

## Boredom as the Modern Condition

Dmitri Nikulin

**Abstract.** *This article discusses the centrality of boredom for the constitution of the modern subject as its proprium. It distinguishes between three forms of boredom: that of indeterminate duration – boredom as same without other; that of repetition – boredom as other without same; and that of self-abdication – boredom as the rupture of same and other. The discussion then turns to Siegfried Kracauer's reflections on boredom, in which he identifies and explores its inherent paradoxes. By contrasting everyday boredom with radical one, Kracauer argues that radical boredom opens an entirely new horizon of thought and action that might allow us to stand up to the social and political challenges of modern times.*

**Keywords.** Boredom, modernity, proprium, paradox, Kracauer.

**Dmitri Nikulin** is Agnes Heller Professor of Philosophy at The New School for Social Research in New York. His interests range from philosophy and history of science of antiquity and early modernity to philosophy of dialogue and literature, philosophy of history. He is the author of a number of books including *Matter, Imagination and Geometry* (Ashgate, 2002), *On Dialogue* (Lexington, 2006), *Dialectic and Dialogue* (Stanford University Press, 2010), *Comedy, Seriously* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), *The Concept of History* (Bloomsbury, 2017), *Neoplatonism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2019), *Facets of Modernity* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), *Critique of Bored Reason* (Columbia University Press, 2022), and *Non-being in Ancient Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

**EMAIL:** nikulind@newschool.edu

While almost all philosophical concepts originate in classical antiquity and live on through various, sometimes unexpected, historical transformations, boredom is unique in that there is not even a term for it in classical Greek. The discussion of boredom is conspicuously *absent* from ancient thought. My claim is that boredom and reflection on it arise properly only in modernity – in the wake of the emergence of the modern subject. Everyone gets bored once in a while, not only people but also animals, yet boredom becomes pervasive as the *proprium, idion*, of the subject only in modernity.<sup>1</sup>

Modernity is a complex set of interacting and interwoven social, cultural, political, and historical processes and phenomena that establish, define, and describe theoretical cognition, practical action, and productive activity. Among the concepts that determine it, perhaps the central and most significant is that of the *modern subject*, which is internalized by us and through which we perceive and construct our social, natural, political, and psychological reality. The modern subject establishes itself as universal, rational, and necessary, and understands itself as self-defined by (excessive) reflexivity and self-awareness. Being a historical (self-)construction, it considers itself as its own transhistorical achievement in history, which is ultimately produced by itself. Most importantly, the modern subject realizes itself as autonomous, as self-legislating and self-sufficient, uniquely asserting a normatively binding moral law.

In this way, the modern subject releases itself from the bond of and with others. It is always a singular collective without and outside of plurality. Exclusive of others, the modern subject is the only actor in and of the theoretical, practical, and productive drama of

<sup>1</sup> On this topic see (Nikulin 2022, 2-3).

modernity, being its protagonist, playwright, director, and spectator at the same time. In the absence of others, the modern subject is utterly lonely, solitary, monological and ultimately tragic in its being and thought. Hence, it is inevitably bored.

The philosophical study of boredom, therefore, is also a critique of the concept of the modern subject as the realization of universal reason in its transformations and vicissitudes. Being very familiar, boredom is utterly unfamiliar. Boredom is an evasive concept and is thus difficult to grasp, inquire into, and indeed to understand the proper question to be asked about it, which is why it comes under a different name even in closely related languages (*verveling*, *Langeweile*, *ennui*, *noia*, *aburrimiento*).

One might make a distinction between *passion* as a natural physiological phenomenon experienced by all humans at all times – and *emotion* as a culturally processed and trained passion (e.g., in Heller 2009). While the basic or universal passions might be relatively few, a number of emotions, such as Portuguese *saudade* or *wabi* in Japanese, are culturally specific and are difficult to translate and render precisely into a different cultural context. Yet, as I argue, boredom is not a mental state or an emotion but rather the inalienable *proprium* of the modern subject, which does not define the subject in its essence, since the modern subject does not have an essence beyond what it freely and autonomously assigns to itself; rather, it is that without which the subject cannot be thought and with which it is mutually substitutable. Paraphrasing Aristotle, one can say: if modern subject, bored; if bored, modern subject. In this sense, boredom constitutes the very *conditio moderna*.

