Attention and the Cause of Modern Boredom

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Attention and the Cause of Modern Boredom

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Boredom is often associated with the large-scale economic and social processes which in the latter part of the nineteenth-century radically transformed societies across Europe and North America. Thus boredom is seen as a result of the effects of industrialization and urbanization — perhaps as a result of the atomization of society and the alienation of individuals from their communities and from themselves, or perhaps as a result of the rationalization of society and the commodification of social relations. The problem is only that any correlation between macro-sociological factors such as these and increases in boredom are far too easy to establish. After all, in a quickly modernizing society, developments simultaneously take place in a range of disparate fields — many things change in the same direction — and as a result the causes of boredom cannot be determined. What we need is a better grasp of the logic involved; we need an account of the causal processes through which modernization made people bored.

The suggestion made in this chapter is that the increase in boredom was caused by changes in people’s ways of paying attention. Although boredom can be defined in many ways and given a corresponding etiology, a common way to understand the concept is as the inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to pay attention. It is more than anything when our attention starts wandering — when nothing catches and holds our attention — that we get bored, and admonitions to pay attention, and even our own conscious effort to do so, will be to no avail. Modernization, the argument will be,
resulted in a massive reorganization of the ways in which people paid attention. Boredom was the outcome of a transition from a habit-based agricultural society in which un- or semi-conscious forms of attention were sufficient for most tasks, to a society were attention was explicit, conscious, and constantly required. Since explicit attention, in contrast to sub-conscious, easily flags and easily is diverted, the result was the epidemic of boredom which contemporaries witnessed. In the enormous conurbations to which farm-hands and milk-maids had moved, there were far more things to pay attention to and many of these things were new and surprising. In the cities there were also many more things that might benefit or harm you, and unless you paid careful attention you would not be successful and perhaps not even survive. In response people often had to force themselves to pay attention, or they had to be forced by school teachers, employers, policemen and social workers. In modern society, forcing people to pay attention is a means of disciplining them and thereby a means of social control. Modern boredom, we will conclude, is a result of the way we were separated from tradition, forced to pay attention to our lives rather than to simply live them, and the way we were disciplined and made autonomous and self-directing.

**Modern boredom**

Although boredom always may have existed, it is often said to be a problem particular to modern society.\(^3\) In pre-modern society, accordingly, boredom was a condition which touched mainly members of the leisured elite. Thus courtiers were often said to suffer from *tædium vitæ* and monks and nuns were attacked by *acedia*, the “noonday devil” who tempted them away from the contemplation of God without giving them another object on which to focus.\(^4\) In modern society, by contrast, boredom is democratized — everyone is bored, and those who claim otherwise fail to see the boredom which constantly threatens to derail their quests for excitement. Indeed, boredom may be the unacknowledged engine of what in
modern society passes for progress. (Paz 1974, 1–18; Ringmar 2009, 17–24) In order to escape from its clutches, we are always on the look-out for newer and ever more exciting ways to entertain ourselves. And when we have tried the new, we want the new new.

We usually think of the nineteenth-century as a time when people were filled with boundless optimism and faith in the future. It was now after all that all those amazing Victorian inventions were made; that the economy grew in leaps and bounds; that standards of public health and education were raised; that European gunships, goods and god conquered the rest of the world. Yet progress seemed to make people anxious rather than self-confident and many showed signs of mental afflictions. (Hilton 1992, 115–162) It was in the latter part of the nineteenth-century that the entire nosology of psychological illnesses first came to be established, cataloguing everything from aphasia, agnosia and abulia to hysteria and schizophrenia. Modern society was sick, many argued, and this included the most modern society of all — the United States. More than anything Americans suffered from “neurasthenia,” a condition similar to what we today might refer to as “chronic fatigue syndrome.” (Beard 1881; Mitchell 1897; Cf. Cowan 2008, 21–64; Radkau 1998) Neurasthenia constituted, said William James, who himself was suffered from the condition, “a chronic sense of weakness, torpor, lethargy, fatigue, insufficiency, impossibility, unreality, and powerlessness of will.” (James 1911, 23) In the years preceding the First World War, references to neurasthenia were everywhere: in magazine and newspaper articles, in fiction, poetry, medical journals, political rhetoric and religious sermons, but also in advertisements for spas, cures and medical gadgets of all kinds. (Lutz 1991, 1–30; Schuster 2011, 113–139; Gijswijt-Hofstra 2001, 1–30)

Boredom was a part of this maelstrom of mental malaise, and like the other afflictions it was somehow related to the processes of modernization, yet it was never clear exactly how. These are five possible processes at work:

people were thrown into vast, impersonal, metropolises where they had far fewer social ties to their neighbours. Without family and friends, the new city-dwellers were more easily bored.

