

A CRITIC AT LARGE

## ONLY DISCONNECT

*Two cheers for boredom.*

BY EVGENY MOROZOV



On November 16, 1924, Siegfried Kracauer, a luminary in the literary world of the Weimar Republic, published a feisty essay in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Trained as an architect, Kracauer was an acute observer of modernity and its impact on life in the city. He followed in the footsteps of his onetime teacher Georg Simmel, the sociologist whose 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” argued that overstimulated urban dwellers were prone to develop a “blasé attitude,” a coping mechanism that blunted their ability to react to new sensations. Kracauer’s concerns went beyond that. “People today who still have time for boredom and yet are not bored

are certainly just as boring as those who never get around to being bored,” he wrote in the *Zeitung*. The bourgeoisie “are pushed deeper and deeper into the hustle and bustle until eventually they no longer know where their head is.”

Life in the modern city, with its cheap and ubiquitous entertainment, was partly to blame. The glow of street advertising hijacked people’s spirits with the promise of cheap liquor and cigarettes, while movie theatres created the illusion of “a life that belongs to no one and exhausts everyone.” Radio listeners were in a state of “permanent receptivity, constantly pregnant with London, the Eiffel Tower, and Berlin,” their souls

*We’re under constant assault by connectivity, receptivity, the tyranny of the now.*

ILLUSTRATION BY MIGUEL GALLARDO

“badgered by the news hounds” so that “soon no one can tell anymore who is the hunter and who is the hunted.” The disorienting experience, Kracauer complained, is like “one of those dreams provoked by an empty stomach”:

A tiny ball rolls toward you from very far away, expands into a close-up, and finally roars right over you. You can neither stop it nor escape it, but lie there chained, a helpless little doll swept away by the giant colossus in whose ambit it expires. Flight is impossible. Should the Chinese imbroglio be tactfully disembroiled, one is sure to be harried by an American boxing match. . . . All the world-historical events on this planet—not only the current ones but also past events, whose love of life knows no shame—have only one desire: to set up a rendezvous wherever they suppose us to be present. But the masters are not to be found in their quarters. They’ve gone on a trip and cannot be located, having long since ceded the empty chambers to the “surprise party” that occupies the rooms, pretending to be the masters.

Kracauer’s remedy was simple: “extraordinary, radical boredom” could reunite us with our heads. “On a sunny afternoon when everyone is outside, one would do best to hang about in the train station or, better yet, stay at home, draw the curtains, and surrender oneself to one’s boredom on the sofa,” he wrote. Only then could one flirt with ridiculous, embarrassing, unscripted ideas, achieving a “kind of bliss that is almost unearthly.” He went on, “Eventually one becomes content to do nothing other than be with oneself, without knowing what one actually should be doing.” A popular slogan of the 1968 generation was “Boredom is counter-revolutionary”; Kracauer would have disagreed. For him, radical boredom wasn’t an excuse for Oblomovian indolence or passivity. Instead, it was inherently political, allowing us to peek at a different temporal universe, to develop alternative explanations of our predicaments, and even to dare to dream of different futures.

These days, “the state of permanent receptivity” has become the birthright of anyone with a smartphone. We are under constant assault by “interestingness,” as new-media aficionados—“curators,” they call themselves—prowl for bizarre factoids and quaint cartoons. The anti-boredom lobby has all but established its headquarters in Silicon Valley: cue Facebook’s celebration of a “more connected” world, or Apple’s reassurances that its latest gadget could do everything “twice

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as fast." Google is so boredom-averse that it seems to change its logo every day.

"Now you're never lonely, because your friends are always reachable," Eric Schmidt, Google's executive chairman, declared, a few years ago. "You're never bored, because there's infinite streams of information and entertainment." In his book "The New Digital Age," he writes that those "feeling bored" can always turn on the "holograph box and visit Carnival in Rio." But the ultimate anti-boredom device is Google Glass, a pair of "smart" spectacles that can overlay infinite streams of information on anything in our visual field. Google Now, another flagship service, wants to hijack the "now" by analyzing everything we've done in the past to predict what we might be doing in the future.

