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REFLECTIONS ON BOREDOM IN CONSUMER SOCIETY

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## INTRODUCTION

Prevailing problems such as aggression destructiveness and apathy are closely linked to a phenomenon that has no small part in today's industrialised nations: boredom. As the problems of boredom in modern cybernetic society have not as yet been fully recognized very little work exists which reports or integrates any findings in this field.

In writing this thesis I have needed to gain some knowledge in fields such as animal and human psychology, media studies, theology and ethnography (areas that touch off individual needs in contemporary society). Knowledge on these subjects is a necessary premise for the understanding of boredom, and to avoid working narrowly, hence giving a distorting frame of reference. There are clearly many pitfalls in such an attempt as obviously, I could not become in any way competent in all or indeed, any of these fields. My aim is to present my findings and relate them to one's cultural experience in complex society.

Chronic boredom - compensated or uncompensated constitutes one of the major psychopathological phenomena in contemporary industrial society, although it has not been given much recognition. If somebody claims to be bored he not only refers to a state of mind but also to the world outside, indicating that it does not provide them with interesting or amusing activating stimuli.



This is exactly what I wish to discuss in my thesis. Firstly, I shall deal with the human mind and its existential needs for unity, excitement and stimulation, identify and effectiveness. This shall lead to a discussion on the overall environmental situation, sensibilities of modern cybernetic society and what it offers mankind. The discussion on man's essential needs will show that these can be satisfied in different superficial ways. I shall attempt to prove that it is all too easy to 'forget oneself' and that man's tragic attempts to gain reason and unity in oneself are only momentarily simulated identities offered by our contemporary society. I shall discuss how people become identified with their social roles, how they feel little by reducing themselves to items, how the existential split in mankind is camouflaged though man is becoming identified with his social organisation which is unconsciously breeding dissatisfaction and boredom while filling only rational needs in mankind.

## CHAPTER 1

Can the problem of boredom in modern society be related to those in poor physical health with low energy reserves? It is known that the metabolic cost of mental work is very slight therefore it is very difficult if not impossible, to prove that sugar might counteract the effects of boredom. In carefully controlled experiments years ago, Benedict and Benedict (1933), found that sustained mental effort for several hours required only the number of calories of half a peanut.<sup>1</sup> Other experiments have shown that in mental work, it is not actually that nervous system that increases oxygen consumption.

If one thinks of the body as a whole, boredom cannot be related to biochemical changes in muscles or nerves or by the lack of energy supplies. Boredom is not relieved by rest or sleep and is cumulative in its effects. It is largely a psychological problem characterized by loss of initiative and perhaps progressive anxiety but is never the less very real to those who suffer from it.

The lack of definition of boredom has been caused by the fact that the world does not have a specific scientific meaning. In medical terms it is not a distinct clinical entity. It refers to a phenomenon associated with impairment, or loss, of efficiency and skill,



. . . boredom represents an important component of the general fatigue feeling though rather transient in nature . . . an urge for a change from a monotonous feeling characterized with drowsiness. 2

It is not unlike the word 'unconscious' which has become a convenient category used to classify certain phenomena that are not clearly understood, yet are none the less real. In due course it will be clear how ironic it is that there was no such word as boredom before the mid 18th century.

All mammals have a strong exploratory urge, but for some it is more than others. Firstly there is the type of exploration undertaken for the sake of survival. Some animals have put all their evolutionary effort into the perfection of one particular survival trick and therefore they do not necessarily have to bother much with the world around them. The non-specialists on the other hand can never relax, they have to test every nook and cranny and keep on rechecking. They must have a constantly high level of curiosity to find their next meal.

But it is not just for the sake of survival that animals explore and solve. People enjoy the appeal of a good problem. It makes little odds whether or the problem is trivial or profound, vague or precise, so long as it tempts to resolves a state of puzzlement or contradiction. This is similar to 'pure' scientific research where the scientist uses his imagination like the artist.



He talks of beautiful experiment rather than of an expedient one. Like an artist he is concerned with exploration for explorations sake. 3

Statistics have shown that the most critical phase in social play is during the infantile period. It has been proven that exploratory involvement at this earlier stage has far-reaching effects on the later life of an individual. Experiments with monkeys have revealed that not only does isolation in infancy produce a socially withdrawn adult, but also creates an anti-sexual and anti-parental individual. In cases of extreme social withdrawal, we witness anti-exploratory behaviour in its most extreme form. Many become preoccupied with repetitive rocking and swaying, sucking thumbs or clasping or unclasping themselves, etc. Instead of performing a variety of heterogeneous activities, the withdrawn individual sticks to the few he knows best.

