ON BOREDOM

Essays in art and writing

Edited by Rye Dag Holmboe & Susan Morris

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Drawings by Martin Creed are interspersed between the essays throughout

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Twenty years of boredom

Susan Morris

In 1997, at the time of making my computer-based work *TEXT*, I became interested in the way that then-new digital technology enabled you to take sequences of still or moving images, or audio recordings, and play them in a random order. Thus, in their ever-changing relation to one another, the components of any piece could build their own narratives, automatically, almost as if they were writing themselves. *TEXT* consists of a collection of quotations, bibliographies, indexes, contents pages and references on the subject of boredom, organised as a series of self-contained animations that run up the screen like end credits in cinema or TV – except that parts of the transcribed written material are sometimes cropped or out of frame. Adding the random function ensures that what is being communicated by the work remains unfixed: the piece loops endlessly, but the separate components of the whole never play in the same order.

The viewer is confronted with a strange kind of writing, a text in fragments. Impossible to grasp as a whole, the material is nevertheless not unreadable – some of it is even quite funny. This is especially the case with anything addressing the problem of boredom within the psychoanalytic setting, with *The Bored and Boring Patient* listed amongst the string of book titles and, from a book extract, a perplexed analysand recounting how he regularly watches his analyst fall asleep.[1] Other animations contain fragments of songs where, for example, a lover laments the 'long, lonely time' of waiting, which the viewer also gets to experience as s/he is forced to spend the time it takes to read the lyrics slowly scrolling up the screen.

> *Time goes by so slowly*
> *And time can do so much*
> *Are you still mine?*[2]

Much of the material focuses on boredom in relation to the subjective encounter with technology. The Russian writer Maxim Gorky's review in 1896 of an early film by August and Louis Lumière is one such instance: in the silence, faced with the strange black-and-white scenes unreeling before him, Gorky feels himself confronted by a world whose 'vividness and vitality have been drained away'. This is not reality, he declares, 'but its shadow'.

> *… before you a life is*
> *surging, a life*
> *deprived of words*
> *and shorn of the*
> *living spectrum of*
> *colours – the grey,*
> *the soundless,*
> *the bleak*
> *and dismal life …*[3]

In its emphasis on the 'monotonous grey' that covers everything, Gorky's description evokes a world as if covered in ash; a dead world, devoid of meaning. But what did the film remove from the scene, if not the viewer himself? To be bored by something – a film, a book or, perhaps worst of all, a lecture – is to be confronted by a scene wherein it is clear that there is *nothing here for me*. When someone or something is boring you, it's as if you don't exist; exposed to a kind of 'meaning vacuum', you are rendered lifeless, snuffed out, like the canary at the bottom of the cage.[4] Seán Desmond Healy, in *Boredom, Self, and Culture* (1984), from which I also extracted quotations for *TEXT*, characterises boredom as 'the loss of a sense of personal meaning, whether in relation to a particular experience or encounter, or to an entire life situation. This loss might be occasioned by the withdrawal or absence of the meaningful, or by the imposition of the unmeaningful' (as was the case for Gorky, perhaps). Sometimes the cause can be easily identified – it is this or that which is boring you. Often, however, the reason for a 'chronic and painful' boredom cannot be pinned down, and this realisation leads Healy to suggest that boredom takes two forms: there is a trivial, everyday kind of boredom, and a 'hyperboredom' that is 'inexplicable, persisting', akin to depression, and directly related to the '*collapse* of meaning'.[5]

The psychotherapist James E. Lantz suggests that boredom erupts 'whenever a subject has been unable to identify, find [or] recognise'
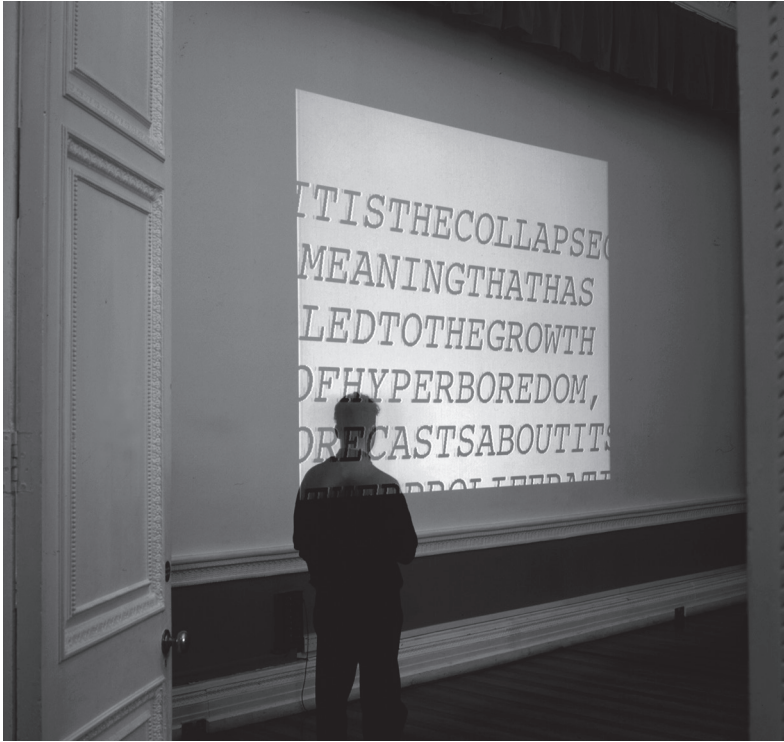
Figure 3.1 *TEXT*, 1997. Randomly ordered series of digital animations, dimensions variable. Installation shot taken at ICA, London, during the launch of the CD *On Boredom* published by Cambridge Darkroom Gallery, December 1997. Courtesy of the artist.

