

The dreambird of experience

Utopia, possibility, boredom

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What future for utopia? Or, rather, what future for the utopian after the critique of utopia? What future for possibility after the critique of its depiction as actual? Utopias have a notoriously contradictory structure: they evoke possibilities by depicting them as actual, yet thereby, in themselves partaking of the actual – as depictions – they necessarily foreclose the most radically possibilizing aspects of their own imaginings (the infinity of possibility), by restricting possibility to the limits of an ideally determined state of affairs. This contradictory structure does not vitiate the concept of utopia – utopia is eminently dialectical, this contradiction is its life – but it has come, increasingly, to erode its credibility under the historical conditions of both capitalist and socialist modernities. That it has done so is not unconnected to the structure of modernity as a form of historical time; or, at least, it is not unconnected to the history of that structure in its main socioeconomic, technological and political forms.

Utopia and the utopian

Utopia is a distinctively modern concept. It is inscribed in historical rather than theological time – a time of politics rather than a time of providence – precisely because of its founding spatial character. Its ‘nowhere’ is an ‘elsewhere’ on earth as opposed to heaven, albeit most frequently nowadays other ‘earths’ than ours, in the sense of other planets. Yet its temporal structure of anticipation, or what we might call *possibilization*, has been progressively undermined by the ever more relentless temporality of modernity as a logic of the new. For in a world of restless ‘innovation’ and spectacularly achieved change, the *imagined* is in ever-increasing danger of becoming confused with the *potential* – that is, the *already actually possible* – and thereby with a hidden dimension of actuality itself.

Utopia is doubly discredited here: first, in its reduction of possibility to determinacy, which, in the context of real possibilities, appears as the alleged authoritarianism of the blueprint or the plan, excluding other possibilities, other desires; second, because it increasingly becomes diffused into actuality, as a series of partial achievements or instalments of the plan. As Ernst Bloch put it in his 1964 discussion with Adorno on the contradictions of utopian longing, responding to Adorno’s description of a world in which ‘numerous so-called utopian dreams – such as television, the possibility of travelling to other planets, and moving faster than sound – have been fulfilled’: ‘[Utopia] is diffused, and there is a reification of ephemeral or non-ephemeral tendencies, as if it were already more than being-in-tendency, as if the day were already there.’ Yet, as Adorno points out, this ‘fulfilment of utopia consists largely only in a repetition of the continually same “today”’.¹ For at the level of its abstract temporal logic alone, which is indifferent to social content in the same way in which exchange-value is indifferent to use-value, the new is an invariant. ‘Longing for the new’ thus ‘represses duration’.² Hence both the ‘eternity’ of utopia and its susceptibility to fashion, the ever-changing forms of the eternally new, the ever-changing forms of ‘the ever-selfsame’.³

What this teaches us, according to Adorno, is that ‘the false thing ... is actually the *only* form in which utopia is given to us at all.’⁴ Add to this the historical failure of scientific-socialist utopianism of the state-socialist variety – the ironic ‘becoming utopian’ (in its own ‘bad’ sense of being unrealizable) of scientific socialism, in the context of a partially *dystopian* actualization – and the double discrediting of utopia appears in two distinct, historically antagonistic but nonetheless mutually reinforcing forms. The critique of

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utopia is thus not just a theoretical critique, but, indeed primarily, a historical critique as well. As socialism became a bad utopia in actually existing socialist states, in both senses of the phrase ‘bad utopia’ (splitting between an apparently unrealizable possibility and a false actuality), so the technologically based fulfilment of various utopias became absorbed into the time-consciousness of the culture of capitalism. This involves not just technological change itself, but differential temporalities produced by the geopolitical incursion of particular technologies, via capitalism, into often previously non-capitalist social spaces (‘underdevelopment’ as a condition of ‘modernization’). This is a contradictory actualization in which utopia and dystopia become inextricably bound together; or, to put it another way, the dystopian aspect of utopia itself comes to the fore.

