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Affect and critique: A politics of boredom*

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Abstract

What are the politics of boredom? And how should we relate to boredom? In this paper, I explore these questions through cases where the disaffection and restlessness of boredom have become a matter of concern in the UK and USA at the junctures between Fordism and neoliberalism, and amid today's resurgence of right-wing populism. I argue that what repeats across the critique of the 'ordinary ordinariness' of Fordism, the neoliberal counterrevolution and today's right-wing populism is a 'promise of intensity' – the promise that life will feel eventful and boredom will be absent. As I make this argument, I reflect on the role of critique in the context of the multiplication of modes of inquiry that has accompanied the interest in affect across the humanities and social sciences. Rejecting the dismissal of critique in some affect-related work, I advocate for and exemplify a type of 'diagnostic critique' based on the practice of conjunctural analysis as pioneered by Stuart Hall and colleagues.

Keywords

Boredom, affect, critique, Fordism, neoliberalism, populism

'All objects are scenes with many entry points. We are always intuiting and inventing associations, thus changing their shapes'.

(Berlant, 2018: 116)

Introduction

Boredom is strange, or perhaps our relations to it are. It is frequently invoked by states, the media, social movements and individuals as a cause for a heterogeneous list of actions coded as excessive and anti-social: 'offending behaviour' or 'deviant behaviour' (The Scottish

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Government, 2014), breaking lockdown regulations during COVID-19 (e.g. BBC News 28th April, Sky News 21st April), violence and self-harm in prisons (Independent Monitoring Board, 2018), worker suicide (Fair Labor Association, 2018¹), world revolution (Katsiaficas, 1987), indifference to the atrocity of Grenfell Tower (Younge, 2019) and much more. Yet, at the same time, boredom is regularly dismissed as trivial, naturalised as a common and inevitable dimension of being human and rarely subject to the public concern and action that surrounds other affects. Indeed, the stasis and stall of boredom appears to lack the intensity, the obvious harm and damage, of other affects that are now central to critiques of neoliberal life in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Compare with how stress and burnout, for example, have become public matters of concern in the midst of critiques of the frenzies of neoliberal life (Chabot, 2019). Or think about how various public moods are invoked as causes of Brexit, the election of Donald J Trump and other contemporary events and political changes in the midst of a ‘crisis’ of neoliberalism: racialised resentment, a feeling of being left behind, online outrage, anger at elites and so on. Boredom does not seem to quite fit with these strong stories about the role of heightened passions in a turbulent present. However, if we slow down and pay attention, we find that claims about boredom as collective condition or bored subjects surface in the background to many recent attempts to diagnose the affective character of the present: cycles of online outrage interrupt the almost but not quite boredom of the scroll; boredom settles in peripheral places supposedly left behind by a rapacious global capital; it exists as a felt consequence of austerity in places where youth services have contracted; it can be a symptom of burnout, etc.

Consequential and trivial, overshadowed by other affects and yet in the background, too absent and too present, boredom today is entangled in a set of contradictions. Contradictions which, although not the focus of this paper, we see at play in relation to COVID-19 as claims about boredom become a key way to narrate the collective affective experiences of the suspension and deferral of ‘normality’. What might staying with boredom and the cluster of affects that gather around it teach us about what was missing in a contemporary condition which, pre-COVID-19, was more often narrated through stories of intensity and strong feeling? And how should we relate not only to boredom but also to the absences that boredom indicates in the context of the multiplication of modes of inquiry that have accompanied and animated affect-related work in the social sciences (e.g. forms of descriptive (e.g. Stewart, 2007) or speculative empiricism (e.g. Massumi, 2015))? My starting point for thinking about what might be lost when boredom is present and how we might relate to boredom as they happen and become matters of concern is found in some reflections on children’s boredom by the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (1993). Echoing Tolstoy’s formulation of boredom as ‘desire for desires’, Phillips describes boredom as a ‘wish for a desire’ (p. 71). His is an account of a particular form of boredom and its celebratory in tone, it isn’t the boredom of oppression or subjugation so we have to be cautious, but he describes boredom in a way that has always resonated as it centres a particular kind of relation between the present and events: boredom is a ‘state of suspended anticipation’ (p. 71). What is missing when boredom is present is what he goes on to call the ‘experience of anticipation’ (p. 72), or what I would term the presence of a possible future event that may be felt through a range of anticipatory affects from dread to hope, from fear to excitement. Boredom settles when events are absent. But this emphasis on flatness, on the unequal distribution of eventfulness and possibility, only goes part of the way to understanding why boredom matters. We also have to consider what boredom does – what kind of relation boredom is and enacts. As time stills and space slows, boredom happens as a practice of detachment from an event, object, scene, landscape, person, ideology and so on. And it is

the turning away which happens as boredom settles that has been at the heart of debates about the ethics of being bored (e.g. Raposa, 1999 on *acedia*). But it is also this turning away which has been central to the valorisation of a creative boredom that initiates new possibilities (e.g. Benjamin, 1999). Staying with boredom teaches us about how detachments happen, as well as how (un)eventfulness is distributed.

Boredom signals, then, that *something* has led to a suspension of anticipation and that some form of detachment and exit is happening. From this starting suggestion, one that hesitates before claiming that boredom is incapacity or opportunity, in this paper, I focus on occasions over the past 50 years in the UK and the USA in which boredom became a political concern at the junctures between Fordism and neoliberalism and neoliberalism and right-wing populism. The examples are from a wider project that attempts to ask what boredom is today as a way to understand the affective character of neoliberal lives. It starts from the presumption that there exist a plurality of boredoms which are differentially articulated with the apparatuses and practices through which neoliberalism is morphing in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. In this paper, I speculate about the affective continuities and differences across different apparatuses and formations, arguing that what repeats across the critique of Fordism, the neoliberal counterrevolution from the late 1970s and contemporary right-wing populism after the 2008 financial crisis is a ‘promise of intensity’: the promise that life will feel eventful and boredom will be absent. As I make this argument, I offer one response to the question posed above of how we should relate to boredom, or indeed any other affect. Stepping outside of either a condemnatory or reparative relation with affective life, I exemplify a form of diagnostic critique orientated to conjunctures.

My argument unfolds over three sections. In the first – *Against Boredom* – I explore how the boredom of an exception – mid-century Fordism – was central to what Boltanski and Chiapelle (2005) call the artistic critique of capitalism. The following section – *Diagnostic Critique and the ‘affective present’* – pauses and argues for a shift in the form of critique in work on affect – from a hermeneutics of suspicion to a practice of conjunctural analysis as pioneered by Stuart Hall and colleagues. The final section – *Populist Boredoms* – speculates that right-wing populism in the UK and USA involves a politics of boredom which repeats the promise of intensity which was central to the artistic critique of Fordism and thereafter the ‘promissory legitimacy’ (Beckert, 2020) of neoliberalism. In conclusion, I open up a wider project on the relations between boredom and contemporary conditions in the midst of transformations in neoliberalisms.

Section I: Against boredom

‘We do not want to exchange a world in which the guarantee of no longer dying of hunger is exchanged for the risk of dying of boredom’.

