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Vulgar Boredom, or What Andy Warhol Can Teach Us about *Candy Crush*

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Abstract

This article is an investigation of boredom in the company of screen-based media. Working across film theory, media theory, affect theory, and game studies, the author argues that boredom is at once a useful counterexample to the common presumption of a saturating aesthetic encounter in film and media studies, and an affective correlate to media theory's figure of the withdrawal of digital technics from the grasp of human perception and attention. Furthermore, he argues that boredom is not necessarily something we wish to avoid, but rather a relational state that we sometimes aim to achieve in relation to media objects that are not engrossing, interesting, engaging, beautiful. His argument unfolds across three stages: a description of modernist 'profound boredom' in Andy Warhol's early film 'Stillies', in which boredom is converted into interest by means of intellection or criticism; a theorization of the 'vulgar boredom' of mass culture, in relation to Christopher Nolan's *Inception*, using psychoanalytical object-relations theory to help understand what happens when we seek out cinematic or mediatic boredom; and finally, a discussion of these results derived from the cinema in relation to King's blockbuster casual game, *Candy Crush Saga*.

Keywords

aesthetics • Andy Warhol • boredom • film theory • gaming • media theory • psychoanalysis

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Andy Warhol would have loved iPhones.

At a recent screening of Warhol's *Empire* (1963), MoMA invited the audience to pull out their phones and live-tweet about the whole static, unmoving eight-hour film of the Empire State Building. Famously (and perversely), Warhol took about six hours of footage and *slowed it down* so that it would last even longer. You just can't stay engaged for that long, with so little happening – and Warhol didn't want you to. In a delightful Warholian move, MoMA invited its viewers to engage in a form of 'bad behavior' typical of our 21st-century media culture: to pull out their phones in a movie theater so they could be just a little bit elsewhere, just for a little while.

Empire is really unbearably boring. This is not, however, to say that it, or Warhol's other excruciatingly long and eventless films, are without interest. In fact, they are masterful pieces of modernist filmmaking, putting the cinematic apparatus to work in new ways in order to lay bare its functioning and its nature. Recalling Erik Satie's 'furniture music', Justin Remes (2015) has argued that we should understand Warhol's films of this kind as *furniture films*: they're boring like furniture, not like a bad movie. They flagrantly, exorbitantly, exacerbate what is perhaps the central fact about the cinema: that it is durational. In so doing, they at once show the essence of the thing and also change the nature of the thing.¹

Which is to say, Warhol's movies of this sort – he called them 'Stillies' – really are boring, even when they're interesting. Their interest is a kind of meta-boredom. Whatever interest we may find on the other side of boredom dissolves or abolishes the boredom we once felt. In one version of this, exacerbated duration becomes meditative, a rapt attentiveness to details that ordinarily fall below the threshold of awareness, details that are often indexes of the material of the medium: a light that flicks on and off in one of the windows and the slow changes in the sky as dawn arrives, but also the grain of the film and the slight differences in tone between reels of Warhol's Bolex film.

Or perhaps, we might just be bored, bored to tears, bored beyond bearing it. And, once I can no longer bear it, the norms of cinematic engagement dissolve. The film certainly doesn't live up to them, so why should I? If I can no longer stand to keep waiting for the film to engage me, I strike out to find other interests. I pull out my iPhone and tweet. I start talking to my neighbor. I take drugs, get drunk, pass out, make out, take a nap, take a piss, wander out the room, down the hallway, down the street. These departures from the ordinary genres of cinematic engagement are as significant as a passionately heightened awareness of scratches on the film. Nevertheless, this (possibly literal) departure is staged, even insisted upon, by the film up on the screen. As works of art in the modernist mold, Warhol's Stillies stage a radical departure from the cinematic ordinary in order to achieve their reflexive effects. *Empire* is boring at its very heart; the sorts of interesting things that people experience in proximity to it, and then later say about it, can only emerge against a backdrop of Warhol's paradigmatic, virtuosic boringness.

My interest in boredom of various kinds lies in how it allows us to attend to certain aspects of the ordinary of our intensively mediated late capitalism. In particular, boredom allows me to draw together two theoretical vocabularies here: affect theory and media theory. Boredom helps us understand some of the affective postures and aesthetic dispositions that make damaged, precarious life bearable in our current economic, social, cultural, and technical milieux. By this I mean a vague set of utterly familiar behaviors, like pulling out your iPhone during a boring movie – or checking Facebook during a faculty meeting. In this, I am relying on projects of theorizing the present in terms of affects and the ordinary that others have begun, most notably Lauren Berlant (2011) and Kathleen Stewart (2007). Meanwhile, media theory figures this ordinary in terms of ‘atmospheric media’ and ‘ubiquitous computing’, in work by Mark Hansen (2013) and Katherine Hayles (2009).² As digital media have come to operate at scales and speeds that exceed our capacities for attention and perception, they recede from the presumptive correlation between technology and human perception. Can we see mediatic boredom as a corresponding or complementary detachment from the presumptive correlation with our media, from the other side? Mediatic boredom from this perspective may be an ordinary decoupling between us and our media.

To articulate the specificity of digital media, media theory has often borrowed from film theory a sense of the cinema as the superseded or outmoded – precisely not-contemporary – paradigm of a tight correlation between the human and the technical (e.g. Hansen, 2014). This correlation, however, is not only technical, but also *aesthetic*. In different tenses, film theory and media theory both construe the cinema as a site where the relation between media and the human – whatever your figure for it: viewer, spectator, subject – is saturated both technically and aesthetically.³ Cinematic boredom is therefore instructive because it is a slackening of the ordinarily or presumptively tight cinematic correlation of film and viewer, outside media theory’s largely technological–determinist story.

