

NOTES ON BOREDOM AND METAPHYSICS, SOCIOLOGICALLY FRAMED

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ABSTRACT: Martin Heidegger's understanding of boredom in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* relates this phenomenon to the experience of time. In this peculiar experience the individual is found without outer references, alone with his feeling. The perplexity awakens with the possibility of nothingness, whose shade menaces every bit of existence's certitude. Out of nowhere seems to grow in the affected individual the urge to drive it away. As a counterpoint to this very abstract apprehension of reality, some specific strategies are offered: efficient 'pastimes', seeking to avoid the negative side of boredom. Free-market economy delivers the society plenty of options that pretend to be meaningful thanks to the separation of working time and leisure time. The reference to philosophers committed to a cultural critique (from Ernst Bloch to Peter Sloterdijk) will enlighten the contemporary tendency to refuse boredom's intriguing feeling of time, that suggests the presence of nothingness, anthropologically processed as death. In the end, the desperate search for comfort, well-being and fun can mask only partially the reach of that ontological fear.

KEYWORDS: Metaphysics, Boredom, Individual, Postmodernity, Leisure, Heidegger, Adorno, Nietzsche.

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Notas sobre el aburrimiento y la metafísica en el marco sociológico

RESUMEN: La comprensión del aburrimiento por Martin Heidegger en *Los conceptos fundamentales de la metafísica* relaciona este fenómeno con la experiencia del tiempo. En esta experiencia peculiar, el individuo se encuentra sin referencias externas, solo con su sentimiento. La perplejidad despierta con la posibilidad de la nada, cuya sombra amenaza toda certeza existencial. De la nada parece crecer en el individuo afectado la necesidad de alejarlo. En contrapunto con la aprensión abstracta de la realidad, algunas estrategias específicas se ofrecen como "pasatiempos" eficientes, buscando evitar el lado negativo del aburrimiento. La economía de libre mercado suministra a la sociedad opciones que pretenden ser resolutivas gracias a la separación del tiempo de trabajo y el tiempo libre. La referencia a filósofos comprometidos con la crítica cultural (desde Ernst Bloch hasta Peter Sloterdijk) ilustrará la tendencia contemporánea consistente en rechazar el inquietante sentimiento del tiempo que se aprehende junto con el aburrimiento. Sentimiento sugerido por la presencia de una nada que antropológicamente es asimilada a la muerte. Al final, la búsqueda desesperada de comodidad, bienestar y diversión enmascara solo parcialmente el alcance de ese miedo ontológico.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Metafísica, aburrimiento, Individual, Postmodernidad, Ocio, Heidegger, Adorno, Nietzsche.

1. Boredom's equivocal actuality

Martin Heidegger's attempts to define boredom in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics. World, Finitude, Solitude* have been considered ingenious and inspiring by some readers, while others find them most ambiguous and non-scientific. Most probably, the distance is due to the very nature of the subject, a tricky issue that is easily labelled but arduously shared or formulated. One of the main concerns about boredom lies, precisely, in the fact that the term itself cannot be fully understood by someone who is not *actually* experiencing it, and that even when it appears adequate, it brings no meaning at all. Heidegger pointed out this double approach, easy to recognize but arduous to objectify: "Who is not acquainted with it –and yet, who can say freely what this universally familiar phenomenon properly is?"¹. The German word for boredom, *Langeweile*, refers a moment that lasts more than expected. A "while" that is felt as (too) long, because of the non-interesting activity that happens in that endless time.

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In spite of being familiar to everybody, nobody really can define boredom, at least by means of a universal statement. A little further, still in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger shows his perplexity while trying to refer the slippery essence of the phenomenon. "Strange: in this way we experience many kinds of things, yet it is precisely boredom itself that we cannot manage to grasp –almost as if we were looking for something that does not exist at all"². Even more surprisingly, the treatment of such an ineffable phenomenon occupies more than a hundred pages in the above-mentioned work, that corresponds to the lessons of the winter semester 1929-1930 at Freiburg's University. In addition to distinguishing various types of boredom, Heidegger underlines the enigmatic dimension of its causality, which provokes that experience. Since it cannot be assumed

¹ Heidegger, Martin, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics. World, Finitude, Solitude* (William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, translators), Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1995, p. 79.

² *Ibid.*, p. 96.

as an objectified phenomenon –understandable according to the usual parameters– its cause remains indiscernible. And still, there is a support, a basis for its happening. Instead of being referred a mere thing or a specific, describable in content, Heidegger states that boredom is “a feeling of time”³. The intimacy of this experience can be understood in Kantian terms, accompanying the formal condition of sensibility –a priori responsible for the perception of inner phenomena.

