Boredom and Violence
Zoltán Glück

The modern metropolis is born in the 19th century in the wake of the industrial revolution. Perhaps so too was Boredom. Walter Benjamin’s research into 19th century life and culture led him to believe as much. Thus, in a section of his Arcades Project titled “Boredom and Eternal Return” he writes: “Boredom began to be experienced in epic proportions in the 1840’s.”4 With infinite repetition as the logic of industrial production, the very noise of the machinery itself seems to have spilled forth as a drone over the social life of European modernity—Drones are monotone, and the hypnotic effect of such sustained frequencies have been well documented by musicologists. Boredom is a drone in which nothing changes. And today not just industrial machinery, but the regular frequency of routine days, schedules and regiments too form a drone (the 5-day work week, weekend, repeat). Boredom is the flavor of technologico-industrial life whose logic is the infinite repetition of the same. At least since Heidegger and Beckett, we’ve known that the ‘essence of technology’ (and the essence of ‘modern’ life) is a standing in wait (Bestand), a waiting for... And in the interim Boredom is born.

The moralist and the medic, who pretend to know all, cannot explain wherefrom comes such a mad and unmanned energy to otherwise docile souls, and how, incapable of accomplishing even the most simple and necessary of tasks, these latter at a certain moment find the courage to perform the most absurd and oftentimes the most dangerous of acts...”5

- Baudelaire

1 “La moraliste et le médecin, qui prétendent tout savoir, ne peuvent pas expliquer d’où vient si subitement une si folle énergie à ces âmes paresseuses et voluptueuses, et comment, incapables d’accomplir les choses les plus simples et les plus nécessaires, elles trouvent à une certaine minute un courage de luce pour exécuter les actes les plus absurdes et souvent même les plus dangereux” (Charles Baudelaire, “Le Mauvais Vittrier”, Spleen de Paris, 118) [translation mine]


4 Benjamin, 105

5 “Ces plaisanteries nerveuses ne sont pas sans péril, et on peut souvent les payer cher. Mais qu’importe l’étérinite de la damnation qui a trouvé dans un seconde l’infini de la jouissance?” (Baudelaire, 121) [translation mine]

6 Akin to “thick description” in the work of Clifford Geertz.

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Another college shooting. The police are the first responders. The second to spring into action are, without fail, the psychologists. As soon as the assailant has been disarmed the acrobatic spectacle of diagnosis begins, staged over the corpse, the murder weapon, the life and the writings... etc. At best these psychologists are well-meaning, but limited insofar as they do not look at the broader social and historical picture; at worst they are an ideological edifice, which veils the real material socioeconomic conditions whence the violence has sprung. The psychologists begin by assuming some abnormality (disorder, pathology, neurosis), which set the shooter apart and led to the violence, and when they cannot find some evidence of mal-adjustment they are puzzled. Baudelaire proposes a different explanation for this violence. C’est une espèce d’énergie qui jaillit de l’ennui et de la reverie. That is, a kind of energy, which springs from boredom and reverie. Perhaps Violence is Boredom’s dialectical antithesis. Acts of violence spring forth almost naturally, as it were, from the boredom of modern technologico-industrial life. It is true that “one often pays for them dearly. But what of eternal damnation for one who has found in a second the infinite of jouissance?”

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for understanding the modern world and its motives.
When trying to understand violence, Žižek cautions us.

We should learn to step back, disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible ‘subjective’ violence, violence performed by the clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts.7

As a Marxist, Žižek incites us to observe the systemic violence of capitalism, invisible but necessary in sustaining the apparent peace and tranquility of everyday life in the “developed world”. Moreover it is only against this background of tranquility that subjective outbursts of violence (such as college shootings and armed robberies) shock and fascinate. Perhaps then Boredom is the flavor of systemic violence, that yawn which would swallow the world…

“Was I sleeping while, the others suffered?” 8

Mais parmi les chacals, les panthères, les lices,
Les singes, les scorpions, les vautours, les serpents,
Les monstres glapissants, hurlants, grognants, rampants,
Dans la ménagerie infâme de nos vices,
Il en est un plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde! Quoiqu’il ne pousse ni grands gestes ni grands cris,
Il ferait volontiers de la terre un débris Et dans un bâillement avalerait le monde;
C’est l’Ennui… 9

8 Beckett, 104

7 Žižek, Slavoj Violence, Profile Books LTD, London 2008
8 Beckett, 104

8 Beckett, 104