

Boredom, time and the creative self during a lockdown

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Boredom has always been an integral part of human life but it seems it acquired a renewed meaning during this pandemic. The global lockdown that was brought about and is still prevalent in most parts of the world till date, confined the individual self to a particular space, bringing the 'human' in terms of interaction and socialisation to a grinding halt. This boredom which started out as either a result or a lack of a specific activity – has acquired a new depth as one continues to find one's self confined to a particular space and within a fractured sense of clock time, which the modern self was not privy to.

Ideally boredom in essence can have a short lifespan, regurgitating whenever an opportunity presents itself and in turn leading to a particular action to quell it – by the individual. But this kind of boredom is different from boredom that doesn't have a temporal nature, the kind that wells from deep within. It is of an existential kind that connects itself to one's very being, a persisting *ennui* of life itself. This kind of boredom doesn't come as a result of an activity or lack of it. It is not a result of idleness in general but rather of a particular kind of idleness – an idleness that isn't temporal in nature and as a result has lost the ability to invoke any meaning. In other words, this kind of boredom generates its own form of idleness. At this point, the brooding lines of Shakespeare's Hamlet come to mind, "how weary, stale, flat and unprofitable/ seem to me all the uses of the world". Hamlet's conundrum with action or the lack of it, in this case, avenging his father, never takes off. Hamlet is deeply bored and hence remains idle. One is led to believe that Hamlet's failure to understand his fears and anxieties leads to his affliction with torpidity, both mentally and physically – an emotional or a spiritual stasis which cannot be remedied by any particular activity or human interaction. Hamlet's idleness in essence can resonate with this lockdown induced idleness. An idleness that has lost its

ability to generate meaning. The repression or the inability to make sense of the lockdown induced anxieties and fears have led to a kind of emotional and spiritual paralysis. In the words of Eliot, “like a patient etherized upon a table.”

Never before had the ‘self’ felt trapped in a particular space with an indefinite sense of time weighing heavily. Never before had the ‘self’ generated this kind of idleness. And never before had one turned to technology to try and quell it. Technology has in a specific sense during the lockdown become a crutch to treat boredom induced by a specific activity or the lack of it. It’s no wonder that sites like Zoom and Netflix had a rebounded surge in their user capacity. Studies have shown that there has been a sudden rise in internet usage for both work and entertainment purposes. While this seems inevitable, where technological innovations always find a way to fill the gap of need and desire, it is vital to note how deeply enmeshed technology is with the human condition. One has to go back to Heidegger’s writings on boredom and its collusion with technology that characterises most of the postmodern life; to understand these forces that structure contemporary life, hence finding a renewed relevance during this global lockdown induced by the pandemic. Heidegger’s work suggests that:

The drive for endless economic growth and technological innovation that characterizes much postmodern life is but a product of boredom with the human condition and its worldly limitations. Technology feeds off this mood of boredom and at the same time suppresses the very opportunity for its overcoming. The collusion between technology and boredom, Heidegger warns, undermines the practice of philosophy and the human task- inherently political in nature- of discovering a home in the world.¹

Nietzsche looked at boredom as the driving force for the growth of morality and religion among “majority of mortals.” For him, ascetic practices and ideals acted as “chief weapon” in combating boredom, while art and scholarly engagement acted as substitutes

¹ Leslie Paul Thiele, “Postmodernity and the routinization of novelty: Heidegger on boredom and technology,” *Polity* 29, 4 (1997): 489-517.

for the same endeavor. Yet in a 'postmodern' world, it seems they all have lost their lustre. Today a more efficient way it seems is outright consumption—an ever-growing heap of gadgets. This applies to the consumers of entertainment as well. During this lockdown the online portals for watching films and electronic content have been constantly pumped with new material to keep the ever fickle attentiveness of the consumer intact. But this only takes care of the superficial boredom which in turn breeds a new form of idleness. "One of the chief products of Western economic growth and its heightened consumption is a society characterized by the abundance of boredom and the boredom with abundance."²

This lockdown defined and redefined the silver lining between isolation and solitude, boredom and productivity, clock time and a fractured sense of time. Aristotle is the first we are aware of, to whom time is the measurement of change. Things change continually and the counting of this change is attributed to time, for him. This need for change, a constant shift of events, symbolized the clock time induced fast paced life, which came to a grinding halt with the global lockdown. This halt reaffirmed the once intermittent connection between boredom and the passage of time to something more concrete, a stasis of deep boredom.