In slightly more grandiose, but related, terms, this article is a small sortie into a much broader concern: how might we conceptualize aesthetics outside of the dual hangovers of Romanticism and modernism? Aesthetics is often, if not paradigmatically, construed as a magic circle outside the ordinary, where we encounter the limits of experience, or of communicating experience. Can we think of aesthetics without establishing a norm of some kind of heightened state? What if we didn’t take as our model an aesthetic object in front of which I lose myself? – which is to say, I find myself variously fascinated, captivated, engrossed, enraptured, ravished, shattered, or caught up in any of the other bossy modes of aesthetic encounter? One possibility is an aesthetics of the ordinary, in which we turn our powers of attention and observation and criticism and conceptualization honed on various kinds of bossy objects toward smaller, more modest, less noticeable, more retiring sorts of things. One name for this critical practice is cultural studies.

And yet, most models of aesthetic objects encounters imagine something saturating, a more or less total resonance. I worry that, with them in hand,

we overshoot the thing we're looking for, if we're looking for the ordinary. I have the sense that what is in the offing, here as well as in the affect theory and media theory I draw on, is a more thoroughgoing reconceptualization of aesthetics. Not that I'll give you anything like that here. I am merely offering another way of turning over this problem: I am proposing that the slackening or diffusion of our relations with media might not be determined or caused by the unilateral disengagement of computational media as their operation recedes beyond the horizon of perceptibility. I want us to learn to attend to our many encounters with media that are not organized by a desire for self-loss, or shattering, or the sublime, or any of the totalizing, insistent, or dominating genres of encounter that have organized so much of the thinking I know on the cinema, media, and aesthetics. And so: boredom.⁴

My question in this article is simple: Why is so much of our contemporary media boring? By this I don't mean bad, crass, tasteless, or inexpert. Much bad, crass, and tasteless film and television is actually captivating: take *Jackass*.⁵ Meanwhile, some very well-wrought pieces of 'entertainment' bore me beyond explanation or description. My example here is Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010). The various culture industries that produce the onslaught of boring media must surely have enough expertise and capital to ensure that all, or at least much, of its output could be interesting, engaging, substantive, worthwhile – or any antonym to boring you might choose. Sometimes, even those of us raised on the mother's milk of Adorno's dour and haughty disdain for mass culture, we don't want to listen to Beethoven or Schoenberg or, you know, watch *The Wire*.⁶ Sometimes, we don't want to eat our highbrow vegetables, and all we really want to do is veg out in front of *Top Chef*, playing *Candy Crush* as we do.

This article is divided into three parts. First, I discuss Warhol's boring film, *Kiss* (1963), developing an account of its profound, modernist boredom. Then, I turn to *Inception* to develop its other, a vulgar boredom that often attends mass cultural objects. Finally, to demonstrate the salience of my analysis to media beyond the cinema, I play out my analysis of boredom in relation to video games, especially the ubiquitous (and utterly vulgar) *Candy Crush*. But first, let me tell you about how I find Warhol boring.

Profound Boredom

Kiss (1963) is also really unbearably boring. In part, it's boring like *Empire* and *Sleep* and even *Blowjob* are boring. Warhol's formula for his Stillies is this: nothing much happens, very slowly, and for a long time. Like every Stillie, it is a series of Bolex reels strung together, including the washout at their beginnings and ends, with no soundtrack. It was shot at synch-sound speed, but is projected at silent speed. We see 13 different couples kissing, mostly in close-up. The kisses lack any narrative context: we catch each one already under way, and only one ends before the roll washes out. They often lack spatial context, too, framed too tight to see a background, or focused and exposed so that the background is abstracted. It is boring: 13 kisses, nearly an hour of film.

As Linda Williams (2008: 58ff) has argued, *Kiss* is a film about Hollywood movies.⁷ *Kiss* takes Hollywood's paradigmatic event – a couple kisses, resolving everything – and deforms it in several ways. Warhol's kisses are too long, too particular, too embodied, too risqué, too gross for Hollywood. We see tongues, swallowing, evident sexual arousal, and two boys kissing. Formally, but also erotically, *Kiss* marks or anticipates the end of what Williams (2008: 63) calls the long adolescence of American cinema, 'a time when the kiss was all the sex that could be seen'. Not just kisses: *Hollywood* kisses, with their narrative window-dressing and rigorously conventionalized, heterosexually chaste eroticism. By contrast, Warhol particularizes, and thus carnalizes, the kiss, violating Hollywood's norms and eschewing its narrative alibis. *Kiss* gives us violated norms, carnal and perverse eroticism, even boys kissing! Surely, this is all very exciting.

It's also nearly an hour long. By the 13th kiss – or, if I'm being honest, by the end of the first one – I find myself checking out, shifting in my seat, not able to muster up enough perverse voyeurism to find these two bodies kissing much fun at all. We might see the messy, carnal particularity of bodies (in a way that Hollywood still withholds from us – abstracted less now by chastity than by a rigorous code of normative eroticism), but this messy, carnal particularity is *serialized*. He deflates his kisses, not only by withholding narrative context, but also by repeating them over and over and over again. By the 13th kiss, I can't much care anymore about these, or any, two bodies kissing. When it is boring, *Kiss* gives us something we might at first find paradoxical: perversion, the carnality of bodies, voyeurism; but then also, boredom, disinterest, indifference.