In its historical rendering, boredom is the response to the improper or inauthentic life of the contemporary city-dwellers, who is thus caught in the net of boredom, which testifies to the utter inadequacy of their existence. Boredom is thus a very modern phenomenon whose roots lie deep in the constitution of modern life and cannot easily be cut off. Boredom needs to be carefully analyzed as a profound symptom of the crisis of our time and a sign of our being with – or without – others and in – or outside – the world.

For this reason, there is much interest in boredom, which is perceived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as «le mal du siècle» and which becomes a prominent theme in its literature, defining the characters and alter egos of Goncharov, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, and Baudelaire (see Barthes 1995, 57).<sup>2</sup> Establishing a keen interest in boredom thus coincides with the development of the novel, where boredom accompanies the ordinary, rather than exceptional, perceptions and emotions of bourgeois life, which yearns for greatness amidst the banality of the everydayness that is, as Lefebvre puts it, «forever unchangeable, unchangeable in its boredom, its greyness, its repetition of the same actions» (Lefebvre 1991, 228).<sup>3</sup> Despite the attempts of the modernist novel to get rid of the boring familiar in its experiments with estrangement, boredom does not loosen its grasp but persists in the flux of self-directed and self-recording over-reflexive thought. As such, boredom becomes the main hero in Sartre and Moravia and transpires virtually in the majority of literary and cinematographic works, even when they intentionally try to achieve distance from boredom through the spectacle and narrative of tragedy and horror.

The reflection on boredom in philosophy is already importantly present in Pascal and Kant, and becomes central to Simmel, Kracauer, Heidegger, and Benjamin, who all critically explore and attempt to overcome the construction of the modern subject, bored with itself in its regal solitude. In discussing their works, I intended to show that, despite their differences, they all share in common the understanding of boredom as symptomatic of our situation in the social, political, and natural world as it has been historically defined by the construction of the modern subject. If philosophy is indeed a heteroreflexion in that it

<sup>2</sup> The first use of “boredom” appears in Dickens’ *Bleak House* in 1852 (Dickens 2008). Curiously enough, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, and Baudelaire are all born in the same year – 1821.

<sup>3</sup> See also (Meyer 1995, 60ff); (Crangle 2010, 71-103).

reflects on something that is not its own, on a radically different other than thought, one could say that philosophy always thinks the improper – that which should not, and perhaps even cannot, be thought. This improper, then, is the *proprium* of the modern thought, which is boredom. As such, it can only be considered by unthinking the (usual) thought or even by not-thinking. Therefore, as both Kracauer and Heidegger agree, since we cannot overcome the deep rootedness of boredom in our own being, we should embrace it. This might then lead to a profound and non-boring experience that could become (re)defining of our being, perhaps even beyond description and thought.

Boredom has recently become an intensely discussed topic in *psychology*, where the researchers often take boredom as a long and slowly developing, inconspicuous yet powerful emotion, or sometimes as an affective state, which most people experience daily. Yet, once persistent, chronic, and acute, boredom strongly correlates with perceived negative states and aversive effects, such as apathy, anhedonia (inability to experience pleasure), depression, stress, anxiety, anger, aggression, loneliness, hostility, somatic disorders, substance abuse, truancy, risk-taking behavior, and inattention, which prevents one from participating in a satisfying and preferred activity and often leads to making wrong steps in everyday situations and work environments.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, many researchers stress the positive role of everyday boredom, which can stimulate creativity and make us explore, learn, discover, and invent new things, and to better navigate and change our social, cognitive, and emotional environment, especially when it is perceived as dull and aversive. As such, boredom can help us find a new purpose and set new goals for a fulfilled life, or at least to organize our life in such a way as to minimize boredom and monotony.

The problem of boredom has once again come to the forefront of *philosophical* debate, where it has been discussed in a number of illuminating works.<sup>5</sup> This renewed interest seems to suggest that we live in an age profoundly marked by boredom, despite the troubling social and political conflicts and the exciting scientific and technological advancements.