(Situationalist Slogan cited in Katsiaficas (1987: 99))

In 1977, the British punk band The Clash released ‘London’s Burning’. The lyrics are incongruous, juxtaposing burning and boredom in an affective image of an emergency present overfull with deadening activities:

All across the town, all across the night

Everybody’s driving with full headlights

Black or white, you turn it on, you face the new religion

Everybody's sitting 'round watching television

London's burning with boredom now

London's burning dial nine-nine-nine-nine-nine

London's burning with boredom now

London's burning dial nine-nine-nine-nine-nine

The juxtaposition of intensity and disaffection – here the violence of ‘burning’ with the flatness of ‘sitting round watching television’ – was central to the disruptive ethos, energy and style of UK punk culture (see Marcus, 1989). Boredom was regularly invoked in UK punk as part of a critique of the monotony and vapidness of Fordism and working-class life, or rather the empty time of a life divided into stable work and compensatory leisure at the cusp of the neoliberal counterrevolution. The Buzzcocks’ 1976 song *Boredom* echoing the sense in *London's Burning* of a stalled, stuck, present. In the suspended time of boredom, in which disaffection dominates, the future is lost:

And now, I'm a-living in this a-movie

But it doesn't move me

I'm the man that's waiting for the phone to ring

Hear it ring-a-ring-a-ring-a-fucking-ding

You know me, I'm acting dumb, uh

You know the scene, very humdrum

Boredom, boredom

Boredom

You see, there's a-nothing that's a-behind me

I'm already a has-been, uh

Because my future ain't a-what it was

Well, I think I know the words that I mean

Only two destinations were available in stuck time – Boredom or Nowhere, as the now iconic art work designed by Jamie Reed for the Sex Pistols’ *Pretty Vacant* bluntly stated. The shouted refrain of the feminist punk group The Slits’ song ‘A Boring Life’ – ‘how could anyone survive this boring life’ – exemplifies what founding member Viv Albertine described

in interview with Jon Savage as the ‘terrible fear of boredom’ or an ‘absolute horror of it’ which underpinned the energy of punk (Savage, 2010: 293).

Amid the roiling economic and political crises of mid-late 1970s Britain and changing expectations and aspirations as the Fordist settlement weakened, punk provided one answer to the question posed by Malcolm McLaren, before he became manager of the Sex Pistols, in a banner hung on stage for the New York Dolls’ early 1970s shows: ‘What are the politics of Boredom?’ (Marcus, 1989: 49). The answer was a strong one, in many ways uncharacteristic of the flat, sometimes mocking, talk that occasionally makes the presence or absence of boredom into a matter of public concern. Boredom named a kind of ‘living death’ felt equally and tragically across work and leisure. The counter-cultural protest against boredom tied UK punk culture in particular to the events and slogans of the situationalists and their actions against boredom (Marcus, 1989). As Savage (1988: 52) puts it, writing about the Sex Pistols but with comments that extend to punk culture in general, “‘Boredom’ described the expansive, occluded, utopian politics that built up at the Sex Pistols core’. Punk became a ‘theatrical expression of boredom’s prison’ (Savage, 1988: 55), albeit one which was articulated differently across USA and UK punk cultures given their emergence from different mid-1970s working-class and middle-class formations and periods of economic change (see Ambrosch (2015), for example, on the relation of the Ramones to the promise and actuality of suburbia in America).

Whilst specific connections can be traced between punk cultures and the situationalists and the event of 1968 (Marcus, 1989), the critique of boredom echoed a wider new left critique of a consumer culture organised around attachment to the promise of the new and leisure as a scene of compensation for work. For one particularly caustic example, consider Adorno’s (1991) account of boredom in his 1977 essay on *Free Time*. Arguing against free time as an ‘oasis of unmediated life’, he ties boredom to a complex mixture of powerlessness and the ‘defamation and atrophy of the imagination’ (Adorno, 1991: 192). He emphasises the historicity and thus contingency of boredom:

Boredom is a function of life which is lived under the compulsion to work, and under the strict division of labour. It need not be so. Whenever behaviour in spare time is truly autonomous, determined by free people for themselves, boredom rarely figures; it need not figure in activities which cater merely for the desire for pleasure, any more than it does in those free time activities which are reasonable and meaningful in themselves... Boredom is the reflection of objective dullness.

(Adorno, 1991: 192)

As with the protest against boredom by the punks and situationalists, Adorno critiques boredom as a symptom of the division of labour under Fordism and, in particular, the compensatory role of leisure in the context of the compulsion to work. Preceding and in many ways anticipating more recent critiques of the foreclosure of alternatives and the loss of the capacity to imagine (e.g. Fisher, 2011), his declaration – ‘It need not be so’ (Adorno, 1991: 192) – expresses the same utopian desire that courses through the ethos of punk: that life can be lived without boredom (a protest against the boredom of the ‘normal’ that was also central to rock (Grossberg, 1992: 180)).

Punk is but one example of how boredom surfaced as a matter of concern in art, activism and politics from the early early/mid-1960s in Western Europe and North America. It can be understood as one expression of the ‘revolution against boredom’ which Katsiaficas (1987: 12) in his history of the new left argues was expressed in May–June 1968 in Paris and

reverberated globally. Beyond this event, boredom was named and protested as part of an emerging dissatisfaction with the Fordist settlement (and so coexisted with other affects of crisis, as named in phrases such as ‘winter of discontent’ and connected more to insecurity and turbulence²). For example, in the early 1970s, boredom amongst assembly line workers in the USA – the ‘blue collar blues’³ – was increasingly named as a problem for retention and productivity, in ways a little different from the threat of the idle or lazy worker (although the problem of boredom in relation to automation had been present since the inauguration of assembly line work, e.g. Robinson, 1923; Wyatt, 1929). Boredom was connected to absenteeism, risk of accidents, poor work, strikes and sabotage. Ways of measuring ‘boredom proneness’ emerged, as well as attempts to motivate, make work more fulfilling, increase compensations and so on (see Hill, 1975; *The New York Times*, 1972). If claims were made that workers no longer accepted the boredom of assembly line work as a trade-off for affluence (on which see Goldthorpe et al., 1968), critiques of boredom also related to the Fordist gendered division of labour. For example, boredom played a key role in second-wave feminism. As Betty Friedan (1963) named the ‘problem that has no name’, she offered a critique of the unequal gendered division of boredom and the subsumption of women to the family under Fordism. Various described as ‘discontent’ or ‘dissatisfaction’ (Friedan, 1963: 24, 25), symptoms of the ‘strange newness’ (p. 26) of the ‘problem with no name’ included a ‘feeling of desperation’ and a ‘terrible tiredness’ (p. 30) which may be ‘due to boredom’ (p. 31). Boredom was also central to moral panics in the 1970s around new figures and practices at the intersection of youth culture and consumer culture on the edge of society – the ‘college dropout’ who exits university through lack of interest (Bernstein, 1975) or the working-class ‘juvenile delinquent’ (Corrigan, 1979).