2) Boredom, rationalization and disenchantment. (Tardieu 1903, 255–268; Goodstein 2005, 99–100, 164–167) Modern society rejected many of the traditional authorities which hitherto had given meaning to people's lives. Life in modern society was rational and efficient but lacking in spiritual values. With incomplete instructions for how to live, life became meaningless and meaningfulness made people bored.

3) Boredom and loss of control. (Carlyle 1872, 233–240; Freeman 1921, 90–140; Cf. E. P. Thompson 1967, 56–97) In the new factories the workers were tied to machines and to set routines; people lived by the clock and time belonged not to them but to their employers. Routinization led to a loss of agency and a sense of resignation, and the resignation, in turn, led to boredom.

4) Boredom and over-excitement. (Tardieu 1903, 122–143; Simmel 1903, 185–206; Lamprecht 1905, 95–134; Hellpach 1904, 32–57) In modern cities, we are bombarded with an over-abundance of sensory impressions and we can no longer process all the information we receive. In order to defend ourselves, we rationalize our experiences — we think too much and we feel too little — and we lose the direct, embodied, ability to experience the world. In the end we are completely detached from the world in which we live and thereby bored.

5) Boredom and leisure time. (Svendsen 2005, 33–36) Even with ten or twelve hours of daily tabor in a factory, the workers had access to leisure of a kind which life in the countryside never had offered. To begin with at least they did not know how to entertain themselves and as a result they were bored.
Attention

Although well known, this potted history of boredom and modernity is not as convincing as it could be. The problem is that too many things changed as a result of the process of modernization and that it therefore is difficult to discern the exact logic by which boredom was produced. Boredom is somehow associated with the atomization of society, with disenchantment and mechanization etc, but such macro-sociological processes are at the same time far too easy to blame. What is missing from the potted history, let’s suggest, is a discussion of attention. Attention matters since boredom more than anything is a result of our failure, or an unwillingness, to pay attention. It is when we have nothing to pay attention to that we get bored. Without a discussion of how, when, and to what people in modern society pay attention, we can never properly understand what modern boredom is or how it came to be produced. (cf. Crary 2001, 11–79)

To attend to something is “to give heed,” or “to direct one’s mind or energies towards” something — from the Latin ad- meaning “to” and tendere meaning “to stretch.” (“Attention” 2000; Cf. Gurwitsch 1964) Attending to something, we stretch our minds towards that object. Thus understood attention is a prerequisite for consciousness and for cognition. Unless we pay attention we will never understand what is going on around us, we will miss the point, never learn and not remember. Much attention is automatic. (James 1890a, 2:418–419; Ribot 1890, 12–34) Our attention is automatically drawn to the quickly moving, to bright lights and loud noises. Without planning to do so, we move our heads and prick up our ears. Our attention is also easily drawn to things that are of concern to us, to things that might benefit or harm us. But attention can also be consciously directed by the will; we can make ourselves pay attention. We strain our hearing in order to pick up a conversation at a neighbouring table; we fix our sight on the horizon looking for rising smoke. By focusing and fixing in this way, we are blocking out other stimuli. (Smith 1992, 119–120, 145–146) Attention is a limited resource and we cannot pay attention to everything at once.
Even with our best efforts, however, our attention will start to wander. We are easily distracted by things that go on around us, but in addition our minds are very good at distracting themselves. (Tarde 1903, 84; Cf. Young 2014) Try hard as we might, we can only hold our attention on a certain object for a few seconds before our minds start wandering. In order to sustain attention, we constantly have to bring our minds back. To make it easier to concentrate, it helps if our minds are supported by some external cognitive structure which provides stimuli which are extended over time. This is what a piece of music does, a story, a movie or a play, which catches our attention, holds us and carries us along. This is the process which a musicologist might refer to as "entrainment." (Krueger 2014, 3–4) Grasping the Gestalt as a whole before each aspect of it has been revealed, we pay attention to each moment since we want to know how it all will end. As long as we are held and carried along we will not be bored. Yet the Gestalt must be revealed to us at the appropriate pace. If it unfolds too quickly, we will be overwhelmed, and if too slowly, we will lose our concentration.