Warhol's Stillies engender a surprisingly differentiated set of aesthetic effects. Like *Sleep* or *Blowjob* or the *Screen Tests*, *Kiss* gives us intimate proximity with other bodies. Like *Blowjob*, it is pruriently erotic. But, instead of withholding the event by situating it out-of-frame, as *Blowjob* does, it gives us nothing but the event, much like the *Screen Tests*. In serializing this nothing-but-the-event, *Kiss* deflates the event, showing us at once the particular content – how *this* kiss is embodied – but then also the banality, the ordinariness, the impersonality of the kiss. In this, Warhol offers a demonstration of a basic psychoanalytic insight, which we learn from Freud (1961, 2000), and which Leo Bersani (1986; Bersani and Phillips, 2008) makes unavoidable: both desire and the pleasurable acts to which desire gives rise are repetitive. Not dully or boringly repetitive – at least when it is your own desire. But if it's not yours – well, when it's not turning you on or disgusting you, most pornography is mind-numbingly boring. Without the ruses of narrative – the chase, the withholding, the foreplay, the diversions and perversions⁸ – Warhol gives us sexuality, and bodies engaged in various configurations of sex, but as repetitive, devoid of interest, indifferent: boring.

Kiss is of course also about television, and even the commodity in general. Seriality for Warhol, across his many media, is a way of despecifying the object, engendering a more diffuse, less attuned, and less saturated mode of aesthetic encounter. For Jonathan Flatley (2010), Warhol's seriality leads not only to an attenuation of the aesthetic, displacing the affectively

intense *loving* we might ordinarily associate with the aesthetic in favor of a more detached, 'mere' *liking*, it also grounded a pointed and continuing emphasis, in much of Warhol's oeuvre, on similarity and sameness. The seriality of *Kiss*, however, is organized by a formal and technical condition of the moving image: you have to encounter it in time, in duration. In *Kiss*, this duration carries with it a temporality of open-ended ongoingness, ateleological waiting, and repetition: the temporality of televisual seriality. Graig Uhlin (2010) argues that much of Warhol's film work targets television with its serially articulated flow. *Kiss*'s kisses are repeated with a formal rigor matching our media's most static and degraded formulas: proto-televisual serial melodramas with women tied, screaming, to railway tracks by mustachioed villains; the sitcom that manages never quite to go anywhere; the game show with its reassuring, explicit, and arbitrary rules; its offshoot, reality TV; the same ads for the same products with the same happy faces; or even repeated attempts to beat a particular level of a particular game, just to get to the next, only slightly-more-difficult level. TV's formulas, or Hollywood's, or *World of Warcraft*'s – it hardly matters which. *Kiss* borrows its seriality from many media, as well as from serialized commodity for which these media are implacable advertisements.⁹

And yet, *Kiss* is also emphatically cinematic. With its serialized accumulation of kissing bodies, it solicits a perverse interest in looking, a voyeurism at the heart of the cinema. As Damon Young (2015) has argued, Warhol's spectator possesses a gaze that is properly voyeuristic, perverse in the Freudian sense: endowed with a sensuality or sexuality that is somehow improper, neither productive nor teleological. This perverse body is not the mechanistic body of psychology or cognitive science, but encumbered by desire and fascinated by looking. Young argues that Warhol's voyeuristic, perverse, and queer spectator is a structural condition of the cinema. Warhol's cinema thus yokes two bodies together: that of a viewer who, bored by Warhol's exacting formal minimalism and relentless seriality, must exercise a disciplinary restraint to maintain focus on and interest in the film (on the bodies onscreen); and, that of the voyeur-spectator, fascinated by the bodies onscreen, resonating erotically with those onscreen bodies. These two bodies, however, are neither identical, nor necessarily, coincident.

The cinema spectator's 'proper' body has not only been trained in the comportment and dispositions for perceiving properly, it has also had its desires and sensuous responses conditioned or even produced by the technology of eroticized looking that the cinema frequently just is.¹⁰ It is a common enough trope in film theory to say that the cinema aligns two bodies – or perhaps, more precisely, aspects of our embodiment. It's present in Metz's (1982) formulation of primary and secondary cinematic identification; it finds expression in Mulvey's (1986) dual figure of fetishistic scopophilia and narcissistic identification. Perhaps not surprisingly, this figure also shows up in studies of modernist aesthetics, and not only of Warhol. Rosalind Krauss (1998: 137) has argued that in front of Marcel Duchamp's optical devices, the perceiving body of the perceptual psychologist and

the libidinous body of the psychoanalyst meet, or coincide. Warhol not only discloses the perverse body of the voyeuristic spectator as an enabling condition of the cinema (which is also conditioned by the cinema), he also teaches us that the cinema itself depends upon and effects a coupling of two bodies: one, effortfully attentive; the other, promiscuously libidinous. From this perspective, the cinema may just be a technology to occasion or produce this coupling.