meaning; when the subject is confronted with an emptiness both absurd and nauseating.[6] Yet many writers have commented on the usefulness of boredom. For Walter Benjamin, famously, boredom was necessary to the creative work of *making* meaning, spun by the listener out of the multiple interpretations of a storyteller's tale.[7] Benjamin might in fact have described himself as following 'an ethos of boredom', taking care to deliberately summon it up in order to begin his writing.[8] Benjamin's boredom is neither trivial nor everyday – it is the 'dream' space through which the subject experiences and has deep connection with the world. Hyperboredom seems, in contrast, to shut the world out. In his review of Healy's book, the historian Eugen Weber summarises it thus: 'It is not we, hyperboreans, who are inadequate; it is the world around, the culture we live in.'[9] And yet 'hyperboreans' suffer, by internalising the lack of meaning. The *nothing here for me* is reflected back onto the subject: there is nothing here *in* me.

Might these different types of boredom each be linked to a different relation to time? In Benjamin's argument, the art of storytelling, which demands boredom's 'mental relaxation', is distinguished from 'a new form of communication': information. Supplied primarily by newspapers – reproduced by the printing press – information is 'shot through with explanation'. It replaces the tradition of the story, yet it has no lasting relevance; information simply evaporates when it is no longer new. Because it is resistant to interpretation, information also short-circuits or shuts down meaning. 'A story is different,' in Benjamin's estimation. 'It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time', *over* time. Information is always local, immediate. Storytelling combines the yarns of the traveller with those of the artisan who stays at home; both leave an imprint on the tale. Untouched by an encounter with otherness, information is supplied to a reader who believes, as Hippolyte de Villemessant, the founder of *Le Figaro*, once stated, that 'an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important than a revolution in Madrid'.[10]

Digital technology allowed me, in making *TEXT*, to experiment with narrative form against a background of ideas about storytelling aimed at disrupting closed systems of information. Artists might copy, sample or quote information out of a desire to create space that more

Figure 3.2 *TEXT*, 1997. Randomly ordered series of digital animations, dimensions variable. Installation shot taken at Five Years Gallery during the exhibition *What Is a Photograph?*, 3 July–9 August 1998. Courtesy of the artist.

accurately reflects the aberrant temporalities of human experience – shot through with fantasy. A great influence on many artists of my generation, for instance, was the film *La Jetée* (1962) by Chris Marker. Marker's film remains radical not only because it consists almost entirely of stills, but also for the questions it poses concerning subjective time. As the artist and writer Victor Burgin argues, different registers of time run through the film concurrently. Firstly, and perhaps more obviously, there is 'the time of the living organism, the irreversible time of the entropic body'.[11] Kept by our biological clocks, this is the time of lifespans. In Marker's film, evidence of this kind of time appears in the traces of graffiti that the characters in the story often come across when they meet.[12] These handwritten marks – fragments of writing and drawing scrawled across walls and buildings – resonate with notations recorded in a diary, where the passing of chronological time is marked by the human individual who ages along with it. Embedded in this register of time, however, there is another, of a different tempo: the time of the human subject. This 'constructs itself' around the couple in the film, Burgin suggests, and is the time 'of *durée* … an indeterminate period of lived existence that may expand or contract according to the attention that is brought to it'.[13] This is subjective time, time that runs its own way and that operates, frequently, in memory and dreaming.

La Jetée, as the opening sequence of the film informs us, is 'a story of a man marked by an image from childhood' – an image that belongs to the register of subjective time. The (nameless) man travels backwards in
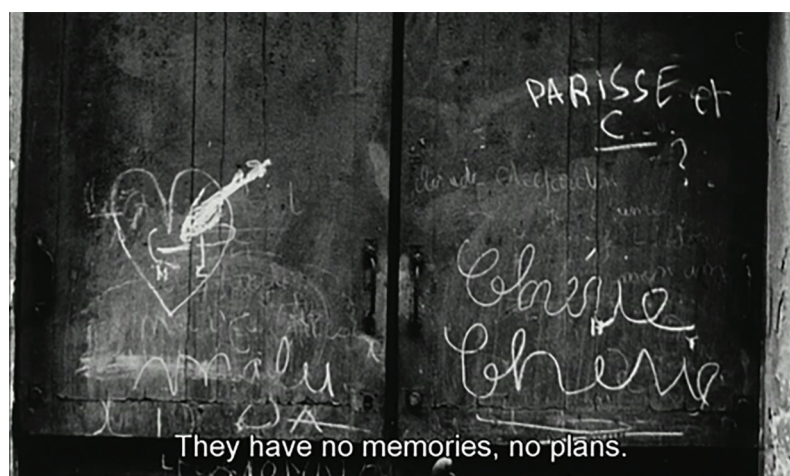