Hence the agreement between Adorno and Bloch, in their conversation, on the prohibition of ‘casting a picture’ of utopia, the famous ‘ban on images’ of utopia, in any direct depictive sense. If the false is the only form in which utopia can be given, then, in Adorno’s words, ‘one can actually talk about utopia only in a negative way’, as a determinate negation of what is (negative in the logical sense, that is, not in the sense of depreciation). Or, as Bloch put it: ‘the essential function of utopia is a *critique* of what is present. If we had not already gone beyond the barriers, we could not even perceive them as barriers.’⁵ One might locate this going ‘beyond the barriers’ as part of the structure of the image in general, rather than anything to do with any particular contents. Indeed, the utopian structure of the image – possibilization, the presentation of something which is not (yet) present – is in contradiction with the identification of utopia with any particular determinate content. (There can be no ultimate fixing or determination of utopian content because the endless variety of possibilities is part of its idea.) Thus the critique of utopia as depiction does not lead back to ‘science’ and an alternative social content, which was considered its ‘historical truth’ in nineteenth-century Marxism, but which itself became the main site of utopian projection during the twentieth century. The critique of utopia leads forwards to an affirmation of *the utopian* (the utopian contra ‘utopia’) as an aspect or dimension of human experience and desire in general.

The utopian, or the spirit of utopia, is described by Bloch as an ‘invariant *longing*, completely without consideration at all for content’. Such a longing, Bloch continues, is ‘the pervading and above all only honest quality of all human beings’. This longing is inherently

connected to *possibility*, the possibility that things be otherwise, in the most radical metaphysical as well as political sense (utopia is a metaphysical political concept par excellence): the possibility of an end to suffering, even, most radically, an ‘elimination of death’ that would be desirable, rather than merely horrendous. A reaction against death, Adorno and Bloch agree, is at the root of utopian longing.⁶ One might even say that it is an existential ground of politics itself. Being-towards-death is in this (decidedly non-Heideggerian) respect always also being-*against*-dying.

The question of the future of the utopian after the critique of utopia is thus primarily the question of the future of possibility. Possibility is the privileged mode of utopian thought. Indeed, it is the modal condition of politics in general. Hence the ineliminability of utopia from politics. But what concept of possibility does the utopian involve? And what are the ‘conditions of possibility’ for its actualization: the actualization of possibility *qua* possibility (rather than the actualization of the determinately possible)? In addressing these questions, I shall take my cue from Heidegger’s 1929–30 lecture course, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, specifically the idea that boredom – a very particular form of boredom, which Heidegger calls ‘profound boredom’ – is the feeling of possibility itself.⁷ However, contra Heidegger – whose analysis is strictly existential, despite its explicit acknowledgement of a historical ground – boredom also has a history, a social history. Fragments of such a history are to be found in Convoluted D of Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, the material for which, from 1928/9, is almost exactly contemporaneous with Heidegger’s lectures.⁸

There is a utopian function to boredom in modernity as the basis of a distinctive experience of possibility. In Benjamin’s phrase from ‘The Storyteller’, which gives this essay its title, boredom is ‘the dreambird that hatches the egg of experience’.⁹ Filling in the blank space of history in Heidegger’s analysis, one might postulate that boredom is a privileged point of entry into the experience of modernity – ‘the characteristically modern sentiment’ (Callois)¹⁰ – because it is the one of the main temporal forms of the experience of *abstraction* that characterizes the culture of modernity more generally. Boredom is a particular temporal experience of abstraction, or mode of experience of the inherently abstract temporality of modernity itself.¹¹ As Benjamin saw, it is the other side of fashion, the dialectical counterpart and existential background to the libidinal discharge associated with the object of fashion, an integral part of the complex and paradoxical temporality of the new: ‘boredom is the grating

before which the courtesan teases death.¹² As such, it is part of a constellation of terms, including *attention*, *curiosity*, *distraction*, *fascination*, *indifference* and *reverie* or *day-dreaming*, that point towards a phenomenology of modernity as utopian longing.¹³

Combined with its utopian function as an existential mood – possibilization – this connection to abstraction suggests that boredom may function politically as the basis for a new mode of appropriation, within abstraction: a retemporalization or rehistoricization within abstraction consistent with the structure of modernity itself as a temporal–historical form. Indeed, perhaps, at best, it might provide the existential ground for a distinctively modern form of political subjectivity. As such, there would be both a politics to boredom, as the appearance of possibility – what Marx called boredom as ‘the longing for a content’¹⁴ – and an art of boredom, a practice of the production of boredom. Such a politics would be far more dialectically entwined with boredom than the situationism that declared ‘We have a world of pleasures to win, and nothing to lose but boredom.’¹⁵ Such an art has become ever more important within art itself since the Second World War, as a defensive reaction against the expansion of the culture industry into its field of operations, leading most recently to the culture industry’s incorporation of the artworld itself.¹⁶ So, viewing boredom through the lens of utopia, we find at least four interacting discourses on boredom: *philosophy* of boredom, *history* of boredom, *politics* of boredom, *art* of boredom, corresponding to four aspects of the utopian function of boredom in modernity. Here, I shall restrict my remarks to a discussion of the first of these, the utopian dimension of the philosophy of boredom. The link between boredom and the utopian is possibility.