Immanuel Kant conceived time as a structure a priori of our faculty to perceive objects –mostly the inner ones, including feelings. Those are the most immediate phenomena for one’s self-knowledge, that –Kant insisted– make unequivocally subjective any conception of “reality”. What we perceive outside, thanks to space, or inside – what happens in our intimate lifetime– is necessarily affected by the circumstances in which experience itself takes place. It is one step further that we find Heidegger’s phenomenological comprehension of time, assimilated to the existence of the “Dasein”, *i. e.*, the existence of that individual thrown into the reality that he constitutes along his being, and that no longer can be objectified. From Heidegger’s perspective the time of boredom is a truly ontological reality, that concerns Being in its genuine, fundamental meaning. “The more profound it becomes, the more completely boredom is rooted in time –in the time that we ourselves are”⁴, he affirms in “The Third form of Boredom: Profound Boredom as ‘It Is Boring for One’”. This reflection continues the ideas made public five years before, in 1924, in front of the scholars of the Marburg Theological Society.

The German author had asked in that lecture –entitled *The concept of Time*, previous to his *Prolegomena* on the issue (lessons dating from 1925) and of course also previous to his iconic *Sein und Zeit*, published in 1927– a couple of apparently simple (actually, rhetorical) questions: “Am I myself the now and my existence time? Or is it ultimately time itself that procures for itself the clock in us?”⁵. Thinking perhaps in his audience’s intellectual formation, Heidegger refers to Augustine’s pioneer effort; one of the early psychological explorers, who thought deeply about the link between time and inwardness, in the search for a first-hand, personal knowledge. Heidegger quotes

³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁵ Heidegger, Martin, *The Concept of Time* (William McNeill, translator), Blackwell Publishers, 1992, p. 5E.

–with his own, peculiar translation– a passage of the *Confession's* Book XI to illustrate that the individual's existence is defined and realized according to the manner in which he or she is affected in his or her intimate temporal horizon. "The disposition I measure in present existence, not the things that pass by in order that this disposition first arise. My very finding myself disposed, I repeat, is what I measure when I measure time"⁶.

The terms of the translation are obviously Heidegger's, who assumes to be paraphrasing. If someone asked with manifest ingenuity "what's the matter with time?" Heidegger would probably show that the question answers itself. His paraphrastic but strangely direct explanations point out in the lecture that everything that matters –all the matters which are significant for the existing individual or *Dasein*– occur in one's own (internal) time, just as Augustine first speculated. And, together with Kant, we can say that time allows the experience (the appearance) of inner phenomena. "Time is the 'how'. If we inquire into what time is –explains Heidegger by the end of his lecture– then one may not cling prematurely to an answer (time is such and such), for this always means a 'what' (...). What is time? became the question: Who is time? More closely: are we ourselves time? Or closer still: am I my time? (...). Such questioning is thus the most appropriate manner of access to and of dealing with time as in each case mine"⁷. According to Augustine, the things that occur in time live an imprint in the individual's soul, while Kant explains that the perceived phenomena are the materials that make possible the meaningful understanding of reality, once the unifying process of the intellect founds adequate concept.

And yet, boredom appears as something completely different, almost impossible to name. A feeling that grows out of nowhere, not being able the individual who is affected to explain positively its reality. No wonder it is represented by the unexpected yawn; an inhaling/exhaling that happens with no purpose, filling time with an involuntary but highly symptomatic action. Much easier to diagnose, anyway, is the urgency to remove the uncertainty that occurs during boredom. Referred by Heidegger in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* as "a way in which we stand with respect of time"⁸, that ambiguous phenomenon can be tracked by means of a negative

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6E.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22E.

⁸ Heidegger, Martin, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, ed. cit., p.80.

approach. In other words, not willing to determine what *that* is, but rather examining the different ways in which it is lived and rejected, as a non-profitable experience: “we may not make boredom into an object of contemplation as some state that arises on its own, but must consider it in the way that we move within it, i.e., in the way that we seek to drive it away⁹ or –he specifies twice– “to shake it off”¹⁰. Heidegger eagerly uses the first person of the plural, in order to show the universality of an issue that involves every being responsible for its own existence-meaning, the *Dasein*, along the experience of an unwanted time.

Via negative the philosopher reveals an understanding of boredom together with its symptomatic denial: the evasive maneuver commonly named “pastime”. The term (literally, *Zeitvertreib*) eloquently refers an activity whose essential significance is to avoid the previously mentioned “feeling of time” which concerns the existence of the individual in a radical and suspicious way. After the Marburg lecture and the lessons on the issue of time –in 1924 and 1925 respectively– *Being and Time* is the book where Heidegger anticipates the *Dasein*’s urge to “drive away” or “shake off” the experience of nothingness during boredom. The expression *Sein zum Tode*, “Being towards death”, is meant to communicate that there is a time of life that is being deployed from birth until its end, even if it is neglected or implicitly refused. Also, even more fundamentally, that limit encourages the determination of our existence-meaning in different manners –according to conscious or unconscious strategies– motivated by the unavoidable directionality of time. The modality (the “how”) is key in Heidegger’s existential hermeneutics.