Stereotypical behaviour crop up in situations of excessive boredom. It can be seen very clearly in the case of zoo animals as well as in our own species. When there is no variability in the environment the exploratory urge stagnates. These zoo peculiarities, such as the pacing to and fro of caged tigers, are very frightening. They should be a lesson in reminding us of the importance of exploration.

There have been many experimental studies which have demonstrated the need for exploration, stimulation and excitement. The list of stimulation means is endless - accidents, murder, fire, sex, television are sources of excitation; so are love, music, art, drama. But the differences between some of these stimuli is a very important point of discussion as it leads to a reflection on our modern contemporary society.

Firstly there is the 'simple' stimulus, which encourages reflex-like reactions. These kind of reactions occur say when one's life is threatened - the response is immediate. They are fast and simple, continued stimulation would require either increase in intensity or change in content; an element of novelty is required.

Activating stimuli have a different effect. They do not remain the same because they simulate the person to be active. They do not produce a simple response - they require you to respond actively, relating your own opinions on them. You become more interested, your mind becoming more awake and aware. You do not remain a passive object on which the stimulus acts, as in the way of 'simple' stimuli, instead you become active and productive. One is driven by a 'simple' stimulus, while the 'activating' stimulus results in a striving effect. Such 'activating' stimuli would include poems, music, art, etc.

The most stimulating poems, concepts, facts or art will fail with somebody who is incapable of responding through conditions of laziness, passiveness or boredom. It is essential to point out that the 'activating' stimulus requires a 'touchable stimulee' in order to have an effect. The person who is capable of reacting to 'activating' stimuli is not frequently bored.

One of the problems which is later going to be discussed in greater detail, is the way in which modern society operates almost entirely with 'simple' stimuli. There are many people who are caught in the world of 'simple' stimulations. The whole situation is comparative to a drug: once addicted it is almost impossible to give up.

The person who is in constant need of ever changing "flat" stimuli is chronically bored, but since he compensates for his boredom he is not aware of it. 4

Chronic boredom - compensated or uncompensated constitutes one of the major psychopathological phenomena in contemporary society, although it is only recently that it has 'found some recognition'.<sup>5</sup>

In modern cybernetic society the vast majority of people (while not suffering from a grave illness) are suffering from a mild form of pathology : an insufficient inner productivity. They are bored because they keep on filling themselves with ever-changing simple non-activating-stimuli. In



contemporary society the bulk of people are bored, a shared normality. Part of the problem lies with the fact that this 'normal' boredom is usually not conscious. The average person spends eight hours a day working and the remainder drinking, watching television, going to parties and engaging themselves in sexual activities. Psychoanalyst, Eric Fromm, believes that 'one of the main goals of man today is escape from boredom'.<sup>6</sup>

The way in which we adjust to leisure time is a reflection on modern day society. In the days of Plato the 'end aim' of life was leisure for the exercise of man's highest faculties. They have slaves to do their work and we have machines. Yet, presently, ours is a 'work orientated' society and therefore it is probably unrealistic to expect that free time would be used creatively or productively in the sense of the Greeks. Rather than leisure time being used as a happy hunting ground for the independent spirit, it is degraded by the same forces that degrade work. Leisure becomes a frenzied managed activity to forget the job rather than a satisfying experience. Our minds need to be exercised, idleness brings uneasiness, a feeling of lack of purpose and therefore conscious boredom.



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## CHAPTER 2

For most thinkers since the time of ancient Greece it has been self evident that there is something which constitutes the essence of man. Darwin himself was very aware of the fact that man was characterised not only by a specific physical attributes but also specific physical ones.

What are the conditions of human existence? What constitutes the essence of humankind? Man is a cultural and social animal has developed cultures and societies unique in kind and complexity. The contemporary investigator of evolution, G. G. Simpson, suggests as the basic definition of Homo Sapiens the interrelated factors of intelligence, flexibility, individualistic and socialization.<sup>7</sup> Psychologist, Abraham Maslow, drew up a list of man's basic needs as being physiological and aesthetic, needs for safety, a sense of belonging, love, esteem, self-actualization, knowledge and understanding (1954).

One must look for a concept of man's nature in the progress of human evolution to gain true sight of man's needs in today cybernetic society. Taking into account the nature of instincts, it is generally accepted that the higher an animal has risen in the stages of evolution, the less weight of stereotyped behaviour patterns that are strictly determined and phylogenetically programmed in the brain. At this stage of evolution man's instinctive determination has reached a maximum decrease while gaining a larger and more complex brain structure especially a

neocortex three times as large as that even of his hominid ancestors and a truly fantastic number of interneural connections. Man can be defined as the primate that emerged at the point of evolution where instinctive determination has reached a minimum and the development of the brain a maximum.

