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Student Boredom, Boring Professors, and Student Burnout. Literary Autoethnography on How and Why I Have Become a Boredom Researcher

MARIUSZ FINKIELSZTEIN

University of Gdańsk

mariusz.finkielsztein@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1620-9402>

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Abstract: The essay describes in an auto-ethnographical and literary form the life experiences of academic boredom and academic burnout. It covers in a condensed and subjective manner the last year of the author's MA studies depicting boring lecturers: Professor Skuka, dr. Langeweile and professor Nudzisz in a vivid, hyperbolic, and ironic way. The main aim of the essay is to explain the Author's motives and his starting point in choosing to become a boredom researcher.

Keywords: boredom, student boredom, academic boredom, academic burnout, boring professors.

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This text contains a dense description and collage of my experiences, impressions, and reflections, primarily taken after the events (although I also drew on my own field notes taken during university classes) covering only selected aspects of the phenomena described and does not pretend to maintain objectivity. Any resemblance to actual places, people, and events as well as any subjectivity, hyperbole, and other stylistic devices are entirely intentional.

§1

Boredom. One of those boredoms where you feel like you're stepping outside yourself and observing everything from the sidelines, from outside your body. As if your spirit, and with it your life, were leaving you, never to return. And as if there was no life left within you, as if you were an object abandoned in this very place and time for no apparent reason. A new dimension of ecstasy, of transcendence.

Time thickens in the room, settling on the benches, chairs, walls, old wooden shutters, and on us, abandoned like rag dolls in this godforsaken space. Our breaths, weary of boredom, heat up; the vapor of thinned and liquefied time lingers. Unreality prevails over reality. We all dream, in various stages of dreamlike decay. Yet these dreams are not sweet, but heavy and crushing, like the body of a succubus. We cannot breathe. The clock has stopped and still shows the same hour—perhaps it has long since stopped, drained of its batteries—and we with it.

There are a dozen of us. Our last year at this provincial university in a far-flung corner of the galaxy and Europe, in a course that's notorious for breeding the unemployed. But who knew we'd acquire one of the key skills needed for life in the modern world? The ability to endure boredom. We're practicing boredom. By the end of the semester, we should have achieved expert status, and by the end of the year, we should have graduated with distinction for admirable resilience and resourcefulness. We're learning an invaluable lesson about life in late capitalism, which eliminates everything living and human—we're learning to become impenetrable to the 'boredom drill.' If we survive, of course. Masters in boredom, immunized against boredom—there is literally nothing left for us that we can't accomplish. Careers are open to us.

The mistress of ceremony this time is Professor Skuka. Dressed in a suit and a knee-length skirt the shade of a tired, gloomy grey sky, she stands alone at the head of the table around which we all sit. A pure embodiment of boredom. Her face is expressionless, and the thick lenses of the glasses adorning her slightly hooked nose reflect the whiteness of the opposite wall, as she prudently avoids looking at us. But she is not blind. She knows well what we all feel. No glasses are so thick, no pupils so clouded with white, that they could prevent anyone from perceiving the thick fog of boredom in this small seminar room on the second floor of the ancient building that houses our institute—one of many at the university, no better and no worse than others.

Professor Skuka breathes silently, or perhaps she doesn't breathe at all—it's hard to say. In moments of silence, the only signs of her life are her hands, which make nervous, uncoordinated movements. Perhaps, in fact, they are completely unconscious. Her right hand makes measured movements to the left, as if trying to free itself from an invisible band that constricts it. The fingers of her left hand stiffen at irregular intervals, straightening energetically

as if electrocuted. From time to time, her hands meet; the fingers of her left hand try to remove the band from her right wrist, vigorously rubbing the skin just above the cuff of her shirt. I find myself mindlessly observing this cyclical movement of Professor Skuka's hands. It seems to be the only manifestation of life in this Tartar steppe.

