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1.3 You Must (Not) Be Bored!

Boredom and Creativity in Global Capitalism

Esther Peeren

Abstract

Boredom and creativity are generally considered mutually exclusive; yet, it is possible to imagine forms of creative boredom or boring creativity. Whether the two notions are compatible or clash depends on their historically and culturally specific meanings. This chapter begins by tracing how Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Jonathan Crary position boredom and creativity in the context of capitalism's increasingly firm imperative to always be doing something. Next, Peeren zooms in on the claims to a boredom-busting creativity made by two popular cultural objects with global reach: the Bored Panda website and adult colouring books. She argues that, besides reinforcing the directive to keep busy, these claims also propose alternative conceptions of creativity and boredom with critical potential.

Keywords: boredom, creativity, capitalism, unnameable, Bored Panda, adult colouring books

Boredom and creativity are generally considered mutually exclusive, yet it is not impossible to imagine forms of creative boredom or of bored or boring creativity. Whether the two notions are compatible or clash is dependent on their historically and culturally specific meanings. This short intervention begins by tracing how Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Jonathan Crary position boredom and creativity in the context of capitalism's increasingly firm imperative to always be doing something. Next, I zoom in on the claims

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to a boredom-busting form of creativity made by two popular contemporary cultural objects with global reach: the Bored Panda website and adult colouring books. I argue that such claims not only reinforce the directive to keep busy but can also be seen to propose alternative conceptions of creativity and boredom with critical potential.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, first published in 1984, Michel de Certeau writes:

In our society, the absence of work is non-sense; it is necessary to eliminate it in order for the discourse that tirelessly articulates tasks and constructs the Occidental story of 'There's always something to do' to continue.¹

Not working is senseless within a capitalist system characterised by a relentless push to act in an economically productive manner. Consequently, the dying – who can no longer work – and the lazy – who refuse to work at their full capacity or at all – are rendered unthinkable and 'unnameable'.² To these two groups may be added the bored, who, by claiming that there is nothing to do or at least nothing of interest to them, also fall outside the prevailing discourse. However, the bored challenge this discourse in a way the dying and the lazy cannot. Whereas the dying and the lazy do not participate because they are, respectively, unable or unwilling to exert themselves, the bored, in their 'refusal of engagement',³ deny the worth of what there is to do, proclaiming it inadequate and unfulfilling. To find something boring is always to devalue and critique it.

But boredom is never only a critical judgement on something or someone else. Those who feel bored are also negatively affected themselves, as boredom is generally experienced as an undesirable, frustrating state, especially when the (lack of) impulse that produces it cannot easily be escaped. This burden of boredom is carried not only by those who, by economic necessity, engage in the many forms of repetitive, routinised labour on which global capitalism continues to rely, but also by those whose work has been lightened by the gains of labour movements and technological advances. As Luce Giard writes in the 1998 edition of *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, the mechanisation of domestic kitchens

1 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 191.

2 Ibid.

3 Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2.

over the course of the twentieth century ‘allowed people to save time and decrease one type of fatigue, but this was done in order to give rise to gray, homogeneous, empty time, the time of effortless and joyless boredom’.⁴ Here, boredom results from manual labour being replaced by machines only requiring minimal input from the cook, who is mostly reduced to waiting. In contrast to the active, critical boredom that identifies capitalism’s story of ‘there’s always something to do’ as insufficient, this is an ‘effortless and joyless’ boredom unassuaged by the distraction of physical exhaustion. It is a passive boredom without content, born of a feeling of superfluity, of finding oneself expendable.