Possibility

Philosophically, one can distinguish between at least four main concepts of possibility, each of which grasps a different aspect of the utopian: (1) a formal logical conception of possibility, associated in modern philosophy with Kant; (2) an objective-real conception of possibility as unrealized potentiality, derived from Aristotle and important to the work of the later Marx; (3) an existential conception of possibility, articulated in its explicit difference from the first two conceptions in section 31 of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*; and (4) a metaphysical conception of virtuality, derived from Bergson but rendered explicit as a philosophical alternative to the concept of possibility by Deleuze.

Kant’s formal-logical conception of possibility treats as possible anything that is thinkable without

contradiction, without regard to any conditions of actualization. It is thus an ideal conception of the broadest kind, central to utopia’s projection of a ‘possible world’ of a radically different character to our own, irrespective of the conditions required for its realization. This conception marks the transcendent power of thought or reason, a spontaneous power, for Kant, with its source in the transcendental imagination, but from the standpoint of the actual it appears as a mere possibilism.

Aristotle’s category of potentiality, on the other hand, signifies that which is not yet but may become actual, although it is at no time necessary that it be so. It is a kind of ontological reserve, the *actually* possible. It is on a lower ontological level than both actuality and necessity, but is nonetheless tied to actuality for the image of its determinacy.¹⁷ As the phrase ‘not yet’ – so central to Bloch’s philosophy, but taken here from Heidegger’s gloss of Aristotle – signals, possibility as potentiality also has a central role to play in the depiction of utopia, in so far as it is a logical requirement for the *fiction* that utopia is actual, albeit in no (known) place. For to function as a political category, utopia must be more than ‘logically’ possible, in the broadest sense, meaning capable of depiction; it must be conceived as in some sense actual, elsewhere. It must have some (albeit unknown) conditions of realization. Otherwise it could not function as an image of fulfilment. However, it is as a basis for the prediction of historical developments – most famously in Marx’s image of a new mode of production developing within the ‘womb’ of capitalism – that this conception has acquired its main political applications. The notorious naturalism of historicism is broadly Aristotelian in this sense.

Heidegger’s existential conception of possibility is neither formally logical nor modal in a categorial sense but pertains to existence itself, in the sense that for Heidegger ‘existence’ is a term reserved exclusively for the ontology of the human, or, more technically, Dasein, Heidegger’s distinctive conception of ‘that being which we ourselves are’. ‘Dasein’, Heidegger writes in section 31 of *Being and Time*, ‘is primarily being-possible ... possibility as an *existentiale* is the most primordial and ultimate positive in which Dasein is characterized ontologically’.¹⁸ This sense of possibility as an existential mode, I want to suggest, links possibility immanently to *longing* in Bloch’s utopian sense. Utopian longing, one might say – a longing ‘without consideration for content’ (Bloch) which is nonetheless a ‘longing for content’ (Marx) – arises out of possibility in the existential sense, the sense of exist-

ence as possibility, of being human as being-possible. This is the felt sense of possibility upon which the life and force of utopian thinking ultimately depend.

The Bergsonian–Deleuzian concept of virtuality also aims to close the ontological gap between the actual and the possible. However, unlike Heidegger, who locates Dasein at (and as) the point of ontological difference and hence as possibility itself, Bergson’s concept of virtuality involves a positivization of the virtual as real, and a corresponding account of actuality as the effect of the self-differentiation of the virtual. The ontological difference at stake here is thus not one between Being and beings (Heidegger) – out of which possibility emerges as the essence of a special ontic-ontological entity, Dasein – but that between the virtual and the actual. And it is bridged by the self-differentiation of the virtual itself, through which it ceases to be virtual and becomes actual. This is less an alternative conception of possibility than the destruction of the very concept of possibility by an ontological monism of self-differentiating virtuality. Nonetheless, it retains a functional relation to the utopian, since it removes all ontological constraints on actuality. Indeed, it is a kind of utopian metaphysics for which literally everything is possible, in a manner unrelated to history. For this point of view, as Deleuze himself put it, ‘history is never anything other than a matter of fact’.¹⁹