In the utter emptiness of our meetings, seemingly dead time ticks away the agonizing minutes, and life passes us by. Boredom is the death of time, the opposite of life and its greatest adversary. We fight an unequal battle against it. However, we are by no means completely lost. As diligently as boxers before a fight, we prepare for these mind-numbing activities. We are armed to the teeth with various tools to combat boredom. Some bring newspapers and prepare a daily or even weekly roundup. Others bring books, which they read under their desks or hide behind large notebooks pretending to be jotting down notes. The arsenal of electronic gadgets is even more impressive—from laptops and tablets to smartphones and e-readers. Everyone has their own favourite way to ward off boredom. Reading texts or doing assignments for other classes, catching up on reading, communicating with friends, listening to music, making shopping lists, planning the day, the week, or even the rest of their lives, which are still somewhere far away from this room and Professor Skuka. Anything to avoid succumbing to the utter boredom of these activities, which reaches out to us with its tentacles like the eternal Cthulhu.

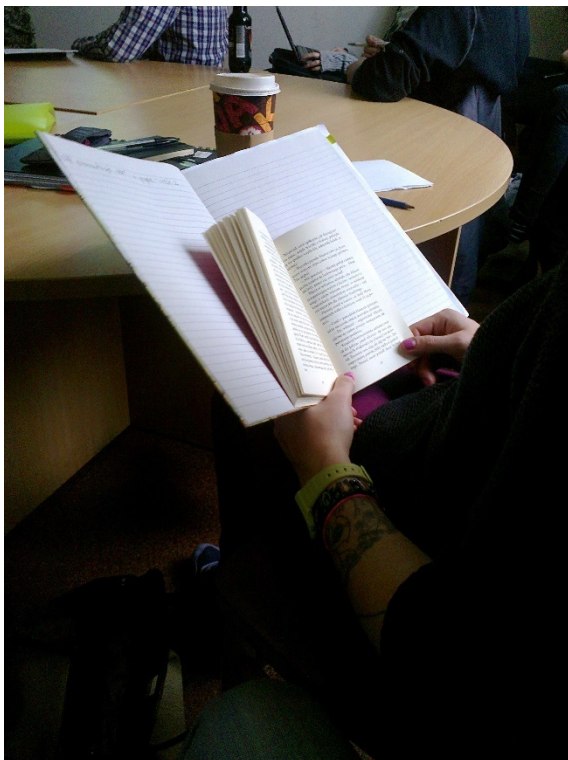


Figure 1: Bored student's coping strategy
(Fot. Mariusz Finkielsztein)

Nothing, however, can completely eradicate the cosmic boredom that pervades Professor Skuka's classes. This is largely due to Professor Skuka herself, who, for 85 minutes, spouts words like a broken heavy machine gun whose cartridge belt is blocked by sand and requires constant adjustments, pulling it back and forth. Professor Skuka's tone is monotonous, but not reverent, like that of some professors who speak like Christian priests over the host containing the body of Christ—whispering magical incantations reminiscent of the gibberish of a madman talking to himself as if he were talking to God himself. Professor Skuka's voice, by contrast, sounds like the rasping of a poorly oiled machine, nervously wanting, but unable, to proceed to the next stage of the activity for which it has been programmed. Professor Skuka utters each sentence at least twice. The first time, tentatively, until she makes a mistake and decides that the word she stopped on should be changed and the entire sentence rephrased. The second time, she repeats the first part of the sentence word for word until she reaches the changed fragment and then somehow proceeds until she reaches the full stop—because Professor Skuka uses full stops, unlike some other lecturers who blend sentences into

one long statement, as if afraid of leaving too much silence. A constant *horror vacui*. Professor Skuka draws out her words more. If you compare her speech to music, it would be more like a constantly jamming music box that needs to be wound up again before the next note can be heard. And so it goes for almost the entire class. When she pauses her monologue five minutes before the end to ask what we think about it all, she seems genuinely surprised that no one has anything to say. Once, during the first class, I tried to say something. Professor Skuka nodded silently. When I finished, she asked if anyone else had anything to say. Nobody had.