The ‘empty time’ of this joyless boredom is hostile to creativity in the everyday sense of the ‘modest inventiveness’ that, through ‘ephemeral results’ such as a hand-cooked meal, allows the definition of a distinctive ‘*lifestyle*’.⁵ This creativity cannot be recovered by replicating cooking practices of the past through an ‘archaistic nostalgia’, while ‘frenetic overmodernisation’ would further erode it.⁶ Where Giard sees it persisting is in certain localised ‘microexperiences’ that ‘try modestly to invent other behaviours’ – behaviours that, in combining the old (handwork) with the new (machine work), ‘define a lifestyle straddling the two cultures and their two temporalities’, countering the dominant tendency towards standardisation.⁷

In the 21st century, the capitalist discourse of ‘there’s always something to do’ has accelerated and spread. No longer a specifically Occidental story, it has found global dominance. Moreover, the growing emphasis on consumption and commodification has added the imperative of ‘there’s always something to buy’. Jonathan Crary, in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, paints a nightmarish picture of a global ‘non-stop life-world’ that ‘has the semblance of a social world, but [...] is actually a non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness’.⁸ The post-historical temporality of this world resembles Giard’s empty time: Crary describes it as a machinic time hostile to ‘any long-term undertakings’ or ‘fantasies of “progress” or development’, not just at the individual level but also at the

4 Luce Giard, ‘Part II: Doing Cooking’, in *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, eds. Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol (Minneapolis, MN; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 212.

5 *Ibid.*, 213. Emphasis in original.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*

8 Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London; New York: Verso, 2014), 8–9.

collective one.⁹ Its space is fully illuminated, dispersing the 'shadows', 'obscurity', and 'alternate temporalities' in which Giard's microexperiences could still take shape.¹⁰ Arguing that 'the highest premium is placed on activity for its own sake', Crary quotes Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's updated, neo-liberal version of de Certeau's story of capitalism:

To always be doing something, to move, to change – this is what enjoys prestige, as against stability, which is often synonymous with inaction.¹¹

Reconfigured as inertia, stability is the new unthinkable and unnameable. This represents an amplification of the story presented by de Certeau because it renders non-sensical not just the absence of work, but also its stable presence, excluding, in addition to the dying, the lazy, and the bored, the satisfied – those contents to stay in place.

Crary locates a possible disruption of the 24/7 global economy in the persistence of a particular form of inaction, namely the 'scandal of sleep'.¹² He sees sleep as offending the command 'to always be doing something' since it 'poses the idea of a human need and interval of time that cannot be colonised and harnessed to a massive engine of profitability'.¹³ This ignores that sleep is both intensely commodified – the global sleep aids market is estimated to be worth \$80,814.7 million by 2020¹⁴ – and increasingly considered essential to enhancing productivity.¹⁵ Redefined as an action that underpins the non-stop economy, sleeping has become part of the 'there's always something to do'.

Similarly, in a 24/7 world that values movement and change above all else, boredom is no longer a potential challenge to the capitalist system or

9 Ibid., 9.

10 Ibid., 19.

11 Ibid., 15.

12 Ibid., 11.

13 Ibid., 10-11.

14 This is a projected valuation according to a 2015 study by Persistence Market Research. See: <http://www.persistencemarketresearch.com/market-research/sleep-aids-market.asp>.

15 Gregory Belenky, Nancy J. Wesensten, David R. Thorne, Maria L. Thomas, Helen C. Sing, Daniel P. Redmond, Michael B. Russo, and Thomas J. Balkin, 'Patterns of Performance Degradation and Restoration during Sleep Restriction and Subsequent Recovery: A Sleep Dose-response Study', *Journal of sleep research* 12.1 (2003): 1-12; Meagan Daley, Charles M. Morin, Mélanie LeBlanc, Jean-Pierre Grégoire, Josée Savard, and Lucie Baillargeon. 'Insomnia and Its Relationship to Health-care Utilization, Work Absenteeism, Productivity and Accidents', *Sleep medicine* 10.4 (2009): 427-438; Mark R. Rosekind, Kevin B. Gregory, Melissa M. Mallis, Summer L. Brandt, Brian Seal, and Debra Lerner. 'The Cost of Poor Sleep: Workplace Productivity Loss and Associated Costs', *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 52.1 (2010): 91-98.