Man's lack of instinct to make correct decisions, except in such cases as sex, hunger, etc. (cases for basic survival), can be very dangerous. Does intellect therefore guide him to make correct choices? We know how weak and unreliable this instrument is. It is easily influenced by man's desires and passions, surrendering to their influence. Man's brain is insufficient not only as a substitute for his weakened instincts but it also tremendously complicates the task of living.

I refer to that aspect in which man's thinking has acquired an entirely new quality, that of self awareness. Gifted with self-awareness and reason, man perceives himself as being separate from nature and from others; he is aware of his powerlessness, of his ignorance; he is aware of his end, death.

Because of man's self awareness, reason and imagination he has set himself apart from nature while also being a part of it. Being aware of himself, he realises his powerlessness and the limitations of his existence. This distinguishes him from the animal which lives, as it were, in harmony with nature.



Even though, man's existence can be relatively stable, with the support of his culture, the dichotomy remains dormant. Man's existential conflict produces certain psychic needs common to all men. One is forced to overcome the horror of his separateness of powerlessness, and of lostness and find new forms of relating himself to the world to enable him to feel at home. His need for a cohesive frame of orientation is vital. One answer lies in the suggestive influence of leaders and religions to guide him. The more an ideology pretends to give answers to all the questions the more attractive it is.

But a map is not good enough as a guide for action, one also needs a goal that tells him where to go (the animal has no such problems). Man needs a focal point for all his strivings. This focal point elevates him beyond his isolated existence with all his doubts and insecurities and gives him a goal in life. He can be devoted to the most diverse goals and idols. The need for devotion itself is a primary existential need demanding fulfilment regardless of how this need is fulfilled.

A solution to this problem is quite characteristic of contemporary cybernetic society. Most people have staked their self images in the present structures and are unwilling to lose their ground. They have found security in one of the

several ideologies that support industrialisation. They feel compelled to push the illusion of progress in modern society.

One becomes identified with their social role, feels little, losses oneself by reducing oneself to a thing. Man becomes identified with his social organization and forgets that he is a person, he becomes to use Heidegger's term a 'one', a non-person. One might say that he is a negative ecstasies, one forgets themselves by ceasing to be a person and becoming a thing. In becoming a thing they long for and expect increased satisfaction with less input of human energy.

I think that being nursed by the state from the cradle to the grave would bring such a boredom to life . . . therefore I can't think of anything more boring than that everything was looked after for you from your birth to your death, but people seem to expect that and think that it is their right. I think that if people have that attitude to life, it curtails - I believe this, I cannot prove it - the creative instinct. It would be difficult to understand why. But I never believe one should have any security and never expect to keep any. 8

... a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic, unfreedom prevails in advanced industrialised nations. 9

In our industrialised society the productive apparatus tends to become totalitarian to the extent to which it determines not only the socially needed occupations, skills and attitudes, but also individual and social needs. Technology serves to institute new, more effective and more pleasant forms

of social control and social cohesion. The technological society is a system of domination which operates on the vast majority of the population which accepts and has been conditioned to accept.

People should really try to find their way from false to true consciousness, from their immediate to their real interest. They can only do so if they live in need of changing their way of life, of denying the positive of refusing. It is precisely this need which the established society manages to repress to the degree to which it is capable of 'delivering the goods' on an increasingly large scale.

If individuals did rebel, stop and think there is a definite chance of finding themselves as being in a strange and over powering world, their consequent sense of impotence as an individual, could easily overwhelm them. If they experienced themselves as entirely passive, a mere object, they would lack, a sense of identity. One acquires a sense of being able to do something to move somebody, to make a 'dent', or, to use the most adequate word to be 'effective'. To effect is the equivalent of: to bring about, to pass, to accomplish something. The sense of emptiness in life is pronounced in almost any onset of boredom. Samuel Johnson, for all his prodigious expenditures of energy was in almost constant dread of what he called the 'vacuity of



life', he feared seeing everything as meaningless, futile or superfluous.<sup>10</sup>

In studying depressions and boredom one can find rich material to show that the sense of being condemned to ineffectiveness, emptiness and meaningless - i.e., to complete vital impotence is one of the most painful and almost intolerable experiences. If this feeling becomes conscious, man will do almost anything to get over it from drug to work addiction. Industrial society breeds masses rather than individuals, the perfect environment for mass media consumption. The rise in crowded industrialised regions led to more powerful communications, creating ready audiences for consumer goods which inevitably led to awareness of consumer art, with consumer sensibilities. During the fifties and sixties a heightened awareness of living in such a society led to the reduction of fine art to a consumer item, through pop.



