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Boredom: An Uncanny Guide to Something Unknown

Introduction

The same can be said of boredom as Saint Augustine said of time: everyone knows what it is but no one knows how to define it. What's more, a colossal amount has been written on the subject, in fields ranging from the literary to the psychiatric and psychoanalytic. (Maggini, Dalle Luche 1991).

For the ancients, boredom was considered an element within the broader category of melancholia and was undifferentiated from a kind of apathetic pain, a rejection of the world, and, in essence, madness, in its repressed and bizarre aspect as well as its creative and inspired one (Screech 1983). In the Middle Ages, boredom was confounded with sloth (lat. *acedia*), which was seen as a sinful emotion representing a loss of faith in the life-giving presence of God in things and in men's souls (Cleare 2005, Maggini & Dalle Luche 1988). At the dawn of the modern age, boredom was recognized as a specific emotion seen as an expression, somewhere between disillusionment and anger, of the loss of contact with things or of a sense of the world, subsequent to the crisis of the major explanatory, philosophical and religious systems (Svendson 2004).

The concept of boredom continues to be elusive in our own time, not least for its elaborate stratification, which necessitates a painstaking operation of semantic discrimination (Dalle Luche 1998). In the field of psychiatry, on the one hand, boredom more or less coincides with depression, of which it represents a less painful, though more irritated and frustrated, version (Maggini & Dalle Luche 1991). On the other hand, it is also identified as a specific emotion of restlessness, searching and dissatisfaction. In the field of psychoanalysis, boredom is again set within the vast realm of depressive phenomena, although the question is discussed in endless articles and analyses as to whether it is simply a variant of loss or if a different type of emotion is involved, somehow more active and tending towards development (Maggini & Dalle Luche 1991).

In this paper, for our purposes and so as not to go astray in a survey of the literature – which has been done by many authors and has not provided a more precise definition (Maggini & Dalle Luche 1991; Dalle Luche 1998) – I would like to identify certain polarities and then propose a definition whose purpose is to facilitate exploration of the field rather than to resolve the problem. Indeed, I am of the opinion that unless an attempt is made to pinpoint a recognizable conceptual center of boredom, it will be quite difficult to make progress in any analysis, given the vastness of the subject and the tendency for the concept to remain vague, given that it is too bland, too wide-ranging and already familiar. After this first step, to address the topic, it will be necessary to arise the issue of authenticity from different perspectives and to propose the idea, as suggested by S. Benvenuto (2016), that boredom can be conceived as the disillusionment of one who believed in a promise that was not kept and was thus deceptive. In the end, some operational conclusions will be drawn.

Boredom: lack or rejection?

One possible polarity is that between lack and rejection.

In the first case – lack — boredom expresses the confused, irritated and discontented perception, in large part unclear and contradictory, of a lack of some essential function in human relations (Svendsen 2004). An example is the boredom of a person involved in a group or institution characterized by an excess of self-satisfaction, conformism or superficiality, and consequently boredom experiences result as a sign of the absence of vivacity and personal richness in the communication between the members of the institution (Gaburri 2003, Kaës 1987).

In the other case – rejection – boredom expresses an active impulse of subtle aggression, which tends to annul the dynamic contribution offered by reality and in general by others, asserting instead destructive, grandiose and hostile narcissism (Mancia 1990, Zapparoli 1979). In this case boredom may be the consequence of a denial of the affectivity of the other, as occurs in certain perversions or chronic psychoses, in which the need to keep the acute, dramatic aspect of the psychosis under control drives the psychotic to drastically repress all dynamic aspects of the relationship for the sake of tranquility and stability: Order replaces life and all its fluctuations (Correale 2000). In both cases – lack and rejection – the space-time for genuineness is saturated, as well as a possible contact with otherness, the objects felt are like something known, they are always the same over the time and they will never change. In the first example it was “conformism or superficiality”, in the second “the full repression of all dynamics aspects of relationship”.

To find our way through the labyrinthine accumulation of data, I would like to propose a specific conceptual core, which, as I said before, in no way exhausts our subject, nor does it begin to cover all the possible meanings. Instead, it aims to serve as a point of reference around which other possible meanings can be arranged, either by analogy or by contrast.

