestrian as everyday monotony, Toohey uses this split to actively and 'unapologetically give simple boredom an equal billing' (6). It is by focusing on 'simple' boredom – a quality of the book that many reviewers found appealing – that he attempts to demonstrate the unchanging nature of this condition.

'When the existence of boredom before the Enlightenment is denied by historians, I suspect what is being denied is the existence of existential boredom before the Enlightenment. I can agree with that' (153). With Goodstein again in his sights, Toohey makes the concession that *half* of boredom is modern, specifically the part that is not of interest to his study. His attempt to explain why an historian would believe that boredom is a modern condition is noteworthy, both for its glaring conceitedness – he appears to assume the authors are ignorant of their own views – and that he overlooks (or possibly cannot see) that, at least for Goodstein, there is no clear distinction. Toohey therefore agrees to an historicized boredom, but he expects something in return: 'And I am quite sure that they'd be happy to allow any era the capacity to feel simple boredom, although I suspect they might want a new word for the emotion' (153). This is the timeless boredom that has always been felt, the 'simple' boredom that cannot be restricted to our lives but instead can be seen as a shared discontent of humankind. Stated simply, Toohey views boredom as 'a universal experience' that has 'been felt in most eras' (169).

For Toohey, restricting this experience to post-Enlightenment culture in this way would diminish the qualities of 'simple' boredom that he finds so *lively* and appealing. As he writes in the closing lines of the book: 'Boredom simply deserves respect for the, well, boring experience that it is' (190). I have no doubt Toohey believes this sentiment and that he sees in boredom something *respectful*, possibly an experience we can share with people from as far back as Antiquity. However much I understand such a desire, it is actually

the terminal or nihilistic qualities of boredom that I believe are most valuable to critical and cultural theory. I would like to end by posing a simple question: why is it so troubling to think of boredom as being a strictly modern experience?

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