Another reason our battle with boredom is doomed is fatigue. Boredom is excruciatingly tiring. No one who hasn't been bored for an hour and a half knows this. This fatigue settles in the limbs and brain like radioactive sediment, preventing normal functioning and draining the victim of all their life energy. The stifling atmosphere in the small room, where we're packed like proverbial sardines in a can, doesn't help either. Therefore, in practice, the most common escape from boredom turns out to be sleeping. At every moment of the class, someone nods off. It's as if we were taking turns guarding a bonfire at night to keep it alive. We field the representation of listeners who try to maintain a focused expression, even though they understand nothing and generally hear little, being far away, traveling like shamans in a trance. Fatigue, stuffiness, drowsiness, and Professor Skuka's constant buzzing in your ear, like a fly, effectively make it difficult to focus on your own business. That's why we all try to fight boredom, and we all lose the battle to some extent.

The most devout members of the medieval Cathar sect allegedly submitted to a ritual called *endura*, which involved systematically starving themselves to death. Professor Skuka's classes resembled this ritual, with the difference that it wasn't our bodies that were starved, but our brains and souls. And this happened not entirely of our own free will. *Endura* was the ultimate rejection of materiality and stemmed from the entire Cathar value system. We merely incautiously signed up for these classes. Some were tempted by the attractive-sounding title and description of the course; others found the class time convenient, allowing them to earn the required number of ECTS points in two well-packed days a week. Their motivations were varied. All were flawed. There is no reason that would justify attending Professor Skuka's classes. Boredom stupefies. Boredom sucks the soul out like dementors. Boredom causes the slow decay of vital body tissues. Boredom is a living death, or a foretaste of hell, if the travelogues are to be believed. We were a miserable group of zombies in a somnambulant trance. We died once a week for an hour and a half, constantly painfully aware of our existence suspended between the worlds of waking and dreaming.

§2

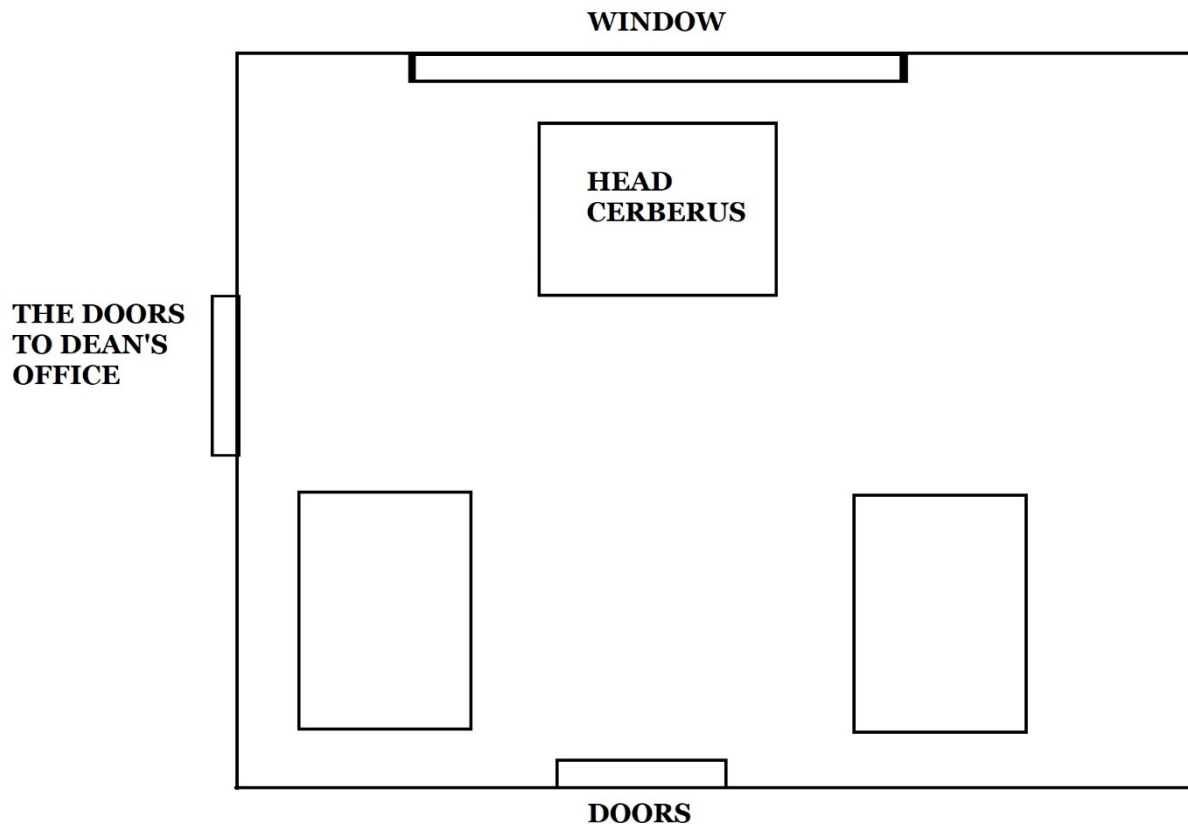
The day after my second class with Professor Skuka, I head to the student office. I prepare as if for a trip abroad. I repeatedly check the documents, dates, signatures, number of copies, fonts and their size, paper colour, quality, etc. I put it all in folders and dispatch cases. I meticulously count the attachments. I check that everything is listed in the application and that they are in the correct order. I want to withdraw from Professor Skuka's class. After all, it's only an elective, so