I propose to define boredom as the subjective experience of a partial or total lack of authenticity in relationships; hence boredom expresses a confused, unclear emotion that we are not in the presence of something which comes from within, but of something affected, far removed or conformist. Objects of perception, experienced as obvious and predictable, lose their aura of novelty and become enmeshed in a network of pre-established symbols which conceal their potential for change, vitality and discovery. The object is perceived with anger since it is experienced as lack lustre, dull, and all too familiar.

I could reformulate what I have said so far by stating that boredom is a kind of reproach against objects for being too dull, lifeless, and static, and that this reproach stems from the fact that bored people feel persecuted by a lack of authenticity either in themselves or in their significant relationships.

The problem of authenticity

Thus, the problem arises of tackling the issue of authenticity – an extremely arduous operation which I would like to do, however, with a few concise references, in the hopes of grasping at least a few of the essential aspects of this question (Neri 2005).

The notion of the uncanny, as proposed by Freud in his renowned work, offers an interesting approach to this problem. Freud states that the uncanny is the alien or strange within the familiar (Freud 1919). I would like to take this definition in its widest sense and state, as a possible development of that assertion, that the sphere of otherness – that which is outside of ourselves – must inevitably contain a component of strangeness. The presence of this component means that otherness always places us in some way in a passive state, and, through quite complex but identifiable pathways, this passivity also generates an ethical demand: the other exists, and is counting on us and on the fact that his existence will be acknowledged.

This otherness, can also be conceived as a mild form of depersonalization: at times the other, or the object, seem to contain something new or, on the contrary, something very old. This change reflects an ineffable element in the object, that part of the object itself which words cannot fully express and which bears witness in some way to its partial unassimilability. This question, whose roots go back to ancient philosophical reflections, has been amply developed by Lacan in his discussion of the real (Lacan 1962-1963).

This aspect can be described – as it was in certain philosophical contexts, especially by Heidegger (Heidegger 1927), and as proposed more specifically in an interesting association between the uncanny in Freud and disorientation in Heidegger (Berto 1999) – as the difference between *Sein* (being) and *Seiende* (entity). The *Saiende* is the given object while the *Sein* is the ineffable component of any object, the germinal, generative component which the object possesses in common with all other objects and which eludes any final definition. Other descriptions of *Seiende* focus on the almost sacred quality of the object, where sacred refers to an aspect that arouses both fear and attraction, capable of opening onto the universal and essentially foreign to the habitual view (Colli 1975). Hölderlin's tragic, broadly defined, also falls into this category (Bodei 1989).

I won't dwell on this subject, which has received considerable historical attention, but I would like to stress the importance of seeing authenticity as a type of curiosity, astonishment, fear of and attraction to this ineffable aspect of the other; that is, the part of the other which we never fully know and which is thus open to further categorization and qualification, and is not caught once and for all in the web of consolidated, established symbols.

Conceived in this way as a core of otherness that eludes the habitual and with residues of unassimilability (Berto 1999), the concept of the uncanny allows us a further clarification. We are accustomed to recognizing anxiety as the feeling that accompanies the appearance of the uncanny, and Freud associates it with the compulsion to repeat, to the inorganic element in our nature, to the double with its outcome of death and annulment, and to the alienating gaze (Freud 1919). More recently, in the vast realm of psychosis, the uncanny has been seen as the beginning of the process of depersonalization; that is to say, the beginning of a catastrophic crisis which can lead to the collapse of spatial-temporal coordinates and which, therefore, heralds the dreadful anxiety attending departure from the habitual world and entrance into a mysterious, unknowable one (Borgna 1995).

But, besides this conception of the anxiety of the uncanny, is it possible to imagine a more benign version? While it is absolutely true that the uncanny signals the appearance of an unbearable anxiety, which prefigures a detachment from reality and the loss of the sense of oneself, it is also true that there is an uncanny experience that fits into the intimate and the familiar, creating a break in continuity and a possible opening. Empathy and an affectionate sense of closeness and protection can exist simultaneously with this uncanny and enter into a dialectic with it, which may be either devastating or promising. In such cases, the uncanny appears as bursts or moments of strangeness, which are however subject to openness, to development and to the acquisition of new sensory or imaginative data concerning the object.

