

Killing Boredom or Be Bored to Death

A Practice-led Thesis

on

Slow Cinema and the Notion of Boredom



by

Wiebke Schnapper

Abstract

The central aspect of this thesis is reviewing the definition of boredom and how it is perceived. By researching Slow cinema as an art form that uses boredom as an aesthetic, I carve out how to bring a positive connotation to boredom. Since this thesis is practice-led, I incorporate the making of the essay film *Killing Boredom or Be Bored to Death* into my research. During my practical and theoretical research, I concluded, that commitment to endure boredom is the key to a contemplative slow cinema experience. I am convinced, that the film language of idleness, long takes, and dead time can lead to an affective understanding of the film.

AKI ArtEZ Academy of Art and Design Enschede

Killing Boredom or Be Bored to Death

A bachelor thesis for the programme Moving Image

By Wiebke Schnapper

Born on 15.05.2000

Student number 1548421

Submitted on 15.01.2024 in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the BA degree Design

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "W. Schnapper". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter 'p'.

Student signature

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1 Introduction

“The Human hates boredom”¹. In an age where film and video production are practically available to anyone, the choice one has for consumption in the form of moving images is endless. If I don’t like the film I am watching I stop it and start a new one. On *TikTok* I make an immediate judgment about whether a clip is entertaining, otherwise I scroll on. Through this constant stimulation, we get alienated from the thought of letting ourselves get bored. It became the antagonist of productivity. Calling something ‘boring’ may be a worse insult than calling something ‘bad’.

But why are we rejecting standing still? Why are we fighting off being bored? Why are we scared to stick to one thought for a long time, or even none at all? And can we bring a positive connotation to boredom?

To answer this, I first need to dive into how boredom is experienced and how it influences creativity. For this, I introduce the art of slow cinema as an example to play with the notion of boredom in art. The genre of slow cinema challenges the viewer’s patience with typically long durational scenes and uses aesthetics of boredom for storytelling.

¹ Deckers, Vera, “Blick aus dem Fenster,” In *Schöner Warten: Über den Umgang mit einem unvermeidlichen Zustand*, Nagel, Armin, (Köln: Lübbe Life, 2023) p.169

1.1 Slow cinema introduction

The cinema is an interesting viewing glass for understanding patience and behaviour towards boredom. Mainstream cinema according to scholar Beata Zawadka exists to “fight boredom off”², it can be described as a killer of boredom. It aspires to a satisfactory watching experience and to “justify itself as a believable Medium”³.

Slow cinema is a movement or genre that challenges the conventions of mainstream cinema and its fast-paced tendency. It describes often minimalist films of slow pace, high average shot length and usually a long duration. It often includes attributes of “idleness, monotony, and emptiness”⁴. With a high emphasis on the lack of action-based narrative and stillness or repetition, it often portrays topics of depression, the banality of life, the passing of time or death.⁵ One key feature of slow cinema is dead time. It describes empty moments in a film that interrupt the consequential action and create time for “contemplation, revelation or sheer inspection”⁶.

Watching numerous slow films I discovered the variety within slow cinema. It ranges from a one-hour meditative “pilgrimage” alongside the characters of *Old Joy*⁷ to being trapped in the misery of *Sátántangó*'s⁸ characters for six-and-a-half hours. Whether confined to a single room, as in the dialogue-based *Scenes from a Marriage*⁹, or in constant motion in *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*¹⁰ where the often abandoned plot serves to learn about the truth of the characters.¹¹ The style can range from simple static shots in *Jeanne Dielman*¹² to expansive camera movement in *An Elephant sitting still*¹³.

² Zawadka, Beata, “The UN/Bearable Lightness of (Slow) Watching: Audiovisual Boredom as Stimulation,” *European Journal of American Studies* 17, no. 4 (2022), p.2

³ Ibid. p.4

⁴ Çağlayan, Orhan Emre, “Screening Boredom: The History and Aesthetics of Slow Cinema,” 2014, p.66

⁵ Nich PK, “Dead Time – Exploring Slow Cinema.” *YouTube* video, 19:14, August 27 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCvWGhbFCqI>

⁶ Çağlayan, “Screening Boredom,” p.67

⁷ Reichardt, Kelly, *Old Joy*, 2006

⁸ Tarr, Béla, *Sátántangó*, 1994

⁹ Levi, Hagai, *Scenes from a Marriage*, 2021

¹⁰ Ceylan, Nuri Bilge, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, 2011

¹¹ Çağlayan, Orhan Emre, “The Aesthetics of Boredom: Slow Cinema and the Virtues of the Long Take in Once Upon a Time in Anatolia,” *Projections* 10, no. 1 (2016), p.76

¹² Akerman, Chantal, *Jeanne Dielman*, 1975

¹³ Bo, Hu, *An Elephant Sitting Still*, 2018

1.2 Practical Research Introduction

Supplementing my watching experience with theoretical knowledge I created an understanding of boredom as part of slow cinema that provided a base for my practice.