Although it may sound like a contradiction in terms, most attention happens outside of our conscious awareness. (Arvidson 2006, 1–20) Most of the things we pay attention to, that is, we never actually think about. Suddenly a tiger attacks us in the jungle and before we know it we are on the run. (James 1884, 196) If we had not paid attention, the tiger would have eaten us for supper, yet we reacted before we were consciously aware of what we were doing. Or compare a simple task such as walking across the floor. In order to successfully do it, we have to pay attention to thousands of variables indicating the position of our bodies in space, the movement of our limbs, the condition of the floor and the room, etc. (Gallagher 1986, 541–554) Again, we pay attention but our attention is automated and it is only when something goes wrong — as a result of neurological damage, for example — that we become aware of the immense complexity of the task involved. Or compare skills. It is surely impossible to say that a violinist does not pay attention to the notes she is playing. She pays attention, but not consciously so, and this is precisely why she is able to play as fluently as she does.
In general we could say that automation allows us to off-load tasks to the un- or semi-conscious thereby leaving explicit awareness free to concentrate on other, perhaps more exciting, tasks.

From this perspective, boredom is the mood in which we find ourselves when our conscious attention starts flagging and there is nothing else that can attract or hold it and carry us along. The object we paid attention to can no longer benefit or harm us; it no longer interests or concerns us. Entrainment fails: the Gestalt is revealed too quickly, too slowly, or we decide that its ultimate shape is not worth the wait. Try as we might, we cannot force ourselves to pay attention. Note, however, that the un- or semi-conscious attention we pay to things never can be distracted in the same fashion. Our unconscious attention is always held, and sustained, by the world around it. As a result we can never be unconsciously bored. Indeed, habits and the exercise of skills are excellent ways of keeping ourselves busy and even if they fail to prevent boredom, they give us something to do when we are bored — we twiddle our thumbs, pop bubble-wrap, play games on our phones. Sometimes our conscious awareness accuses our habits of not being exciting enough. We are bored by our routines and by a life that constantly repeats itself. But to blame habits for being boring is to forget that they ultimately are what makes conscious attention possible. It would be more correct to say that habits become boring only once they stop serving a purpose and only the physical movement itself is left.

**Modern attention**

The process of modernization as it took place in the latter part of the nineteenth-century can be described as a change in the way people paid attention; what they paid attention to and how.(Crary 2001, 11–79) Most obviously, in modern society there were many more things to pay attention to than in agricultural society. Indeed, if we understand tradition to mean “habitual practice,” and if we define agricultural societies as traditional societies, then explicit, conscious, attention was rare by definition. In modern,
untraditional, society, these well-established habitual practices were no longer applicable. Here you had to pay explicit attention just crossing the street; and you had to pay explicit attention to many more things besides — to rules and regulations, to clocks and to the latest news; to orders from bosses and instructions from teachers and policemen; and machines, the new factory-workers soon discovered, constantly had to be attended to. Much explicit attention was also directed towards other people. Since city-dwellers constantly interacted with people they did not know, social success depended on their ability to judge others, their character and intentions, but they also had to pay more attention to themselves, to how they presented themselves and “came across.” (Lears 2000, para. 15–19) Self-directed attention made people in modern society more self-conscious and more self-aware.

Sociologically speaking, paying attention is a bourgeois virtue which describes a bourgeois ideal of human beings as simultaneously disciplined and self-directing. A person who pays attention has made herself available for instruction; she is ready to take notes, receive orders, follow plans; a person who pays attention is open to suggestions and therefore potentially manipulable. But attention is also a prerequisite for independent reflection. A person who pays attention is doing things consciously and for a reason, and only a person who pays attention can properly be said to be autonomous. Unfortunately, however, the ability to pay attention turned out to differ considerably from one human being to the next, and some — notably the poor, the uneducated, savages, women and children — were often discovered to have very “short attention-spans” indeed. Such people had to be forced, for their own good, to pay attention. To force people to pay attention is to discipline them. (Cowan 2008, 15)

Despite the atomization of society, or perhaps because of it, much modern attention took place in crowds. (Crary 2001, 241–247) People gathered to watch performances in theatres, opera houses and concert halls, and later in music-halls and movie houses, but they also assembled in large crowds in newly built football stadiums, or to watch horse- and bicycle races. In these settings people were entrained as they
were entertained. The fact that they were entrained/entertained together meant that attention was shared, that they reacted to the same things, and that the reactions of one person had to be coordinated with the reactions of others. The development of a “mass society” in the course of the nineteenth-century was premised on such joint attention. This was most obvious, perhaps, in the case of the rapid expansion of mass-media — newspapers, the penny press, and later movies and radio. People read the same papers at the same time and reacted to the same “sensations” and “news.” (Diamond 2004, 41–82) Eventually a whole range of institutions — most notably the state — and associations — such as trade unions and membership clubs — were developed which helped individuals pay attention to themselves and to the multitude of rules and regulations which governed life in modern society. (Ringmar 2005, 63–67, 95–107) In this way its inhabitants were disciplined but also made into autonomous, rational and self-directed individuals.