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### CHAPTER 3

I think that the word 'Pop' best entails cast of mind or sensibility of modern cybernetic society. A detailed exposition of the full history of pop art is neither necessary or possible here as what I intend to discuss is not alone pop art but a closely related body of pop sensibilities which can be found in our society. The notion of pop not only referred to the new art of such people as Warhol, Lichtenstein, Wesselmann and others, it also stood for beat and rock music, poster art, the flower child cult and the drug scene.

Pop art was interested in both extending esthetic attention to the mass media and in absorbing mass media material within the context of fine art it was an expansionist esthetics aimed at relating art to the man made environment of the fifties. Advertising, colour photography and colour reproduction (big screens), films (early English), television, automobile styling were regarded on equal terms with the fine arts; not the same but equally interesting. 11

Pop art has been critized in the mid fifties as being pro-American. But before it is pro-American it is an art born of industrialisation. Pop art was pro-urban and accepted an involvement of media in mass production. Pop was brash flash and commercialized. Pop art is anti-art of expressionism, it is fabricated, invented and manufactured.

Art has always run the risk of boring most people - or all people under adverse psychological conditions. As I mentioned in the first chapter, the need for a 'touchable stimulee', a person

suffering from chronic boredom could not be activated by the most profound art. What is distinctive about pop art is that boredom was often not left to chance. Pop underlined the non-presence in art of every insight, feeling or association that might have made it interesting. In an essay on human feeling Susanne L. Langer believes that

the prime function of art is to make the felt tensions of life, from the diffused somatic tonus of vital sense to the highest intensities of mental and emotional experience. 12

The instinct to write and read away from the world in meditation, the instinct to draw, to see and perceive through the senses was lost. Screen prints, cut-ups, photographs from magazines pointedly suggested that the tradition of the artist was being superseded by the techniques of mass production and mass reproduction, identities were drowned in the welter of popular culture, fine art was sinking beneath a flood of anonymous, mass produced images.

Art became more of a collective than an individual enterprise, more a matter of ideology than of synthesis of form and feeling. It became less something that was worked out than something that was categorically given. Thus the true making of artistic advance was lost.

One characteristic of the pop movement is that it is proudly objective and non-judgemental. It dismisses whenever possible personal commitment or



expression. Pop artists maximised the presence of objects while declaring their indifference to these subjects. The emotional disengagement of the artist from his work was conveyed through sleek spirit of the machine shop, the rationalized impersonality of various forms of geometric and colour field abstraction. Pop reflected the artist's environment in deal pan. Andy Warhol disclaimed many times that that he wanted anything to do with his art 'I want to be a machine' he told us. He certainly did function as a recording machine, simply reproducing mass produced realities such as Coca-Cola bottles, Brillo boxes, photographs of film stars and Campbell soup cans. He accepted what he found in the world mostly using images directly and without comment, excluding to the maximum possible degree, lyricism, humanity and warmth of expression.

An aesthetic of boredom gained prestige in all the arts as the most advanced approach. Tedium became a goal, either as an affirmatively calculated effect or as in the inevitable consequence of the deliberate elimination of all qualities likely to be attractive to the active mind or imagination. Through its coolness monotony, repetitiveness and shedding of content pop is totally expressionless. One might say that indifference, depersonalization, standardization in general are typical of American lifestyle which we are all too ready to copy.

The following passage conducted by G. R. Swenson in 1963, shows how Warhol naively praises the reification of modern life as a virtue.

Somebody said that Brecht wanted everybody to think alike. But Brecht wanted to do it through communism, in a way. Russia is doing it under government it's happening here all by itself without being under a strict government; so if it's working without trying why can't it work, without being communist? Everybody looks alike and acts alike, and were getting more and more that way. I think everybody should be a machine. I think everybody should like everybody. **Is that what pop art is all about?** Yes, it's liking things. 13

With the ultimate neutralization of the self, any choice seems futile, human beings and events are like mere extensions of 'things'. This pop sensibility seems to condemn any existentialist theories while advocating the virtues of modern consumer society.

Pop art was indulgent and decadent refusing to adopt a morally consistent and responsible line on the commercially structured culture which it invaded and blindly promoted . Warhol seemed to become a victim of the advertising slogans he himself helped design before he became a fine artist. He had made the switch from ad man to artist with a single idea : not to advertize products, but to proclaim those same products with their graphic reproduction as works of art. Pop artists took the trivial and banal imagery of daily life at face value, and the subjugation of art by the laws of a commodity producing capitalist

seems to be complete. Pop artists surrendered to a capitalist mode of production in their techniques and glorified the commodity by their choice of subjects. Pop art, which partly originated in advertising, in turn influenced it. Comics, for instance began appearing in ads only after Lichtenstein had made them the main theme of his work. It is symptomatic that the artists themselves did not see this link between pop and advertising as something negative. Pop art was not an art of imaginary cultural revolution but rather than this it showed art as a commodity of the consciousness industry.