Kracauer's recipe for boredom—draw the curtains and get to know your sofa—doesn't work in the heavily mediated homes of today. Try the sofa experiment with Kinect, the Xbox, and the Roku player by your side. Meanwhile, "the bored at work network"—as Jonah Peretti, a founder of BuzzFeed, once described the millions of people who are making his site's stories go viral—toils to push the latest meme into your inbox. The world outside offers no relief. Your leisurely walk to the train station might be an even greater amusement trap, what with the glowing billboards that recognize your face, news feeds that beam on giant screens above your head, and smart gadgets that inform you when they detect the latest deals from shops and restaurants nearby. (Yes, Google has an app for that: it's called Field Trip.)

Information overload can bore us as easily as information underload. But this form of boredom, mediated boredom, doesn't provide time to think; it just produces a craving for more information in order to suppress it. Dave Eggers ruminates on this odd modern condition in his latest novel, "The Circle." It's a campus novel of sorts—there are even dorms—only, the campus here belongs to an eponymous Facebook-like technology giant. The Circle's employees are drowning in unceasing and utterly trivial updates delivered to them on a rapidly proliferating number of screens, but they

still insist on ever higher dosage. The Circle's founder sounds like a character in a Kracauer feuilleton: his college nickname was "Niagara," for his ideas "come like that, a million flowing out of his head, every second of every day, never-ending and overwhelming."

The Circlers strive to overcome their mediated boredom by documenting and rating every aspect of their existence. Despite all this digital activity, though, they appear profoundly boring to the few refuseniks who prefer to experience things than to archive their digital representations. Worse, the Circlers are completely oblivious of how boring they are. One reason that mediated boredom is so hard to notice is that it cloaks itself in the rhetoric of newness and newness. To recognize oneself as bored, one must know how to differentiate between moments—if only to see that they are essentially the same. When one is living only in the present, however, it's easy to mistake a constant invasion by the new—status updates or tweets or e-mails—for a radical break with everything that has come before.

Henri Lefebvre, the French philosopher who succeeded Kracauer as the most astute observer of everyday life in the twentieth century, summed up this modern condition in a splendid essay from the early nineteen-sixties:

Once, in an ahistorical society with virtually no conscious history, nothing began and nothing came to an end. Today everything comes to an end virtually as soon as it begins, and vanishes almost as soon as it appears. But everything repeats itself and starts off again. . . . As interest in it gets progressively weaker, so news becomes more rapid and concentrated, until finally, at the end of a shorter and shorter period, it wears itself out. . . . The all-too-well-known phenomena of saturation, of boredom, of lightning transitions from interest to tedium, produce techniques aimed at overcoming those very reactions: techniques of *presentation*. Ways are found of varying the ways news is presented. . . . We have the phoney "new," faked novelty (by dramatizing or dedramatizing, depending on the period and the technicians involved). . . . The confusion between triviality which no longer appears trivial and sensationalism which is made to appear ordinary is cleverly organized. News shrinks to the size of the socially instantaneous, and the immediate instant tends to disappear in an instant which has already passed.

Eggers seems firmly in Lefebvre's camp. Mercer, an overweight craftsman

who worries that his ex-girlfriend Mae has, in working for the Circle, effectively joined a dangerous cult, is one of the few sympathetic characters in the novel. He compares social media, with their constant prompts for more interaction and feedback, to snack foods that are packed with precisely determined amounts of salt and fat in order to keep us wanting (and eating) more and more. "You're not hungry, you don't need the food, it does nothing for you, but you keep eating these empty calories," he tells Mae. "This is what you're pushing. Same thing. Endless empty calories, but the digital-social equivalent. And you calibrate it so it's equally addictive."

"The Circle" is a work of dystopian fiction; its most disturbing products do not exist, and probably never will. Three new nonfiction books explore our infatuation with interruption and connectivity by discussing actually existing apps and startups. "The Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now" (Current), by Douglas Rushkoff, a media theorist and consultant, seeks to diagnose the malaise. "The Distraction Addiction" (Little, Brown), by Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, a futurist trained as a historian of science, and "Ambient Commons: Attention in the Age of Embodied Information" (M.I.T.), by Malcolm McCullough, a professor of design and architecture at the University of Michigan, prescribe various remedies. All three manage to be skeptical without pandering to technophobia or neuroscience—the two dominant frameworks for discussing how digital technologies affect attention and distraction. They argue that, armed with a different philosophy of time, space, and cognition, we can still design a different technological future.