But what happens if this presumptive, even fundamental, alignment breaks down? What, I want to ask, if I'm *just* bored? In the bored excruciation of a Warhol film, I find not only that my attention isn't held; I find that my body rises up as an object of attention. Shiftless, sore, stiff, my body becomes an encumbrance which requires relief, or it becomes a site (many sites) of mindless occupation (nail biting, knuckle cracking, fidgeting). Absent some process of metacognitive or meditative or perverse aesthetic appreciation, a passage to the other side of boredom into some form of absorption or fascination, Warhol's formula – not much happens, very slowly, and for a long time – casts my attention and awareness neither to what is on the screen, nor to the scene of the cinema, but rather to my actual and literal bodily presence *in* a cinema – and to my psychic non-presence.

Here again we see the prejudice of film theory (and aesthetic theory, and media theory) for what I called earlier the bossy genres of aesthetic encounter. The presumption, even in front of so boring a film as *Kiss* (or *Empire*) is that we are on the inside of an aesthetic encounter that is *working*. When a viewer is bored by a film, it's usually understood as a failure of some kind: either of the viewer (to be sufficiently sophisticated) or the object (to be sufficiently captivating). Warhol's Stillies aren't the only aesthetic objects that use boredom in the context of the aesthetic, demanding you find the other side of boredom. Modernism's various forms of minimalism can be seen as attempts to get past the *Sturm und Drang* of Romantic aesthetics or the vapid noisy mess of popular culture. Thus boredom becomes an important aesthetic affect for much of modernist aesthetics. Ask John Cage: 'if something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all' (quoted in Goldsmith, 2004). Kenneth Goldsmith (2004) calls this 'unboring boring', a deflation of the aesthetic embraced by various avant-garde aesthetics over the decades: Warhol, of course, but also Satie, Duchamp, Stein, and Pound.

The very real boredom at work in Warhol (and others) is not a failure. It lies at the center of their aesthetic. This 'unboring boring' – following Agamben (2003), I prefer to call it *profound boredom* – is itself a special kind of boredom, a boredom that, when it works, dissolves itself into various forms of critical and aesthetic reflection.¹¹ This boredom helps maintain the integrity of the magic circle of the aesthetic encounter with serious art. This may look like a dour and unrelenting serious-facedness (this is how I imagine Stein and Pound), but it could look like Warhol or Goldsmith with their queer playfulness. Either way, modernism's profound boredom is one

iteration of the avant-garde's resistance to the reifying, commodifying logic of capitalism, which Frederic Jameson (1979: 135) taught us to see as the very motive force, if not the purpose, of avant-garde art.

Profoundly boring works of art like Warhol's *Stillies*, in their attempt to liquidate the bossy genres of the aesthetic encounter (shattering, self-loss, rapture, etc.), nevertheless insist on absorption in the object, a lavish and even exorbitant attentiveness that requires effort to maintain in the face of stultifying boredom.¹² Like the sublime, and like Sianne Ngai's (2005) 'stuplimity', this modernist boredom requires you to overcome a negative affect, an ugly feeling, to realize its aesthetic. You have to have faith that you'll discover that the thing isn't boring at all – eventually. Profound boredom is not only intentional, it ratchets up the stakes of the aesthetic encounter, heightening modernism's insistence on trust that the artist isn't having fun at your expense (see Cavell, 2002b). And critics, perhaps afraid of embarrassment and the risk of fraudulence (and dedicated to the integrity of the aesthetic), cannot bring themselves to declare Warhol's films merely boring: their spectator must pass through boredom to amorous fascination and obsessive voyeurism.

So here is where I proclaim that *Kiss* really bores me. It bores me, bores me: *boring* boring. Not every time I see it, though. The first time I saw it, I very nearly lost my shit. It was my first Warhol film, and I just didn't know you could do *that* with movies. But now, mostly, instead of modernist mindfuck, I discover only a bored indifference to Warhol's filmmaking, and a similarly bored indifference to the bodies kissing onscreen. Perhaps I should not admit this, but in writing this article, I couldn't even bear to watch it all the way through, not once, try as I might. I'm not even titillated anymore. I would leave it running on my television, but would then also find myself digging out my iPhone to check email and Facebook, getting up to get some food or (another) glass of wine, even watching some videos on YouTube. My boredom is *vulgar*.

Here we might ask questions about the social dimension of cinema-going, instead of the bored domesticity of my recent attempts at watching *Kiss*: if *Empire* is supposed to be the occasion for a party rather than a screening, surely that matters. But it doesn't actually say very much about boredom *with the film*, because such boredom is still orchestrated by the film as an occasion for a modernist aesthetic project of overcoming boredom. *Empire* and *Kiss* just offer different methods for the resolution of boredom: a party, or voyeurism. Profound boredom, as a matter of the aesthetic, is largely impersonal (in Kantian terms, it pretends to universal subjective validity). It is textually inscribed. Not only is it on purpose, it heightens our reliance on the good faith of the artist. Thus profound boredom is easy to render as a critical object, to argue about it, to subject to analytical procedures of knowledge-making. Profound boredom may even rely on critical procedures to make it profound: intellect is often the solution which dissolves our initial disinterest. Part of the allure of profound boredom is that it requires its spectator to have successfully received enough of an aesthetic education to

recognize the glint of interesting behind the veil of boredom. It is a kind of esoterism. It is a decisive break from the ordinary, or a rupture within it. It allows the viewer to feel the pride of the initiate. (Or, at least, to feel relieved at having overcome boredom in the face of a major work by a canonized artist: thank God I figured out how to hang with the cool kids who insist that *this* film is actually absolutely fascinating!)