As entrepreneurs and businessmen soon discovered, a lot of money was to be made in a society where everyone constantly was forced to pay attention. Self-conscious individuals can easily be sold a next to infinite range of products and services that help them control and improve their image of themselves and help them negotiate relations with others. And a lot of money was to be made from the sale of tickets to performances, competitions and events and from the sale of newspapers and books. The beauty of it all was that since people’s attention easily flagged, it was always possible to sell them another product or service as long as it was marketed as the newest, the latest and the even more sensational. Consumer society, we can conclude, is not natural, and not a consequence of the development of capitalism as such, but instead premised on the development of a society in which everyone is forced to constantly pay attention. (Cf. Debord 1994)

As one would expect, attention was a much discussed topic among scholars at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century and attention research was a staple of the new science of experimental psychology. What interested researchers was what kinds of phenomena
that attracted people's attention; for how long attention could be sustained, why attention could not be suspended and how it could be improved. (Ribot 1890, 35–77; Wundt 1894, 249–265; Titchener 1908, 209–284) This research often had perfectly practical implications. School teachers wanted to know how to improve the attention of their pupils; employers how to improve the attention of their workers; politicians the attention of the people; and advertisers what it was that made people pay attention to some ads rather than others. In response a range of new propaganda techniques came to be developed. (Bernays 1947, 113–120) By improving people's ability to pay attention, the bourgeois ideal would be ever easier to live up to — people would at the same time become more disciplined and more self-directing.

Modern boredom explained

The problem of modern boredom, we said, is the problem of modern attention. The causes of modern boredom which we briefly reviewed above can thus be redescribed as problems of how attention can be captured and maintained.

1) Boredom and the atomization of life. Atomized individuals are not bored because they are isolated as such but instead since they are forced to pay attention to things by themselves. Since conscious attention depends on the interest and engagement of individuals, it is sooner or later going to flag. Flagging attention leads to boredom. Yet atomization may be a less important cause of modern boredom than sometimes suggested. As we noted, modern society provided many venues where attention was shared and shared attention mitigates the effects of atomization. Joint attention was a key mechanism for reintegrating individuals into social contexts and thereby for keeping society together; when attending to things together with others, we form a collective we in which individuals are less easily bored.

2) Boredom, rationalization and disenchantment. Enchantment is nothing more than
a particularly intense form of attention. To be enchanted it to be captured, held and carried along by the attention we pay to some phenomenon, perhaps a supreme being. In the Christian tradition, attention works the other way around too: God pays attention to the world and his people and we are constantly under his care. As long as people actively believed in the existence of such a deity, there were many aspects of their lives to which they did not have to pay explicit attention themselves. God would look out for us and we did not need to look out for ourselves. Modern boredom, from this point of view, is not due to meaninglessness as such but is a consequence of the fact that, lacking a god, attention has become an obligation we all have to assume. It is when we fail in this task that we get bored.

3) Boredom and loss of control. The mechanization of production meant a loss of conscious control on the part of the workers, but as such it was not necessarily different from the process of automation by which habits and embodied routines come to take over from our conscious attention to a task. In both cases, such off-loading was supposed to free up time for more sophisticated, and enjoyable, projects. This, indeed, was the basis for Marx's prediction of a future in which ordinary people could spend at least part of their time both fishing and philosophizing. Automation as such is not the problem, in other words, and automation does not by itself cause boredom. What matters is rather on which terms the process of automation takes place and whether off-loading indeed provides opportunities to engage in alternative, and more exciting, tasks. That is, the consequences of automation depends on who has power over the workplace.

4) Boredom and over-excitement. The super-abundance of impressions which hit the senses of the inhabitants of modern cities are often said to have overwhelmed them. And, as we saw, neurasthenia and other mental afflictions were often associated with such sensory overload. Yet, pace Georg Simmel and others, life in
modern cities was often experienced as exciting rather than boring. What made the difference between the overwhelming and the exciting, it seems, was not the stimuli as such but instead the extent to which individuals were required to pay attention to them. (Crary 2001, 49) People were often able to cope with the problem by off-loading attention to others — to the welfare state, to trade unions and membership clubs of all kinds — and by increasingly relying on new habits and semi-conscious motor routines which were appropriate to life in modern society.

5) Boredom and leisure time. Hard and monotonous though it was, factory labour was not necessarily boring. On the contrary, attending to the needs of the machine, following the flow of the work, often helped workers establish routines which allowed them to lose themselves in day-dreams and, if the din of the factory was not too intrusive, to carry on conversations with each other. The problem of boredom was more obvious during their leisure time, once the workers had time off and there suddenly was nothing that could capture and hold them. As we saw, however, this problem was soon solved through the creation of new markets in a range of mass entertainments.