The outcome is the essay film *Killing Boredom or Be Bored to Death*,¹⁴ which serves as a teaser for the art of slow cinema and food for thought to create a new perspective on boredom and how we spend our time.

Creating a passe-partout by reenacting six powerful scenes from various slow films allowed me to pass on my understanding of the practice to the viewer while learning myself from carrying out the practice. By adding a voiceover I invited the viewer to the theoretical discussion about slow cinema and boredom.

Reenacting or appropriating is a way to include my research, thoughts, and strategies in the scenes. Slow films, with their open-ended nature, leave room for a personalized understanding. Cinema scholar Scott Richmond characterizes the perception of a contemplative slow film as autobiographical.¹⁵ By revisiting and reenacting scenes, I add a layer of intertextuality, incorporating my interpretation. Intertextuality describes the influence a discourse and context have on the understanding of a text. This comes forward in reenactment when discussing artwork in a new context creates interaction with additional thoughts shaping new meaning.

¹⁴ refer to the script *Killing Boredom or Be Bored to Death* in the appendix

¹⁵ Richmond, Scott C, "Vulgar Boredom, or What Andy Warhol Can Teach Us about *Candy Crush*," *Journal of Visual Culture* 14, no. 1 (2015): 21–39.

2 The stages of boredom

During my research, I discovered that there are multiple ways to define boredom, and the commonly used connotation merely scratches the surface. In order to differentiate, I present the various aspects as five stages of boredom, that will lead through this chapter. For this, I will use terms by author Scott Richmond.

I will start by introducing the everyday “micro boredom”¹⁶ and how one can embrace it with mind wandering. Hereupon, I will talk about accepting boredom and how this leads to the experience of “vulgar boredom”¹⁷. Eventually, I will present the state of “profound boredom”¹⁸ as an ideal condition for a contemplative slow cinema experience.

Alongside the theory, I elaborate on how practice influenced my thinking and how the research influenced my choices for my essay film.

¹⁶ Richmond, “Vulgar Boredom, or What Andy Warhol Can Teach Us about *Candy Crush*,”. p.35

¹⁷ Ibid. p.24

¹⁸ Ibid.

2.1 Stage 1: Micro boredom

The most simple form of boredom is the everyday moments of waiting that Richmond calls micro boredom. I say every day, but many people do not experience this boredom daily, since we have a powerful tool to avoid this: the smartphone. One reason for the negative connotation of boredom is its lack of productivity. In a post-industrial world, the guilt of not working (this nowadays includes working on mental health and social life) has made us reject boredom.

In his book *Schöner Warten* (Happy Waiting), Armin Nagel talks to experts about what we can learn from waiting and how we learn to wait. To all his conversation partners, he poses the question: “Would a world without waiting be better or worse”¹⁹. The reaction, all of which are in favour of waiting, values certain attributes that come with waiting like joyful anticipation, increasing value for the awaited object, teaching humbleness, empty time intervals, and time to reboot.²⁰

2.1.1 Waiting in Berlin

As part of my practical research, I took some time to create several tryouts. As I did, I found an interesting research subject in myself, by creating new behaviours towards watching and waiting while filming my surroundings. I started to film myself every time I was waiting. Turning on the camera on my phone prohibited me from using any other apps and therefore made me aware of the waiting and my thoughts and behaviours during it, as well as my impatience. Looking back at it, while I got bored I also got intrigued by this outside perspective rewarding the viewer’s patience with interesting shots one can only value after having waited for them.

These tryouts inspired me to embrace the patience in creation just as I demand patience from my viewers. I found that allowing scenes time to unfold led to intriguing dynamics.

¹⁹ Nagel, Armin. *Schöner Warten: Über den umgang mit einem unvermeidlichen Zustand*. Köln: Lübbe Life, 2023.

²⁰ Ibid.

Therefore, when filming, I chose an improvisational approach, repeating scenes to discover compelling moments.