"The Present Shock" is the least successful of the lot. Rushkoff rehashes Lefebvre's thesis with far less eloquence and analytical insight. He argues that we have been invaded by presentism that results in "a diminishment of anything that isn't happening right now—and the onslaught of everything that supposedly is." The thesis feels right, intuitively, but its cogency hinges on the details. When exactly did this invasion begin? And how is the onslaught—coordinated mostly by social media—different from all the earlier invasions, say, those advanced by



## ANOTHER LETHAL PARTY FAVOR

I was being ushered somewhere to be beaten when I ran into my old friend Harry. He looked slicked down like he'd had help licking his wounds and when I told him where I was going he said, Ha, they don't even know how to beat a fly there. That's Harry for you. Don't let him see you dragging your trash to the curb because he'll have to produce a bigger heap, carry it on his back even if his chin almost scrapes the ground like a dung beetle. Tell him about your heart transplant and he'll say, Didn't know you had a heart. Lately he's been concentrating on contemporary poetry of all things, kinda a relief like if Hitler had stayed interested in painting more than politics. Besides, it was a beautiful day to be beaten, one of those spry spring afternoons you feel you could talk to a daffodil and the daffodil, full of its own problems, would nonetheless accompany you into the dark cave of your own skull like a torch held by a villager intent upon burning down the castle.

—Dean Young

radio or billboards? To posit, as Rushkoff does, that we are “creatures of the digital era” doesn't suddenly make this era revolutionary and unique. We are its creatures, yes—but it's our creature, too.

“The Present Shock” unwittingly confirms its own thesis: this is a book about the dangers of presentism written in an unashamedly presentist mode. Forget Lefebvre: reading “The Present Shock,” you wouldn't know that Simmel mused on “absolute presentness” (“the sudden rearing of the life-process to a point where both past and future are irrelevant”) in 1911. Or that the idea of “real time” was being explored by artists in the mid-nineteen-sixties. The list of omissions is very long, and Rushkoff acknowledges, in a footnote, that thinkers from Aristotle to Lewis Mumford mined the same intellectual terrain. But he barely engages with them, on the assumption that the “digital era” is unique. Although Rushkoff styles himself a media theorist, he never dabbles in any actual media theory. He is not afraid to theorize the uncharted territory that is “the Internet,” coining his own terms

along the way (“digiphrenia,” “fractal-noia,” “apocalypso”), but it's a theory that establishes its originality by cutting ties to everything that has been said and thought before. If only he had heeded his own warnings about the tyranny of newness.

“The Present Shock” has little in the way of specific advice. “We can stop the onslaught of demands on our attention; we can create a safe space for uninterrupted contemplation; we can give each moment the value it deserves and no more”—O.K., but how? Perhaps Rushkoff would share the details only with his clients.

Alex Pang's “The Distraction Addiction,” by contrast, brims with suggestions for how to embrace “contemplative computing,” a mindful approach to digital technology that could buy an impressive supply of Kracauerian boredom. Instead of shunning the technological in pursuit of the mythical authentic experience, Pang wants to use technology to clean up the mess it created. “The Distraction Addiction” is a paean to various tools for blocking or limiting our Inter-

net connectivity: tools with names like Freedom, Chrome Nanny, and Stay-Focusd. Running such software on your computer is the equivalent of drawing the curtains in Kracauer's living room.

Reading “The Distraction Addiction,” I was reminded of “Micro Man” (1982), a mostly forgotten book by Susan Curran and the eccentric British cybernetician Gordon Pask, which offered a prediction about the commodification of time. “Today we buy time as our parents used to buy accommodation, as space to live in,” they wrote, of the far-off year 2000. “There are as many real time agents as real estate agents.” This is the present we know all too well. For one thing, Freedom isn't free: you pay ten dollars to use it. A modern-day Ulysses, desperate to be tied to some digital mast, is probably getting his ropes at the App Store.

I should admit that I'm something of a “contemplative computing” devotee, which is also to say, a distraction addict. Last year, I bought a safe with a built-in timer that I use to lock away my smartphone and Internet cable for days on end. (Tools like Freedom didn't work for me—they are too easy to circumvent.) At first, I was baffled. How, for example, would I stream films from Netflix? In retrospect, this was a silly question. Before I was liberated by the safe, I had spent more time browsing Netflix's film recommendations than streaming any of its films. Having made a long queue of films I'd like to watch, I now contentedly receive and mail DVDs from and to Netflix—all without ever getting online. If there's such a thing as an “offline aesthetic,” I think I've found it.