Of these four philosophical concepts of possibility (assuming we can speak of virtuality as a concept of

possibility), each has a different relation to time. The formal logical conception abstracts from time completely – leading to the notorious problems associated with Kant’s concept of freedom. Nonetheless, this is the basis of its political radicalism: its refusal of the currently actual. The objective-real conception, on the other hand, presupposes the objective chronological framework of a shared cosmic time in which time is figured spatially as a measurable continuum and, crucially, future-time is ontologically indifferent from past time. This is the famous ‘empty homogeneous’, chronological time of historicism, which is also the time of narratives of the future. The existential conception of possibility is based, in turn, upon Heidegger’s distinctive account of the ontological priority of ‘temporalizing’ (*Zeitigung*), as the existential process of the production of time, over the ‘everyday’ chronological time of the objective-real conception, which is treated as a derived and reified form. It is the philosophical difference between these two forms of time – time as temporalizing and time as chronology – that underpins the contradictions inherent in the concept of utopia (which led to the ban on its depiction) from which I set out. Finally, Bergson’s concept of virtuality was itself derived from the ‘pure qualitative differentiation without quantitative measure’ of his concept of duration – a concept of time as pure continuity, ‘succession without distinction’, which he too opposed to the abstract idea of time as a ‘homogenous medium’, represented spatially in the form of a line. Pure duration,



as a time absolutely indifferent to space and hence to being, is the (fundamentally theological) time of the eternity of utopia itself.

Here, I shall concentrate on Heidegger's account of the appearance of existential possibility in boredom, as the feeling of time: the 'self-awareness of the self-temporalizing temporality of Dasein'. In profound boredom, Heidegger argues, we experience the fact that human existence essentially *is* the self-awareness of its own self-temporalizing temporality.

Boredom

It is a mark of the modernity of Heidegger's early philosophical work that, for a period at least, it considered the analysis of boredom a necessary preparatory stage to outlining the fundamental questions of metaphysics concerning world, individuation and finitude. Indeed, in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, one particular kind of boredom – what Heidegger calls 'profound boredom' – appears as *the* fundamental attunement or mood of the 'contemporary Dasein' of the times (1930).²⁰ The self-temporalizing structure of human existence, which is presented in *Being and Time* as analytically dependent on the anticipation of death (as the constitutive limit of temporalizing), is represented here, purely phenomenologically, as revealed in and by boredom, without any relation to death.

Heidegger was interested in boredom as the phenomenological condition of a particular kind of questioning (and hence of philosophy itself), rather than in possibility as such. However, it is via possibility that the analysis proceeds – from boredom, via possibility, to 'the essence of time' as the root of metaphysical questioning – and it is this aspect of the analysis to which I shall attend.²¹ Heidegger's discussion is long and complex, full of false starts, gaps, leaps, isolated insights, redundancies and etymological short-cuts, as befits a lecture course. Indeed, it leads one to think that Heidegger's notorious etymologism was largely an artefact of his teaching – much like Raymond Williams's. So I shall be brutally reductive. The analysis develops through three main stages or 'forms' of boredom of increasing existential-ontological depth: (1) becoming bored 'by' something, (2) being bored 'with' something, and (3) profound boredom or 'it is boring for one'. Its five most salient features are as follows.

(1) An etymological definition of boredom derived from the German word *Langeweile* as a lengthening of time (literally 'long while'). Boredom is a temporal concept that involves a peculiar remaining, enduring or dragging. More specifically, according to Heidegger, '*Becoming bored is a peculiar being affected by time*

as it drags and by time in general, a being affected which oppresses us in its own way... *a peculiar impressing of the power of that time* to which to which we are bound.'²²

(2) The idea that our immediate relation to boredom is a negative one, in so far as it manifests itself 'ordinarily', in everyday life, only via our attempt to combat boredom by 'passing the time' (*Zeitvertreib* – literally, a 'driving away of time'). Since boredom is a lengthening of time (too much time! too long a while!), we drive boredom away by driving time itself away; or, at least, by driving away our sense of time as lingering. Boredom thus 'always *shows itself* in such a way that we immediately turn *against* it'. There is 'a peculiar *unity* of a *boredom* and a *passing the time* in which a confrontation with boredom somehow occurs'.²³ This will be crucial to its critical function.

(3) This passing the time/driving time away, or, more colloquially, 'killing time' – an important idea in



Pauline Kael's famous account of Andy Warhol's early films: 'Timekillers on the way to the grave' – is also necessarily a driving of time onwards, into the future: 'Passing the time is *a driving away of boredom that drives time on.*' Reflection on boredom thus reveals the temporalizing power of our intentional relation to things, at the same time as it reveals 'the strange and enigmatic power of time itself'. This is the power, first, to 'hold us in limbo' or to suspend us in time, and, second, to 'leave us empty' in such a way that things appear to refuse us something we expect from them: namely, an ability to be present or to engage us in such

a way that time passes, *without* our having to force it to pass, to drive it on.²⁴ It is the indeterminacy of our relation to boredom here, our failure to grasp quite what it is about something that bores us, that leads Heidegger to posit his second main form of boredom: being bored not ‘by’ something, but ‘with’ it.