### 1. Three Forms of Boredom

In my own analysis, I argue that in modernity boredom appears under two guises: as *vexing* ennui and as *unending duration*. This brings me to distinguish and discuss *three forms of boredom*, which I do by using the concepts of *same* and *other*, which are not taken as opposites but rather as two categories that can be bound into a mediated dialogical unity without identity. In these three forms, boredom appears as *indeterminate duration* (boredom as same without other); as inevitable *repetition* and *privation* (boredom as other without same); and as inescapable *self-abdication* and *self-incapacitation* through *odium* and self-hatred (boredom as the rupture of same and other) of the modern subject that unsuccessfully attempts to overcome boredom by various philosophical, scientific, and artistic means.

The modern subject attempts to get rid of the inevitability of boredom by turning to the pervasive yet equally repetitively boring *entertainment*. In the absence of the real other that remains always a task to be achieved, and thus in a situation where dialogical communication is (almost) impossible, entertainment as diversion from, and substitution for well-being, which becomes a pointless and endless flight from boredom, which we can never escape. At best we can only embrace it, as both Kracauer and Heidegger claim, in order to

<sup>4</sup> Here, I can only mention the works of Stephen Vodanovich, Mikulas, Jerome Neu, Frederick Leong, Gregory Schneller, John Eastwood, Shelley Fahlman, McWelling Todman, and Timothy Wilson.

<sup>5</sup> See (Goodstein 2005); (Svendsen 2005); (Toohey 2011).

make sense of the nonsensical.<sup>6</sup> The modern subject takes entertainment very – perhaps too – seriously, which undermines itself as an engaging and playful activity. The modern subject is a playful subject. And yet, being lonely and *tragic* in its seclusion and the exclusion of the other, it always plays against itself, entertaining itself by a narcissistic (dis)play, boringly enacting the same game, even if trying to turn it into entertainingly innumerable different games offering seemingly uncountable possibilities of being other, which, however, is still the same but under a different guise.

*Scandal.* The most radical attempt at a breakaway from boredom, predictable yet failing, is *scandal*. As I argue, scandal is always public, dialogically communicative, yet at the same time it constitutes a rupture in such communication. Besides, scandal is intrinsically comic, conceptually oral, loud, swift, and spontaneous. The modern scandal is the unsuccessful yet constantly repeated attempt of the modern subject to flee away and get rid of itself. Scandal tests the existing explicit and implicit norms of thinking and behavior. Autonomous and moralistic, the modern subject constantly judges itself against itself. In the absence of the norms that would be established by the other rather than by the lonely autonomous self, the modern subject comes repeatedly to challenge, question, and punish itself through scandal. This attempt inevitably remains unsuccessful, since scandal is public and dialogical and as such is impossible in the absence of others. The modern scandal is thus a response provoked by the modern subject's painful realization that well-being as dialogical being with others is unattainable.

The expression of the modern scandal is *revolution*, as an attempt at a radical break with the boredom of the lonely subject. As such, modern revolution takes three forms: the revolution in science (in theoretical philosophy, in the understanding of nature), art (in aesthetics, in the understanding of beauty), and politics (in practical philosophy, in the understanding of human action and relations).

And yet, the modern all-pervasive boredom is only inescapable if we remain within the historical construction of the modern subject. But another, non-boring social and political world is possible, if we realize our well-being as being in dialogue, as being in comedy, and as being with others. Such an understanding of well-being presupposes an entirely different concept of the subject, which is decentered, is the one in which we all participate and which we enact in our lives. Such a subject allows for a distributed and shared common good, is not an inevitable being toward death, and is fundamentally plural in its being. Rather than being autonomous in its establishment of the moral law by a universalizable act of rational will, it is autarchic, or capable of establishing moral norms in a heteronomous exchange, through participation and deliberation by many independent yet dialogically bound and communicating participants.