Figure 3.3   Still from *La Jetée*, 1962, dir. Chris Marker.

chronological time to meet with a woman (also nameless), whose image is fixed so firmly in his mind. The strangeness of this film is that it ends where it begins; or it doesn't end, because although the reel runs for about 26 minutes, the film is looped *internally*. A boy will see himself die as an adult, and the adult will realise this at the moment of his death, but will also acknowledge that *he is there still* – alive – as a child in the same place. The two separate biological times coincide, in the time of the desiring subject.

Can subjective time be thought of in relation to psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott's concept of the transitional object? A 1953 article by Winnicott on the child's first 'not-me' possession notes the use of transitional phenomena – such as toys, a blanket or even a special repertoire of songs – through which the infant develops a relation to external reality. Given that reality often contains things that are absent, 'thinking, or fantasying', as Winnicott suggests, 'gets linked up' with these objects.[14] Yet there are also certain times, such as the time between sleep and awakening, or in daydreaming, when fantasy mingles with external reality. This time is anticipatory; it is a time of potential reunion. Initiated when the separation from the desired other first occurs, transitional time transforms the separation into a potential reunion. But if nobody comes, or if, upon returning, anticipation is repeatedly frustrated, then transitional time is transformed into what the psychoanalyst André Green describes as *le temps mort* – 'dead time' – the chronic equivalent of empty space. As Burgin writes: 'In normal everyday experience this is the time of boredom, the waiting from which one expects nothing.'[15]

Transitional time is anticipatory. Endless waiting is dead time (boredom). In each kind of time, the thing upon which the subject waits is crucially bound up with his or her identity, but while transitional time looks to the future, endless waiting, as a kind of dead end, can curdle into severe depression. Here the subject 'suffers a total inhibition of action and disinvestment from the world', as if the world, or they themselves, were dead.[16] Strangely, as Green explains, the subject experiences this as if they are at the mercy of a force other than themselves: 'It is not me who is going away; I am not wanted here. I/they are expelling me.'[17] This description resonates with Sigmund Freud's observation that in melancholia, with which hyperboredom may be compared, the ego appears to align itself with the lost object, the object that will never return. 'In this way an object-loss [is] transformed into an ego-loss.'[18] Freud characterises the existential state of melancholia as a kind of annihilation or death of the self – or a death *wish*, 'the overcoming of the

instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life'.[19] Here the cry of every spurned lover, 'You're dead to me!', is thrown back upon the self: 'I am dead to me.'

For anyone who has had writer's block, this feeling is familiar. How might one induce the kind of boredom that is conducive to making work? How might one avoid falling into that which baffles or suffocates thinking, that deadens the space of dreaming and strands us in a dead end where nothing comes? An answer might be suggested in Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée* (1950), where the link between boredom and endless waiting is also explored. A princess, who represents Orpheus's death, sacrifices herself to make the poet immortal. But she desires one last embrace, so she has to wait for him to come back to her in the underworld, and is tortured by the time it takes him to reach her. *Now I understand what it is to wait!* she cries. Is this what, for humans, is boredom?

> *For the first time I almost know what time is*
> *On earth, waiting must be terrible*
> *Do you get bored?*[20]

Cocteau's *Orphée*, as a modern-day retelling of the Greek myth, is set in Paris and saturated with residual trauma of the Second World War, when members of the French Resistance, anticipating the return of freedom,

Figure 3.4   Still from *Orphée*, 1950, dir. Jean Cocteau. English subtitled version released in 2018, BFI, London.

awaited communication from the Allies. The strange spoken messages in the film that Orpheus receives through his car radio reconstruct, or mimic, such kinds of coded signals. Orpheus, suffering from writer's block and therefore desperate for inspiration (he has been waiting, despondently, for the return of his muse), interprets them as poetry. He writes them down. What does he recognise in these incomprehensible fragments? Why do they claim the status of poetry for him?