(4) According to Heidegger, there is a deeper form of boredom than being bored by some determinate object, in which what bores us (what lengthens time) is *indeterminate*. It has no specific object. This is because here it is ‘passing the time’ or driving time away *itself* with which we are bored. (Heidegger’s example is a dinner party at which he didn’t realize he had been bored until he got home.) In this situation ‘*boredom and passing the time become intertwined in a peculiar way*’.²⁵ It is not just that boredom manifests itself through our confrontation with it in passing the time (the example there was waiting on a deserted railway station for a train), but that boredom and passing the time – fighting boredom – become one. We are doing what we are doing, not for its own sake, but only in order to pass the time. Hence we are bored with this too. (There is a phenomenological version of the dialectic of boredom and distraction, familiar from analyses of the cultural industries, buried here beneath Heidegger’s abstract prose: distraction itself becomes boring.) What bores us in this boredom is, according to Heidegger, ‘I know not what’, *Je ne sais quoi*:²⁶ that very attribute of an object that was held, in eighteenth-century France, to distinguish it as an object of aesthetic appreciation, a work of art.²⁷

The temporal immanence of being bored ‘with’ the passing of time – its failure to release us from the hold of time – is Heidegger’s cue for a further ontological deepening of his analysis, reaching the culminating position of what he calls ‘profound’ boredom.

(5) Profound boredom, as the structural unity and temporal immanence of the earlier two forms (becoming bored *by* and being bored *with*), is taken to spring from the temporality of human existence itself. Profound boredom, Heidegger argues, ‘arises from a quite determinate way and manner in which our own temporality temporalizes itself.’ ‘*What bores us in profound boredom ... what is solely and properly boring, is temporality in a particular way of its temporalizing*’.²⁸ The third and final form of boredom, profound boredom, thus has the more neutral grammatical form of ‘it is boring for one’, where the ‘it’ in question is the temporal character of existence itself. Existing, merely existing, as temporalization, the production or lengthening of time, is itself boring. Profound boredom is the feeling of time in its ability

to expand itself. It is not just *a* structure of feeling, in Raymond Williams’s sense, so much as *the* structure of feeling. Profound boredom is the temporal structure of affectivity itself. For if human existence is a process of self-temporalizing, within which the ‘I’ is a moment of self-awareness – time as pure self-affectation, in Heidegger’s reading of Kant – profound boredom is the phenomenological register of temporality’s ‘stretching’ of itself out into ‘time’, chronological time, its objectified shell. Profound boredom is an ‘entrancement’ of existence by time, or, more fundamentally, ‘the entrancement of the temporal horizon: ‘the horizon of whiling ... *expands itself into the entire temporality of Dasein*’, covering over its own shortness. The experience of time’s lengthening turns out to be a peculiar vanishing of its inherent shortness, its constitutive limit: namely, death. Indeed, it is a kind of *disavowal* or *wishing away* of death. In so expanding itself, profound boredom makes what Heidegger calls ‘the extremity of the moment of vision’ – the moment of action – vanish. It would therefore appear to be the very opposite of a possible ground for politics. However, Heidegger insists, ‘only the [particular] possibility vanishes here, whereby the possibility of whatever is possible is precisely intensified.’²⁹

This *affective intensification* of possibility, per se, in profound boredom, which Heidegger remarks upon in passing but never develops – and which has few of the usual connotations of boredom – is the existential basis of what Bloch calls the ‘contentlessness’ of utopian longing and what Adorno identified as the testimony of ‘the reality of artworks’: ‘the possibility of the possible’.³⁰ It may be understood historically – contra Heidegger – as being both based in and a reaction against abstraction in the precise sense in which, in his critique of Hegel in the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx writes of boredom as ‘the *mystical* feeling that drives the philosopher forward from abstract thinking to intuiting – longing for a content’.³¹ (Marx is discussing the impulse behind the transition from logic to nature in Hegel’s system, a discussion that interestingly parallels Kierkegaard’s account of God’s creation of the world.) For Marx here, boredom is the affective and productive experience of the emptiness of self-sufficient abstraction – a ‘being left empty’ by abstraction, rather than by ‘the refusal of things’ (Heidegger). Boredom drives subjectivity forward in the search for social content, much as, in psychoanalytical accounts, boredom is associated with the ‘suspended animation of desire’, a return to the childhood mood of ‘diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire’.³²