The vision is one of disaffected subjects detaching from work or leisure or family and desiring ‘more’ to life than mid-century Fordism can offer. This led to wider claims of the importance of boredom by cultural critics trying to understand a period of intense change. Writing in the mid-1970s, and with more than a hint of moral condemnation, Bernstein (1975: 518), for example, identifies a ‘search for sensations of ever mounting intensity and impact’ in as varied cultural phenomena as portrayals of sex and violence in cinema, use of colour in the visual arts, increased number of extra-marital affairs, rock music and the encounter group movement. What is specific about the critiques of life within Fordism is that they all centre the affective bargain of Fordism: economic security for a tolerated boredom. Beyond the punks, there is a whole artistic genre dedicated to dramatising and reworking this critique of monotony, especially focused on the intimacy between fantasy and disaffection in the new space-times of consumer culture, including the suburbs and malls. Think, for example, of how the architectures and atmospheres of post-war Fordist Britain are staged in the British artist Martin Parr’s series ‘Bored Postcards’ – where the boredom of ordinary life is mocked and wondered at simultaneously.

However, these critiques of Fordist forms of living focused on the subjects who were in proximity to its cluster of promises and good life fantasies. They do not necessarily fit with differently positioned subjects and groups for whom the security of Fordism and affluence of post-war consumer culture remained an exception rather than norm (with the security of Fordism itself being an exception in capitalist history (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008)). Consider, for example, bell hooks’ (1984) opening in *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center* where she particularises the bored leisured subject of ‘the problem that has no name’:

Friedan’s famous phrase, ‘the problem that has no name’, often quoted to describe the condition of women in this society, actually referred to the plight of a select group of college-educated,

middle- and upper-class, married white women—housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life.

(hooks, 1984: 1)

By centring and universalising White middle- and upper-class women's almost existential boredom and their desire for 'more', hooks argued that Friedan ignored other women's pressing political concerns – issues of economic survival and racial discrimination, amongst others. hooks' critique reminds us that boredom at the ever-same and the desire for 'more' is the boredom of those at the 'centre' of a racialised formation of post-war capitalism (likewise see Majumdar (2013) on the colonial yearning for excitement and boredom as a symptom of colonial domination).

Particularising the bored subject that surfaced in critiques of Fordism opens up a project beyond the scope of this paper – understanding how forms of boredom within Fordism related to different lived experiences of economic and other (in)securities and changing patterns of expectation and aspiration. For now, we can say that what crosses between these different ways in which boredom became a concern and problem is the experience of empty, stuck, time. In different ways, boredom became a sign of the failure of Fordist work, leisure and their relation to enable activities to feel meaningful and authentic and purposeful. Critique is focused on the repetitive time and experience of work/leisure but also, perhaps more interestingly, on boredom as symptom of an emerging crisis in the 'promissory legitimacy' (Beckert, 2020) of Fordism organised around the family wage and compensatory leisure. Even if they shared little else, punks in the UK, American factory workers and White middle- and upper-class housewives in the USA perhaps shared a desire for 'more'. Where the 'more' was differently articulated, in relation to 'careers' for Friedan's women for example, but reflected a desire for the present to somehow feel more intense. Long before Berlant's (2011) identification of how conventional good life fantasies sustain and harm as people stay in proximity to them even as they fray and become unattainable, the claim that life was boring morphed into a critique of the fantasies and promises that accompanied Fordism. Instead of the 'crisis ordinariness' (Berlant, 2011) of the post-Fordist present, what was critiqued was 'ordinary ordinariness': repetitive, inert, empty time where nothing new happened.

Section 2: Diagnostic critique and the 'affective present'

Did this form of Fordist boredom – the boredom of those who remained in proximity to its fantasies – become residual in the midst of the expansion and intensification of neoliberalising apparatuses from the early 1980s organised around the promise of participation in the market? The 'promissory legitimacy' (Beckert, 2020) of neoliberalism was in part founded on incorporating the critique of how Fordism felt and offering an alternative experience of enlivening risk and positive uncertainty (as well as the persistent articulation of neoliberal policies and programmes with Fordist good life fantasies, most prominently nation or family or security (see Hall (1988) on these articulations)). What participation in the market promised was a form of 'good life' based on autonomy, individuality and choice (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) in which the boredom of 'ordinary ordinariness' would be transcended. Summarising a range of work, we could say that what we can call the 'promise of intensity' – that life would feel eventful and boredom would be absent – was assembled in two principle ways. First, the anti-state mood, the 'state-phobia' that coexists in neoliberalism with the strategic use of the state to create markets (Foucault, 2008), was refracted

through a popular critique of the social democratic ‘Big State’ as bureaucratic and paternal (‘red tape’), as that which bores as it stifles and stills life (itself repeating the longstanding critique of the ‘predictability’ of ‘impersonal’ modern bureaucracy (Weber, 2015 cited in Holm, 2020), as well as resonating with popular representations in the West of the boringness of life in Eastern Europe). Alongside the negative affects which were attached to the ‘Big State’, secondly, changing modes of subjectification centred the enlivening experiences which followed from risk and orientations to an open future, as typically expressed in the heroic figure of the entrepreneur or the consumer as a figure of enjoyment. This shift included attempts to make all work into an occasion for self-fulfilment and enrichment, for example through the injection of creativity and flexibility into mundane tasks (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Dardot and Laval, 2013). Put differently, we could say that neoliberalising apparatuses domesticated the critique of the boredom of Fordism, by promising release from disaffection and flatness through participation in the market.

So far I have offered a proposition: that boredom became a matter of concern in relation to Fordism and neoliberalising apparatuses reacted by offering a ‘promise of intensity’, whereby participation in the market became a means to self-realisation and fulfilment in which life would feel eventful and boredom would be absent. As with my observations on Fordism, this proposition opens up a wider project on the specific relations between boredom and neoliberalising apparatuses, not least the forms of boredom that accompany the expansion of bureaucratic forms and practices (audits, etc.) that is the oft-noted effect of the extension of relations of competition in actually existing neoliberalisms (see Davis, 2020). Before developing this proposition by way of a discussion of boredom in the midst of today’s ‘crisis ordinariness’ (Berlant, 2011), let’s pause and reflect on what kind of thing boredom is in my account so far. My emphasis has been less on boredom as felt, and more on how boredom surfaced as a matter of concern, becoming a sign of dissatisfaction, and gathering a series of surprisingly strong affects around it as the Fordist settlement weakened. Whilst the exact critique is rarely articulated, across the punks, second-wave feminism and so on a claim was made that boredom is symptomatic of something lost in relation to unspecified virtues that go by names like dignity, spontaneity, fulfilment or freedom. Boredom was, to put it in Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005) terms, enrolled as part of the ‘artistic’ critique of Fordism from the 1960s: invoked as symptomatic of a crisis of not only meaning and purpose but also of intensity. In this critique of Fordism, we find an update of how boredom has long figured in criticisms of capitalist modernity more broadly – where the disaffection of boredom is part of a story of modern alienation and becomes a secondary effect of a series of now familiar, nameable, causes: rationalisation, secularisation, individualisation, etc. (see Goodstein, 2005).