But, in the heavy bouts of a fractured sense of time there can be moments for the 'self' to find itself. This is not a new idea. Literature is replete with names like Montaigne, Rousseau, Thoreau, Dostoyevsky, and others who have explored this in their writings. It is difficult to forget the narrator of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* whose confessional rhetoric lays bare the disturbing inner workings of a bitter recluse.

To reiterate Neitzsche, art or the act of creation in any form can bridge the gap between stasis and meaningful activity. In other words, it can add sail to a ship standing still in waters, symbolising an albatross in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

² Ibid, 495.

The inclusion of the factor of time or rather the sense of time, with regard to isolation or solitude seems relevant in understanding art in these conditions (the condition of deep boredom). If one argues that art is a representation or expression of the inner and the external that surrounds the artist then this bubble of perception has to operate in consonance with one's sense of time. To go further, this bubble will shrink and possibly change colour in isolation as a result of the lack of intensity in terms of change surrounding time.

While some artists like Louise Bourgeois might argue that isolation helps in keeping their creativity intact and original, others like Hemingway might have a different take on it. Either way, the point remains that lack of social contact and a repressed sense of change stunts the perceived sense of passing of time in isolation.

I am reminded of the protagonist from Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, Nikolai Rubashov whose seemingly indefinite sessions of intermittent tortures in the prison where he was denied sleep and was subjected to a constant blindfold of bright light during interrogations and the oppressive silence of his solitary cell, only heightened his need to write:

During the first few days Rubashov had looked for familiar faces, but found none. That relieved him: for the moment he wanted to avoid any possible reminder of the outside world, anything which might distract him from his task. His task was to work his thoughts to a conclusion, to come to terms with the past and future, with the living and the dead. He had still ten days left of the term set by Ivanov.³

This sense of purpose to create in an oppressive (in the case of Rubashov) or isolatory (with regard to a pandemic in the real sense) might be fastidious for some while for others a disintegrating experience. What is interesting in both the cases is the possibility of an individual coming closer to one's self and /or discovering an 'I'. Koestler's description of Rubashov's 'I' with regard to time and isolation certainly seems apt in this regard:

³ Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at noon: A novel*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), 67.

Now, when he stood with his forehead against the window or suddenly stopped on the third black tile, he made unexpected discoveries. He found out that those processes wrongly known as “monologues” are really dialogues of a special kind; dialogues in which one partner remains silent while the other, against all grammatical rules, addresses him as “I” instead of “you”, in order to creep into his confidence and to fathom his intentions; but the silent partner just remains silent, shuns observation and even refuses to be localized in time and space.⁴

Moving on from literary examples, there exist a score of artists who produced their best work in isolation. Of course, in many cases isolation can be a choice like in the case of the painter Alfred Wallis, who is known to notoriously seclude himself to paint from memory. While for others, geographical, political or biological factors forcefully determine one’s tryst with creating art in isolation. Apart from the classic examples of Munch and Van Gogh, Frida Kahlo stands out as someone who produced magnificent work while being confined to bed due to injury and illness. Kahlo’s predicament won’t apply to most in the current lockdown, but her mental state might be a different story. Being confined to a particular space (which one might even call ‘home’) leaves one like Koeslter’s Rubashov in a need to create, to break the vortex of deep boredom.

The epistemological variants of this pandemic induced lockdown might have different interpretations. Only time will tell! But regardless, some of the concerns shared by philosophers like Heidegger in lieu with technology might find a new resonance, while for artists like Kahlo, regardless of the merit of the work, when the need is to turn an experience imbued with isolation into something that resonate solitude, the ship with a sail still holds as a right metaphor.

⁴ Ibid, 79.