Interestingly, a debate about what constitutes writing occurs during the film's interrogation scene. The judges cannot decide if Orpheus is a 'writer' at all, or they argue as to whether he is a writer or a poet. Orpheus suggests that writer and poet are almost the same thing. There is no *almost* here, snaps the interrogator, and *What do you mean by poet?* 'Écrire sans être écrivain', Orpheus replies – *to write without writing*.[21] A poet doesn't engage with writing, though he writes. Writing that isn't (consciously) written – what is this? For the poet, the 'text' has to come from elsewhere, the radio receiver perhaps. Poetry, at least for Orpheus, has affinities with automatic writing – it emerges from a dream state. The interrogation panel, flummoxed by Orpheus's replies, gives up on the question, but it lingers on in the film; the struggle to write, and to write *poetry*, is perhaps the film's central theme. This is because in this post-war Paris version of the Orpheus myth, poetry equals death – or immortality. Perhaps they are one and the same. Poetry as 'not writing', or as writing that is not writing; that is the *end* of writing:
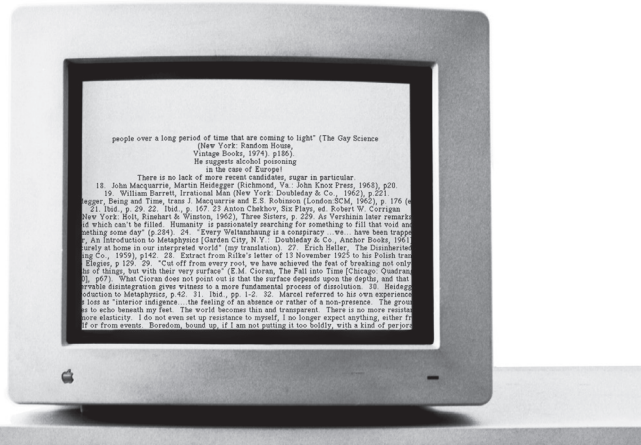
Figure 3.5 *TEXT*, 1997. Randomly ordered series of digital animations, dimensions variable. Installation shot taken at Five Years Gallery during the exhibition *What Is a Photograph?*, 3 July–9 August 1998. Courtesy of the artist.

this signals the beginning of something else, something that breaks with the traumatised past. Here 'information' is repurposed and remade as a poetry equivalent to the shattered fragments of day-to-day life among the ruins. Language regains meaning, but only once it is coded, broken down, presented in pieces.

Gorky's reaction to the Lumière film chimes with Roland Barthes's observation that through photography the dead 'return'.[22] But they return, are made present, through other means too. Beginning around the end of the nineteenth century, modern industrial technologies of transport, production and communication, through which things could become doubled or set adrift, seemed to bring the dead closer. Voices could be severed from their speakers, for example; objects and machinery could move by themselves. During the First World War, this feeling intensified as people started seeing longed-for loved ones in the street, even though they knew they were dead – 'just catching a glimpse of someone on a bus or through a shop window, thinking it's their husband or their brother or their son'.[23] Suddenly the glass in the buildings or on vehicles would double as a sensitive plate or recording instrument with the face of the absent loved one projected across the street, like a cinematic fragment; like a photograph. The city therefore itself becomes a medium, housing the dead, with the literature that reflects it classified, perhaps, as the work of mourning. The dead can be made present in the fractures, blanks and discontinuities within a text – in writing's undercurrent, or in what the poet Claudia Rankine terms the 'underneath-ness' of language, where it is possible, she suggests, to stage 'silence'.[24]

When we see our beloved 'everywhere', we are waiting to be with them again. So it is for the man in *La Jetée*, who sees the image of the person with whom he wishes to be reunited. So it is for all of us who wait for the ones we love. As the narrator of André Breton's *Nadja* (1928) asks at the very beginning of the book, 'Who am I [if not] whom I "haunt"[?]' This idea, he continues, 'makes me, still alive, play a ghostly part'.[25] Breton's novel, the story of a doomed love affair, is constructed, like a collage, from fragments of real (or more often missed) encounters, the majority of which take place in the street or in bars and cafes. It's a text that didn't have a planned outcome, but that wrote itself as it moved along a route dictated by desire, accumulating material lifted directly from the exterior world. The camera has always done this – absorbed the world, unmediated, into itself – and since the invention of photography, literature has frequently tried to adopt the camera's point of view.[26]

Indeed, as new technologies continue to give rise to different literary forms, contemporary storytelling reflects our encounters with the internet. Now content is gleaned from websites and social media, with the narrative arc (or more often, the anti-narrative outcome) directed by reactions to and between sources. Conducted in a dreamlike state, the route taken as a user travels through, or 'surfs', the rhizomatic space of the web is intuitive, spontaneous, anticipatory, with the resulting 'text' structured in ways that replicate this journey.

Such is the argument put forward by the poet and critic Kenneth Goldsmith in his book *Wasting Time on the Internet* (2016). Goldsmith suggests that Breton's strategy of using inquisitive, open-ended 'wandering' to construct a narrative is analogous to the experience of the contemporary internet user, whom Goldsmith proposes as the twenty-first-century equivalent to the *flâneur*. Absorbed by and into the environment, people surfing the web drift – just as the Situationists, with their strategy of *dérive*, once gave themselves up 'to the tugs and flows of the urban street, letting the crowds take them where they will'.[27] In this space where contemporary forms of writing and art-making are emerging, Goldsmith argues, we might think of 'our web sojourns as epic tales effortlessly and unconsciously written, etched into our browser

Figure 3.6 Anonymous Situationist slogan, 1968.

histories as a sort of new memoir'.[28] Goldsmith refers to early precedents including Samuel Pepys's diary and James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* – built up out of the 'accumulation of bits and pieces of the quotidian ephemera: letters, observations, patches of dialogue, and descriptions of daily life' – in order to compare them to online blogs.[29] Interestingly, to advertise his course at the University of Pennsylvania (after which his book is titled), Goldsmith chose a Situationist slogan that marked the walls of Paris during the May 1968 protests: 'live without dead time'.