changing groups is out of the question. This is my make-or-break this semester (or so I thought at the time). After two classes, I've had enough. The prospect of another dozen or so sessions of boredom at the same time every week makes me nauseous. This application is my ticket to freedom. My only chance at happiness. The most important task for this week, month, and the rest of eternity.

A line of people is waiting outside the office. The semester is starting. Everyone wants something. The queue is as if they were selling Holy Grails. I'm waiting. Boredom. Again. It often happens that we encounter boredom on the very paths we try to escape it. Finally, a groupmate appears. She also wants to escape Professor Skuka. We exchange notes. A spirit of brotherhood, even veterandom, hovers between us. We read each other's minds and hearts. What a relief. Someone not only suffers as I do (which is easy to observe in class) but also thinks similarly. We discuss the professor's terrible way of speaking and her tics. My colleague laughs that a regular sequence of hand movements can indeed be observed. She conducts a linguistic analysis—calculating the frequencies of Skuka's use of recurring words or phrases. She calculates the time intervals between such recurring words or their characteristic clusters, and calculates means, medians, averages, intervals, and correlations. In short, she conducts regular research. She wants to submit it as a proposal for her master's thesis, or at least a final paper for some class. There's nothing more enjoyable for a convict than laughter; laughing at his torturers and the prison, making fun of them. Of course, unless the matter is a serious one, then no one is laughing. But we can ease our suffering a bit through humour. We wait our turn in cheerful moods, full of hope for salvation. After all, that's why we came here. To lift this burden from our shoulders.

After an hour of standing, it's my turn. It's a good thing, because we were running out of observations about Professor Skuka, and our mood has dropped somewhat. We're starting to have doubts about the success of our mission, and therefore the point of continuing standing. I enter the office, a room as small as our seminar room and cramped as a cupboard under the stairs. Three desks are arranged in a triangle, with a door at the centre of the base. Opposite the door is a wall entirely composed of windows offering a view of the city, as the institute is located on a hill. The desks and the bureaucrats sitting behind them immediately surround every applicant like a pack of hyenas. Not that they pay any particular, or any, attention to incoming students, but the geography of the place is designed to discourage those who enter. Two desks guard the door, while a third blocks the view from the window, obscuring the light. Students are usually served at a desk that is the apex of this Bermuda triangle—in this triangle, however, it is not machines with people on board that are lost, but rather applications and hopes (below I am including a schematic drawing of the Cerberus room layout, see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Office layout



Source: Author's own work.