Vulgar boredom, on the other hand, has the desultory singularity of mere taste. If I say that I'm bored – *bored* bored, vulgar bored – by *Kiss*, you more or less just have to take my word for it. I can describe my boredom, but I cannot offer reasons for it.¹³ If you're interested in *Kiss*, or any other boring-to-me film, I am not likely able to talk you out of that interest, although you very well might be able to talk me out of my boredom, using critical procedures to formulate a meta-boring interestingness. 'Don't you see? The unrelenting seriality of *Kiss* is actually a comment on Hollywood film and capitalist commodification!' Indeed, it is. The film is *still* boring, at least to me. Narrating vulgar boredom feels like autobiography: there's no 'phenomenological I'. Even then, it doesn't have the regularity of profound boredom. Sometimes, still, I get worked up into a lather watching Warhol. But mostly, I don't.

Sitting through *Kiss*, I have a durational intimacy with other bodies by which I am bored. If the film is working, and it takes on its voyeuristic aspect, I find myself in some more or less pointed erotic relation to the bodies onscreen engaged in sex acts: scopophilia, fetishistic or not. Meanwhile, if my boredom is vulgar, I find myself indifferent to other people's eroticism, bored by their sex acts. Bored viewing puts us in proximity and even intimacy with bodies onscreen, a proximity and an intimacy that are not marked by the various forms of intensive affective resonance that usually go under familiar names, identification or objectification, but are rather durational, drawn out. How can we reckon with our *inattention* to others on screens?

Vulgar Boredom

Like *Kiss*, *Inception* bores me, but it's not boring because nothing happens. You'd be hard-pressed to find grander ambition in contemporary Hollywood. The narrative is so convoluted that the internet coughed up a contest for infographics to map its multi-tiered narrative structure. Also, plenty of shit blows up. It's often stunning in its visual effects and production design. The characters are a bit one-dimensional, but the actors portraying them don't want for charisma. (I could watch Joseph Gordon-Levitt read the telephone book – and he's not the only one earning his pay.) Ultimately, the film is tightly organized around its convoluted narrative structure and its final narrative trick. It insists on its 'sham profundity' (borrowing Freud's [1961: 45] phrase), carefully arranged as it is to deliver a 'mindfuck' to its audience.

Inception asks its viewers to keep track of no fewer than four narrative levels, and then delivers an ambiguous Gestalt with its final moment, a narrative duck-rabbit. It withholds any satisfaction we viewers may finally

get for all our work, leaving us to yet more interpretive labor to reassess what has come before. But actually, there is no there there. The film calls out for plenty of 'interpretation', but does not deliver anything that could actually stand up to any real interpretive pressure: it is merely carefully calculated to be laborious and ambiguous, and it is not very interesting labor or ambiguity at that. Like Nolan's earlier *Memento*, *Inception* is basically a trick film, but it's all setup for no payoff.

And yet, boring movies do have their charms. *Inception* is a series of mildly pleasant diverting set pieces, action sequences, and (ahem) actors, about which I don't particularly have to care. This is not quite as bare as the bored proximity I have with Warhol's kissing couples, because it's softened a bit by the mildly pleasant divertingness of the affair. In its profound superficiality, Warhol's ascetic formalism prevents this softer boredom. Meanwhile, bored in the theater and oddly indifferent to Nolan's narrative gyrations and to his flat characters, I really do experience myself, but in an attenuated, lateral way. I am not at risk of losing myself in the aesthetic object – and that is the point. I may daydream, fantasizing about Joe Gordon-Leavitt or what I'll cook myself for dinner. Perhaps I try to remember my most interesting, or most cinematic, dreams. Maybe I let my attention wander to the exit sign, to the person next to me, to my cell phone, to the crunchy dregs of my box of popcorn and the ice and meltwater in the remains of my Diet Coke, to the arrangement of my clothing behind me on my seat, to my posture and the dull ache in my low back. If I am at home, I may get up to go get something from the fridge without pausing anything, letting the film run. Whatever it is that occupies me in my boredom, it's *not about the film*. I am instead occupied in a desultory, loose way with various aspects of myself – my body and my psyche – while in the same room with the film. The really strange thing about this pleasant boredom we may experience when we watch boring movies (like *Inception* is for me) lies in that we don't watch these things to relieve our boredom. We watch them, rather, to be bored *with* them.

As with almost all of Nolan's films, *Inception* calls out for interpretation, or something like it. Despite its concern with dreams and dream logic, its interpretive demand is not to discover latent content, but rather to discover what 'actually' happens. *Inception* is boring because it calls out for interpretation, without actually rewarding it. It solicits me as an interpreter of films, present in and bound to the here-now of the theater (or my living room), without actually arranging an impact or a transformation or some pedagogy or a scene of uplift or self-improvement: if you successfully execute the set of interpretive moves organized by the film, what you will have discovered is only what has happened in the fiction. The sort of viewing it demands isn't messy or disorganizing. I don't lose myself here, but rather *find* myself. And, finding myself as an interpreting I before the film, what I find is – *myself*.