One of the main insights behind this discussion is that *dialogue* is never boring. By “dialogue” I understand an always renewable, non-repetitive, and communicative exchange between a multiplicity of mutually independent interlocutors, who, however, need each other in order to live in and off the dialogue. In dialogical communication, which is practical but not productive, everyone is included freely as equal in a shared unfinalizable communication, which can always be meaningfully continued without a repetition of contents. For this reason, being as well-being is being in dialogue.

Against the self-perception and self-cultivation of the modern subject as *tragic* (inevitable being toward death, which makes well-being eventually impossible), the *comic* subject is always integrated with others and strives to achieve well-being on the chaotic public stage as the end of democratic political action with real and equal others.<sup>7</sup> In comedy, there

<sup>6</sup> On this topic see (Nikulin 2022, 14-52).

<sup>7</sup> On the dichotomy between tragic and comic see (Nikulin 2022, 152 ff.).

is no place for solitary being, action, or thinking, which are always shared with and distributed among others. Comic being is always being toward life, its renewal and assertion with others. The comic moral and political subject always comes in the plural and is already oriented toward others. Comedy allows for solving a problem or an initial complication by concerted joint acting, thinking, and working toward the resolution of the current conflict. The strived-for good ending of well-being is possible but never guaranteed, and can only be achieved by the common effort of everyone involved in action across customary divides. Social justice in comedy is accomplished by allowing the dispossessed, the poor, and the deprived to be the main actors who act together with others, which directs them toward the autarchic, rather than autonomous, freedom and equality that makes well-being possible. Such a well-being, then, is non-boring and can only be realized as being with others.

*Boredom as a modern malaise.* In contemporary debate, Georg Simmel's short paper *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903) sets the tone for the discussion of the importance of boredom for the constitution and perception of modern city life. The congestion of the city in medieval times leads Max Weber to stress the frequency of personal and political contacts. But a modern city grows, enlarges, and straightens its streets and alleys into avenues and boulevards, its own old self slain at the hands of Baron Haussmann. This urban self-straightening and re-planning promotes the comfort and protection of the inhabitants but instills separateness and disconnection between them. The collective change in emotional perception leads to the equally collectively shared attitude to life. The city as the place of modern dwelling, then, is the locus of social exchange and political interaction in which its residents share the same set of emotional and rational attitudes that are established and conditioned by the frame of the modern *polis*. This position has been supported by a number of prominent sociologists who pay attention to functional connections between people in the complex mesh of urban social interactions, rather than to individual perceptions or thoughts. Émile Durkheim and then Maurice Halbwachs follow this line of reasoning when they argue that our thought and memory is collective in its nature, so that we always participate in socially shared collective representations and remember only within a collectivity or group.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, Elizabeth Goodstein, mostly following Simmel but also relying on Benjamin, Heidegger, and Musil, has argued that boredom is the effect of modernization, which results in the loss of «the meaning and purpose of existence in a world increasingly bereft of both religious and worldly certainties» (Goodstein 2005, 259).<sup>9</sup> Boredom, then, is the expression of and reaction to the disorientation in the world, in which one cannot find meaning in terms of traditional religious and social structures. The meaninglessness of the world signifies for Goodstein the loss of traditional values, which transpires in the form of modern «democratized» skepticism (see Goodstein 2005, 260, 399, 414).<sup>10</sup> Much of the contemporary discussion of boredom in psychology, in the works of Fahlman, Igou, van Tilburg and others, also stresses the close association of boredom with meaninglessness. For Fromm, boredom is *the* problem of modern life, much more than cruelty or self-destructiveness, precisely because contemporary life is meaningless (Fromm 2004, 144).<sup>11</sup> The thesis that boredom is a specifically modern phenomenon is certainly a tenable one, yet why

<sup>8</sup> On this topic see (Durkheim 1898). For Halbwachs, collective memory is related to collective consciousness as linked to collective beliefs and class consciousness (see Halbwachs 1992).

<sup>9</sup> «“Boredom” is the name for the state in which the lived discrepancy between the involvement with transient means and their value in a larger vision of existence enters subjective awareness» (Goodstein 2005, 259).

<sup>10</sup> Goodstein follows Peter Sloterdijk, for whom modern skepticism is incapable of securing «a realistic foundation for philosophical knowledge of the world» (Sloterdijk 1987, 20).