But I don't have such control when I step outside my apartment. Of course, there are noise-cancelling headphones, mobile-phone jammers, and the like. Still, something doesn't feel right about our reliance on such tools to deal with the sensory overload. Why accept ubiquitous distraction as a given? Technology companies produce apps to fight noise, overload, and distraction—having first produced noise, overload, and distraction—but shouldn't we also tackle these problems through standards and better design?

The anti-noise campaigners of the early twentieth century—to take just one earlier effort to rein in the excesses of



industrialization—didn't merely promote earplugs and soundproof windows. Nor did they advocate moving out of the cities and settling in the countryside. Instead, the Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise, in the United States, and similar groups in Europe (*"Non clamor sed amor"*—"Make love, not noise"—ran the motto of one) sought to make noise into a public problem that ought to be tackled collectively—by turning silence into a right.

The modern city might have had an uglier soundtrack were it not for these anti-noise campaigners. They waged a war on carpet-beating and bell-ringing. They pushed for different rubber tires, quieter pavements, and car mufflers. They passed ordinances that prevented piano enthusiasts from practicing at night. And they did all this in the face of opposition from intellectuals who thought that noise was an inevitable feature of modernity and that, in due time, we would all get used to it. ("Your campaign against noise is of no use and unnecessary," the Viennese theatre director Otto Eisenschitz wrote, on being invited to join an anti-noise group. "On the contrary, it is narrow-minded, useless, pointless and absurd!") Not all of

their reforms paid off, but the politicization of noise inspired a new generation of urban planners and architects to build differently, situating schools and hospitals in quieter zones and using parks and gardens as buffers against traffic.

What's needed is a modern-day counterpart to the anti-noise campaigners of a century ago. As Malcolm McCullough puts it in *"Ambient Commons,"* the most rewarding and politically literate of the recent books on distraction and attention, "Information deserves its own environmentalism." (Such environmentalism has always had a flair of élitism about it: just as the anti-noise campaigns were popular with writers and intellectuals who charged that noise made it impossible to get any writing and thinking done, today it's mostly literary types who are complaining about the perils of distraction and connectivity.)

The city of São Paulo is a trendsetter here: concerned with "visual pollution," it banned all outdoor advertising in 2007. But McCullough also celebrates technologies that can make us more alert to the world. To stop us from noticing less and less, the consequence of being distracted by flashing screens and other media, McCullough wants to surround

us with technologies—from media façades that eschew pictorial images to devices that monitor light pollution—capable of sharpening our focus and helping us develop new perceptual abilities:

A quieter life takes more notice of the world, and uses technology more for curiosity and less for conquest. It finds comfort and restoration in unmediated perceptions. It increases the ability to discern among forms of environmentally encountered information. It values persistence and not just novelty. It stretches and extends the now, beyond the latest tweets, beyond the next business quarter, until the sense of the time period you inhabit exceeds the extent of your lifetime.

*"Ambient Commons"* sizzles with provocative ideas: attention theft, right to uninterrupted attention, peak distraction. It's a call for a responsible urbanism. To realize that vision, however, would require the kind of political, social, and legal innovation that the anti-noise campaigners perfected. As McCullough points out, the old regulations won't do; they say nothing about "whether walking past a store might cause a pop-up ad on your phone, or whether it would be wrong for that ad to occur in audio, either as an interruption to a stream on a device, or as a targeted beam in the space of the sidewalk." Given the recent hype about the rise of the "smart city"—courtesy of large technology companies pitching solutions to innovation-hungry mayors—McCullough's advocacy of technologically mediated but humane urbanism is timely. If you wouldn't trust your city to Robert Moses, why would you trust it to Eric Schmidt?

Many are already campaigning for their own version of "information environmentalism." Some cafés and bars refuse to offer Wi-Fi, and in Amsterdam a number of benches block Wi-Fi. Librarians are considering the benefits of building connectivity-free "Walden zones," as the writer William Powers christened them. A group of Norwegian design students has built a modern "igloo"—billed as an "unplugged space in an online home"—which blocks electromagnetic signals. It's another safe for your home, except that it hides you and not your devices.