I glance around the room hesitantly, checking if any of the office residents will look up at me. After a moment, the head of the top Cerberus rises. This is an experienced Cerberus, which is evident not only in her age but above all in the somewhat casual yet profound gaze with which she surveys those who enter. Slitted eyes carefully examine the applicant, categorizing them accordingly, assessing whether and how much of a quarrel they are, and how easily their application could be dismissed or rejected. Do they seem conscientious and confident in their arguments, or rather are they insecure slobs? Slobs and resigned individuals are most liked. The office thrives on misfortune and desperation. The most important task, role, and mission of the 'Cerberus room,' as I like to call the office, is to allow the dean to receive as few applications and requests as possible, i.e., to reject as many applications as possible at the earliest stage. (The office, it must be clarified at this point, serves as a buffer and a barrier protecting His Eminence the Dean from students and employees, and its employees act as a Praetorian Guard. Deans are elevated and deposed by their Praetorians; the will of the Senate or a predecessor counts only insofar as it is consistent with the will of this Varangian guard). The guiding principle here is therefore a ruthless and methodical search for formal errors in applications. Wrong date, incorrect title of His Highest, Most Optimal, Supra-Universal Eminence, Prof. Hab. PhD. M.Sc. Dean, incorrect order of attachments, missing attachments, unjustified text, lack of indentation at the beginning of paragraphs, incorrect title of the application, etc. But the best way, and the most frequently used, to dismiss a petitioner is to claim that the application is incorrectly addressed.

The university deliberately creates the impression that responsibilities are blurred, and no one knows exactly who is responsible for what. The office claims the application should be addressed to the Vice-Dean for Student Affairs, the Dean's Office to His Eminence, the Student Office to the Vice-Dean for Student Affairs, and the Teaching Office to His Eminence, as he ultimately signs all decisions anyway. This was the case this time as well.

I approach the desk of the head Cerberus with a stack of papers, a woman close to retirement, hunched and wrinkled, as if the job had drained her of all her energy. She has no distinguishing features except for short, greying hair and a pack of cigarettes in the centre of her desk. She's a known chain smoker. She goes for a smoke every ten minutes, smokes two or three cigarettes in the stairwell right next to the no-smoking sign, chats with a colleague in her hoarse, scratchy voice for about ten minutes, and then goes back to cerbering. All this, as you can imagine, significantly slows down the office's work. She's also someone who doesn't tolerate any opposition. The dean himself and the entire faculty, who grovel before her like any student, are afraid of her. However, anyone who knows her better and lives on good terms with her, knows this is a mask. The head Cerberus has a kind heart, which she hides beneath a gloomy, sharp expression. Students are bloodthirsty and insatiable beasts, after all. Anyone who has ever given them the finger knows this.

So I approach the head Cerberus's desk and hand over the stack of papers with the application on top. She looks at me sternly, beneath a thick brow and a gallery of wrinkles. With a tired gesture, she picks up a pen, and before I can realize what's happening, she crosses out the addressee.

—Withdrawal applications are sent to the Vice Dean for Student Affairs, not to the Dean.

—But last time, I addressed my withdrawal application to the Dean, and there were no problems.

—We had to accept it as an exception. We address such applications to the Vice Dean. He'll go to the office on the first floor, room 101, with the amended application.

That was the end of the audience. The matter had been dealt with by the office, the statistics tallied, and another student had been served. And so began my journey from Annas to Caiaphas through the Kafkaesque corridors of our university—for the administrative offices were not concentrated in one place, but picturesquely scattered throughout various buildings, floors, and even sections of the university. A veritable 'organization of stupidity' (see Graeber, 2015) orchestrated a whole score of absurdities, with a single goal: to seal the application with a number of signatures equal to or greater than the number of noble seals on the act of the Union of Lublin.¹ Describing my entire journey through all the burrows and dens, mortuaries, and cemeteries of this inward-looking university would take at least as much space as describing Gulliver's or Marco Polo's travels. It's no wonder I was ultimately forced to endure an entire semester with Professor Skuka and her nauseatingly boring monologues because, as it should have been clear to me from the very beginning, I ultimately lost the administrative battle, and my application pilgrimage ended up in the shredder, and I lost every last shred of motivation for all these