a pernicious side-effect that may be countered through microexperiences, but what drives the system, albeit in a paradoxical way. On the one hand, boredom never has to occur, since there are now so many things to do all the time that it is impossible to claim not to be engaged by anything. On the other hand, boredom has to be incessantly conjured in order to push people into constant action and, above all, consumption. Thus, within the current system of global capitalism, boredom simultaneously makes no sense and total sense. There is no time for it and there is no time when it is not looming. Boredom has become eminently escapable – the empty time produced by kitchen appliances' efficiency is now easily filled by turning to the instant entertainment offered by a multitude of digital devices – while at the same time being necessary to produce non-stop pressure to move on to the next thing. Just as the new adage with regard to sleeping is not, as Crary maintains, 'You shall not sleep!', but rather 'You shall sleep enough to render you optimally productive as a worker and consumer!', the new adage with regard to boredom is not 'You shall not be bored!' but the maddeningly contradictory 'You must (not) be bored!'

How to put such an illogical command into practice is demonstrated by the Bored Panda website, which features a wide array of brief articles, lists, and image galleries designed to dispel boredom, while relying on the constant renewal of boredom to ensure traffic to and within the site.¹⁶ Its perplexing name – is it asserting that pandas are particularly prone to boredom (if so, how was this ascertained?), or is the panda, as the epitome of animal cuteness, supposed to be seen as a guaranteed antidote to boredom? – underlines the lack of a logic for the site's disparate content, other than it being so varied that, as a whole, it could never be deemed boring. Significantly, Bored Panda presents itself as a 'leading art, design and photography community for creative people' and relies on people uploading amusing content of their own making. Here, boredom appears as the 'creative impetus' it was often seen as in the nineteenth century,¹⁷ but in a twisted manner. It is not one's own sense of boredom that prompts a spurt of creativity but that of other people, while the product of creativity is not valued aesthetically but solely in terms of whether it draws and engages the attention of the nominally bored.

In what sense, then, is the site's content creative? The site states that 'anyone can write on Bored Panda', so there is no assessment – other than through the number of times a post is clicked on, commented on,

¹⁶ See www.boredpanda.com.

¹⁷ Spacks, *Boredom*, 3. See also Lindner in this volume.

or shared on social media – of the degree of creativity entries must have to be able to dispel boredom. Most posts are certainly not creative in the globally dominant sense of the term, heralding from romanticism and associating it with originality, beauty, and artistic genius. It seems as if the aim of dispelling boredom, which, ‘unlike its more dignified cousin ennui [...] is often considered a trivial emotion’,¹⁸ only requires a mundane form of creativity, especially when the site’s commodification of the relation between boredom and creativity relies on users moving quickly from post to post rather than being arrested by a single one. However, while Bored Panda is undoubtedly complicit with global capitalism in urging both its visitors and its creative community ‘to always be doing something’, the site’s light-hearted absurdity also prompts a questioning of this command, not least because it is likely to be used during work-time as a distraction from productivity.¹⁹ In addition, the broad, modest notion of creativity adopted by Bored Panda, besides being a ploy to generate free content, enables those who would in other contexts not be recognized as creative to show off what they have made, to mostly supportive comments. Thus, Bored Panda may facilitate meaningful microexperiences in Giard’s sense.

Like Bored Panda, adult colouring books, currently enjoying bestseller status across the world, are marketed as combating boredom and stress through creativity.²⁰ While the idea of fighting stress, associated with overstimulation, by engaging in an activity that for most adults requires minimal effort and skill makes sense, it seems paradoxical to use this same activity to battle boredom, often considered to result precisely from repetitive, unchallenging tasks. However, it could be argued that what these colouring books challenge is a different type of boredom, namely the erratic boredom generated by the ever-shortening attention spans of those trying to comply with neo-liberalism’s demand for continuous change and novelty. Adult colouring books then appear as part of a larger

18 Spacks, *Boredom*, xi.

19 There is now also research suggesting that looking at cute images may actually enhance productivity: Nittono et al. found that ‘participants performed tasks requiring focused attention more carefully after viewing cute images’. Still, only part of Bored Panda’s content fits the cuteness category.