The experience of boredom represents, thus, a threat for the construction of a meaningful reality by the existing individual or *Dasein*. Installed in the never-ending moment of boredom (*Langeweile*), he or she experiences void in a personal way; an undesired emptiness that annoys, that is silently felt as anticipation of his or her own state of non-being. The useless time reminds of what cannot be reminded or even “named” –that does not have a “face”, to recall Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Masque of the Red Death* story– since it is not lived in a temporal way. The anthropological fear communicated as *horror vacui* awakens with the restlessness that characterizes the experience of boredom. A physical experience, a critical feeling due

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

to lack of meaning, that at the same time means an opening beyond the traditional way of thinking. In other words, the transcendence of a materialistic comprehension of life. The same academic year (1929-1930) that Heidegger taught the course at the Freiburg University that would be published later as *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* had been inaugurated with his lecture *What is Metaphysics?* A lecture in which he sought to redefine the task of philosophy, showing progressively –by means of a deep questioning, once more– that the ontological openness is to be experienced through anxiety.

2. Metaphysics after the era of metaphysics

In the 1929 lecture it is anxiety –a very Kierkegaardian affection¹¹– which predominantly provokes nothingness' attunement. A radical mood considered as most appropriated for the awareness of the new meaning for metaphysics, transcending the philosophical, most common way of grasping things (and even Being itself as a mere thing). Heidegger considers critically the rejection of nothingness by science and by logical thought, incapable to understand its metaphysical relevance (“For thinking, which is always essentially thinking about something, must act in a way contrary to its own essence when it thinks of the nothing”). But he also mentions the importance of profound boredom, the topic –as we know– he would develop further that same year: “Profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and men and oneself along with it into a remarkable indifference. This boredom reveals beings as a whole”¹².

The negation of it all takes place or, literally –says Heidegger-, it is “revealed” with the radical experience of anxiety, which simultaneously represents an opportunity to “slip away from ourselves”. It “leaves us hanging” when “the nothing reveals itself”, not being able the *Dasein* to “grasp it” in any way. The answer to the question of metaphysics is kindly served by the end of the lecture, where –strangely enough– his thought appears rather direct and clear: “Human existence can relate to beings only if it holds itself out into the

¹¹ Heidegger had made explicit the influence of the Dane in his 1923 summer course, also at the Freiburg University, published later as *Ontology. The Hermeneutics of Facticity*.

¹² Heidegger, Martin, *What is Metaphysics?* (in *Basic Writings*, translation by David Farrell Krell), Harper Collins, 2008, pp. 89-110.

nothing. Going beyond beings occurs in the essence of Dasein. But this going beyond is metaphysics itself. This implies that metaphysics belongs to the “nature of man.” It is neither a division of academic philosophy nor a field of arbitrary notions. Metaphysics is the basic occurrence of Dasein. It is Dasein itself”. Just like Heidegger established an intimate link between the Dasein and time in his lecture *The Concept of Time*, it is not foolish to understand metaphysically the issue of time, inasmuch as it concerns fundamentally the meaning with which the Dasein constructs hermeneutically his / her notion of reality.

The distressing intuition of nothingness –going back, for a not-too-long moment, to the ideas explained in the first section– shows symptomatically the urgency to make sense of the world that is lived by the individual. Heidegger’s final question, at the very end of *What is Metaphysics?* –“Why are there beings at all, and why not rather nothing?”– may sound obvious or even naïve, but this very obviousness confirms the prevalence of *Horror vacui* in our Western context. Affected by the taboo of death perhaps like any other period due to the advances of positive, scientific knowledge, our time displays strategies to avoid the possibility of boredom –and of course, also anxiety– thanks to hobbies or any form of pastime. In other words, activities that entertain, relax or comfort, eluding the experience of nothingness. More than ever, in Heidegger’s work, those reflections on metaphysics seem sociologically fathomable –even if its author was not eager to do it– as we shall see it in the third section. As a matter of fact, he has been traditionally confronted with the philosophical school that promoted a line of thought explicitly committed to denouncing and improving the material circumstances in which men and women lived. We obviously talk about the Frankfurt School, focused on social theory and critical philosophy and some of whose members –most openly, Theodor W. Adorno– declared their disapproval of Heidegger’s intellectual implications.