If you are able to travel unobserved along ungoverned routes, you remain open to the chance encounter, to otherness. But it's no good if these journeys take you nowhere; if you only end up back where you started; if you don't get started at all. Recent changes in the internet in fact threaten to kill off the digital *dériviste*. In 2009, for example, Google started using a new algorithm for its search engine with the aim of providing a 'personalised search for everyone'.[30] As author and activist Eli Pariser explains in *The Filter Bubble* (2011), Google tracks 'signals' obtained from individual users in order to present them with customised pages corresponding to who they are assumed to be, and what kind of things they like. Thus the world that forms before your eyes is simply a reflection of your own past forays into the web; new routes are closed down or non-existent. In an uncanny echo of newspaperman Villemessant's comment cited above, Pariser's book opens with a quotation from Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's co-founder: 'A squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa.'[31] States Pariser: 'Now you get the result that Google's algorithm suggests is best for you in particular – and someone else may see something entirely different.'[32]

'The user', in other words, 'is the content'.[33] In this surely regressive situation there are no 'not-me' phenomena, no longed-for other. There is only the mirror image of yourself as a narcissistic, closed circuit that has little contact with difference, with anything that falls outside of what has already been 'liked'. For film-maker Adam Curtis, the version of cyberspace that is currently evolving is very much like the one imagined in William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984), where 'behind the superficial freedoms of the web' are a few giant corporations with opaque systems that control and limit what we see and shape what we think, what we buy, how we vote.[34]

While the full impact of this technology as an 'influencing machine' is not yet understood, there is nothing new about the malleability of the

subject.[35] Advertisements and public relations companies have always exploited the subject's tendency towards projection into a future where a new and better self awaits. This idea – that there is another 'you' somewhere else – is rehearsed in the anticipatory time of daydreaming. Under these conditions, *where* the authentic self is actually located shifts to the question of *when*, thus reiterating the ideas outlined above about subjectivity's peculiar relation to time. Outside of any fixed time and place: subjectivity is *anachronic.* I like the definition of this word as a description of the chronologically 'misplaced'.[36] Subjective time is disordered; it disregards chronological time. Gazing at a photograph – perhaps one in an advert – you experience, as Barthes suggested, a peculiar conjunction of tenses (dizzying, impossible) all operating 'under the instance of "reality"' – a reality that nevertheless is out of time, above or beyond time; or where time, on a loop, eternally recurs.[37]

According to a graph supplied by the *Collins English Dictionary*, use of the word *anachronic* might seem to have risen during the period of the two world wars – precisely when the dead began to appear in such numbers among the living, within an environment formed by technology's proliferation of discontinuity and otherness.[38] The shadow or blur in early photography, the echo on the telephone line, the uncanny self-sufficiency of automated systems of production and transportation: these things that are in excess of technology's primary operation expose us to something outside of ourselves. Overall, however, and alongside further technological mutations, *anachronic* appears to have actually declined in usage, as if the ever-increasing industrialisation, mechanisation and quantification of labour and life coincide with – or indeed produce – the urge to categorise, classify and fix everything within an allocated time slot. Things are discouraged from drifting out of place. In this scenario, ever more 'subject to administrative norms', as Benjamin observed, 'people must learn to wait'.[39]

Has digital technology increased this waiting time? Analogue technology, including the machinery of industrial production, brings into everyday experience the encounter with the dead. There is something about celluloid footage of a train, for example – or even about the train itself – that haunts the subject. The effect of digital technology (and its algorithms) is to turn this dead thing back upon ourselves. The anticipatory time of fantasy and daydreaming slips into endless waiting. Into this space of dead time no one comes. The object dies. This is the time of hyperboredom, the encounter with the dead, when that dead thing is yourself.[40]

Benjamin wrote his essay 'The storyteller' in 1936, but he had started working on a very different kind of writing much earlier. *The Arcades Project* – unfinished at his death – presents scraps of information in such a way that they replicate the open-ended fabric of storytelling. Described as a way of 'writing about a civilization using its rubbish as materials', the book also introduces something of the *flâneur*'s approach to reading, intricately linked with boredom.[41] Consisting of multiple entries on various themes – like a collection of index cards gathered in researching a particular topic that never coalesces into a whole – the book might be started at any point, for its thesis is constantly regenerating itself. Benjamin's overall 'topic' is, in fact, the Parisian shopping precincts, or arcades, that brought together (as the text does) apparently incompatible objects and ideas all under the same roof. 'Existence in these spaces flows like the events in dreams. Flânerie is the rhythmics of this slumber.'[42] Indeed, while there remains some debate about his intended final outcome, there is no doubt that Benjamin was experimenting with form, juxtaposing seemingly unrelated textual fragments to create a disunited whole: 'This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage.'[43]