People in agricultural, traditional, society, we said, were not bored. They were not bored since comparatively few tasks, and little of their time, required their conscious attention. For most purposes, long-established habits and well-honed skills were adequate. Without ever quite realizing it, they were caught, held and carried along by the tasks before them and as a result they properly belonged to the world in which they lived. In modern society, by contrast, boredom was a constant threat. The reason was that life itself increasingly became an object of conscious attention. (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, 71–90) In modern society, life itself had moved from un- or semi-conscious to fully conscious awareness; life was represented and reflected on rather than simply lived. By paying attention, that is, a layer of reflection came to separate human beings from their
lived experiences, and, in a self-perpetuating logic, the more separated they were from their lived experiences, the more they were required to pay attention to them.

But, as we pointed out, conscious attention, in contrast to unconscious, easily flags and is easily distracted. This is why people in modern society always are on the look-out for new things and sensations that can capture, hold and carry them along. In modern society people often have to force themselves to pay attention or they have to be forced by their superiors. This, in the end, is how the bourgeois ideal of the human being came to be established and enforced. Modern individuals had to pay attention to the instructions, suggestions and commands they were given, but they also had to be attentive to their own thoughts and actions. More than anything, modern boredom is a result of the way we were separated from tradition, forced to pay attention to our lives rather than to simply live them, and the way we were disciplined and made autonomous and self-directing.

“Achtung! Achtung!”

In the first part of the twenty-first-century, we are more than ever required to pay attention and there is a plethora of new technologies to assist us. This imperative is more than anything the result of the increased reliance on economic markets as a means of distributing basic goods and services — including education, health care and housing. Moreover, the institutions — such as the state — or the associations — such as trade unions and membership clubs — which previously paid attention on our behalf have increasingly come to retreat from social life. (Ringmar 2005, 135–142) Today more than ever we have to look out for ourselves. As we constantly are admonished: we have to pay attention to what we eat and how we eat it; to what we drink, and not too much; we have to control our weight by means of exercise and our muscles by means of regular work-outs. Attention gives us control and control allows us to defend ourselves against the vagaries of life in capitalist society. In fact, we are supposed to take charge of our minds too. “Mindfulness” is a catch-phrase which pervades contemporary culture, having
moved in a couple of decades from the esoteric realms of Buddhist practices to every bookshop's shelf of self-help books. (Brown and Ryan 2003, 822–848) If we pay attention to our minds, we can control them, and if we can control our minds we can control our lives. The next task on our society's to-do list concerns attention to, and control of, our dreams. (E. Thompson 2014, 107–165, 178–184)

Meanwhile, new technology has made it far easier, and cheaper, to pay attention. (Crary 2014) The first commandment of life in the twenty-first-century is to pay attention to our computers, to our phones, to the feeds on Facebook and Twitter. News-media, first on television, now on-line, are continuously and in real-time updating us regarding everything that is going on. The requirement to pay attention is particularly exacting for young people who are in the process of establishing themselves and their relations to others. Everything has to be reported, everything has to be noticed, we are not allowed to miss a single thing. If we fail in this duty we are met with a reaction which combines outrage with disbelief — “How could you have missed the update? Are you not checking your account?” As we would expect, given the turn-of-the-twentieth-century example, the imperative to pay attention to ever-more tasks is reducing rather than increasing our attention-spans. (Carr 2011, 136–143, 193–197) As a result, we are more than ever dependent on a constant stream of external stimuli which can hold us and carry us along. The architects of the on-line world are masters of entrainment: teenagers can play shoot-'em-up games all night without getting tired; their parents, going to the on-line casino, get broke before they get bored.

The only possible form of resistance here is to refuse to pay attention. We must sin against the first commandment of life in the twenty-first-century: sign off, if we dare; not keep up with the news; not let ourselves be fed by the feeds. Instead we must embrace boredom. (Phillips 1994, 68–78; Cf. Gardiner 2014, 29–46) Letting our bodies take over and relying on our semi-conscious motor routines, we should rest, and trust, in our boredom; revel and luxuriate in it. Thumb-twiddling and bubble-wrap popping are the most effective forms of protest under the conditions imposed by global capitalism.
And if this sounds unduly quietist, we should remember that such strategies only are a first form of self-defence. It is only once we successfully have defended ourselves, that we can go on to restructure our lives. In the twenty-first-century, only the bored are free.

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1 A previous attempt to write on this topic is Kustermans and Ringmar 2011; A forthcoming attempt is Ringmar 2016.