Is this how we should relate to boredom – name and protest it as part of a critique of the affective degradations of contemporary capitalisms? Identify it as an ill and proclaim that life can be lived without boredom in a way that valorises fun, spontaneity, passion, intensity or some other virtue? Critique is only one mode of inquiry. There are others. What else might we notice if we learn to relate differently to boredom and the affects that gather around it? Across the social sciences and humanities, interdisciplinary work on affect has experimented with other modes whilst continuing to align with the political or ethical goals of critique. What is questioned is critique as sole, habitual and therefore default mode of inquiry, and how the hegemonic position of critique crowds out other ways of encountering worlds and achieving ethical and political ends. The concern with critique is twofold. First, work has argued that critique is tied to and reproduces a logic of modernity and Enlightenment thought, involving what Sedgwick (2013: 144) describes as a ‘certain disarticulation, disavowal, and misrecognition of other ways of knowing’. Second, critique

encounters the world through a limited range of moods – principally suspicion (Felski, 2015) and paranoia (Sedgwick, 2013) – and modes of argumentation – primarily exposure (including demystification) and condemnation (or more loosely ‘problematising’ or ‘questioning’ in Foucaultian influenced critique). Whilst these moods and modes of argumentation and the reasons for caution about them differ, they reproduce a division between the shown and hidden – with the task of the critic being to reveal the hidden to a supposedly unknowing audience who will be moved by revelation.

For now, I have left what is meant by ‘critique’ vague. The aim of Sedgwick and Felski is to particularise the orientation, mood and mode of argument of critique, disturb the faith in the effectual force of exposure (and associated triumphalism) and to allow multiple modes of inquiry to proliferate and flourish. Their aim is not to end or escape critique, indeed perhaps such a move is impossible, but to unsettle its hegemonic status, and the presumption that being critical equates with being political or ethical. In response, one move might be to change the shape of the object – here boredom – by experimenting with speculative modes of inquiry orientated to potentiality and animated by a mood and disposition of hope. Where hope serves as a way of orientating to the not-yet: futures and therefore also pasts which might be different from the here and now (or, as Back (2021: 18) wonderfully puts it ‘glimmers of worldly hope’). Instead of a *symptom*, boredom might be related to as a *herald*: the inarticulate expression of a desire for more to life. We would encounter boredom for its potentiality, for its restlessness, for how it moves subjects into new relations and attachments. We would suspend judgement and follow what opens up in the wake of the detachment that is boredom, staying close to and valorising escape attempts, from day-dreaming to world historical revolutions. Boredom would become another seemingly negative affect which is valued and becomes otherwise through inquiry (e.g. Probyn (2005) on shame or Cvetkovich (2012) on depression) (a reversal of the typical critical move of demystification in relation to positively coded affects, e.g. Ahmed (2010) on happiness or Pedwell (2014) on empathy).

Whilst useful as a reminder that our modes of inquiry assemble our objects, we should be cautious. There is nothing distinctive about a reparative orientation or hopeful mood as ways of encountering boredom. In the context of versions of the artistic critique of existence in relation to capitalist modernity, potential has long been found in certain kinds of (normally gendered) boredom. There are many examples. For both Benjamin (1999) and Kracauer (1995 [1924]), for example, certain kinds of gendered boredom are treated as a form of waiting which functions as a portal to something different by interrupting captivation by the ever-same in the guise of the new. Kracauer (1995 [1924]: 334) writes of boredom as ‘the only proper occupation’ and how, with patience, by staying with one’s boredom one ‘experiences a kind of bliss that is almost unearthly’. Likewise, Benjamin (1999: D2a, 1) valorises boredom as ‘the warm grey fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colourful of silks’. The American post-war avant-garde, to give another example, experimented with deliberately producing boredom – through an ‘aesthetic of indifference’ (Roth’s (1998 [1977]) or ‘aesthetic of the indecidable’ (Katz (1998)) that performed silence and repetition – in complex relation to the illusory plenitude of mass consumer culture and the violent atmosphere of 1950s cold war.

We reach an impasse. How to encounter boredom in a manner which does not reproduce the polarisation in how boredom, as per other affects, has been figured as either symptom or herald in reflections on discontent? My starting point is to suspend an affirmative disposition and return to the discussion of critique. I left what is meant by ‘critique’ vague above. Implicitly, critique is treated as a reading practice – a hermeneutics of suspicion based on a distinction between the hidden and shown whose effect is demystification. In making this

equation, the discussion risks missing a slightly different tradition of ‘diagnostic critique’. Sharing an emphasis on denaturalisation, diagnostic critique departs from critique-as-hermeneutics of suspicion by (a) orientating to how the geo-historically specific present feels and (b) describing and assessing the different forces which gather and are assembled to constitute that present. Two examples illustrate this mode of inquiry. Both are concerned with the USA and the sustaining and harmful role of the promise of progress in crisis times and in the midst of racialised and other injustices. Moving between USA aesthetics, everyday life and politics in a crisis of neoliberalism, Berlant’s (2011) account of ‘cruel optimism’ tracks the ‘historical sensorium’ which has emerged ‘since the fantasmatic part of the optimism about structural transformation realized less and less traction in the world’ (p. 3). As optimistic objects/scenarios which held space for the good life dissolve, optimism becomes ‘cruel’, in the sense of ‘when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’ (p. 1). Berlant’s account of the dissolution and loss of fantasies can be read alongside Winters’ (2016) engagement with the persistent belief that America follows a trajectory of racial progress. Winters argues that the fantasy and promise of racial progress coexists with and is undercut by a Black cultural, political and intellectual tradition in which hope is ‘drapped in black’ – articulated with loss, tragedy and melancholy. As well as identifying the presence of this form of hope in American life, he also advocates for it as a way of avoiding silencing the history of racial violence or avoiding dissonant memories or attachments. By supplementing Berlant on the coexistence of different kinds of optimism by showing the fraught relation Black lives have to one fantasy that structures American exceptionalism, Winters demonstrates the work ‘post-racial’ forms of optimism continue to do in foreclosing the capacity to face racial violence.