<sup>11</sup> See also (Svendsen 2005, 70, 153-154).

the spread of skepticism inevitably leads to boredom remains unclear. For skepticism was already widespread and quite “democratized” in antiquity, which, however, did not know boredom as a collective social phenomenon and thus did not even have a word for it. For us, the uncertainty about our place in the world and its ultimate meaning should create anxiety; that is, the fear of the unpredictability of the consequences of our actions whose origin and logic we moderns no longer understand.

*Paradoxes of boredom.* According to Simmel’s famous diagnosis, the modern bourgeois as a city inhabitant is emotionally protected by the city, which imposes a rationally planned sheltering and safeguarding of its inhabitants. Such a protection results in a «*blasé attitude*», which is an indifference towards the distinctions between things caused by a precisely calculated and predictable life (see Simmel 1950, 413-415). So it is the modern city life with its inextinguishable dynamism, unlimited offer of entertainment and the inability to pause for a while in order to make some sense of one’s ever-unstable position in the middle of the well-regulated flux of production, exchange, suffering, and amusement, with its seasonal ebbs and tides, that is the primary locus of boredom.

Perhaps one of the most significant modern and critical accounts of boredom comes in a short piece by Siegfried Kracauer published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1924.<sup>12</sup> Kracauer’s writing is stylistically elegant, philosophically condensed, and literarily engaging. In just four pages, he mentions and briefly engages with the themes (anonymity, alienation, inauthenticity) that preoccupied thinkers of the age and that would be developed at much more length and with scholarly ponderosity three years later by the author of *Being and Time*. Kracauer begins his discussion with a rather paradoxical claim: those who today have time for boredom but are «not bored (*nicht langeweilen*)» are as boring as those who do not come to be bored. This happens because their «self (*Selbst*)» is lost, remains unaccounted for, and has been long forgotten, since people live in an ever-busy, hasty world, without a purpose, «not lingering anywhere for long (*nirgendwo lang zu verweilen*)» (Kracauer 2011, 161). Kracauer takes boredom to be *inevitable*: the experience of the inevitability of boredom inescapably leads us to encounter a number of paradoxes. Kracauer himself seems not to notice them, and yet they transpire and are implied in his discussion. For him, boredom is both a burden and a blessing. People – by whom Kracauer means modern city dwellers, wage office laborers who routinely do boring, tedious work – reward themselves with their justly deserved contentment and satisfaction of fulfilled obligations, after which they customarily return to their city apartments to enjoy their deserved and earned leisure.

For Kracauer there is no nature – only urban civilization. Therefore, boredom is not a voice of nature in us but is intimately connected with culture with its emphasis on production that gets eventually rewarded with entertainment and leisure. The distraction, fascination, fantasy, and enchantment of city life are endless. They drive oneself from oneself, hanging and hazing about in the evening streets, from one night into another, lit with lights and advertisement. The fantastic world of cinema and the illusion of the presence of other places through radio (and later television and the internet), substituting for communication, are the expressions of the city life that becomes a perpetual self-contained run and activity of amusement (see Kracauer 2011, 161-163).

Because city life is the life of culture, superfluous yet vivid and engaging, the sympathetic figure of a city-dweller is that of *flâneur*, gadder, wanderer, the observer of city life in its endless fascinating minutiae, who knows and loves the city. For the *flâneur*, the city is a theater in which every minor event may become meaningful and insightful, connected with

<sup>12</sup> See (Kracauer 2011), all translations are mine. The essay was originally published in «Frankfurter Zeitung» on November 11, 1924. See also (Kracauer 1995).

the lived history of the city, as was stressed by Walter Benjamin. Another figure representing the ever-curious city inhabitant is a «*Lumpensammler*», ragpicker and tatter, which is what Benjamin calls Kracauer in his review of Kracauer's book (see Benjamin 1972, 225). Interested in the splinters and rags of what the city has to offer, a ragman or chiffonnier is a connoisseur and antiquarian, a collector and appreciator of the concatenated poetic and political activity of the city. In modernity, this is the *flâneur*, ever distracted and never bored.