Pop art worked in the same way as the advertising industry, using simple stimulations to catch the audiences attention just as advertising loosens the reflexes stimulating the audience to respond - 'Ideally in Pavlovian fashion' - to its publicized products, pop art

loosens the reflexes of the spectator so that he will take to the picture (the art product) with resistance - before he can recognize the product. That is, the attempt to sell the product before its character can be carefully questioned. 14

Art critic, Donald Kuspit, sees in pop art a reflection of the manner in which publicity operates in a capitalist society. In creating a consuming relationship with commodities, it views all realities in terms of a commodity.



Thus one is supposed not only to be consumed by publicized reality but to experience it strictly objectively, with the exaggerated objectivity created by fetishism. The objectivity is reflected in the presumably "cool" look of pop art. 15

Kuspit finds this most explicit in Warhol's use of seriality when he creates a 'blank wall of monotony'<sup>16</sup> that prevents any genuine penetration of the reality signified.

Warhol, simply by manipulating signs - repeating them add nauseam and arbitrarily - makes use immune to their particular meaning and ideas from which they emerge. 17

Rather than leading us away from moronization Warhol drives us into it revealing a particularly technological type of fascism. It participated in the 'organisation of optimism' essential to our consumer capitalist society because it wanted the same instant, superficial, instant yet binding hold on its spectators that the well advertized American subject matter it used had on its consumers. And did so for the same purpose - to sell itself.

The environment in pop is the aggressor, man its victim. Andy Warhol claimed that the intellectual hated pop while the 'average people liked it. It is easier to understand'.<sup>18</sup> The phrase the 'medium is the message' carries the spirit of pop. Art became decorative in the bad sense of the word, banal and boring. Tedium became the accepted affect of most compositions by pop artists.

Confronted by dance, recitals of random shufflings, 'reductive' silk screens of everyday

objects, or underground movies of interminable length and home-made awkwardness the audience eventually experiences that combination of lassitude and impatience known as boredom. (One could say that the audience in being bored bears witness to the sober truth - that of universal vacancy. Its ennui could be said to be an insight into the modern world. In being bored the audience comes as close as possible to behaving as if it were not there.) But Art was being created without any real thought of the spectator's response. The virtuosos of boredom is neo-aesthete who, caring for nothing strives for an art that cannot be cared for. The work is a masquerade that keeps the viewer as a stranger and at bay. Its impenetrable surface makes it less something that was categorically given. Thus the true meaning of artistic advance was lost, keeping the viewer as a hopeless Philistine. The relaxation of pop cliches, the boring print, painting or performance served to strengthen the inner unity of various ideological taste groups that constitute the world of the arts.

In pop immediate impact was all - the overt and instantly perceived sensuous and formal qualities of the work carried its value. After pop stimulates, one is left feeling bored. One is bored, when the mind is 'forced back upon itself', the condition is similar to a situation in which one is powerless to

affect. Art which is consciously or subconsciously inspired by the aesthetics of simple stimulations or boredom is evidence of how widely prevalent in the disruption between the 'I' and things in contemporary mass society. Pop art is a mirror of the repetitiveness, in-expressiveness, abstractness and boredom of consumer society. The real significance of pop lies beyond the scope of traditional art history (as the movement went no further than a fetishistic stage) but the true legacy is located in the pop sensibilities, in a post-modernist society which bombards us with graphics, fashion, music and many more consumer products. Pop led to the post-modern, capitalist society where the culture of the people lies in consumption.



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## CHAPTER 4

Modern day social conditions of pathology are not separated from the individuals difficulties in generating a true identity for themselves. The conscious production of one's identities - self identification - is a necessary condition for enabling the individual to establish social bonds, to locate him or herself.

Identities bring reason, normality. 'Madness' indicates a refusal/loss of meaning. In 'normal' people the individual and collective demand for control grows. In preventing 'social problems', identity sources made available today breed boredom. Mankind has become dependent on the simulated identifications of society and measure their perception of pathology behaviour and relationships against these standards of normality and well being.