Juxtaposing Berlant and Winters’ accounts of the structuring role of optimism in post-war American life allows us to distinguish diagnostic critique from other modes of inquiry orientated towards affective life: it discloses the composition of the always multiple ‘affective present’ (Berlant, 2011), the boundaries of which are never given, but subject to revision as people adjust to events, as lives are restructured, and as different forces become palpable. A little different to affect-related work that stays with bodies coming together in the unruliness of encounters or scenes, diagnostic critique aims to disclose how the affective character of presents are (de/re)composed through multiple forces working at different levels of abstraction. One ‘affective present’ might be the mid-1970s moment in the UK from which punk culture emerged, for example. In this orientation to the present as ‘mediated affect’ (Berlant, 2011: 4), diagnostic critique follows Williams’ (1977) orientation to how the present is encountered affectively through registers of feeling, named deliberately and necessarily vaguely by him as ‘characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tones’ (p. 132). There are, though, different types of diagnostic critique (compare, for example, how Ahmed (2010) reads the politics of affect through *figures* and Berlant (2011) through *scenes*). Here, I advocate for one type that has received less attention in relation to recent work on affect – ‘conjunctural analysis’, as practiced by Hall et al. (2013 [1978]) in their analysis of mugging, and Hall (1988) in his analysis of Thatcherism. What conjunctural analysis offers is a practice which begins from a named affect/emotion and then moves between different levels of abstraction and across different phenomena to offer propositions about the character of the affective present. As an example, consider the analysis by Hall et al. (2013) of the wave of fear and anxiety, the ‘moral panic’, over the threat of mugging in late 1970s Britain. Starting from the fears and anxieties which were catalysed and intensified by the racialised event of mugging and amplified into a general sense of the presence and threat of disorder (1970s student protests, etc.), Hall et al. trace the emergent formation of a ‘law and order’ society in the midst of multiple, intersecting crises as the post-war corporatist settlement

began to collapse – high inflation, industrial unrest, the fallout from the end of empire. By working across these levels, *Policing the Crisis* details how an intensification of the repressive side of the state apparatus was conditioned between 1970 and 1974 by what was variously described by Hall et al. (2013) as a ‘sharpening climate’ (p. 269), an ‘atmosphere . . . of mounting, often carefully organised, public hysteria’ (p. 270) and ‘a ‘scare’ pre-election mood’ (p. 272). Over the 1970s, the ‘routinisation of control’ and associated ‘exceptional state’ (p. 268) became normal as Britain ‘edged, bit by bit, towards a law and order mood, now advancing, now retreating, moving into a crab-like way, sideways into Armageddon’ (p. 272).

Policing the Crisis was prescient. It anticipated the project of ‘authoritarian populism’ which Hall (1988) went on to argue defined Thatcherism as neoliberal ‘counterrevolution’ which yoked security and family to the promise of the market. It serves an exemplar of the practice of ‘conjunctural analysis’ for how it began with an event (a robbery and injury in Birmingham) before spiralling out to diagnose the multiple forces that came together in a period of crisis. Beginning with this example, but drawing conjunctural analysis into relation with recent affect-related work, we can identify four features which make conjunctural analysis distinctive.

First, conjunctural analysis *offers propositions* by orientating to and articulating what is specific or particular to a present (with terms like ‘situation’, ‘age’, ‘contemporary’ used interchangeably). Those propositions are contestable – hypotheses about what might be happening in a situation of intensifying change and unrest (a ‘conjuncture’) that goes beyond the now standard deconstructionist or Foucaultian injunction to problematise a phenomenon to reveal its contingency. Propositions are based on a practice of attention to ‘conjunctures’ as occasions of limited but open-ended duration when antagonisms and contradictions ‘fuse’ to form a ‘ruptural unity’, lived in and through crisis before some kind of resolution. As such, Hall (1988), after Gramsci, describes conjunctures in terms of unities-in-difference composed of ‘related but distinct contradictions, moving according to very different tempos, whose condensation, in any particular historical moment, is what defines a conjuncture’ (p. 173).

Second, conjunctural analysis is *transversal* in that description works between levels of abstraction and across different kinds of entities. In his analysis of Thatcherism, Hall (1988) emphasises the role of ideology to understand the remaking of common sense, in particular the new articulations between the ‘free market’ as a site of freedom and reworking of ‘Englishness’ that produces a form of ‘regressive modernisation’, but he develops these propositions by moving between different kinds of things. Take his list of the precipitating conditions for Thatcherism: the break with the post-war consensus, the recomposition and fragmentation of relations of representation between classes and parties, the emergence of new social movements, the end of empire, amongst many others (Hall, 1988: 2). Propositions are offered through a practice of description that expands and contracts as it focuses on the practices of ‘articulation’ which allow differences to temporarily ‘merge’.

Third, and unlike certain forms of description associated with affect-related work (e.g. Stewart, 2007) conjunctural analysis is explanatory in the sense that it makes claims about *causation*. For example, in relation to ‘authoritarian populism’, the images and representations that compose a ‘virulent, emergent, ‘petty bourgeois’ ideology’ are described by Hall (1988: 41) as ‘factors’ which ‘have effects on and for the social formation as a whole – including effects on the economic crisis itself and how it is likely to be politically resolved’. Rejecting an expressionist model of the relations between the economic and other spheres, Hall is at pains to stress, after Althusser, that conjunctures are always made through multiple determinations. This is not, though, the ‘billiard ball’ model of cause and effect

(‘efficient causality’) which underpins some explanatory modes of analysis. What the vocabulary of (over)determination offers is a multiplication of causality in ways that echoes recent discussions of causality (see, for example, Bennett (2011) on ‘operators’ or ‘convertors’). So, a structure of feeling might shape, an event interrupt, an affect imbued ideology initiate, an atmosphere catalyse and so on.

Finally, conjunctural analysis is *speculative*. As provisional unities in motion, conjunctures are driven by residual, pre-emergent, emergent and dominant forces, apparatuses and events, to adapt Williams (1977) vocabulary of change. This means that the ‘present’ is never fully present; it is not a punctual, separate ‘now’. It is full of tendencies and latencies; traces of past and present futures which exert some kind of presence as they are felt through hope and other anticipatory affects, emergent social formations which coexist with dominant formations, residual events that live on and return in other forms with different affects. By speculation, I mean a practice that *produces* (in the sense that description produces a ‘thick description’) possibilities and a different relation to those possibilities, i.e. a named possibility *and* a relation of interest, engagement, horror, excitement, etc. As such, speculation creates conditional claims – that this could have happened, or perhaps this might be happening.

Conjunctural analysis is, then, always specific and subject to revision – diagnosing the affective character of conjunctures which are and will become different. In its modes of relation and argumentation – *propositional, transversal, explanatory and speculative* – it differs from practices and forms of critique based primarily on a hermeneutics of suspicion and from affirmative or reparative modes of inquiry which disclose possibility. *It offers for discussion and revision plausible, contestable propositions about the specificity of geo-historical conjunctures.* What, then, are the politics of boredom in *this* conjuncture – in the midst of claims about the end of neoliberalism and the emergence of various populisms of the left and right – and how might they relate to the critique of the ‘ordinary ordinariness’ of Fordism?

Section 3: Populist boredoms

BORING!

During a debate between democratic presidential candidates, on the 26th June 2019, Donald Trump sent out a single word tweet – BORING! It was retweeted over 79,000 times and liked over 325,000 as of 7th August 2019. The tweet – and reactions to it and interactions with it – became another quasi- or pseudo-event in the discontinuous flow of other almost but not quite mediated events which make up digital worlds (on which see Kember and Zylinska, 2012). There was nothing unusual about the tweet. The judgement of politicians or parts of the state or media as boring is something Trump often does. On the 7th August 2019, for example, he tweeted:

Watching Sleepy Joe Biden making a speech. Sooo Boring! The LameStream Media will die in the ratings and clicks with this guy. It will be over for them, not to mention the fact that our Country will do poorly with him. It will be one big crash, but at least China will be happy!