20 Adrienne Raphel, ‘Why Adults Are Buying Coloring Books (for Themselves)’, *The New Yorker*, July 12, 2015, accessed November 4, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/why-adults-are-buying-coloring-books-for-themselves>; Kate Harrison, ‘The Adult Coloring Craze Continues And There Is No End In Sight’, *Forbes*, February 2, 2016, accessed November 4, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kateharrison/2016/02/02/the-adult-coloring-craze-continues-and-there-is-no-end-in-sight/#2519e7ba643b>.

movement appealing to slowness – from slow food and slow fashion to slow thinking²¹ and slow professors²² – in the face of the seemingly limitless acceleration of the 24/7 world. Carefully colouring within the lines challenges the fetishisation of newness, of having to always think outside the box, in a reversal of adult colouring books from the 1960s, such as the *Executive Coloring Book*, which, as part of that era's counterculture, took aim at the conformity its form of capitalism enforced by depicting it as a soul-destroying colouring within the lines and utter blandness: 'This is my suit. Colour it gray or I will lose my job'.²³ Crucially, these colouring books tended not to be coloured in, as doing so would mean to conform rather than to critique the system.²⁴

It is almost impossible to withstand the urge to dismiss adult colouring books as boring, immature, or infantilising, and devoid of any creative or artistic value: in *The New Yorker*, the craze is seen as part of a 'Peter Pan market',²⁵ while a blogger refers to 'poorly executed cheater art'.²⁶ Valid critiques can indeed be made of the hyperbolic claims to colouring's therapeutic and spiritual value, as well as of the genre's cultural appropriation of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jainist mandala symbol. Yet, it is important to realise that dismissing adult colouring as not 'really' creative because it supposedly does not offer any room for originality reifies a particular, Western notion of creativity and echoes the disparagement of Chinese *shanzhai* or 'fake' art.²⁷ What is ignored is not only that originality may be located in many aspects besides the delineation of an image (in colour choice and combination, pencil stroke, thickness of colour application, etc.), but also that creativity is not necessarily predicated on originality; skill, acquired through laborious practice and the copying of existing works, may also found and enhance creativity, just like creativity research has shown

21 Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2011).

22 Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber, *Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

23 Quoted in Laura Marsh, 'The Radical History of 1960s Adult Coloring Books', *New Republic*, December 28, 2015, accessed November 4, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/126580/radical-history-1960s-adult-coloring-books>.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Raphael, 'Why Adults Are Buying Coloring Books'.

26 Joni Edelman, '7 Reasons Adult Coloring Books Are Ridiculous', *Ravishly*, October 7, 2015, accessed November 4, 2016, <http://www.ravishly.com/2015/10/07/7-reasons-adult-coloring-books-are-ridiculous>.

27 Winnie Wong, *Van Gogh on Demand: China and the Readymade* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

boredom can do.²⁸ Present-day adult colouring books may indeed offer a 'neat package of therapy, escape and nostalgia'²⁹ that keeps people engaged in consumption and offers them a no-risk, low-effort sense of achievement, but they also encourage the kind of absorbing, durable activity that escapes global capitalism's imperative of 'you must (not) be bored!' In addition, like the Bored Panda website, these colouring books endorse an alternative, more inclusive notion of creativity that allows activities often seen as unproductive, valueless, and boring to make sense and to be endorsed, as when people showcase the results of their colouring on social media.

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28 Sandi Mann and Rebekah Cadman, 'Does Being Bored Make Us More Creative?', *Creativity Research Journal* 26.2 (2014): 165-73; see also Wilf in this volume.

29 Laura Marsh, 'The Radical History of 1960s Adult Coloring Books', *New Republic*, December 28, 2015, accessed November 4, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/126580/radical-history-1960s-adult-coloring-books>.

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