This is not to say that finding ourselves interpreting films is always boring. Rather, Nolan, like Warhol, makes films that belong to a broad category

of film aesthetics organized by activities (and failures) of interpretation, which, drawing from psychoanalytical object–relations theory, we might conveniently call *depressive aesthetics*.¹⁴ In Thomas Ogden's words, the depressive position is marked by a 'fully developed sense of an interpreting self standing between oneself and one's lived experience' (Ogden, 2004: 143). I mean the term 'depressive' to register that this aesthetics suspends or withholds engrossing interest or self-loss: we're stuck with ourselves. I submit that, variously, Russian formalist *ostrenanie* (Shklovsky, 1965), Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekts* (Brecht, 1964), political–modernist alienation (Rodowick, 1988), and modernist–minimalist profound boredom all fall under this heading just as much as anything marked by the diffuse reverie of vulgar boredom. And indeed, this should square with our sense of Mulvey's feminist project: to use psychoanalysis to destroy identification and absorption in favor of a politically modernist alienation and 'passionate detachment' (Mulvey, 1986: 209). The salient question is not whether interpretation succeeds, or is engaging, or gives rise to something productive (a reading, a feeling, a piece of critical writing), but rather whether interpretation becomes a *problem*, something that has to be maneuvered around in proximity to the aesthetic object.

This recalls Lauren Berlant's (2007) explanation for why we might be over sex:

Sex ... forces the rational/critical [read: interpreting] subject to become disorganized for a bit, and that's hard when the conditions of reproduction of life are already both so overorganizing and fraying ... *Being overwhelmed is exciting, except when it's exhausting.* (pp. 433–434, emphasis added)

Boredom is the response of somebody who can neither bear nor arrange (or perhaps just doesn't want) to be relieved of themselves – either sensorially or affectively – by an object at hand. Now, if the object can be involving *interpretively*, this boredom may dissolve in favor of some interest: Warhol's profound boredom. Profoundly bored, I can indeed bear to sit through my boredom and discover that, as a result of a corporeal and attentional discipline, I can become overwhelmed by scratches in the film stock. That boredom is both reflexive and reflective. It leads to a position of an interpreting I who is capable of criticism and philosophy, that is, *good thinking* – in the absence of *feeling good*.

Vulgar boredom, meanwhile, takes place in the failure of the object to involve an interpretive, depressive I. We are left instead encumbered by I-ness in the here-now. To be sure, this boredom isn't perforce aversive: let's just stipulate that at least sometimes, we seek out boring films. So let me reprise one my opening questions: why is so much of our contemporary media boring? One answer would be that boring media allow us to be with ourselves for a while, in a way that is neither overorganized, subjected to productivity or uplift or pedagogy, nor intensive, taking the exacerbated or heightened state of modernist or Romantic aesthetic response as its model.

I'm just with myself in a room with a movie. Profound boredom allows us to detach from the here-now so that we might engage in acts of criticism and interpretation – or, in a more philosophical articulation, we depart from our ordinary to engage in the radical activity of philosophy, or at the very least to *really* find ourselves (as in Heidegger, 1995), and not always to look for ourselves only to find some degraded fragment of mass culture (Kracauer, 1995). Meanwhile, vulgar boredom merely allows us to detach from the here-now enough to be with ourselves in what I only really know how to call an *ordinary* way.

But then, not *only* with ourselves: because there are others in the scene, on the screen. Psychoanalytical film theory has traditionally put the viewer in the position of the regressed analysand (to a pre-Oedipal state, to the mirror stage, etc.), and the theorist in the position of the analyst. According to this scheme, however, the bored viewer is rather in the position of the *analyst*, maintaining a posture of what Ogden (2004: 74–78) calls *reverie*. (This is perhaps a way of making sense of Metz's [1982: 54] *aperçu* that the spectator's ego hovers over the screen, like the listening of the analyst.) In the depressive position's reverie, the viewer holds open a posture of a merely potential attentiveness which may or may not be engaged by the film. Vulgar boredom, then, occurs when that reverie is not dissolved in more engaged sorts of attention that condense around an object, a relation, or an interaction. Vulgar boring media become props which help me achieve reverie, and stage an ambivalent retreat from desire: in boredom, I am stuck with myself, but I am also relieved of wanting, waiting, or acting. Reverie is a posture in which I open myself, waiting for the other to organize my attention and thus my desire. Bored, I am a subject, but not an agent. In Adam Phillips's (1998) words, 'in boredom there is the lure of a possible object of desire, and the lure of the escape from desire, of its meaninglessness' (p. 76). This is a delicate ambivalence, indeed, and it requires an other of some kind. Vulgar boring movies – and television shows, and games, and many other media besides – can help us achieve it.

This posture of reverie is a genre of being-with, and, while common, it is quite unusual to find descriptions of it. It occurs in duration with an other, as the condition of possibility for the more engrossing attunements that are our typical models for being-with and aesthetic experience.¹⁵ Crucially, for Ogden, this reverie is itself a form of attunement, but it is *extensive* rather than *intensive* (these are my words, not his). Reverie is not held by an object, nor by a structured attentiveness toward the object. It is rather the prerequisite for that object and my attentiveness toward it. Reverie bleeds out into the world. This durational being-with is not, however, wholly indifferent to its object (even if it is bored by it), and does not leave its subject unchanged. It matters that it is in time with an other: a person, an aesthetic object, a technical medium. If I daydream in front of a boring film (or, for that matter, a boring patient), what I find in that daydream is in some slackened, diffuse, very possibly unconscious, relation to what's onscreen. This is obvious at the level of the experience of boredom of this type, I think, but it's not at all obvious to me how to attend to this phenomenologically, in

the sense of a sustained and generalizing description, since the connections are rhizomatic, diffuse, illogical, associative, contingent, experienced within the frame of the depressive position's sense of I-ness. I experience my daydreams as belonging *to me*. And, their connection to the object at hand is always underdetermined or indeterminate. A reading of *Inception* is beside the point – just about any boring film would do – and the best I can give you is mere autobiography.