We might transpose this analysis into Marx's later thought, where what has changed is not the relation to abstraction, but the ontology of self-sufficient abstraction. There, the illusion of self-sufficiency is no longer exclusively associated with philosophy (and hence subject to epistemological critique), but is identified with the actual abstractions or objective idealities of the value-form (and hence subject to social critique). In this respect, boredom becomes a central part of that form of subjectivity constituted by the dynamics of the commodity form – as Benjamin's pathbreaking but fragmentary analyses testify. But how is this experience of profound boredom, as the experience of possibility per se – the existential ground of utopian longing – connected to Benjamin's 'egg of experience'? How does the dreambird hatch its egg? And to what does it give birth?

It is at this point that we encounter the aporia of action in Heidegger and Benjamin alike. It is marked – and covered over – in both cases by the metaphor of awakening, but in different ways, linked to their very different projects and perspectives. Heidegger's primary concern in Part One of his 1929–30 lectures is indicated by its title, 'Awakening a Fundamental Attunement in Our Philosophizing'. It is the mood or attunement of profound boredom, 'concealed in our contemporary Dasein', which is itself to be awakened. It does lead to any further awakening/hatching, but to metaphysical questioning. And awakening it, oddly, 'does not mean making it awake in the first place, but *letting it be awake, guarding against it falling asleep*'. Once it is 'let be awake', it is taken simply to 'give' the metaphysical questions of world, individuation and finitude. Heidegger is explicit: the 'demand' with which it is associated – 'not to let boredom fall asleep' – 'has nothing to do with some human ideal in one or other domain of possible action'. It is 'the *liberation of the Dasein in man*' that is taken to be 'at issue'.³³ Heidegger is not interested in any particular possibilities, any possible actualities, that might be made possible by the affective intensification of possibility as an existential mode. Benjamin, on the other hand, clearly is: specifically, in the actualization of the dreams of the past. Yet the metaphors of sleep, dream, and awakening to which he too is so attached block the thinking of the passage from existential possibility to actualization. In fact, ironically, given Benjamin's famous criticisms of the naturalism of historicism, they naturalize this passage, in a quasi-psychoanalytical manner, offering no opening onto the (narrative) horizon of the temporality of action.³⁴

The 'founding concept' of historical materialism, Benjamin insisted, 'is not progress but actualization'.³⁵ Yet he never moved beyond the image of actualization as awakening to be found in Marx's early letter to Ruge: 'the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality ... it is not a question of drawing a great mental dividing line between past and future, but of *realising* the thoughts of the past ... mankind is not beginning a *new* work, but is consciously carrying into effect its old work.'³⁶ Boredom functions for Benjamin as one of a number of threshold or liminal concepts, located on the surface of the boundary between sleeping and waking, between the wishful dreams carried forward from the past and their future actualization. On the one hand, boredom is the 'warm grey fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colourful of silks' in which 'we wrap ourselves when we dream' and hence 'the external surface of unconscious events'. As such, it is 'an index to participation in the sleep of the collective'. On the other hand, it is (supposedly, thus) 'the threshold to great deeds', as 'he who waits' takes in time 'and renders it up in altered form – that of expectation'.³⁷ (The difference from Heidegger here is that in Benjamin boredom is identified with a transfiguration of sleep on the threshold of awakening, rather than being the thing which is to be kept awake.) But the expectation that is generated is no less abstract than that of utopian longing itself: possibilization as the temporality of anticipation. The idea of actualizing the thoughts and wishes of the past, as a whole – for it is the whole of history that is to be redeemed, for Benjamin – is a pure wishfulness, incapable of translation onto the plane of action, except metonymically, in a manner in which each act stands (indifferently) for the whole. In particular, it appears incompatible with the idea of the qualitatively historically new, upon which revolutionary thought of social transformation depends. The contradiction between the two main temporal forms of Benjamin's thought – redemption and the new – remains stubbornly undialectical.