In a recent essay, the Dutch media scholar Christoph Lindner argued that smart cities ought to create "slow-spots"—pockets of silence and attention that could house "creative sites of decelerated prac-



*"I can do whatever I want—I come from a safe district."*

tice and experience.” It’s a proposition worth considering seriously. For what is modernity if not a collection of pockets of silence and distraction? Consider the Amtrak train: yes, we get Wi-Fi, but we also get the Quiet Car—and is there a more beloved and trusted American institution today than the Quiet Car?

Now that trains have become mobile shrines to the gods of contemplation—“The Quiet Car is the Thermopylae, the Masada, the Fort McHenry of quiet,” an Op-Ed in the *Times* last year announced—it’s easy to forget how train travel was once regarded. “I get so bored on the train that I am about to howl with tedium after five minutes on it,” Gustave Flaubert complained in 1864. “One might think that it’s a dog someone has forgotten in the compartment; not at all, it is M. Flaubert, groaning.” He preferred to stay up the night before in order to sleep through the train journey. Railway bookstores and libraries soon emerged to solve the problem.

The idea that trains can be places of sacred disconnection would have puzzled Flaubert, but this shouldn’t detract us from cultivating our own gardens of connection and disconnection. This would invariably involve creating zones that run on different rules of media engagement. Some of them would offer a cornucopia of sensory stimulation; others would look bare and leave us no choice but to get bored. It’s by regularly walking in and out of these zones that we could break the spell of “real time” and survive the assaults of interconnectivity.

These gardens won’t be built until we stop treating boredom and distraction as somehow at odds with each other. Kracauer, for one, never did. As much as he favored radical boredom, he disdained neither modern technologies nor the masses, with their penchant for dance, travel, and slapstick films. On the contrary, all these diversions, he thought, could help sabotage modernity’s efforts to shove people “into an everyday life that turns them into henchmen of the technological excesses.” Kracauer wrote a celebrated essay on the distracting potential of the cinema, but it’s his essay on travel and dance that reaffirms the need to create diverse pockets of experience. Kracauer saw travel and dance as strategies to suspend the growing rationalization of modern life, in all its dimen-

sions—space, in the case of travel, and time, in the case of dance—and even to glimpse the sublime:

What one expects and gets from travel and dance—a liberation from *earthly woes*, the possibility of an *aesthetic* relation to organized toil—corresponds to the sort of elevation above the ephemeral and the contingent that might occur within people’s existence in the relation to the eternal and the absolute. . . . Through their travels (and for the time being it doesn’t matter where they are headed) the shackles are burst, and they imagine that infinity itself is spreading out before them. In trains they are already on the other side, and the world in which they land is a new world for them. The dancer also grasps eternity in the rhythm: the contrast between the time in which he floats about and the time that demolishes him is his authentic rapture within the inauthentic domain. Dance itself can readily be reduced to a mere step, since after all it is only the act of dancing that is essential.

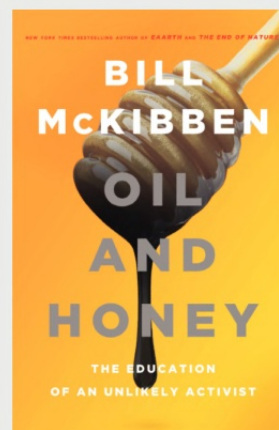
Both radical boredom and radical distraction can get us closer to such “authentic rapture within the inauthentic domain.” The trick is to honor and celebrate both of them—and not to settle for their tepid, mediocre versions. Do we need a stimulus program for distraction? Probably not: Silicon Valley and bad manners are doing a great job already. On the other hand, radical boredom could probably use a subsidy and a national holiday of sorts.

Luckily, both eternity and infinity are still within our grasp. Jumping into the boundless streams of Twitter is not very different from compulsively buying books in the false hope that, one day, you might read them. Of course, you won’t, but this doesn’t matter: it’s the very brief encounter with that possibility that counts. The fire hose of social media tricks us into thinking that, for a fleeting moment, we can play God and conquer every link that is dumped upon us; it gives us the mad utopian hope that, with proper training, we can emerge victorious in the war on information overload. Likewise, the possibility of controlled disconnection—embedded in software like Freedom and hardware like my safe—reassures us that our task lists and deadlines are manageable, if we approach them systematically and without distraction. Like travel and dance, both are illusions concocted by modernity, but this shouldn’t prevent us from enjoying them in full. Life in the New Digital Age might be disorienting, but at least it isn’t nasty, brutish, and short. Not in the Quiet Car, anyway. ♦

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