In a cinema – and with many other media besides: television's flow, the endless updating scroll of Twitter and Facebook – this reverie is organized by the implacable technical temporality of the medium. My reverie begins, it ends, and in between the film (TV, Twitter feed) just keeps going without me. My reverie doesn't even have to coincide with the beginning and ending of the film. It does not have the unstable if teleological temporality of interpersonal reverie. I do not have to worry about being responsive, and I do not have to worry about a human other's responses to my unresponsiveness. If it's *Inception* (or *Top Chef* or *Candy Crush*), I don't even have to worry about whether or not I can rouse myself to profound boredom as a successful aesthetic subject. If I am bored at the movies or at home on my couch or tapping away on my iPhone, I may be encumbered by an experience of I-ness, but I am not encumbered by the burden of being present (or not) to, or for, someone else. (This is a way of rephrasing Stanley Cavell's [1979: 23] observation that in the cinema I am absent from the world that is present to me onscreen.) In short, the asymmetry of mediatic boredom makes it very different from more social forms of reverie (even those that are mediated). It is a prop for achieving a non-productive mode of presentness to myself and to the world that is slackened, diffuse, lateral.¹⁶ Vulgar boredom is a form of disorganization that is neither overwhelming nor organized by a teleology of eventual engagement.

Boring Games

In 2010, Ian Bogost wrote a modernist Facebook game, redolent of Warhol. In Bogost's (2014) words, '*Cow Clicker* is a Facebook game about Facebook games.' *Cow Clicker* is also profoundly boring. Here is Bogost's description of gameplay: 'You get a cow. You can click on it. In six hours, you can click it again. Clicking earns you clicks.' You can pay some money for 'custom cows'. You can publish stories on your Facebook 'newsfeed' about it. It's boring and it's modernist: '*Cow Clicker* is Facebook games distilled to their essence.' In a structure that rhymes with Warhol's Stillies, Bogost's minimalistic, distended version of the thing distills it to its essence, and does so at the limit of human attention.¹⁷

With an act of critical interpretation, however, we can begin to see that *Cow Clicker* is in fact *really* interesting: a devastating critique of the casual gaming industry. Or something more existential, perhaps. *Cow Clicker* went dead in September 2011, 'rapturing' its cows in a 'Cowpocalypse'. All that's left now are patches of empty grass to click on. And yet, as one *Cow Clicker*

player muses, 'it is very interesting, clicking nothing ... But then, we were clicking nothing the whole time. It just looked like we were clicking cows' (Tanz, 2011). Which is just to say that – despite our tendency to see them as entertainment – games, sometimes, are profoundly boring.¹⁸

More often, they're vulgar boring. While 'casual games' are perhaps the most boring, it is not for nothing that the repeated attempts to level up in games is often called 'grinding'.¹⁹ With their levels and quests and so on, games exacerbate the seriality of mass culture that Warhol redeploys in *Kiss*. But games, even when they are vulgar boring, are not failures – commercially, aesthetically, or affectively. Many casual games are successful precisely *because* they are not immersive in any register. You can pick them up and put them down at will without consequences, whether or not players tend to engage in longer bouts of gameplay.²⁰ They are also casual because they do not require the forms of habitus that 'hardcore' gamers acquire through hours (and hours and hours) of gameplay. If Warhol laid bare the ascetic corporeal training at the heart of cinema, grinding through levels in *World of Warcraft* might just be its gamic equivalent. The frustration many people experience when coming to much of the high-gloss output from major studios (e.g. the *Call of Duty* series, *Mass Effect*, or *Halo*) stems from the fact that they do not have the embodied capacity to enter into the saturating attunements the games demand. It is worth noting that these games not only tax their players' limits, but also the limits of the digital technics on which they run, involving faster and faster platforms, especially graphics processing. The dominant model of gaming – or at least the one that organizes the blockbuster game industry, the sale of high-end gaming consoles, and the popular imagination of the gamer – involves a tightly coupled, saturated and saturating attunement between player and console.

Meanwhile, casual games offer registers of engagement between players and games – that is, between humans and technical media – that are not immersive, saturating, or tightly attuned: they are shallow, slackened, diffuse. This is, after all, what makes them *casual*. Casual gamers do not have to spend countless hours training their perceptual and motor responses to allow for intensive involvement in gameplay. Perhaps the obvious case is the epitome of social media games and Bogost's evident target, *Farmville*, but to conclude, I would like to turn to King's blockbuster *Candy Crush Saga* (2012).

Candy Crush is, in its own way, minimalistic. Like many casual games, it uses a familiar two-dimensional gamespace of a grid populated by game pieces, like *Tetris* or *Bejeweled*. It offers only a single game mechanic, swiping bits of candy so that they swap places. When three or more bits of the same color candy line up in a match, they disappear. Pieces fall in the spaces by falling down from above, often in cascading matches, with randomized new pieces arriving at the top of the screen. Levels increase in difficulty, with different goals, such as clearing a certain number of candy pieces in a certain number of moves or within a specified time limit. The goal is simply to beat levels. As a puzzle game, *Candy Crush's* primary mode of

engagement is ultimately interpretive. However, unlike more sophisticated puzzle games (e.g. Jason Rorher's enchanting *Primrose* [2009] also designed for smartphones), *Candy Crush* does not reward sophisticated strategic or abstract thinking. At best, it rewards something like tactical intuition. After sufficient time playing the game, by means of habituation, players can arrive at a sense of which moves are good. But because the game has such a large component of randomness, it attenuates even the logic of most puzzle games. Like *Inception*, *Candy Crush* is just not a very interesting puzzle.