2.2 Stage 2: Mind wandering

Author Nagel encourages the reader to unwrap waiting time like a present.²¹ It creates unexpected moments free of responsibilities to trail off on one's thoughts. Following this train of thought, I formulated a dialogue on the perspectives of waiting that I situated into the setting of a waiting scene from Bela Tarr's *Sátántangó*²².²³

While waiting is considered an irritating gap between activities, mind wandering, when committed to it, is rather pleasant. The brain enters the default network mode, which can open a well of creativity.²⁴

In this state, our mind experiences a lack of external stimulation and, therefore searches for another kind of stimulation from within.²⁵ Authors Menninghaus et al. describe boredom as being "capable of triggering meaning re-establishment strategies."^{26,27}

Slow cinema invites the viewer to let their mind wander while watching. Due to its durational dedramatized long takes, the viewer is given a lot of space for interpretation. The long take, being the most common feature of slow cinema shows actions at their full length instead of skipping ahead to the consequential part of the action.²⁸ Given the time to explore the details of a shot or a scene, the viewer enters a contemplative watching mode. The minimalism of slow cinema creates a watching experience close to reality, or as theorist André Bazin phrases it: "pure cinema"²⁹. The filmmaker is passing the decision of when to

²¹ Nagel. *Schöner Warten*.

²² Tarr, Béla, *Sátántangó*, 1994

²³ Refer to chpt.3, *Script Killing Boredom or Be Bored to Death* in the appendix

²⁴ Eastwood, John D., Alexandra Frischen, Mark J. Fenske, and Daniel Smilek, "The Unengaged Mind," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 7, no. 5 (2012): 482–95.

²⁵ CBS Mornings, "How being bored can stimulate creativity," *YouTube* video, 3:41. July 12 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-pKn41dxkA>

²⁶ Menninghaus, Winfried, Valentin Wagner, Julian Hanich, Eugen Wassiliwizky, Thomas Jacobsen, and Stefan Koelsch, "The Distancing-Embracing Model of the Enjoyment of Negative Emotions in Art Reception," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 40 (2017), p 26

²⁷ For elaboration refer to chpt.4, *Script Killing Boredom or Be Bored to Death* in the appendix

²⁸ Çağlayan, "Screening Boredom," p. 51

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 59

look where, and what to make out of it on to the viewer and therefore “confronts the artificiality of cinema as a medium.”³⁰

2.2.1 What the mind yearns for

The film *Call Me By Your Name*³¹, while making use of long takes, is not explicitly defined as a slow film. But its end-credit scene slowly releases the viewer to their reflection of the film, where we watch Elio, the main character, crying in front of the fireplace for several minutes. In a reenactment of this scene, I place a meta layer of voice over the visual of a person calmly observing a public space. Listening to thoughts about the default network mode the viewer can reflect on their habits of letting their mind wander. With the voiceover being read in a monotonous way, it also invites the viewer to zone out into their thoughts.³²

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Guadagnino, Luca, *Call me by your name*, 2017

³² refer to chpt.4, Script *Killing Boredom or Be Bored to Death* in the appendix

2.3 Stage 3: Accepting Boredom

Waiting is not truly waiting when distracted by other tasks, as well as boredom is not truly boredom if one is engaged and sophisticated in the work.

When I started my research by watching slow cinema, I enthusiastically entered a contemplative watching mode, learning to love the aesthetics of boredom. Seeing beauty in every shot and calming down with long plotless idling takes. But it needed the long films, it needed Bela Tarr's *Sátántangó*³³ to confess that I was genuinely bored. The fact that I was willing to explore this boredom made me stay through the movie.

2.3.1 Who is watching?

Sátántangó – A seven-and-a-half-hour visit to the Hungarian town Satan and its peculiar more or less pleasant inhabitants. You become acquaintances as you get involved with their daily routines and challenges. Getting annoyed by them, impatient, waiting just as they do for something to happen. And for the persistent rain to stop. Just like the village is cut off from the nearest town due to the rain, the viewer is cut off from the outside world due to a commitment to getting engaged to Bela Tarr's holy grail of slow cinema. Regardless of the unusual running time, Tarr wants to show rather little as film critic Janet Maslin puts it.³⁴ Instead he wants to make the viewer feel the mud, the rain, and the hopelessness. "He wants us to see devastation at the bottom of everything."³⁵

Who is watching? I entitle my reenactment of the opening scene from Bela Tarr's *Sátántangó*. Using Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "time-image", he suggests that in these idling shots of slow cinema, the character becomes a kind of viewer themselves.³⁶ By including the sounds I make while recording the scene, I add another character to the scene

³³ Tarr, Béla, *Sátántangó*, 1994

³⁴ Maslin, Janet, "FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW: SATANTANGO; A Seven-Hour Contemplation of Boredom, Decay and Misery," *The New York Times*, October 8, 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/08/movies/film-festival-review-satantango-seven-hour-contemplation-boredom-decay-misery.html>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Çağlayan, "Screening Boredom", pp. 61-62

literally as the viewer. One is watching the person behind the camera on their journey of watching the sheep.