Yet the leisure offered by city life is both a burden and a blessing. Here we encounter the *first paradox*: (1) contemporary life provides people with much leisure, yet in fact they have no leisure at all, because they are as bored at their leisure as they are at their work, which means that most people lack leisure. Rather than being time off, time for freedom, leisure becomes an institution that pays for boring work. At one's leisure, one is allowed not to do anything, «does not want to do anything, and is made not to do anything» (Kracauer 2011, 161). Yet, this is boring.

Here, Kracauer introduces an important distinction between two kinds of boredom: the «right», «exemplary», «radical», «legitimate» (Heidegger's «*tiefe Langeweile*») – and a «vulgar (*vulgäre*)», ordinary, and mediocre boredom. The latter is the insatiable satiety of the improperly lived leisure that suspends leisure and cancels its blessing. The vulgar boredom is neither hot nor cold, but rather tepid: it neither kills (Kant's English gentleman) nor calls for a new life. It only causes dissatisfaction, which can be driven away by morally allowable distraction, and this ultimately testifies to moral uprightness. What Kant takes to be the purpose of boredom in his *Anthropology* – the pursuit of duty, the establishing of moral character<sup>13</sup> – for Kracauer is only the means to dispel the bother of inauthentic boredom. People are too busy to be bored, which is why they are bored, but not in the right way. Boredom, then, is the condition of modern human existence in its two different forms, which in fact are two sides of the same coin, with which the modern self both pays and charges itself.

This entails the *second paradox* (2): the flight away from boredom through distraction in the abundance of modern entertainment does not save us from boredom. Driving away from boredom makes us only more bored in a «vulgar» way. Rather, embracing boredom in its inevitability makes us realize that boredom itself is *not boring* at all, once we come to recognize its right, radical form. Accepting boredom gives us back our leisure, which is not the leisure of fleeing away from boredom but the leisure for being bored, or rather for not

<sup>13</sup> See (Kant 1968, 233-243; §§ 61-66). Boredom for Kant is aversion or repugnance to one's own existence. Boredom is a response to the lack of impressions, to the absence of any signs or greeting from the world, of its frightening silence that leaves us in panic and the anticipation of death. Our striving at preserving ourselves is double and ambiguous, in that it balances two opposite moves. On the one hand, we have a propensity toward laziness and indolence, to the avoidance of tiresome and difficult activity and thus toward rest (Kant 1968, 151). Yet, absolute rest is death, which causes aversion (*Ekel*) and fear. Nature thus has put an opposite tendency in us that echoes the fear of nothingness, through a kind of suffering and pain, which is the incentive to life-saving activity (Kant 1968, 235). Nature arranged for pain always to creep into pleasant sensations (Kant 1968, 164). For Kant, we are by nature inclined to be lazy and keep at rest – and to suffer for it. The cunning of nature, then, is meant to preserve us through the negativity of suffering, which is not accidental or meaningless but has the purpose of the renewal of our mental, physical, and social life. Boredom is thus a force or impulse put into us by nature, an inevitable yet potentially beneficial force of suffering, which is not rational but sensible, and whose purpose is to avoid the immobility of stagnation and the lack of new perceptions. Boredom motivates us to work more, since for Kant work is the most important *intentional* activity proper to humans, the source of worth and dignity. Modernity understands the human primarily as a *homo faber*.

being afraid of being bored. What we cannot avoid, we should accept, and boredom becomes our blessing.

The *third paradox* (3) is that boredom is a state of powerlessness and supineness, in which one cannot and does not produce anything, yet boredom is most creative. Kracauer's prescription for well-being is to turn away from vulgar boredom to the genuine one by a radical suspension of all commonly accepted distraction. On a sunny afternoon, when everyone is outside, one goes back to one's room, closes the curtains, lays on the sofa, and does the "spiritual exercise" of fully committing oneself to the radical boredom – by embracing not acting, by not doing anything, drifting away in thoughts and reveries.<sup>14</sup> In this way, Kracauer performs a radical *epoché*, yet not of thought or judgement – but of *action* that overcomes action. Rather than preventing boredom, one embraces it in the non-doing that surpasses and goes beyond *theōria*, *praxis*, and *poiēsis*. This radical boredom is the suspension of all action. In order to be properly bored, one needs leisure, which one should be able to know how to use. One should dare to be lazy, not to produce, make, or do anything. Paraphrasing Erasmus (*Stultitiae laus*), one could call Kracauer's way *Pigritiae laus* (Apology of laziness). This is exactly what Kazimir Malevich advocates in his short piece *Laziness as the real truth of humankind* of 1921 (see Malevich, 1994, 13-25).