The Arcades Project opens itself up to multiple interpretations and so presents an interesting model for representing a scattered, chronologically disordered subject position. Almost contemporaneous with it, but less well known, was a project initiated by Maxim Gorky some 50 years after his encounter with the Lumière film. Aimed at capturing a snapshot of the world by condensing samples of it taken from a single day, *Den' mira* (*A Day of the World*) compiles, in book form, news reports including photographs and cartoons from around the globe on 27 September 1935.[44] When the project was reperformed in 1960 for publication as *A Day of the World: The events of Tuesday, September 27, 1960*, one contributor, the East German writer Christa Wolf, somehow found herself unable to stop; she went on to make annual notations of her everyday life on or around every 27 September until her death in 2011.[45]

Contemporary writers and artists seem increasingly drawn to practices that are either diaristic or that utilise found material as a method of producing work discontinuous in style but externally structured (often, for example, by the clock or calendar) – think of Claudia Rankine's recent poems from the *American Lyric* series, Kenneth Goldsmith's books *Day* (2003) and *Capital* (2015; directly modelled on Benjamin's *Arcades*

Project) and Uwe Johnson's *Anniversaries: From a Year in the Life of Gesine Cresspahl* (1970–83; translated from the German – four volumes – into English in 2018).[46] Collaged and fragmentary, with content frequently extracted from the exterior world, this writing may come out of a desire to record and fix time, but to do so through the collecting together of ephemera – material often cast aside or thrown away. Encyclopedic in scale, while simultaneously undermining the encyclopedia's quest for accuracy, these kinds of texts present an alternative to the deadening meaninglessness of endlessly recycled newsfeeds and status updates – which they nevertheless often incorporate.[47]

My recent large-scale work *de Umbris Idæarum* (*on the Shadow Cast by our Thoughts*) takes the form of a diary. It is like Johnson's *Anniversaries* because it records an entire year – 2011 – but it is not a work of fiction. A mixture of writing, such as my own 'personal' observations alongside text extracted from books, newspapers, transcriptions of radio shows and conversations overheard on the bus, with photographs and other scanned paraphernalia, the work was built using the software application Evernote, into which I could save information at any point in the day using a Wifi-enabled device (typically
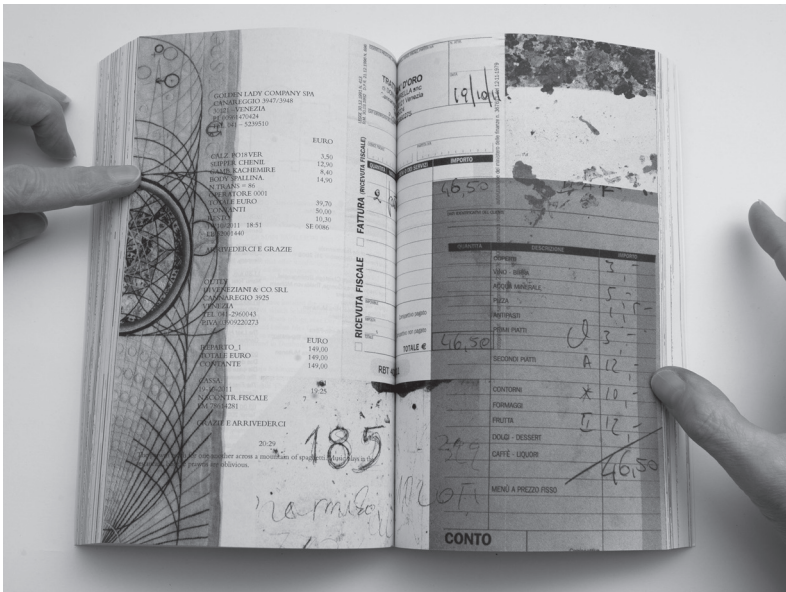
Figure 3.7 Images from *de Umbris Idæarum* (*on the Shadow Cast by our Thoughts*), 12 softback books, each 21.5 × 13 cm, with shelf. Printed paper and wood, 25 × 95 cm, 2019.
Courtesy of the artist.

my own phone, iPad or laptop). Gathered over time, like Breton's *Nadja*, the diary presents a chronological flow of 'updates' in a seemingly endless narrative that continually returns to the present – for instance, entries repeatedly start with the statement 'I am awake' (usually in the morning, though not always). I am also often waiting (at bus stops, or for friends to arrive) or apologising for keeping my friends waiting (when, racing against time, I'm running late).