Insisting on the distance between Heidegger and Adorno –often made explicit by the latter, for understandable moral-political reasons– is not the purpose of this text; a modest attempt to show some significant philosophical approaches to the phenomenon of boredom. The few coincidences between such distant thinkers are not casual, but rather rooted on a common ground. A ground in disintegration, in which Friedrich Nietzsche’s contribution can be identified. According to Heidegger, Nietzsche’s refusal to *believe* in metaphysics, to assume notions like truth or eternal good, prepares a new kind of metaphysics, a new era for its existential understanding.

Boredom itself might have been despised by Nietzsche several times (for example, when in *Beyond Good and Evil* he asked himself that “Isn’t life a hundred times too short to be bored?”), but his claim for the celebration of life in all its complexities, an acceptance of destiny that does not separate good from bad events, implies also a particular consideration of time, along which meaning or values are not presupposed or inherited as a comfortable habitat but rather created in a deeply personal manner. His very anti-theoretical perspective seems compatible with Heidegger’s existential hermeneutics. Thus, when the latter locks Nietzsche into the epoch of metaphysics, as the last one to come, he actually opens the scope for a completely new manner of thinking.

The nihilistic diagnosis represents the “metaphysical consummation”, but “that does not mean a last addition of the still missing part, nor the final repletion of a gap hitherto neglected”. It rather means “the complete installation, for the first time and in advance, of what is unexpected and never to be expected”¹³. At this point it is interesting to recall one of the opening paragraphs of *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, entitled ‘The Truth of Philosophy and its Ambiguity’. Heidegger underlines there that it is not possible to fulfill any expectation about the pureness of philosophy, and he even describes Descartes’ thought –the master of clarity and method– as ambiguous. The modern, neo-platonic references are radically reconsidered, seeking to awake a fruitful perplexity: “Yet if we ourselves do not know if we are philosophizing or not, does not everything then really begin to vacillate? Indeed –continues Heidegger-. Everything should start to vacillate”¹⁴. Far from giving an evidence that comforts, philosophy begins with this doubt. A deeper, more radical doubt than Descartes’, since it does not presuppose existence, or an understanding of the notion of Being. “Philosophy –he states further on, in a rather Nietzschean tone– is the opposite of all comfort and assurance. It is turbulence (...). Precisely because the truth of this comprehension is something ultimate and extreme, it constantly remains in the perilous neighborhood of supreme uncertainty”¹⁵.

Heidegger’s phenomenological approach refuses the *a priori* of any essential truth. Having adopted Edmund Husserl’s methodology for

¹³ Heidegger, Martin, *Nietzsche. Volumes Three and Four*, Harper Collins, 1991, p. 7.

¹⁴ Heidegger, Martin, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, ed. cit., p. 19.

¹⁵ *Id.*

his own purposes, he refers to a dimension of Being which is ineffable, impossible to grasp and/or associate to any being; and that, therefore, stirs in a subliminal way the interpretation of the being which exists, the Dasein, consciously or unconsciously committed to the hermeneutical task. Indeed, the task is often *unrealized*, because it is not explicitly required by things themselves and because there is always a handy pre-interpretation circulating in the mass that prevents its very conscience by the individual. The impersonal explanation found in the German term *man* appears in *Time und Being* comparable to the opinion which is commonly accepted. The acknowledgement of what is *naturally* real or true avoids that need, making believable the fiction that there is not an urge to understand one self's or to understand how life cannot be fully understood –just like Nietzsche stated– especially not in a moral, comforting way. That *there is no truth* is, indeed, an intriguing truth. It contradicts itself when stated, and in the fashion of Heraclitus' enigmas –that both Nietzsche and Heidegger appreciated– points to a different kind of understanding, not only focused in the positive, intellectual conception. As it is known, before Heidegger had already Nietzsche criticized systematic philosophy and the increasing positivism of the metaphysical and scientific views, postulating in works like *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* the need do design consciously the proper appearance, and to grasp a concept-less vital meaning.

The topic of boredom is prepared with a succession of questions at the very end of Heidegger's chapter 'Awakening a Fundamental Attunement in Our Philosophizing' in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*: "Have we become too *insignificant* to ourselves, that we require a role? Why do we find no meaning for ourselves anymore, i.e., no essential possibility of being? Is it because an *indifference* yawns at us out of all things, an indifference whose grounds we do not know?"¹⁶. These questions literally follow Nietzsche's critique of knowledge –mentioned too in these lessons– underlining how meaning cannot be fixed by any philosophical or rational projection, belonging to the any positive belief. "Must we first make ourselves interesting to ourselves again? Why *must* we do this? Perhaps because ourselves have become *bored* with ourselves?". And the final question, that would be repeated twice: *Do things ultimately stand in such a way with us that a profound boredom draws back and forth like a silent*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

fog in the abysses of Dasein?"¹⁷. The final part of the quote is originally in italic. Indeed, the enigmatic presence of boredom –that “silent fog”– works as a *leitmotiv* in Heidegger’s text, no matter how poetic or ambiguous might that sound.