Benjamin never moved beyond the series of elliptical formulations about boredom, interspersed with materials for a history of boredom, in the *Arcades Project*. But he indicated one way forward with the (unanswered) question, 'What is the dialectical antithesis to boredom?'³⁸ At one level, the answer would seem to be 'distraction' – hence Benjamin's subsequent interest in developing a (technologically based) theory of reception in distraction.³⁹ However, there it is attention that appears as the dialectical counterpart to distraction. Thus we can see the emergence of a con-

stellation – boredom, distraction, attention – fracturing any simply binary dialectical relations, dependent upon detailed accounts of historically specific technologies and institutions for its articulation. In this respect, boredom does indeed appear to offer the possibility of mediating an existential analysis of utopian longing with a historical account of its conditions and a socio-cultural account of its predominant forms, in a manner that would move decisively beyond Benjamin’s own enabling, but blocked, formulations. Such an account would reintroduce something of the determinacy of ‘utopia’ into the utopian, without reifying it in the form a fixed historical end. Stripped of these mediations, and in particular their subjection to the additional mediation of a reflective and collective political discourse, ‘contentless longing’ can point in any political direction at all, as both Bloch and Benjamin became only too aware during the course of the 1930s. For it is one thing to theorize the existential ground of political possibility as utopian longing; quite another to render the insight concrete by reconstructing the coordinates of political possibilities themselves.

Notes

1. ‘Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing’ (1964), in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1988, pp. 1, 11, 2.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p. 27.
3. Walter Benjamin, ‘Central Park’, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 4, 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2003, p. 175.
4. Bloch and Adorno, ‘Something’s Missing’, p. 12.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–12.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 8, 10.
7. Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1995, pp. 59–167.
8. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, pp. 101–19. For an analysis of the contradictory relation to history in Heidegger’s account of boredom, and its symptomatic significance for the ‘turn’ in his thought during the 1930s, see Miguel de Beistegui, ‘Boredom: Between Existence and History’ (2000), *Thinking with Heidegger: Displacements*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2004, pp. 61–80. In so far as there is a historical dimension to Heidegger’s analysis, in its reference to ‘our contemporary Dasein’, it is part of an epochal history of Being – a subjection of history to Being – rather than anything approaching a history with its own temporality of social forms. The (elite-theoretical) sociology of *Being and Time* is thus displaced by an even more undiffer-

- entiated history of epochs of Being. 1840s’ France may have experienced an ‘epidemic’ of boredom (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* [D3a, 4], p. 108), but it was Weimar Germany that was the site of the outbreak of its analyses. See also, in particular, Siegfried Kracauer, ‘Boredom’ (1924), in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed., Thomas Y. Levin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1995, pp. 331–4.
9. Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’ (1936), in *Selected Writings*, Volume 3, 1935–1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2002, p. 149.
 10. Benjamin, *Arcades Project* [D4A, 2], p. 110.
 11. Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, Verso, London and New York, 1995, ch. 1; ‘The Reproach of Abstraction’, *Radical Philosophy* 127, September/October 2004, pp. 21–8.
 12. Benjamin, *Arcades Project* [B1, 1], p. 62.
 13. There is a characteristic tension in Benjamin’s remarks on boredom, distributed across various texts, between the idea that ‘the activities that are intimately associated with boredom ... are already extinct in the cities’ (‘The Storyteller’, p. 149) and the suggestion that boredom is an integral part of the experiences of a whole range of figures characteristic of modern metropolitan life, including the courtesan, the gambler, the flâneur, and ‘he who waits’ (*Arcades Project* [D3, 4], p. 107).
 14. Karl Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844’, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 3, 1843–1844, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1975, p. 344. Marx is alluding to Hegel’s analysis of Stoicism in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: ‘The True and the good, wisdom and virtue, the general terms beyond which Stoicism cannot get, are therefore in a general way no doubt uplifting, but since they cannot in fact produce any expansion of the content, they soon give rise to boredom [*Langeweile*].’ *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 122; translation modified. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Reclam, Stuttgart, 1987, p. 153.
 15. Raoul Vaneigem, ‘Postscript’ (1972), *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Rebel Press, London, 1983, p. 216.
 16. See, in particular, Dick Higgins, ‘Boredom and Danger’ (1966), *Something Else Newsletter*, December 1968. Duchamp associated the artistic production of boredom with Happenings: ‘Happenings have introduced into art an element no one had put there: boredom. To do a thing in order to bore people is something I never imagined! And that’s too bad, because it’s a beautiful idea.’ Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (1967), trans. Ron Padgett, Da Capo Press, New York, n.d., p. 99. Characteristically, the deliberate production of boredom is expressly rejected by Heidegger. ‘Are we explicitly and intentionally to produce boredom in ourselves? Not at all. We do not need to undertake anything in this respect. On the contrary, we are always already undertaking too much. This boredom becomes essential of its own accord, if only we are not opposed to it, if we do not always immediately react to protect ourselves, if instead we make room for it.’ *Fundamental Concepts*, p. 82. Such is the naturalism of the history of Being.
 17. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Blackwell, Oxford, 1962, p. 183. I take Heidegger’s presentation in this passage

of possibility as a modal category of presence-to-hand to be a gloss of Aristotle on potentiality. Aristotle's own presentations are less concerned with temporality. See for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 4, ch. 12.