On 15th March 2020:

I must say, that was a VERY boring debate. Biden lied when he said I want to cut Social Security and Medicare. That’s what they ALL said 4years ago, and nothing happened, in fact, I saved Social Security and Medicare. I will not be cutting, but they will. Be careful!

Trump as a political-cultural figure and Trumpism as bellicose right-wing affective style will soon morph to live on as a more or less intense memory of a betrayed promise of future American ‘greatness’, or past warning of the intimacy between democracy and fascism, depending on political position. However, Trump is far from alone amongst populist politicians or supportive media in judging non-populist political forms and practices as boring. As with Trump’s emphasis on the ‘lamestream’ media, institutions or processes that have been central to liberalism are frequently labelled as boring. In the UK, for example, ‘Brexit boredom’, a detachment from the event, was regularly claimed by right-wing commentators and conservative politicians in relation to processes of parliamentary scrutiny and disagreement in the impasse post the 2016 referendum and advocated as a reason for speeding up exiting the EU and enacting the ‘will of the people’. Specific politicians are labelled as boring in comparison to populists. The current leader of the UK labour party, Keir Starmer, for example, has been repeatedly labelled as ‘dull’ and ‘boring’ by conservative commentators during his first 100 days in the role (The Spectator, 2020a; The Spectator, 2020b). The accusation that politicians, institutions or processes are boring is not new. As well as the boringness of the social democratic ‘Big State’ and competition stifling bureaucracy, as discussed above, judgements of boredom have been key to the atmospheres that envelope formal politics in the wake of neoliberalism. They resonate with forms of ‘disaffected consent’ (Gilbert, 2015) through which neoliberalising policies and programmes are often encountered with an uneasy mix of discontent and acquiescence, rather than enthusiastic endorsement. At the same time, judgements of boredom can fuse with anger and resentment. Reactivating the new right’s backlash against ‘political correctness’ (see Ahmed, 2010), the charge that liberal or left politics bores and reduces or ends people’s feeling of autonomy and agency is violently expressed in critiques of the ‘woke’ gendered and racialised figure who is too earnest.

How to understand this return of a critique of boredom in right-wing populism and its connection with the ‘promise of intensity’ which I argued was central to the critique of ‘ordinary ordinariness’ and the 1970s neoliberal counterrevolution? How, in short, to understand it conjuncturally? ‘Boring’ is a common aesthetic judgement. It implies that something – a scene, object, person – has not touched and moved the one uttering the judgement. As with all judgements of taste, the judgement performs connection and disconnection. It creates intimacy between those who share the judgement but who may otherwise have little in common other than their boredom on listening to ‘Sleepy Joe’, watching the ‘lamestream media’, or, in the UK, reading about Brexit. When issued as a judgement, boredom is always a matter of division – between that which bores and that which is interesting. In judging something or someone as boring, dismissing it or them and separating oneself, the speaker also proclaims a right to be affected, to be moved – often signalled by the terms ‘interesting’ or ‘interested’ (Ngai, 2005). For Trump and as we will see other populists, not being boring became another mark of distinction from a liberal elite whilst also introducing spontaneity and unpredictability into the digitally mediated present. With grim predictability, the BORING! statement generated circuits of self-reinforcing, amplifying, outrage mixed with mockery in the replies and retweets by opponents who remained affected by Trump.

Trump’s creation of scenes of intensity fuelled by mediated quasi-events enacted and exemplified the complex affective politics of right-wing populism in North America and Western Europe where racialised resentments coexist with other collective affects, including charisma attached to the typically male figure of the authoritarian leader, and bellicose national optimism.⁴ As I have argued elsewhere (Anderson, 2017), right-wing populism also regularly involves a kind of violent fun, linked to the promise of action without impediment or constraint. Whether it was excessive hand gestures as he mocked opponents, call

and response chants at rallies where supporters laughed as they joined in, Trump embodied and offered his mostly White supporters an affective promise in the wake of neoliberalism – of a world in which action is no longer impeded by something external, and in which freedom is felt in and as intensity (his occasional performances of solemnity, whilst different in tone, shared this emphasis on intensity). We might note the resonances between the critique of the ‘ordinary ordinariness’ of Fordism and the creation of scenes of intensity that shock, enrage or entertain by populist leaders (and the links to trolling, sinister mockery, anti-PC sensibilities and other practices of the online far-right). In more or less violent ways, fun is a key register in which this sense of excess is expressed and returns us to the relation with the open future and the embracing of uncertainty that was central to the promissory legitimacy of neoliberalism. Tellingly, Trump’s (1987) self-help book, *The Art of the Deal*, gives fun a pivotal role linking it to a heroic, masculine, entrepreneurial subject whose art is the ‘deal’. He stresses the value of fun in ways that resonate with the punks: ‘I try to learn from the past, but I plan for the future by focusing exclusively on the present. That’s where the fun is. And if it can’t be fun, what’s the point?’ (Trump, 1987: 2). One of his core pieces of advice to his readership of would be entrepreneurial subjects is: ‘Have fun’ (Trump, 1987: 63). ‘Fun’ is here elevated to status of the value of a life worth living. Just as Trump is not alone in issuing judgements of boredom, he is not an exception in invoking fun and re-enacting the neoliberal promise of intensity by routing it through a sense of what individual sovereignty should feel like. Other populists also create scenes of intensity, in part by mobilising cultivated disorder and practiced spontaneity. In the UK, for example, Boris Johnson’s affective style also involves an image of action without restraint, a form of practical sovereignty or independence, and a sense of joy in living without embarrassment or shame (where fun is refracted through the aesthetics of the British upper classes (O’Toole, 2018)). One campaign event during the 2019 UK general election exemplifies this affective style. Johnson drove a Forklift truck through a polystyrene wall in an otherwise empty warehouse. On the front of the Forklift truck was the promise of resolution which served as the general election slogan of the conservative party: *Get Brexit Done*. As well as symbolising breaking an impasse, with the wall standing in for a blocked and stalled present, the scene was one of fun, the act being obviously outrageous and ridiculous. Johnson emerged smiling. The message being that it is the elite who are boring, who judge and in doing so take life too seriously and steal enjoyment.

The return of the promise of intensity in the form of populist events and slogans does not quite fit with the dominant claim about boredom today – where boredom is presumed to be absent as ‘crisis ordinariness’ (Berlant, 2011) is lived through burnout, stress, anxiety and other affects of frenzy (Chabot, 2019). Against the background of ‘non-stop inertia’ (Southwood, 2011), spreading and intensifying precarity, and fragmented and mobile attention engendered by digital worlds, a form of restorative boredom is advocated in an emerging self-help and management literature as one route to enhanced creativity (e.g. Time Out, 2019; Zomorodi, 2017). The fantasy and promise is not simply of empty time – time outside of the frenzy of life today – but an empty time that can be made productive (in ways that resonate with other practices of the present such as mindfulness and yoga, even if those practices should not be reduced to a neoliberal will to productivity (Coleman, 2020)). This repeats a longstanding counter discourse about boredom that valorises boredom for the freedom that detachment inaugurates, but articulates it with the demand that all of life should be made productive as lines between work and life blur in the emphasis on the constant acquisition and maintenance of human capital (Feher, 2009). The presumption being that unwanted, overwhelming, intensity has become a threat to constant ‘productivity’. In other words, the neoliberal promise of intensity has been realised but rather than

positively coded as ‘fun’ as it is by Trump in *The Art of the Deal* it finds expression in harmful affects. Hence, why the activist and artistic collective Plan C (2014, np) argue that anxiety has replaced boredom as the dominant ‘reactive affect’ of contemporary capitalism. Offering a strong, hyperbolic claim they argue that in the midst of the extension of relations of competition that is neoliberalism, anxiety has spread to the ‘whole social field. All forms of intensity, self-expression, emotional connection, immediacy and enjoyment are now laced with anxiety. It has become the lynchpin of subordination’.