Outlined ironically and in a sketch, Kracauer's way to the "legitimate" boredom goes through a number of stages (see Kracauer 2011, 163-164). At first, one entertains certain ideas and even thinks of some projects, which, however, do not, and cannot, lead anywhere and are thus totally useless. Once one recognizes their ephemeral character, one comes to reject any thought and activity, marveling at the presence of the "not serious" little ludicrous beings around you, such as a glass grasshopper or a cactus. Their just being-there testifies to the purposelessness of the activity of the constant production of new things, distractions, meanings, which makes one utterly and inescapably bored. Such a being finds «*nothing* (*Nichts*)» in its existence worth noting or of importance to the greater whole of the existent. Such a being is «that which *is without being* (*was ist, ohne zu sein*)» (Kracauer 2011, 164), a being that is present in its absence to the world of reality and purpose.

But existence without (serious and purposeful) being is irritating, causes an inner unrest without any aim, and one can only be content with «not doing anything further than being by oneself and not knowing what one actually should do» (Kracauer 2011, 164). And finally, if one can wait long enough, one arrives at legitimate boredom, which opens the flux of passing images through a shimmering landscape that looks strangely like a paradise. As Rousseau says in *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, dreaming at one's leisure, «to the attraction of an abstract and monotonous reverie, I am able to add charming images that enliven it. The objects of these images often eluded my senses in my ecstasies, and now, the deeper my reverie is, the more vividly it presents them to me. I am often more in their midst and more pleasantly so than I was when I was really there» (see Rousseau 2011, 58). And here one encounters what one was always looking for but was always missing, the end of the journey, which itself is a journey. For the lack of a better word, Kracauer calls it «great passion (*große Passion*)». But it can perhaps be called anything, because everything is just a play of boredom in imagination against itself.

Hence, along the "way of boredom" one first needs to know how to be distracted; then one does not know at all what to do, other than just being with oneself by being bored; and finally, one does not even know how to be, what to know, and how to ask the right question, committing oneself to the oblivion of anything that has a purpose, useful knowledge, and dutiful judgement. Yet, one cannot force oneself to be rightly bored: radical boredom

<sup>14</sup> See (Tieck 1986, 215), where the experience of the hellish suffering of boredom («*Langeweile ist gewiß die Qual der Hölle*») is associated with passing the time in one's room on a sofa.

cannot be produced or be had on purpose. Rather, one needs *patience* in order to be bored. Boredom thus comes to those who are capable of being bored in waiting for it.

And so boredom, which does not produce anything, generates *nothing*, *nichts*. The one who can get embraced and be taken away by boredom is a kind of bored creator who produces nothing – the nothing of the daydream, of not knowing, of oblivion. Yet the nothing of boredom is *almost* nothing, which makes the bored creator an *as-if* creator who flows along with the fleeing appearances of the world of rattletraps, fantasies, and forgettings that he makes up out of almost nothing.

This leads us, finally, to the *fourth paradox* (4): boredom alienates ourselves from ourselves (our self), yet it is the only way to go back or have access to our proper – “authentic” – existence (*Dasein* (see Kracauer 2011, 163), which is being bored without giving an account of that which is and should be, of the world and our action in it with and against each other. Here, Kracauer diagnoses what other thinkers of the age will be discussing at much length: that we can get back to ourselves as living non-productive beings by facing the negativity of finitude, mortality, and anxiety. Kracauer is more benevolent: it is boredom that opens the way to our self and existence, rather than death. Unlike in Kant, boredom is not opposed to pleasure but, if it is the right one, boredom brings its pleasurable «blessings (*Beglückungen*)» (see Kracauer 2011, 164). Boredom is useless, yet it is most helpful. By itself, boredom is meaningless, yet it allows our actions to become meaningful. We live to the full only when we are really bored. Paradoxically, we are liberated from (vulgar) boredom by (radical) boredom. Happiness, life, and freedom – such are the blessings of the right, radical boredom for Kracauer.