18. Ibid.
19. Gilles Deleuze, 'Bergson's Conception of Difference' (1956), in his *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles and New York, 2004, p. 41.
20. Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*, p. 153. Heidegger emphasizes that there is not one but 'several' fundamental attunements (p. 59). However, boredom is taken to be *the* fundamental attunement of 'the day'. Hence the importance of the unacknowledged problem of the definition of the historical present.
21. A phenomenological analysis begins with the most familiar, culturally given form of an object and attends to the totality of the descriptions of this form in such a way as simultaneously to deepen and to make less certain our sense of it, by revealing contradictions in the descriptions, to the point at which a new sense of it, centred on a new description of it, emerges. This new conception is then subjected to the same process, and so on. In Hegel, this leads inexorably to a phenomenological construction of the absolute, as the only possible endpoint of the process. In the early Heidegger, on the other hand, as a systematic procedure, phenomenology takes the more Kantian form of the elaboration of a *series* of 'equiprimordial' or equally basic conditions of the object. The formality of this procedure, notoriously, introduces a crucial indeterminacy into the relations between the various conditions. But it has the advantage of imparting a certain independence to each analytical stage, allowing a recontextualization of the argument.
22. Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*, pp. 96, 98.
23. Ibid., p. 95.
24. Ibid., pp. 93, 106, 99, 101.
25. Ibid., p. 113.
26. Ibid., p. 116.
27. This second phenomenological form of boredom appears close to what is understood by the French term *ennui*, received into English, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, in the mid-eighteenth century to denote a diffuse form of 'mental weariness and dissatisfaction arising from want of occupation or lack of interest'. Although Heidegger himself does not make the connection, art and *ennui* are, of course, bound together in aestheticism, which, one might propose, was a cultural condition of Heidegger's analysis. The *OED* etymology of 'ennui' cites the Latin phrase *in odio* as its source (as in the expression *mihi in odio* – it is hateful to me), thereby connecting it directly to both the English 'annoy' and 'odium', via 'anui', a term common to Middle English and Old French. In fact, the substantive 'annoy' was apparently originally equivalent to 'ennui' in its sense of 'a disturbed or ruffled feeling arising from impressions ... which one dislikes', before acquiring its current sense of active discomfort. The *OED* cites the expression 'His ennui amounted to annoy' from 1812. The origin of the English word 'bore', on the other hand, is (satisfyingly) unknown; although it appears as a synonym for the malady of *ennui* in the 1760s, at more or less the same time that 'ennui' first appears in English, in the phrase 'French bore', connoting 'dullness or lack of interest', but which my *OED* (1973) admits it is unable to explain. It certainly lacks both the intensity

of aversion associated with 'odium' and the 'ruffled' element of dislike in 'annoy'.

All of which suggests that Heidegger's second phenomenological form of boredom secretly draws on a separate, less Alemmanic, more modern, and essentially French semantics – a position which is explicit in Benjamin, for whom boredom was central to the emblematic cultural status of Paris, as the capital of the nineteenth century, and Baudelaire, as the poet of early modernism.

28. Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*, pp. 127, 158.
29. Ibid., pp. 152–3.
30. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 132.
31. See note 14.
32. Adam Phillips, 'On Being Bored', in *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, Faber & Faber, London and Boston, 1993, pp. 82, 71.
33. Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*, pp. 79, 171–2.
34. See Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, pp. 150–59.
35. Benjamin, *Arcades Project* [N2, 2], p. 460.
36. Marx to Ruge, September 1843, Marx/Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 144.
37. Benjamin, *Arcades Project* [D2a, 1; D2a, 2; D3, 7; D2, 7; D3.4], pp. 105–8, 118.
38. Ibid. [D2, 7], p. 105.
39. See Howard Eiland, 'Reception in Distraction', *boundary 2*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 51–66; Peter Osborne, 'Distracted Reception: Time, Art and Technology', in Jessica Morgan, ed., *Time Zones*, Tate Publishing, London, 2004, pp. 70–79. The connection was first made by Kracauer in the mid-1920s. His essay on distraction followed that on boredom (see note 8) by two years. Kracauer, 'The Cult of Distraction' (1926), *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 323–8.

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