2.4 Stage 4: Vulgar Boredom

With the notion of rebellion towards mainstream cinema, it is natural that slow films hardly stop at providing a contemplating watching mode. The viewer's fascination can hardly be enough to keep engaged throughout Andy Warhol's *Empire*, an eight-hour-long 16mm film portraying the top of the Empire State Building in a single static shot.³⁷

2.4.1 The passing of time

Inspired by Warhol, in one sequence of my essay film *Killing Boredom or Be Bored to Death* the viewer is looking at an alarm clock for what seems to be one whole minute. Only that the second hand is not moving at the right speed, it seems to stumble across the clock face. While the viewer is bound to keep watching, they start to question the perception of time.

It is impossible to tell the actual duration of the scene by the alarm clock depicted, still there is nothing else to be followed than the passing of time. I chose an unpretentious setting to create this ambiguity of discomfort and a "rapt attentiveness to details"³⁸ – in this case to the movement of the second hand – that according to Richmond viewers of *Empire* experience.

This description comes closer to the intuitive definition of boredom as an undesired condition of lack of stimulation and the "inability to engage in satisfying activity."³⁹ In mainstream cinema, boredom is seen as "a failure of some kind: either of the viewer (to be sufficiently sophisticated) or the object (to be sufficiently captivating)."⁴⁰

Richmond calls this failure a feeling of vulgar boredom when the viewer is left with nothing but a shiftless and stiff feeling of underwhelmed disorganization.⁴¹

But still, slow cinema exists as an art form so there surely must be more to it than torturing the viewer or testing their attention span.

³⁷ Warhol, Andy, *Empire*, 1965

³⁸ Richmond, "Vulgar Boredom, or What Andy Warhol Can Teach Us about *Candy Crush*," p.22

³⁹ Eastwood, "The Unengaged Mind," p.482

⁴⁰ Richmond, "Vulgar Boredom, or What Andy Warhol Can Teach Us about *Candy Crush*," p.27

⁴¹ Ibid p.33

2.5 Stage 5: Profound Boredom

In his essay, Richmond introduces profound boredom as a state beyond vulgar boredom, a reward for being committed enough to “overcome a negative affect, an ugly feeling, to realize its aesthetic.”⁴² It includes an aesthetic reflection that can only take place in interplay with the experience of boredom or how Richmond states it: “You have to have faith that you’ll discover that the thing isn’t boring at all – eventually.”⁴³

2.5.1 A story by boredom

I can confidently say that the film *Jeanne Dielman*⁴⁴ by Chantal Akerman is boring. We follow a housewife, fulfilling her daily routine around her apartment in static medium shots. Nothing exciting seems to happen. The dialogues are held at a bare minimum. The whole first hour you sit there watching the emotionless main character in her monotonous repetitive action – you have to get comfortable with it.

But what seems to be a very boring occupation, and even more boring to watch turns out to be a coping mechanism to avoid the emptiness. Where the viewer sees a woman being caught up by duty and routine in the beginning of the film, later they can recognize, that it is not the duty that is the reason for a mundane life, but rather the mundane life, that is the reason for the never-ending duty.

While reenacting this scene, I wanted to focus on the contrast of how the two characters deal with boredom. Where the child seems to be all relaxed, the woman is constantly occupying herself trying to not get bored at all. This creates an interesting interplay between the setting which has a connotation of boring housework and the action that feels tense rather than boring.

⁴² Ibid p. 28

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Akerman, Chantal, *Jeanne Dielman*, 1975

Film scholar Çağlayan defines boredom in two categories: simple boredom as a momentary feeling and existential boredom which is more of a deep-rooted mood.⁴⁵ Chantal Akerman manages to indulge an atmosphere of simple boredom within the cinema in order to make them understand the underlying existential boredom of the film's character. Nothing can explain a character's ennui better than making the viewer feel a glimpse of it.

⁴⁵ Çağlayan, "Screening Boredom," pp. 206-207

3. Conclusion

I conclude in my essay film *Killing Boredom or Be Bored to Death*: A viewer that signs a contract when walking into the cinema can turn this displeasure of boredom into a more dimensional cinematic experience.⁴⁶ Demonstrating that boredom unfolds in stages, I emphasize the need for patience to fully commit and endure its discomfort, ultimately leading to a new, felt understanding of the film rather than a purely intellectual one.