In comparison to critiques of Fordism, the problem is that boredom is too absent and what is lost is an empty time that can be made productive (rather than empty time being a threat to productivity as in the figure of the bored assembly line worker). This diagnosis is absolutely critical for understanding the relations between affective life and neoliberalising practices and apparatuses and opens up research on the forms of boredom that follow the demand to make all of life productive and the blurring of lines between paid work and other aspects of life. Nevertheless, it is partial. The promise of intensity in right-wing populism conjures a very different sense of the present, where felt control is missing as action is impeded, and crisis is lived as the flatness of muted frustration and tedium and disaffection. On this point, there are connections back to the artistic critique of capitalism as enacted in relation to Fordism by the UK punks, as well as surprising resonances between left and right populisms, usually around images of deindustrialised urban landscapes full of empty factories, broken infrastructures and weary people. Perhaps it indicates that something of the character of the present has endured across Fordism and neoliberalism and that the promise of intensity remains to come for many in ‘stalled’ or ‘stuck’ time (Berlant, 2011)? As well as the continuation of forms of Fordist boredom in relation to factory work, perhaps these images of disaffection resonate with the new forms of boredom that accompany the intensification and extension of service and logistical work post the 2008 financial crisis. Unsurprisingly, then, it is not only right-wing populists who mobilise scenes of intensity. Politicians and activists on the left and centre are trying to reclaim intensity as a response to the crisis of liberalism. For example, the liberal democrats’ slogan in the 2019 UK general election – *Bollocks to Brexit* – and associated visual imagery recalled the Sex Pistols. As with the Sex Pistols practice, but arguably with far less success, the statement attempted to shock the public out of their Brexit boredom, as well as establish an unambivalent position. Likewise, experiments with ‘pleasure activism’ (Brown, 2019) or ‘acid communism/acid Corbynism’ (e.g. Fisher, 2018; Gilbert, 2017) on the left aim to loosen the hold of forms of ‘left melancholia’ and explore other, democratic and egalitarian sensibilities. Left-wing populist campaigns also try and create and circulate scenes of intensity. Central to the Labour 2019 UK general election campaign and Bernie Sanders’ (2016–2019) campaign for democratic presidential nominee were scenes of collective enthusiasm in which people are depicted as *affected* by politics. Echoing Winters (2016) comment on post-racial optimism, Sanders’ 2016 campaign video ‘America’⁵ begins by depicting everyday scenes from multi-racial ‘America’. People are presented as immersed, involved, in their ordinary actions, whether working on a laptop in a coffee shop or feeding animals on a farm, before the advertisement shifts to people becoming increasingly animated as part of a crowd waiting for and then cheering and clapping for Sanders. What is offered is a promise of a life of collective belonging without disaffection or division.

That right-wing populism promises intensity does not imply that every supporter of populist parties or politicians attaches intensely or without ambivalence. It might, however, cause us to wonder about why, how and for whom boredom remains a problem and, more precisely, whether the promise of a life lived intensely still resonates with people’s ordinary life. However, a second public mood that surrounds boredom today suggests that

disaffection does not endure as a problem in quite the same way that it did during Fordism. Rather than being too present as we saw in relation to Fordism or too absent in accounts of a precarious neoliberal present, another claim is that boredom is at once too absent *and* too present. Reprising fears of overstimulation and that have regularly played out throughout modernity, for example in relation to television and the classed figure of the ‘couch potato’ who ‘channel hops’, critics claim that digital capitalism is accompanied by a particular affective malaise characterised by perpetual, non-stop, restlessness and unease (e.g. Kingwell, 2019). Boredom is *simultaneously* too present as a necessary affective condition for an attention economy that requires attention to be mobile *and* absent – in the sense that what exists is an anticipation of boredom and various pre-emptive escape attempts to avoid boredom (e.g. ‘the scroll’). The subject of digital capitalism is an *almost*-bored subject suspended between attention and inattention, attachment and detachment, captivation and escape, as they are perpetually connected to multiple informational and affective digital worlds. Maybe, as Fisher (2018) speculated, contemporary capitalism has extirpated boredom, replacing it with a mix of boredom and compulsion which we do not quite have a name for.

Perhaps today’s right-wing populism requires this kind of ‘pre-boredom’ and subjects who regularly anticipate and pre-empt the possibility of boredom. The scenes of intensity associated with populism generate a sense of eventfulness. But they also promise strong, unambiguous, feeling as a counter to forms of experience mediated through the digital which increasingly make distinctions between flatness and intensity redundant. They also interrupt and provide an alternative to the sense of disaffection – the absence of affection – that Gilbert (2015) convincingly argues is a key affective correlate of neoliberalising apparatuses. In doing so, right-wing populism re-articulates through enmity orientated to racialised others, one of the promises of neoliberalism in the wake of the much heralded ‘end’ of neoliberalism. As I argued above, central to the ‘promissory legitimacy’ (Beckert, 2020) of neoliberalism in the context of the artistic critique of ‘ordinary ordinariness’ was the feeling of intensity as offered through the extension of relations of competition. This promise of the market as the means for a particular kind of experience coexisted and bolstered heteronormative ‘good life’ fantasies that had their origins in Fordism but were reactivated through neoliberalising apparatuses. These are now fraying (Berlant, 2011). By comparison, the promise of intensity has been reactivated. It persists, with the market remaining one route for its realisation. From the premium placed on ‘liveness’ in the entertainment industries pre COVID-19 and the emergence of influencing as a type of affective labour based on the lure of authenticity, through to the growth of an ‘experience economy’ (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and the role of immersive entertainment technologies in the home, consumer culture continues to offer a life lived intensely in which people will be affected (see also ‘user involvement/empowerment’ in the delivery of state functions (Newman, 2020)). However, the centrality of intensity to populist styles suggests that the hope invested in the market is being supplemented by the promise that politics can also be a scene of intensity, in ways that break with conditions of disaffection and apathy. Perhaps, to go further, the promise that the present can feel different not only remains but intensifies after the end of the future, in that populism happens in an impasse characterised by a renewed orientation to the present after the double ‘cancellation of the future’ – where both the futures of the Fordist settlement (Berlant, 2011) and the futures of a ‘viable’ non-capitalist horizon are lost (Fisher, 2011). Discontent is channelled into a desire for the present to feel differently, as a response to the imaginative-affective foreclosure of ‘coherent’ alternatives (Fisher, 2011) *and* the fraying of belief in various heteronormative good life fantasies (Berlant, 2011). What right-wing populism offers, then, as well as a return in the future to a stolen or lost

heteronormative, White past ('Make America Great Again', 'Take Back Control'), is a way of reactivating and expanding neoliberalism's promise that life can be lived intensely. The always fragile conjoining of discontent and acquiescence is disrupted as fun mixes with the intensification of forms of anger and resentment. What mattered, then, in Trump's mockery of opponents as BORING! was as much the capitalisation and exclamation mark as his ordinary aesthetic judgement.