3. “Free time” and leisure in the spectacle’s society

And yet, some specific hints can be found in the midst of Heidegger’s often cryptic explanations, in connection to the western predominant way of life. Most especially in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, whose concepts may easily be illustrated by social behaviors of his time, which are also present in ours. For example, that idea of “pastime” (*Zeitvertreib*) shines delightfully in the different modes of entertainment and cultural consumption deployed since the success of industrial economy and capitalism. An encyclopedic work by Ernst Bloch such as *The Principle of Hope* (whose three volumes were written between 1938 and 1947, and revised before their publication in 1954, 1955 and 1959), dedicates some of its pages to analyzing neoliberal societies’ management of non-productive time. Namely, the time for leisure, which is offered in order to maintain the efficiency of production and the dynamics of consumerism, meaning a kind of “invigoration” –according to the term employed by Bloch– for the worker: “The oppressed man is relaxed in the evening, when he becomes something like a free man”¹⁸. In events such as sports or card games –he adds– individuals symbolically celebrate their “freedom”: they play then as if could do *anything at any time*. But, of course, that happens only in a precise lapse, granted for their sake to have fun or “enjoy life”. The daydream condensed in the idea of a “permanent vacation” –the unlimited experience of entertaining free time– is an operative, very convenient fantasy for the productive system. It grounds its reality in a spacetime that is not particularly creative or open to *any* possibility. On the contrary, it is organized in a rather impersonal way, leading to overcrowded proposals to enjoy or pass the time.

Sports watching, gambling or buying unnecessary goods are certainly not new, but the development of digital technologies have made those activities more available –at most moments of the day– by means of the so-called smartphones. The scenario of a perpetual

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Bloch, Ernst, *El principio esperanza* (Volumen II), Trotta, Madrid, 2006, p. 506.

satisfaction through data science –remindful of the experience of fulfillment and freedom expected already in the early forms of vacation– may look closer than ever, especially if we think in the emotional feedback that is sought and found through the social media. Not too paradoxically, though, the almost-granted gratification appears as the main cause for unhappiness –we shall see it afterwards– and therefore activates the search for different forms of compensation. Fifteen years ago, one could hear the philosopher and Lacanian psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek –I personally had the pleasure to interview him in 2005– stating that individuals are overwhelmed by the obligation of satisfying the possibilities of happiness that are “offered” everywhere, anytime. Such an obligation is especially tough, since the necessity created that comes from the outside, having become a normative criterion, is introjected. In Freudian terms it could be said that the *superego*, taking control of the instinctive demands of the *id*, is no longer censoring desire, but rather behaving in an inverse though not less imperative way: it is now in disposition to stalk the *ego* by reminding *at any time* that he or she is not really fulfilling its (*id*’s) legitimate desires nor embracing happiness in the manner that ought to be done.

But before pointing out some implications of this diagnosis, valid not only from a psychoanalytical perspective, we shall go back to the fifties and sixties of 20th century to understand the primitive forms of a social phenomenon –vacation, entertainment, leisure– that is sold as a medicine against boredom, even if it may seem to contribute with its spread. Ernst Bloch mentioned the “dull and desperate stroll”¹⁹ of families along the boulevards of Paris on holiday, with a dim pseudo-joy; the melancholic attitude that Seurat’s paintings captured. The trivialization of entertainment concerns also the consumption of cultural products, which are converted into goods that pretend to mask boredom, sometimes in a very poor way. Bloch explains, for example, that “what is offered is liquidation, leftovers and cheap goods, an effort to turn Mozart into a candy”²⁰. Even more conspicuously, Theodor W. Adorno called attention, by the same period, to the comforting pseudo-understanding of classical masterpieces. In his *Philosophy of the New Music*, appeared in 1949, Adorno recalls the massive refusal –inversely proportional– to dodecaphonic music: “The dissonances that frighten them speak of

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 511.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 513.

their own situation; for this reason only are those dissonances intolerable to them"²¹. Perceived as uncanny, the unfamiliar harmony breaks the comfortable and well-adjusted ground. It works as a distorted mirror, in which no one wants to be reflected (the risk of discovering that the deformity is not a result of the mirror's imperfection is too high). Adorno would make explicit art's negative function; its capacity to disrupt and reveal positively that which cannot be tolerated, and that is typically buried under the carpet of the good and all too familiar conscience. Some years later (but only published posthumously, in 1970), he would explain: "When it is a matter of art, the bourgeois habit of attaching itself fiercely and with cowardly cynicism to something once it has seen through it as false and untrue becomes an insistence that: "What I like may be bad, a fraud, and fabricated to dupe people, but I don't want to be reminded of that and in my free time I don't want to exert myself or get upset"²².