In this regard, Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1955) distinguished two types of possibilities in the concept of experience: the first derives from accretion, through the slow deposit of successive encounters, which leads to the domestication of otherness, so to speak, to its entry into our usual familiar, personal world; the second, through illumination, in which moments of breaking through occur within the strata and deposits. Such moments may arouse a slight anxiety, but they also arouse curiosity, wariness but also desire. In brief, they give the object new life by marking it as something as yet unknown and which is thus open to the world, to language and to knowledge. A vision of human relationships based exclusively on the value of experiences of repeated contact runs the risk of obliterating this possible opening. In order to preclude any type of anxiety, a potential window on the world is closed when importance is given only to the idealized experience of encounter and contact. From this point of view boredom feeling can be a possible opening for what is "yet unknown" at the price of a slight arouse of anxiety.

A second way of conceiving authenticity comes from Winnicott (Winnicott 1971), who approaches the question of authenticity when he speaks of the true self. This concept is well known, at least two important aspects can be highlighted for the purposes of our discussion.

First, the true self has something to do with the body. Its real existence, its visions, its relationship with time, illness and death, but, above all, its relationship with desire, instinctual and emotional drives, the inexhaustible urge towards the outside world, towards the other, towards the object, that urge recognized in antiquity – for example, in Plato's concept of Eros, Aristotle's concept of movement or Saint Augustine's of *appetitus* – and taken up again with the Freudian libido.

This inexhaustibility of the urge towards the outside world opens the way to the issue of the relationship between boredom and the infinite, according to which boredom is considered a form of atheistic spirituality (Dalle Luche 1998, Jankélévitch 1963).

In light of this first aspect, we could say that the authentic is all that which has a corporeal dimension, which is related to need and desire, but also to fear of death and to confronting solitude, sexuality and life's most infinite and mysterious aspects.

The second aspect concerns the mysterious assertion that the true self is an unreachable core of a human being – a secret aspect that can never be completely revealed. Excluding mystical interpretations, I think we can associate Winnicott's idea with the ineffable aspect of the self and the object, the generative dimension linked to the stream of consciousness which leads us to conceive of the self as a flow, a flowing, in some way associated with the infinite and from which Saint Augustine derived the idea of the infinite dwelling in man's soul.

If we put these two aspects together – authenticity as a benign contact with the uncanny and authenticity as the expression of a corporality that is always essentially other even if it becomes largely our own – we can return to the concept of boredom, proposing the idea that man has a kind of hunger for this type of authenticity and that its absence places man in a condition of deprivation, as suggested in other terms by Bion (Bion 1962).

In fact, this statement is not unlike certain well-known assertions made by Bion who proposed, in approaching analytic material, a type of phenomenological *époque*, through his suggestion to renounce memory and desire (Bion 1970). That is to say, a reduction of that which is already familiar, an attempt to approach that illumination we mentioned before, but disregarding any mystical qualities and conceived as part of a methodologically controlled experiment, so to speak. Furthermore, when Bion said that psychoanalysis must operate within the sphere of the senses, of myth and passion, he touched upon an important truth: it is essential that the body be present in human relations through its senses, and likewise there must be emotion, which arises from the way in which mind and body experience the relationship together.

The unending promise

But let us get back to the question of boredom. Following up on a very constructive suggestion by Sergio Benvenuto (2016), I would like to propose the idea that boredom can be conceived as the disillusionment of one who believed in a promise that was not kept and was thus deceptive: nature, the world, or others promised something that never happened. Within the subject, the counterpart to such a promise is the feeling Borgna (2005) defines as waiting with no hope or expectation.

The promise can be interpreted in two ways. In the first, we can invoke the ideal of the Ego. Within the Freudian tradition, and even more within this aspect specifically dealt with by Kohut (1971), we can state that the child faced with an overwhelming ideal of the Ego cannot reconcile the true self with the ideal or

grandiose self. The object's relation is saturated by idealization and the child can only see an unrealistic self through the looking glass. This view is in fact a very illuminating method to explain much narcissistic boredom, where the object is constantly disappointing because expectations are so high and, for the most part, unrealistic.