Walter Benjamin's essay The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1936) has become, with good reason, an essential starting point in assimilating industrial production of identity and of 'mass cultures'. In it, Benjamin argues that the specific difference between traditional artworks and mechanically reproduced cultural products is the loss of an 'aura'; it is this 'aura' that attaches to originals and unifies the historical process of reception. Aura has not exactly been replaced, but rather shifted to a new mythology produced by the



capitalist commodification of culture. Industrial art within a totalizing framework that traps the audience into a 'reception' of experiences and thereby blocks their assimilation and criticism.

The audience's relation to the artwork has become fully conscious and rational. The decline of 'aura' due to the homogenizing effect of introducing industrial production methods into culture, does not adequately capture the simulation of authenticity in fully industrialized cultural production. Aura is a unique phenomena of distance, however close it may be which is the basis for the empathy of the traditional artwork. When the cultural world is swamped by 'copies' without originals it is impossible to regard them as 'copies' anymore. We are offered a plurality of images that are not simply identical but refer to each other. The spirit of originality has not only declined but is simulated. The new post-modernist experience of culture can be described as a circulation of self-referring images constructing a meaning. We recognize and express our subjectivity as individuals and as group through our relations to these image sets.

Take the 'Mona Lisa' for example. Not only are there many mechanical reproductions of different sizes and qualities available to the public but also there is what we could call a cultural production of this piece. The image of The Mona Lisa has been used

by Warhol, Ducamp and in many different advertisements. So the many images of the 'Mona Lisa' refer to each other but are far from identical to the original. We recognize the 'Mona Lisa' because there are so many images of it in our cultural world. What we have acquired is a feeling of 'Mona-Lisa-ness'. In our consumer-orientated capitalist society, there are many image sets continually becoming available. Each such image-set postulates an original, an authentic experience, that is not within the image-set itself but is created by it. Thus if the real 'Mona Lisa' was viewed it would be immediately recognized by those seeing it on the basis of a prior circulation of images. This therefore can not be thought of as an 'authentic' experience as authenticity requires a 'distance'; that is, an experience of a cultural object which stands over the viewer as a source of meaning, as not being at the audiences's whim. The subject is previously formed by the image sets. Authenticity is not exactly lost but staged.

Theoder W. Ardorno argues in The Jargon of Authenticity that industrial production of commodities produces a homogenized mass of consumers of culture.

. . . now any person signifies only those attributes by which he can replace everybody else: he is interchangeable, a copy. As an individual he is completely expandable and utterly insignificant. 19

Subjection has not been entirely replaced, but it has been overlaid by a simulation of the individual through uncoerced and unrelated choices from a plethora of industrially produced commodities. it is not really that goods are for sale but lifestyles. There is no such a thing as individuals, but individuals produced through the staging of goods. Cultural identities are produced industrially.

The post-modern era of mass culture can be called 'staged difference'. Image sets set a standard for 'authentic' experiences, commodities are produced for 'individuals' who define themselves through their difference in consumption groups. Individuals are produced through simulated identities, post-modern industrial culture is not a repression but a simulation of identity. There is no alienation from an original identify to which one can authentically 'return'. Identities are no more coherent than a stacked deck of cards; technology and commodity production serve to define the rules by which we serve and shuffle the deck.

In our culture pleasure ensues from the release of anxiety in which identity is signalled by the consumption of differences, we find ourselves in our simulated differences from others. in our so called advanced industrial culture everything is



reproduced, simulated, commodified as an image and devoured. Through this we become fractionated audiences of ourselves, contemplating our identity as we search for a new original to authenticate our choices from the promiscuity of simulations. our post-modern culture thrives on its own uncertainty. Availability reduces identity, fuels the postulation of originals, and allows us to recognize ourselves by bringing them closer, setting the stage for renewed unconscious dissatisfaction. The industrial production of identity is a cycle of pleasurable recognition, authentication cynical dissatisfaction, and despair: reduplicated novelty and boredom.

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## CHAPTER 5



As automation takes over factories, offices, television stations and shipping, the dwindling of human employment towards a vanishing point of total free time has become a subject of anxious research, analysis and speculation. The prospect of a no hour week is rapidly becoming more likely that the 72 hour work week of a century ago. A nostalgia is developing for the good old machine that needed 'hands' to tend it, instead of being run by computers. What are the dispossessed workers going to do with their spare time. In modern times, joblessness, especially among youth but in other strata as well, produces its baneful results, mindlessness, a feeling of functionless which undoubtedly lapses into boredom, which all too often becomes apathy and depression. With automation man (who has been defined as a 'maker') not only loses his function as a homo-faber, but also has to bare the tragedy that he no longer possesses the character of animal laborans. With the 'disemployed' the absence of the discipline of a job or vocation deprives their personality of its psychological as well as its social foundation. The part played by work in simulating identity structures and even the health of individuals has been receiving increasing emphasis in current psychotherapy.