There is a chronological coherence in Adorno's aesthetic reflections, from his early manifestations in works such as the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (written with Max Horkheimer) or *Minima moralia* to his late unpublished pieces. Appalled by the crimes of WWII, he expressed in many of them an openly pessimistic view of humankind, considering impossible any appreciation of beauty or any kind of understanding between people. The dissimulation of the wound, by means of comforting and commercial forms of art, would be radically denounced by him as a collaboration with injustice –that, furthermore, made possible its repetition. Adorno's tone is especially vehement in *Minima moralia* due to the closeness of the tragedy: "Every visit to the cinema, despite the utmost watchfulness, leaves me dumber and worse than before. Sociability itself is a participant in injustice, insofar as it pretends we can still talk with each other in a frozen world, and the flippant, chummy word contributes to the perpetuation of silence"²³. So, what about leisure? What spacetime does it have? Adorno is clear: the difference between work time and free time is something that neither the intellectual nor the artist knows about. Work itself may be understood as a source of pleasure, and not as a means to *make a living* and thus have "truly-

²¹ Adorno, Theodor W., *Philosophy of the New Music*, Minnessotta Press, p. 11.

²² Adorno, Theodor W., *Aesthetic Theory*, Continuum, London, 2002, p. 312.

²³ v. Adorno, Theodor, *Minima moralia*, Akal, Madrid, 2004, p. 30 (the translation, here, is Dennis Redmond's, available online).

free” time. This explanation appears in the section entitled ‘Timetable’, completed by a witty impression: “One could no more imagine Nietzsche in an office, the secretary answering the telephone in the foyer, sitting at a desk until five, than playing golf after a full day’s work”²⁴.

The refusal to appreciate the gift of “free time”, as if it were a poisoned candy, would be underlined two decades later by Guy Debord. Through the pages of *La société du spectacle*, published in 1967, we can find some ideas related to leisure that –quite surprisingly– still are relevant for the assessment of today’s scenario. He writes about a *temps-merchandise*²⁵, in a world where value relies in representation. That form of time is the “spectacular time” which is given back, after having been alienated from the normal time during the submission to production and work: “In order to force the workers into the status of “free” producers and consumers of commodified time, it was first necessary to violently expropriate their time. The imposition of the new spectacular form of time became possible only after this initial dispossession”²⁶. This time has a similar role to the one that Bloch already pointed out. Images are consumed as real during that time. As we know, perhaps more than ever leisure activities “perfect” to be reflected spectacularly, captured in pictures with moody icons or videos that create “stories”. They are enjoyed in the very act of being shared in the social media as reproductions: the more reproduced the better, the better the more real...

Somewhat paradoxically, the reality of the experience itself seems to be left aside. Or not. One could inquire –Pilate’ style– *well, after all, what is “the experience itself”?* Seriously, or at least more philosophically, the question can be rephrased: has not Kant already taught us that the experience is nothing but the way that we access to those materials –that are actually “given” to us in space and time and with which the image of “reality” is constructed? One could say –trying to avoid any shade of cynicism– that every piece of reality experienced, and consequently “reality itself” is nothing but an image, the sum of representations that the mind unifies, just like the idea of identity. And, then, the postmodern habit or tendency to design it artificially would not mean a real twist but one step further

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136 (about the English translation, see note *sup.*).

²⁵ Debord, Guy, *La société du spectacle*, Folio, Paris, 1996, p. 157.

²⁶ Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Ken Knabb, translator), Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkeley, 2014, p. 85.

in that same “spectacular” conception that leads to our times. In this sense, another episode of the critique of modernity –after Heidegger’s, Adorno’s or Debord’s– took place in 1983, consolidating the notion of postmodernity. Gilles Lipovetsky’s *L’ère du vide. Essais sur l’individualisme contemporain* identifies another victim, and that is the critical diagnose itself, that which Nietzsche began and that was so influential in the referred criticisms: “God is dead (...) but nobody gives a damn”²⁷. And, with terms that are even more familiar, Lipovetsky explains that “in the era of the spectacular, the harsh reality –the antinomies of true and false, beautiful and ugly, (...) meaning and nonsense– vanish, antagonisms have become ‘fluid’, in spite of what our metaphysical or anti-metaphysical thinkers may believe”²⁸. Lipovetsky postulates, consequently, that “it is already possible to live without purpose or meaning”²⁹.