Nonetheless, in my opinion, this view has the weakness of underplaying the role of the other and focusing too much upon the self. Idealization unquestionably represents both a powerful force and a grave danger, yet some bored people experience an urge towards the reality of things, towards their essence, a nearly insatiable yet productive curiosity that induces a very strong move towards the other, which may be permeated with idealization but is not exclusively defined by it.

From a strict Freudian perspective, this urge could be attributed to a somewhat hysterical condition of the bored person, in the sense that, having been deprived of the corporeal and sexual dimension in his primary relationships by a parent who constantly invoked it and then prohibited it (Bollas 2002), the person continually seeks it out in his object relationships without however allowing himself the luxury of achieving it. This conflict is a desire that cannot be achieved and despite this repeated. But when this boredom is related to the uncanny we referred to earlier and penetrates so profoundly in object relations, can it really only be explained by the grandiose self's dissatisfaction, as in Kohut's version, or by the person's underlying hysteria, as in Freud's version?

Is it not more legitimate to imagine that in some types of boredom there is an acute perception of a fundamental lack in the human subject, of an insurmountable separateness between the self and the world, of an underlying negativity which paradoxically, however, becomes a dynamic force stimulating a constant search for associations, bridges and connections? Basically, the aspect I am trying to stress was clearly pointed out by Winnicott (Winnicott 1971), whose discussion of transitional objects repeatedly highlighted the need to overcome the basic separateness, this ineliminable negative, through the illusionary activity of fantasy, art, religion and feelings of love. There is a famous poem from J.L. Borges that underline how a death promise can become an unsaturated pledge, it's called "*The unending gift*" and it says:

"A painter promised us a picture.

Here, in New England, having learned of his death, I felt once again the sadness of recognizing that we are but shapes of a dream. I thought about the man and the picture, both lost.

(Only the gods can make promises, for they are deathless).

I thought about the place, chose in advance, where the canvas will not hang.

Later, I thought: if it were there, wouldn't it in time become one thing more – an object, another of the vanities or habits of the house? Now the picture is limitless, unending, capable of taking any form or color and bound to none.

In some way, it exists. It will live and grow, like music, and will remain with me to the end. Thank you, Jorge Larco.

(Men can make promises, too, for in a promise there is something that does not die)". (Borges 1975).

It seems clear that, like a promise, there are at least two ways of thinking boredom feeling: the first in relation with authenticity and the hunger for a new way of perception; the other in relation with a saturated world.

Thus the problem becomes why some subjects hunger more for authenticity than others, with an almost painful connotation. I believe that the answer can be found in the experience of a childhood traumatic situation that has shaken the subject without plunging him into chaos, and created a deep, though not

devastating, sense of solitude within him. However, a separate, in-depth analysis would be needed to do this subject justice (Green 2004).

So, let us come back to the subject of authenticity and our effort to isolate an essential core from within the full range of boring or bored situations – a core that is hungry for reality and thus tends to mistrust self-satisfied or conformist responses to the problem. The question then arises: what type of relationships can facilitate the discovery of this authenticity in oneself and in things?

I would like to follow up on an idea of Agamben's (Agamben 1977), and on a much older proposal by Greenson (Greenson 1953), which I find very interesting. They suggest that boredom derives from a strong and necessary attachment to an object some of whose parts are deadened, which results in a corresponding deadening in the subject. This type of attachment must be strong, necessary and irreplaceable and yet, the subject perceives an aspect of numbness, absence, and death within the bond which calls forth a corresponding sensation in him or her. It is characteristic of boredom that this aspect is not perceived clearly as such, but rather as a type of toxic exhalation, like a food whose bad taste is not immediately perceived but which leaves the foul taste of something gone bad. In response to this perception, the subject often intensifies the object relationship hoping his sensation will be overwhelmed by the renewed, stronger attachment, but thereby sets off a vicious circle. To understand better this idea let's focus on the example I made while talking about the lack polarity of boredom in the introduction of the paper. The experience of boredom by the people involved in a group or institution is a sign of the absence of vivacity and personal richness in the communication between members of the group, characterized by an excess of (plenty of) self-satisfaction, conformism and superficiality. These are dead objects.

As a result, a veil of hypocrisy is established – unacknowledged hypocrisy, or even worse, hypocrisy that is often taken for affection or respect for the other. Regardless, it is sufficient to suffocate the authenticity we have been discussing – that is, the sense of a periodic rediscovery of the otherness of the other, which is an absolute prerequisite for the vitality of a relationship.