In the end, it might be the boredom that teaches us most about the story being told.

When determining the stylistic direction for my final essay film, I was arguing whether or not to make an entirely boring video. However, I learned that not every narrative-lacking film has the potential to evoke the state of inspirational boredom that slow cinema seeks. It requires an understanding of the viewers' experience to find the small pass of just being boring enough to evoke contemplation, without risking disinterest.

Ultimately, it takes boldness to produce a deliberately boring film in the hope that someone is daring enough to invest and discover hidden treasures within it.

⁴⁶ Refer to chpt.6, Script *Killing Boredom or Be Bored to Death* in the appendix

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Appendix: Script Essay Film *Killing Boredom or Be Bored to Death*

Chapter 1: Who is watching?

Boring is an unincorporated community in Baltimore County, Maryland, United States, located at the intersection of Old Hanover and Pleasant Grove Roads, approximately five miles north of Reisterstown. It consists of about 40 houses, the Boring Post Office, and formerly the Boring Volunteer Fire Company and Boring Methodist Church.

Chapter 2: Killer of boredom

Are you bored yet? What do you feel looking at slow plotless long takes providing no help in understanding and processing the scene? What is your anticipation?

Mainstream cinema nowadays is leaving little room for individual engagement, it is the ultimate killer of boredom. We want to experience emotion to fill any emptiness inside, so we've become masters of avoidance.

With narration that initially appears baffling, cryptic, and incomprehensible, and embracing idleness and Monotony Slow cinema has become a medium to challenge this fast-paced tendency of cinema.

Slow cinema is a genre of art cinema characterised by a style that is minimalist, observational, and with little or no narrative, and which typically emphasizes long takes.

Chapter 3: A waste of time

The two clocks show different times. Both are wrong of course. This one here is too slow. Instead of telling the time, the other one seems to point at our pointless condition. (The other one measures not so much time, but the eternal reality of the exploited)

What about our condition is pointless?

We are waiting for nothing.

We are waiting for the sake of waiting.

Exactly that is the point there is no point. Waiting is an activity whose only purpose is for it to end. It is a state of anticipating its natural breaking point. This is a waste of time.

What do you mean?

I mean I am doing nothing.
I don't have time for this.

You have now. This is what you get out of it. Time. It's a present.

You are a great poem I tell you.

Person coming out of the room What are you waiting for?

Chapter 4: What the mind yearns for

Mind wandering is the discrepancy between the dullness of the current condition and the unfulfilled yearning for a more desired activity.

If we embrace the boredom and let our mind wander the brain enters the default network mode. In this state, our mind experiences a lack of external stimulation and, therefore searches for another kind of stimulation from within. We are not fed with someone else's ideas so our brain comes up with its own instead.

Its name is hinting on its relevance. This is the default mode. We should get used to coming back to these in-between activities rather than hustle on from one task to the other. My default mode is called Instagram. The brain uses as much energy in the default network mode as when doing other activities.

Even if we are taking a rest it actually never stops racing. Once we steer our focus and consciousness on things that seem ordinary and trivial, we start looking for details and our mind tries to find meaning beyond the monotony.

Chapter 5: The passing of time

Boredom is an undesired condition. A lack of stimulation and the inability to engage in satisfying activity.

It doesn't mean what we do or watch is boring. It is us being bored.

Nothing is boring on its own. When one is not truthfully committed to a task, is when one feels bored. Being agitated, annoyed and frustrated that the time doesn't run the way you wanted.

Chapter 6: A story by boredom

With the right mindset slow cinema is not only about torturing the viewer and testing their cognitive capacities, as it might seem at first glance.

As many slow films focus on the topics of death and the passing of time, they often create a dull nihilistic atmosphere. Still slow cinema, with its patient minimalistic aesthetics can immerse you into a story, giving you the comfort to open up your thoughts towards a different world.

This is where filmmakers use the attributes of idleness, monotony and emptiness as aesthetics of boredom to welcome a contemplating watching mode.

With the usage of dead time, it projects the perplexing feeling of being stuck, dullness or loss of meaning of life onto the viewer. In the end, it might be the boredom that teaches us most about the story being told.

A viewer who signed a contract when walking into the cinema can turn this displeasure of Boredom into a more dimensional cinematic experience.

But once we manage to sit through a slow cinema piece. Whether it is 3 hours, seven and a half or only an hour, can we carry this attitude back to our normal lives? Life doesn't work that differently from media. You can live your life as a feed of TikTok or as slow cinema. It is for you to decide.