And that, of course, is the point. Juul (2010: 10) argues that casual games like *Candy Crush* are popular because they 'fit into people's lives'. This, however, is not only a question of the busy (more often harried) rhythms of contemporary life, intensified by the precarity of neoliberal capitalism. Tellingly, makers of casual games on smartphone platforms imagine their games filling moments of 'microboredom', those moments when we are unoccupied waiting in line at the grocery store, stopped at a red light, or sitting on the toilet (Johnson, 2008). Social or not, games like *Candy Crush* solicit casual, attenuated, and extensive attunements with technical media. However attenuated these attunements may be, they are still attunements, they still set me in a relation to my technical media, now always on my person and increasingly on my body.

It's easy to get cranky about casual games. They are frankly and explicitly the expropriation of our attention, monetizing even those small moments of boredom where I might be released from desire.²¹ Capitalism ruins everything. It's also pretty easy to get excited about them, as Juul does: finally, gaming isn't just for nerds! And anyway, alongside the crass, exploitive, popular games, there are always possibilities for critical or modernist counter-practices, as Bogost (2011) has amply demonstrated. This is, of course, just the same old debate about popular culture we've been having for as long as we can remember.

I am more interested, however, in the space that this analysis of boredom might open up for thinking the decoupling between technics and human experience, the shifting texture and rhythm of the ordinary. Our perceptual, affective, and cognitive relations with our technics are shifting, profoundly, not only with the old-news rise of digital computing but also with the new-news rise of mobile computing. To the crucial story about how technics now operate way far out beyond our still-human limits, we can begin to tell another story: about how those relations might never have been as tightly coupled as all that. Even in the cinema, we are sometimes bored, and sometimes want to be. Casual games take that logic and elaborate it, distribute it geographically and temporally, tie it to the body. Our relations with technics have, it seems, become emphatically *extensive* – and not only because our computing is now extended everywhere. This ambivalent fact belongs to our contemporary, highly-mediated, Western life; it structures this life, modulates its textures and rhythms, makes it new and strange and difficult and, at times, unbearable; but it also offers ways of making it bearable, as it offers new possibilities – and obligations – for maintenance, repair, and release.

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Notes

1. This is one working definition of modernist works: 'Confirming, even as they modify, the character and options of the medium' (Michelson, 1969: 56).
2. See also Hodge (2015). Related figures abound in writing on media; see especially McCarthy (2001).
3. Indeed, this is the prevailing assumption among most film theory, especially (but not only) 'contemporary' film theory. We might notate this schematically in the following (evidently incomplete) series: Baudry (1974–1975), Metz (1982), Mulvey (1986), Shaviro (1993), and Sobchack (2004).
4. For a closely related argument using boredom to critique 'New Materialism's' neo-baroque postures, see Anderson (2004).
5. Well, I find it captivating (see Richmond, 2011).
6. Of course I mean Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) and Adorno (2001).
7. Warhol's kisses also surely recall Edison's kiss from the 1890s. Given that *The Kiss* (1896) clearly belongs to the cinema of attractions (Gunning, 1986, 1989) and its presentational mode, Warhol's film engages and deflates not only Hollywood's highly narrativized kisses, but also the stimulation typical of attractional cinema.
8. Here I am thinking of Foucault's (1997: 151) observation of the narrational structure of heterosexual romance, as opposed to homosexual intensification of sensation.
9. I am channeling, of course, Adorno and Horkheimer's (2002) pessimism, but I am borrowing Uhlin's (2010) synthesis of theories of televisual temporality.
10. Here, see Williams (1999, 2000).
11. It also leads to philosophy. 'Profound boredom' is Agamben's name for what Heidegger (1995: 59–167) presents in his famous analysis of boredom. Siegfried Kracauer (1995) offers a related, much briefer, equally canonical take on profound boredom.
12. This formulation evokes Fried's (1998) famous dichotomy of theatricality and absorption. These two terms, however, don't quite track what I'm trying to describe here: the opposite of absorption isn't theatricality, but rather boredom.
13. Here and in the last several paragraphs, I have been channeling Cavell's (1979, 2002a, 2002b) account of modernism
14. Of course, see also Sedgwick (2003, 2007).
15. Here and below, I use 'attunement' in the precise sense that phenomenology and affect theory give it. In particular, I mean to evoke Heidegger's (1995) concept of 'Stimmung' (often translated as 'mood', but more accurately rendered as 'attunement'), as well as Stern's (2000) affective 'amodal attunement' (see also Flatley, 2008, 2012). I develop the concept at length with reference to perception in Richmond (2016).
16. Here I am borrowing figures from Berlant (2007, 2011).

17. Well, almost. Apparently, some players took *Cow Clicker* both seriously and at face value (Tanz, 2011).
18. Phil Solomon's recent 'remake' of *Empire* using *Grand Theft Auto IV*, 'EMPIRE' (2008), draws a more direct line between games and Warhol (see Stults, 2008).
19. See the wonderfully cranky Golumbia (2009).
20. Apparently, 'more than a third of the players of downloadable casual games played nine two-hour game sessions a week' (Juil, 2010: 8).
21. See not only Kracauer (1995), but also Golumbia (2009) and Crary (2013).

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