

SPECTACULAR DESOLATION: BOREDOM AS A POLITICAL PHENOMENON

Philosophers and psychologists tend to conceive of boredom (under whatever name) as a timeless feature of the human condition. However, when reflection on human existence is understood as historically and politically situated, the question of the politics of boredom and of the political stakes of the dilemmas of identity, desire, and meaning associated with it come to the forefront. Building on legacies of critical cultural theory from Hegel to Debord, this paper probes the intertwined philosophical and political ramifications of the dominant modes of reflection on boredom today. If the constitution of identity is a political process in which transpersonal affective and power dynamics take experiential form, construing boredom as a revelation of the existential situation of human being as such can be seen to have an ideological function. The apolitical politics of boredom turn on the personalization of alienation it exemplifies and epitomizes in an age of information overload – a world where philosophical and psychological accounts converge with managerial discourses to reinforce a vision of boredom as the fate of the isolated individual who must manage attention and distraction and cultivate wellness and efficiency in the face of endemic burnout and attention fatigue. Approaching boredom as at once an embodied response to the increasingly technologized lifeworld and a mode of reflective distance from instrumental logic and mechanistic temporality allows it to be read, in Walter Benjamin's terms, as a historical index of the political horizons obscured in and through immersion in the virtualized experiential spaces of digitized mass consumption.

Elizabeth S. Goodstein