There have been workless strata before in the history of society. Think only of the half-million

in imperial Rome on bread and circuses out of a total of two million people the results were unsalutary to say the least. Historian, Arnold Toynbee, gave this 'internal proletariat' with its bored restlessness, its unproductivity and its rising resentment of the government that fed it , credit for being along with the 'external proletariat' or invading barbarians, one of the two key problems that caused the eventual collapse of the Roman Empire.<sup>20</sup>

The enlargement of spare time has already led to wholesome stultification. August Heckscher America's cultural chief, encountered a widespread feeling that leisure creates the very conformity which it should have the effect of abolishing. In his opinion, holding second jobs or volunteering for civic and charitable tasks, like exhausting oneself with social engagements is motivated by a desire to escape from leisure which many find intolerable.<sup>21</sup> By the testimony of Freidmann, conditions are no better. Accordingly, in France, membership in the immensely popular sports organizations results in indifference to larger political and cultural issues and in turning adults into retarded children under strict supervision'.<sup>22</sup> Beyond all the consequences of overgrown leisure, observers are haunted by the nightmare of populace twitching to the stimuli of the mass media with their predigested news canned philosophies, calculating infantile entertainment.

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## CHAPTER 6

The reward for enduring work under capitalism is called leisure. Most people in our society do have the option to spend eight hours a day earning a living, but when the boredom threatens to become conscious after 'business hours'; this danger is avoided by the numerous means that prevent manifest boredom, such as television. The growth of audiences for broadcasting has been spectacular, the great majority of homes in western society have television sets. Audiences for particular programmes are the largest ever known in the history of communications. It is difficult to make exact calculations, but there are many people who watch television for three to four hours a night. it is quite easy to do so. Television has become a normal part of life, and it is relevant to observe that for many people it must be in one of the top few categories of all their activities.

The boredom which is 'overcome' by watching television is only superficial, why is this so? Television is a very powerful medium and used in a positive way it could do great things. Television operates almost entirely with such simple stimulations as greed, sex, sadism, destructiveness, narcissism, etc. The mechanism is always the same: simple stimulation - immediate and passive response.<sup>23</sup> The boredom compensating means are like a bulky food with no nutritional value. One remains

empty and unmoved on a deeper level . The spirit of television has become so standardized that we have no absorbed interest in anything but simply an indifferent mixed indiscriminating bored reaction. Fundamentally speaking today's consumer society are inescapable from television and other related media, feeling slightly less alive when unhooked from long lines of news and entertainment.

Modern communications have drastically altered the ordinary structures of interest and feeling, the normal sense of being alive, of having a social reaction. 24

The content of television creates myths, modifies perception and changes the individual's orientation to his or her community.

People sometimes say that the way things happen in the movies is unreal, but actually it's the way things happen to you in life that's unreal. The movies make emotions look so strong and real, whereas when things really do happen to you it's like watching television you don't feel anything. 25

The extent to which a television audience can be considered active is related, first of all, to the degree to which a clear and consistently motivated selection of channels takes place, and secondly to what one might call a media experience (the reactions the media encourages to life).

There is some measure of selectivity available to audiences between channels and types of content, but there is reason for strong consideration as to how much selectivity there actually is available



and a good deal of evidence to show that much of media use is habitual and unselective. Given that the bulk of the audience watches one programme after another, through the evening few programmes are fully appreciated even if there was any appreciation to be derived from them. The sharp (relative) reality of the news is blunted by the action drama that went before; the all too rare offerings of aesthetic richness in a play could not possibly be appreciated by a mind affected by comedy or variety. Witnessing trivial and banal events with real human disasters one is often guilty of moral numbness.

Television seems to vitiate much of its best work in informing society by its tendencies to distort and distract - distracting people from what really matters into a show. Television has uncritically decided that news is what is newsworthy, that good news is no news and that news is an end in itself. Television seems to act on the principle - if it moves, film it; if it does not move, it does not exist. It acts on a maximum if it is dramatic it will be reported, and worse again - if it is not dramatic make it. Embodied in its performance is the assumption that the object is impact; not in fact communication.

The pop sensibility of dramatic oversimplification, immediate, thrills, flash and brash is seen very clearly in the way we receive news. The

concept of newsworthiness which television has imbibed from the press includes the device of shocking over simplification. This is shown most obviously in the language of news headlines, in which politicians do not criticize, they slash; people do not ask but probe; bureaucrats do not economize they axe.