The word that comes to mind to illustrate the dominant behavior diagnosed there by Lipovetsky –to understand the “contemporary individualism”– is *immediacy*, a popular word these days, but that belongs to the tradition. Søren Kierkegaard, influential both in Heidegger and Adorno’s work, employed it to qualify the aesthetic apprehension of life. A hedonistic attitude, intense but highly volatile, that leaves the individual always thirsty for more stimuli, unconscious of the responsibility of his or her choices. In a recent interview with Lipovetsky³⁰, the cultural journalist made the part of the chorus –a bit like Heidegger’s partner during *Der Spiegel*’s trance, back in 1968– and argued: “It seems human that people aspire to reach what the so-called welfare state offers them...”. Like then, the interviewer received an equivocal reply from the philosopher –almost in the form of an interruption, that still arises an all too familiar perplexity: “But there are parents who are unemployed whose children have a tablet, a brand-new smartphone, fancy trainers (...). In other times, aspirations consisted in finding a job, having to eat, a house. Today there are other aspirations, like shopping cute things just because everyone else does it”. Technology has improved much in 40 years, but the consumer’s habits –that Lipovetsky diagnosed

²⁷ Lipovetsky, Gilles, *La era del vacío. Ensayos sobre el individualismo contemporáneo*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 1987, p. 36.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ Interview published in *El País* the 1st February 2020, by the journalist Borja Hermoso.

decades before– have not changed radically. The dialectical exchange shows that it is still possible to live without ideals, making a program out of this (anti)idealistic idea, as explained by Peter Sloterdijk in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, a work appeared also in 1983.

Twenty-one years later, in 2004, at the end of the third volume of his trilogy *Spheres*, Sloterdijk treats the issue of individualism, indicating that the individual “claims a privileged access to him or herself”³¹. Spiritually distant from the Augustinian early (and pre-modern) introspection, the logic of marketing makes available an attractive self-knowledge, inasmuch as he or she believes and realizes his or her possibilities: “The ethics of individualism –explains Sloterdijk– recommends the customers to consider their existence as a unique and unrepeatably offer”³². The implications of this model are known to all of us. And, yet there is a fundamental issue that should be made explicit, concerning the promotion of self-care –it was mentioned at the beginning of the current section, with Žižek’s advice– and that is the “explosion of self-attention”, whose “immediate consequence is the general submission of life to the alternative boredom or fun”³³.

4. Roma o morte: ontological dilemmas inside the glasshouse

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The alternative “boredom or fun” could be an adequate *motto* for our times, a consumerist variation of Garibaldi’s epic “Roma o morte” –being the triumph over Rome linked to fun, and death to the experience of boredom. In a very subtle way –shown in the inscription on Garibaldi’s monument– the dilemma is recalled in a recent film by Paolo Sorrentino, *La Grande Bellezza*, in which several characters appear aesthetically involved in an anxious need for self-recognition. It is the case of a tremendously wealthy mid-age woman, that takes pictures of herself from every perspective and in any situation –she says– “in order to know me better”. Then, she shares those apparently true representations with other people, “friends” that she has never met, to fulfill her legitimate and inevitably personal desire of being known and, simultaneously, of defying boredom. Her name is Orietta but she could wear any name, since this behavior has

³¹ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Esfemas III. Espumas*, Madrid, 2004, p. 627.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 629.

become a pattern, a dominant paradigm today, when perpetual connection is a dream *almost* realized.

The narcissistic tendency implicit in the absolute attention to oneself has probably attained a peak in the history of humankind. And yet, even if the technology of the media has taken the issue of physical exposure and self-observation to a different level, it may be useful to remember that it still can be understood from Debord's critique of spectacular images. What may look like freely chosen tyranny –the tyranny of representations– has become a necessary ingredient for living intensively. Neuropsychology has evolved in the meantime, to the point to be able to explain how our neuronal plasticity makes possible the incorporation of experiences, no matter if they are real or imaginary. In both cases they are fixed in the brain through images. Since it does not make a qualitative difference between what is experienced “live” and what is perceived as an artificial or induced representation, achieved as movies or even daydream.