Radical boredom is thus the way to its own truth, which is *freedom*. It is the freedom *for* our proper existence and the freedom *from* the fake life of purposeful production. Kracauer thus establishes the diagnosis of modernity. Modernity is born out of the spirit of boredom. But he also suggests a treatment by the remedy of philosophical homoeopathy: treat the same by the same, *similia similibus*, evil by evil, poison by poison, *pharmakon* by *pharmakon*, boredom by boredom. In fact, philosophical thinking itself gets suspended by literary writing, the boredom of long treatises by a short newspaper article, attentive thinking by the *far niente* of doing nothing, which becomes the realization of freedom. To be is to be free, and hence, to be is to be bored.

Kracauer's discussion is notable in its being both a reflection on boredom and an exemplification of the way of boredom, of the working of boredom by being bored. As he hints at the end of his piece, the double reflection on boredom by thinking about boredom and acting out of it, might itself be boring, and it might even be written out of boredom. If the modern subject is forever stuck in the ongoing reflection about itself, there might indeed be no way out of such a reflection. Besides being boring, the boring reflection on boredom in boredom is a kind of self-praise, which, although being narcissistic, is alleviated and even suspended by self-irony, the way the praise of stupidity overwhelms and cancels stupidity (see Erasmus 1993).

## Bibliography

Barthes, R. (1995). *Michelet*. Paris: Seuil.

Benjamin, W. 1972. “Ein Aussenseiter macht sich bemerkbar. Zu S. Kracauer, ‘Die Angestellten’”. In *Gesammelte Schriften Band III*, hrsg. von H. Tiedemann-Bartels. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp (219-225).

Crangle, S. (2010). *Prosaic Desires: Modernist Knowledge, Boredom, Laughter, and Anticipation*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Dickens, Ch. (2008). *Bleak House*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Durkheim, E. (1898). "Representations individuelles et representations collectives." *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 6, 273-302.
- Erasmus, 1993. *Praise of Folly*. Engl. Trans. B. Radice. London: Penguin.
- Fromm, E. (2004). *The Dogma of Christ and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology and Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Goodstein, E. (2005). *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On Collective Memory*, Eng. Trans. L. A. Coser. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Heller, A. (2009). *A Theory of Feelings* (2nd ed.). Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Kant, I. (1968). "Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht." In *Kants Werke. Akademie Textausgabe VII: Der Streit der Fakultäten; Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (117-334). Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Kracauer, S. (2011). „Langeweile.“ In *Werke, Band 5.2: Essays, Feuilletons, Rezensionen 1924-1927*. hrsg. von I. Mülder-Bach (161-164). Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Kracauer, S. (1995). "Boredom." In *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*. Engl. Trans. Th. Y. Levin (331-334). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). "What is possible." In *Critique of Everyday Life vol. 1*. Engl. Trans. J. Moore (228-252). London: Verso.
- Malevich, K. (1994). *Len' kak deystvitelnaya istina chelovechestva*. Moscow: Gilea.
- Meyer Spacks, P. (1995). *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Nikulin, D. (2022). *Critique of Bored Reason*. New York, Columbia University Press.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (2011). *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Engl. Trans. R. Goulbourne. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Simmel, G. (1950). "The Metropolis and Mental Life." In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, Engl. Trans. K. H. Wolff (409-424). New York: Free Press.
- Sloterdijk, P. (1987). *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Engl. Trans. M. Eldred. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Svendsen, L. (2005). *A Philosophy of Boredom*, Engl. Trans. J. Irons. London: Reaktion Books.
- Tieck, L. (1986) *William Lovell*. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam.
- Toohy, P. (2011). *Boredom: A Lively Story*. New Haven: Yale University Press.