In television's depiction of human relations, it fails to notoriously to establish critical character-types that can serve as models for social action. Its typical image of human personality tends to be wholly stereotyped and banal. Prime time soap dramas of tremendous popularity project sets of human behaviour and needs to go with it, needs for consumption. These dramas of dominance and financial fulfilment require that we passively view while subtle sequences and juxtapositions of the work demonstrates stereotypical thinking and plays with our identification. Their rhythm of purgatorial prolonging makes them a replica of everyday boredom and a simple chemiriccal escape escape from it.

Chat programmes likewise do not rely on equal degree upon an image of the 'whole' person. Rapid and largely meaningless chatter about a personality's latest show, film, marriage, hobby, etc., resembles cocaine babble.

These highly consumable and fatuous entertainments not only strive to establish and

endorse a notion of success but also demand it as a prior condition, such that; the 'personality' now provides an ideal type of human behaviour within the consumer culture of the west, both establishing false needs and a notion of life as consumption rather than life as expression.

The character of post-modern society is illustrated through the present articulation of sports, femininity, masculinity and militarism on television. The selection and combination of these stereotyped images into different sets produces different cultural meanings - such as the fantasy of masculine control, strength and success, from these such image sets identities are formed. Horkheimer and Adorno railed against the mass entertainments industry in the United States for having caused a wholesale loss of individuality in the society.

The individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardisation of the means of production . . . pseudo individuality is rife. 25

Since its arrival in the late 1940s television has mainly served as a marketing instrument flooding views with thousands of advertisements; dozens of them inserted in each transmitted hour. The commercial system during the 1960s moved in very rapidly on every profitable movement and tendency in popular culture. It is a reflection on a capitalistic structured society in which commercial



interests become a priority in every area of life. Wherever one looks in the streets, in our homes, in theatres - it is there promoting goods and services, anything that can be sold.

Advertising pushes a vision of life that satisfaction is available across the retail countertop. 27

The logic which advertising pushes is one of 'you are what you own'. We buy images, one's quality as a person is directly proportional to one's ability to buy one's possessions. The pop sensibility, 'The medium is the message' comes in full force yet again 'what you have is what you are'.

Most of the time consumerism is engaged in persuading us to buy things that we can do without, in defending luxury as a necessity. It is widely assumed by biologists that there is to be something of a traumatic effect on most people from excessive idleness, unwanted leisure or an abundance in anything. Boredom is in sum a response of the human brain to such conditions which are beyond his natural needs. Satiety is doubtlessly a key element in boredom. Advertising speaks to emotional hungers, presenting its commodities as emotional nourishments. One might say that we are hypnotized by the systems of control by the alleged naturalness of our needs. Needs are inevitably the result of cultural perception which we receive through the mass media.

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## CONCLUSION

The problem of boredom in modern cybernetic society has not yet been fully realised. With regard to stimulation and boredom we can distinguish between two types of persons: 1) the person who is capable of responding productively to activating stimuli is rarely bored. 2) The person who is in constant need of ever-changing, 'flat' stimuli is cronically bored, but since they compensate for their boredom they are not aware of it. Contemporary life in industrial societies operates almost entirely with 'simple, 'flat' stimuli. What is stimulated are such drives as sexual desire, greed, sadism, destructiveness, narcissism; these stimuli are mediated through movies, television, radio newspapers, magazines and the commodity market.

Because of man's self awareness reason and imagination, he has set himself apart from nature and other animals. He is forced to overcome the horror of his separateness, powerlessness and lostness by finding different ways of relating himself to this unnatural world. Man needs a goal, a map, an identity to overcome his lack of instinct to make correct decisions.

Momentary solutions to this problem are characteristic of our consumer oriented society. One can almost completely forget oneself in a world of sex, drugs, fast cars, religion, television, work, food and so forth. In a society where 'the medium is



the message', everything is superficial, identities are simulated, boredom breeds. The average person is nursed by the state from cradle to death in a cycle of pleasurable recognition, simulated identities, consumption, cynical dissatisfaction, reduplicated novelty, chronic monotony and boredom.

As for the future of boredom all we must do is think of Rome where idleness cum boredom caused the downfall of what was a 'great empire'. The sense of world-weariness, of passive indifference to life has become greater as we post modernism lives, sweeping a wave of nihilism over Western civilisation. The effects of boredom will not remain dormant much longer while the desire for ecstatic release from tedium greatens. Astronomer and educator Harlow Shapley ranked boredom third in a list of possible causes of the destruction of civilisation, a list that included war, natural catastrophe and pandemic disease. If life is to be saved from boredom relieved only by superficial stimulations (which could lead to disaster) means must be found of restoring individual initiative not only in things that are trivial but things that really matter.

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