The collected material is organised as a series of 12 books, one per month, with each book's interior spreads structured by the timing of individual diary entries – a column of numbers that run down the centre of the pages, parallel to the book's spine. Time counts down over the course of the year, with what is randomly ordered being the self, the many variable, anachronic instances of me. My moods, like the weather, are both changing and recurring. The people around me – friends, colleagues, family members as well as strangers – exhibit the same yet unpredictable behaviours – who *they* are is as impossible to pin down as I am. Assertions and decisions are undone as quickly as they are made; like any diarist, I am unreliable, inconsistent.[48] During the recording process I became interested in publicly displayed messages on walls and noticeboards, such as graffiti or posters for lost pets or items for
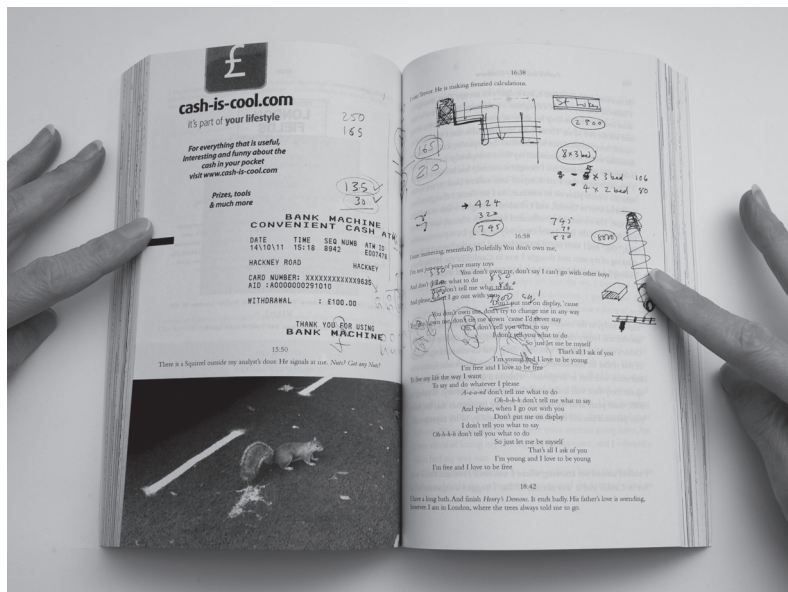

Figure 3.8 Images from *de Umbris Idæarum* (*on the Shadow Cast by our Thoughts*), 12 softback books, each 21.5 × 13 cm, with shelf. Printed paper and wood, 25 × 95 cm, 2019.
Courtesy of the artist.

sale, and there are many photographs of these kinds of things reproduced in the diary – evidence of the time of the living organism, which operates alongside subjective time.

There is in fact a third kind of timekeeping recorded in the diary – that of the wildlife in my immediate environment, seemingly synchronised to something other than subjective or chronological time. Observations are made of the coming and going of city birds, the activities of local foxes, as well as of changes to trees and flowers and even the impact of the seasons on the food I eat. Detailed in the receipts from restaurants and cafes, supermarkets and corner shops, are names of the individuals I was 'served by', seasonal special offers, advertising slogans and company logos. Finally there are the many songs, often on repeat, that come into my head either randomly or triggered by the external world. I am myself like a radio, a receiver, a transmitter; and the randomly collected ephemera has evolved into something affiliated with the dream space of *TEXT*, from back in 1997.

The overall effect is to show the subject of the diary as fluid, cloud-like, unresolved and migratory, constantly rewriting itself in relation to – or against – chronological time. The 'text' of the diary – littered as it is

Figure 3.9   Images from *de Umbris Idæarum* (*on the Shadow Cast by our Thoughts*), 12 softback books, each 21.5 × 13 cm, with shelf. Printed paper and wood, 25 × 95 cm, 2019.
Courtesy of the artist.

with receipts, flyers, news articles, etc. – is marked by dates of issue and time-stamped proofs of purchase. In contrast to this time 'of the body', my self drifts, rewriting itself in each new entry. In this way the diary attempts to stage the unconscious, that is, the self as *other*. Mirroring the day's events as well as the culture I am embedded in, 'I' become scattered across clock time, adopting different subject positions *in* time.

André Green describes the activity of the average neurotic as working 'against the ineluctable march of time [where] something is repeated, without the subject knowing it, or in spite of himself, which is fundamentally resistant to any possibility of being transcended'. Often the elements in the subject's discourse 'that are indispensable for its intelligibility are lacking'.[49] Writing – what it can contain as well as what it leaves out, what is inadmissible to it – is still very much at the centre of my work. I regard the diary as a kind of 'involuntary' novel, but I'm also interested in the way that writing can incorporate blanks, or *yawning* gaps. This may stage a new form of automaticity, where the montage of texts and images, rather than evidencing traces of an automatic gesture, is the *engine* of it. By this I mean that the collected citations, quotations, reports and so forth, alongside my own (possibly boring) personal musings, generate something that operates like unconscious thought. What is made present may be excluded from the actual contents, may in fact only make itself felt (as ghostly presence, or as absence-as-presence) through lapses and silences in the assembled materials. Thus the diary is an attempt 'to write without writing'; to draw out the singular, evasive and discontinuous, the temporally aberrant nature of subjectivity. This is to move beyond the nullifying effects of much current technology – governed by algorithms – and towards a future as yet unwritten.

Note: The context for this piece is the symposium '20 Years of Boredom', hosted by the Department of History of Art at UCL in 2017, where I gave a short paper on which the above essay is based. Twenty years earlier, I had curated an exhibition on CD, *On Boredom*, which brought together a group of artists who had started working with newly accessible desktop computers and image-manipulation software, including early versions of Photoshop and Premier, and with the worldwide web, which had first made its appearance in 1994.[50] Often frustrated by the limits of the processing power, we were nevertheless optimistic about the creative potential of these 'new tools'. The CD, with a fold-out publication including essays by David Bate and Andrew Brown, was launched at the ICA, London, in December 1997, and published by Cambridge Darkroom Gallery.