Long before those scientific discoveries publicity had reached similar conclusions empirically, being perfectly aware on how a reality is constructed by repetition, with the accumulation of images in a way that induces behaviors and believes. With variations, most slogans offer “the real thing”, connecting their product with a happy life, that leaves no space (no time) for boredom. No wonder that those who have more followers on the social media –artists, sports players or “models” of any kind– earn even more when they publicly show the consumption of some product, as if it had been indispensable to meet their successful condition. The illusion is fruitful in economic terms, but there's also an ontological perspective, not to be missed. As a matter of fact, in the postmodern era –back to Lipovetsky's incorporation of Debord– any genuine idea of life has become as artificial as its many potential representations. Representations *make*, therefore, reality. This explains the power of conscious visualization, and of the effect of the many unconscious brain-bombing that the advertisement industry plans, in order to make believe what it is like to live a happy life. Ultimately, the seal that guarantees that comes from the success or acceptance in social media.

Until the activity is not represented and shared, it is not completed and therefore remains unreal/unrealized. There seems to be no fun –or absence of boredom– until it is not made public on the digital world. The languishing Orietta has a point. The more her body is shared and “liked”, the more visible and real, she (or it) is, transcending her (its) own time. In this context, when representa-

tion and massive exposure are taken for real –never forgetting completely how artificial images can be– it is difficult to understand the common complain about the dominance of the so-called post-truth. Not only that complain ignores that the very notion of truth is posterior to post-truth (having worked the sophists before Plato’s theoretical speculations, and that it has remain critically affected for more than a century, at least since Nietzsche’s diagnosis) but it also refuses to recognize the comfortable benefits of such an artificial construction on a daily basis. Self-recognition and self-delusion oscillate randomly, like a magnetic arrow impossible to point the North, and not feeling any nostalgia about it. The claim for a solid, “real truth” in a *liquid* world –to use Zygmunt Bauman’s term– contradicts utterly the way that the ontological ground seeks to be recovered; that is, by the necessarily artificial projection of the (image of the) self.

The paradoxical, but very symptomatic activity that refers an activity which is valid only as re-presented, a “real simulation”, is mostly –but not exclusively– displayed during the *temps-merchandise*. A time to enjoy, to have fun or just to disperse that “silent fog” of boredom –a time that can be any specific time, since it is at reach of the smartphone. As we perfectly know, by second-hand rumors or direct experience –due to a sociologically curiosity or non-less legitimate will to be part of the show– in so many occasions this is a way of pretending: how often do we find people –or ourselves– gathering with “loved ones” but lonely, each individual stuck to a screen, working on a representation of what is (actually not) taking place? *Me in the snow, at the spa, disco, beach*, and so on... Are these images of fun the opposite of boredom, really, or rather boredom is revealed through its very negation, according to Heidegger’s consideration of this activities as mere “pastimes”? The apparent democratization of public exposure –the control of one self’s identity, that in Modern times started with an exceptional figure, such as Francesco Petrarca– offers through the social network the possibility to design life as a reality-show.

A sum of exciting experiences is required –as a new categorical imperative– *to be someone*, perfectly different and interesting, valuable despites the endless repetition of original (“different and interesting”) individuals. And yet, the narcissistic existence of the individual –its compulsion to reverberate in images of him or herself, that cannot depict essentially what he or she is– works as silent punishment. Like a post-modern Prometheus, the individual is always somewhere else, always somebody else, unable to meet the real

and complete satisfaction, *which happens only in the present moment whatever it may look*. The possibility of designing freely the personal identity does not forcefully make the individual happy. Boredom slips as a restless guest in the privileged atmosphere, “the ether of comfort” in the glasshouse existence –remembers Peter Sloterdijk, quoting Heidegger, in his title *In the Inner World of the Capital*³⁴. The “glasshouse” is the metaphor that refers the space of maximum privilege in which the individual grows, living as is if he or she was his or her own proprietor and avoiding cynically the realization that, replicated and recognized as real only from outside, depends on the gentle care of the others.

The tacit agreement on the value of the fake inevitably affects the possibility of an authentic experience. Here lies the paradox of fun or amusement –the opposite of boredom– once it is displayed for the others as an urge to do something, as an urge to be recognized and grounded by keeping away the possibility of nonsense implicit in boredom: the ontological reality of nothingness that affects every living creature, and that human-beings –as Heidegger suggested– process through different experiences of time, denying and affirming unconsciously its very end. Taking for granted subsistence and comfort, the reversal of existence tends to be unconsciously (and, thus, symptomatically) refused. David Foster Wallace noted in his commencement speech *This Is Water* that the boredom present in adult routines is virtually unthinkable beforehand. Examples that he gives: tediously waiting in traffic jams, having to shop in a crowded mall or even *living* there, when he thinks of the work of a supermarket clerk. This metaphysically bored individually deals with hundreds of customers a day and grants them with the automatic *Have a nice day* compliment, that Foster Wallace believes to be pronounced by the very “voice of death”.

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³⁴ Sloterdijk, Peter, *En el mundo interior del capital*, Siruela, Madrid, 2010, p. 255.