Concluding Comments

What might staying with boredom allow us to notice about the affective presents which are entangled with Fordist and neoliberal apparatuses? In this paper, I've speculated in response to a question that inaugurates a wider project by staying with a fraction of the ways in which boredom shows up and experimenting with using it as a key diagnostic for an always multiple affective present. Whilst I have left it to the reader to make the connections, the strange relations to boredom I have detailed here play out in relation to COVID-19, albeit in ways that are unclear, in part because they are still emergent as lines between emergency and normality blur. A matter of occasional public concern and yet secondary to other affects such as loneliness or anxiety in attempts to discern the feel of the pandemic and sometimes subject to jokey dismissal, boredom is at once affective correlate of a suspension of 'normality' and index of both sacrifice (what is lost is enlivening sociality) and privilege (that boredom is felt, rather than or mixed with anxiety about risk, fear of job losses, or grief at loss). Perhaps the promise of intensity plays out in presumptions about what normality *should* feel like and what is lost, and which experiences might return in a promised but deferred post-pandemic 'normality'. As with all affects, boredom in relation to COVID-19 and my account of Fordism and neoliberalism is already many different kinds of things in ways that complicate any simple story. As well as the experience of the suspension of anticipation and a relation of detachment, boredom is simultaneously: public problem, expression of a subject, genre of aesthetic judgement, cause, symptom, background that finds expression in something else, governance problem and herald. Any account of the present that starts from boredom, which wonders about the curious intimacy between absence of affection and the movement of detachment, must track the relations between different kinds of things boredom might be. How has the use of 'boring' as an ordinary aesthetic judgement changed? Who claims boredom as a cause of actions or makes it into a public problem? Whose boredom is governed and how and whose is forgotten? and so on.

In order to understand the specificity of affective presents, I've contributed to affect-related work by advocating and exemplifying a mode of diagnostic critique based on a practice of conjunctural analysis. Taking inspiration from the political writings of Stuart Hall and colleagues, at the heart of this practice is an orientation to the diverse forces that compose a conjuncture, rather than the detail of encounters or scenes which characterise attempts to 'provoke attention to the forces that come into view' through evocative affect imbued description (Stewart, 2007: 1). To be clear, my aim is to supplement, rather than replace, these and other modes of inquiry. As a propositional, transversal, explanatory and anticipatory practice, conjunctural analysis steps outside of a relation of either condemnation or redemption with affective life (the critical or reparative moves). Instead, it understands how the present feels by staying with the question of (dis/re)articulation: how and with what consequences is boredom, if it is always many things, articulated with other forces?

Through this practice, I have offered a proposition: contemporary right-wing populism reactivates the promise of intensity at a time when the legitimacy of neoliberalism's other

promises are ending, fading, fraying and otherwise changing in a transitional present lived, felt and narrated in terms of crisis. The promise of intensity incorporated the artistic critique of 'ordinary ordinariness' which emerged from the 1960s and honed in on the impoverished life of Fordism. Promising autonomy and agency through the market, the fantasy is of a world of intensity without the absence of engagement and attachment, the flatness, which came to haunt Fordist work and leisure as patterns of expectation and aspiration changed. Although contradicted by actually existing neoliberalisms, the promise remains durable. It continues to be offered through consumer culture and in relation to work but is also reactivated in the content, tone and style of right-wing populism, as it is articulated with a renewal of violent heteronormative, White fantasies. As with the neoliberal counter revolution, the critique of boredom attaches to liberal politicians and forms and institutions. Not only corrupt, not only separated from the interests of the people, liberal politicians are presented as boring. They are responsible for the persistence of a flat world.

Propositions are offered to be disrupted. Conjunctural analysis is partial and contingent. Alongside my speculations about right-wing populism and boredom, I've offered the beginnings of other stories about boredom and the present, which gesture towards a wider research project. Alongside the return of the promise of intensity, for example, is a critique of the problem of intensity in crisis ordinariness, as articulated in concern about burnout, stress and anxiety. In response to the problem of too much intensity, of being overwhelmed, the empty time of boredom becomes a hoped for experience, once again valued both for its claimed links to productivity but also for its nostalgic connection to a simpler, easier life (a relation we again see playing out in relation to COVID-19 through calls to enjoy enforced boredom as respite from incessant demands and overwhelming busyness). The demand for intensity we see in populism coexists, then, with a demand for a kind of emptiness that promises to restore what is lost in a world without boredom. We see articulations of this kind of 'comforting boredom' recently in the realm of formal politics, where the boredom of liberalism becomes a virtue connected to the hope of a more habitable present. For example, it exists in the 'no drama' campaigns of liberal-centrist politicians such as Joe Biden or Keir Starmer and their promise to end the turbulence of contemporary formal politics and inaugurate a return to a pre-populist political normal of non-eventfulness (where intensity, such as it continues to exist, gets channelled into passionate calls for 'unity' and renewed liberal optimism). There are many other boredoms, entangled with the different forces re/unmaking this transitional moment of 'crisis ordinariness' and 'crisis crisis'. Listing them here is a way to acknowledge that multiplicity and the partiality of the proposition I've offered, as well as anticipate future research: lingering boredoms of the margins linked to un- or under-employment, tolerated boredoms of the optimistic attachment, frustrated boredoms of non-realised or deferred promises, carceral boredoms of confinement, boredom of wasted in-between time, the anticipation of the possibility of boredom, boredom with others and so on...

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Notes

1. <https://www.ibtimes.com/fair-labor-association-boredom-caused-apple-factory-suicides-411850>
2. The phrase ‘winter of discontent’ is credited by being first used in an editorial by *The Sun* newspaper in 1979 and refers to a 1978–1979 period of intensified industrial action and disruption under the then Labour Callaghan government. An attempt to name the public mood and resonating with the anti-state and anti-trade union moods that are part of the affective structure of neoliberalism, it was recently invoked and reactivated by conservative politicians in relation to Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the labour party.
3. As named in a speech by James Rosow, then assistant secretary for policy, evaluation and research at the US Department of Labor, on 29th October 1970 at the conference of the American Compensation Association.
4. There are important connections beyond the scope of this paper between the return of the contemporary promise of intensity and the role of the experience of felt intensity in 1920s proto-fascism and fascism (see, of many examples, Theweleit’s (1987) powerful and essential analysis of how the German Freikorpsmen, emerging from the first world war, made war, made death, into a way of life, inseparable from a hatred and dread of women and the feelings of violence).
5. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nwRiuh1Cug>

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