In this regard, we need to touch upon the subject of emptiness. From the point of view that concerns us here, emptiness is not only an absence but also the presence of an overload of dead or deadened objects, existing alongside or together with vital and beloved parts. The contemporary world offers us a vast example of this situation, in the addictive exaltation which values objects over people for the satisfaction of needs and desires (Recalcati 1998). The Lacanian conception of the gadget object (Lacan 1982) and the entire psychoanalytic interpretation of addiction indicate that the tendency in contemporary society to satisfy needs and desires with objects and not with relationships feeds the very emptiness that it seeks to fill and creates a circular causality: the emptier I feel, the more I seek to fill my emptiness with unsatisfying objects, as part of a narcissistic and inexhaustibly destructive spiral.

Conclusions

I would like to conclude by reiterating a few concise points. Within the vast world of boredom, I have tried to identify a specific way of being bored, which is typical of people who are partially or completely trapped in a contradictory relationship with another person or with a group or institution in which the appreciation of some parts corresponds to the non-acknowledgment – through denial or confusion – of other dead or deadened parts of the other person, group or institution. The result is a veil of hypocrisy that in a sense shrouds the relationships with dust and envelops them in an aura of boredom. This boredom arises when the hunger for authenticity so characteristic of human beings remains unsatisfied. This phenomenon cannot be explained exclusively by idealization but is related instead to a primary, essential acknowledgment of the irreducible core of otherness, which is the underpinning of both our pains and our pleasures. As Greenson pointed out years ago, emptiness is an overload of dead or deadened objects whose presence inhibits the affective and libidinal drive towards the outer world: "The emptiness in boredom is due to the repression of

forbidden instinctual aims and objects along with inhibition in imagination” (Greenson 1953). Thus, this too-full emptiness is replaced by another kind of emptiness – one associated with negation as suggested by Freud (1925) but which still leaves room for openness and development (Cimino 2005).

So, what are the operational consequences? The first regards what I propose as a return to the sensory nature of things, to their being something alive, in flesh and blood and not merely phantoms or parts of a dream inside of us. While psychoanalysis has always followed the path from the thing to the symbol (in the wake of Freud who proceeded from the representation of the thing to the representation of the word) and established one of its most significant contributions to the knowledge of the human mind upon this approach, at this point it is necessary to propose the inverse process – not as an exclusive alternative but *alongside* the previous one: from the symbol to the actual thing, from phantom to perception. This orientation has been energetically and effectively argued by Sergio Benvenuto for years (Benvenuto 1998). In the above-mentioned paper, he closes stating that the real interpretation does not exist: “The argument it is not to finally find the meaning behind a metaphorical meaning but rather to answer metaphors with other metaphors which bear more grace with the aim to act in a way in which the subject become aware of what it is real”. Boredom, as well as the analytical interpretation, puts us in relation with the real and leads us to a dialectic approach to otherness which by definition moves away from both the ideal and the usual.

It is as if we need the ability to return to the real object, to its share of strangeness, and to propose a type of knowledge that is neither stereotypical nor an endless reference from phantom to phantom, from transformation to transformation, from narration to narration, which dislodges the psychoanalysis of the relationship with the real and shifts it into the sphere of an inaccessible idealism. A return to the thing counters boredom and drives the person to come up with new explanations, new interpretations and new models in the group, institution or individual and to not seek refuge in an idealized relationship between two people in which strangeness is forbidden in the name of the struggle against anxiety.

The second point concerns the uncanny. A careful analysis of these micro-depersonalizing moments can serve as a valuable tool and irreplaceable guide to break out of pre-established frameworks, to venture into as yet unknown areas of oneself and of the other. Similarly within love relationships and institutionalized relationships in general, the pursuit of strangeness can be a corrective element against the danger of deadening, numbness and monotony that threatens the life of the institution so profoundly.

A third operational consequence concerns what I propose as an appreciation of boredom – of course not narcissistic boredom or destructive boredom or omnipotent, grandiose boredom, but rather the boredom of those who are exasperated by the lack of a more intense and real human contact. In this sense, I would almost like to invite us all to get bored a bit more often.

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