My thanks to the then-director, Ronnie Simpson, for enthusiastically embracing boredom all those years ago. This essay is also indebted to Victor Burgin's brilliant essay 'Marker marked', which brings together so elegantly the themes of biological time, subjective time and André Green's 'dead time'.

Notes

1   Stern (ed.), *Psychotherapy and the Bored Patient*, 31.
2   Stern (ed.), *Psychotherapy and the Bored Patient*, 129. The song is 'Unchained Melody' (1955), lyrics by Hy Zaret.
3   Gorky cited in Leyda, *Kino*, 407–9. Gorky writes of 'grey rays of the sun across the grey sky, grey eyes in grey faces and [that] the leaves of the trees are ashen grey'.
4   Lantz, 'The bored client', 111.
5   Healy, *Boredom, Self, and Culture*, 10 and 99. Emphasis mine.
6   Lantz, 'The bored client', 111.
7   Benjamin, 'The storyteller', in *Illuminations*, 91.
8   Sturgeon, 'The storyteller by Walter Benjamin: review'.
9   Weber, review of Healy, *Boredom, Self, and Culture*.
10 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 88–91.
11 Burgin, *The Camera*, 146.
12 They encounter it again – this record making/evidencing of time passing – when they come across the giant sequoia tree trunk.
13 Burgin, *The Camera*, 146.
14 Winnicott, 'Transitional objects and transitional phenomena'.
15 Burgin, *The Camera*, 149.
16 Burgin, *The Camera*, 149.
17 Green, *Diachrony in Psychoanalysis*, 120.
18 Freud, *On Metapsychology*, 258.
19 Freud, *On Metapsychology*, 254.
20 These translations are lightly paraphrased from the English subtitles in the version of *Orphée* released in 2018 and distributed by the British Film Institute (BFI), London.
21 A literal translation would be 'To write without being a writer.' Subtitles in the version released by the BFI in 2008 have the phrase as 'One who writes, without being a writer,' while the 2018 BFI version has: 'No writer, yet he writes.'
22 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 9. Barthes writes of 'that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph'.
23 In research conducted for his 2016 public art project *We're Here because We're Here*, British artist Jeremy Deller came across many such recorded accounts. For the comment about 'seeing a glimpse of someone', see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXnr3w74TJs.
24 See Flescher and Caspar, 'Interview with Claudia Rankine'. Rankine has spoken of 'the potential openness of the page', which she uses 'to suggest silence, for example'.
25 Breton, *Nadja*, 11. The 'proverb' Breton refers to in this opening statement is 'Dis-moi qui tu hantes et je te dirai qui tu es' ('Tell me who you haunt and I'll tell you who you are').
26 See Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences*; Banfield, 'L'imparfait de l'objectif'. Drawing on Banfield, I discuss this idea at length in 'On the blank', especially pp. 27, 55.
27 Goldsmith, *Wasting Time on the Internet*, 56.
28 Goldsmith, *Wasting Time on the Internet*, 24. In an interview with Claudia Rankine, Kayo Chingonyi suggests that Rankine's recent prose poems similarly reflect the way our lives are mediated through many different spheres and media: 'Instagram and Tumblr poets are now part of popular culture, and the boundaries that divide poetry from other creative modes are being called into question.'
29 Goldsmith, *Wasting Time on the Internet*, 79.
30 Quoted in Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 1.

31 Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 1.
32 Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 2.
33 Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 47.
34 See *Hypernormalisation*, dir. Adam Curtis (2016). https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04b183c.
35 See also Tillmans, *What is Different?*
36 https://www.thefreedictionary.com/anachronous.
37 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 97.
38 https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/anachronic.
39 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 119.
40 André Green thinks of this 'disappointed expectation' as a kind of 'negative trauma … The hallucinatory wish-fulfilment has had no effect: nothing comes. Beyond a certain time, the possibilities of postponing the hoped-for-satisfaction are exceeded. The object dies.' Green, *Diachrony in Psychoanalysis*, 120.
41 Coetzee, 'The marvels of Walter Benjamin'.
42 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 881.
43 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 458.
44 Gorky recruited the journalist Mikhail Koltsov as editor and the resulting book was published in 1937, a year after Gorky's death. See Bird, 'Revolutionary synchrony'.
45 Published in English as Wolf, *One Day a Year, 1960–2000* and *One Day a Year, 2001–2011*.
46 See Sehgal, 'A masterpiece that requires your full attention'.
47 The diary, for example, could be considered as 'a new mode of writing for a new mode of living'. See Levensen, 'Stephen's diary', 185.
48 Because 'I was someone else then'. See Levensen, 'Stephen's diary', 191.
49 Green, *Diachrony in Psychoanalysis*, 115–17.
50 Invented by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989, the internet didn't become widely accessible until 1994. In 1997, a few months before we published *On Boredom*, Larry Page and Sergey Brin registered the domain name for Google.

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