¹ The act signed on 1 July 1569 in Lublin, Poland creating a single state, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.



peregrinations. The rejection decision was justified with almost poetic simplicity. Since many students wanted to withdraw from Professor Skuka's classes, which would have resulted in cancellation due to low attendance, and the professor needed to complete his teaching load for the current academic year, there was no way I could leave Skuka this semester. Therefore, there was no way out, no exit.

Figure 3: The act of the Union of Lublin (Wikipedia)

§3

To my dismay, it quickly becomes clear that Professor Skuka has some serious competition. Dr. Langeweile is a small, dry man with short, straight white hair and a stooped posture that creates a flat valley of sunken, rickety, consumptive chest. He generally slinks through the institute's corridors, clinging to the walls like a gargoyle after liposuction, carrying under his arm his mangy black briefcase made of cracked leather, in which he always carries his holy books—that is, printouts of the texts he discusses in class. In the centre of his face, a potato nose adorns this wrinkled peel, recalling the proletarian origins of this 'March scholar.'² Dr. Langeweile, it turns out, is yet another teacher this semester using boredom as a teaching method. Although, in truth, Skuka doesn't employ boredom methodically, boredom is merely a side effect of a certain endemic type of communicative obstruction, communicative indigestion, an inability to communicate, of which she seems fully aware. Dr. Langeweile, on the other hand, completely lacks such awareness. Although Dr. Langeweile's approach to the issue is diametrically opposed, it ultimately produces a boredom identical to that experienced in Professor Skuka's classes. That Dr. Langeweile is a serious competitor to Professor Skuka is evidenced by the fact that the students tend to measure boredom levels in classes in either Skukas or Langeweiles, and heated discussions ensue about the ratio of the two units of measurement—a truly martyrological rivalry. Some maintain that Skukas are like euros and Langeweiles like cents, but I believe this is a gross underestimation. Both units are more like two currencies (e.g., dollars and pounds) that can be used interchangeably. The only point of contention is the mutual exchange rate. From my perspective, both instructors demonstrate different styles of boredom, with Dr. Langeweile's being even more burdensome, as it requires active torment with no escape. Furthermore, Dr. Langeweile's boredom extends not only during the classes but also into the intervals between

² A reference to the events of March 1968 in Poland, when, as a result of student demonstrations against the policies of the Polish People's Republic authorities and the support of these demonstrations by some academic staff, the communist authorities expelled faculty critical of the regime from universities (this coincided with the 'purge' caused by the expulsion of scholars of Jewish origin from universities after the outbreak of the Six-Day War and the regime's 'anti-Zionist' reaction). These actions caused significant staff shortages at universities, which the authorities attempted to address by introducing the possibility of awarding the title of associate professor to individuals without a habilitation or even a doctorate. Hence the negative term 'March associate professor.' The text refers to individuals who were employed in 1972–1973, when previously closed or suspended departments began to accept students again, and therefore quickly needed teaching staff and massively hired new employees using much more liberal selection criteria than in previous years.

them, since it's impossible not to read the texts he assigns, a reason for that I'll explain in a moment.

Just reviewing the class schedule makes you feel a truly cosmic sense of dread, where each class seems like an encounter with yet another creature from the pantheon of the Ancient Ones. The recipe for the course is simple: select the most boring, hermetic, impenetrable (and therefore completely impossible to get through without losing a piece of your soul) texts and compile them into a single syllabus. It's not worth recalling the pantheon provided by Dr. Langeweile—anyone who has studied a bit in their life can create a similar list for their field, provided, of course, they aren't afraid of nausea and/or nightmares. Examples could be multiplied ad nauseam—boring people are drawn to science. They find niches within it for themselves. They colonize them. Finding footholds, they begin systematic expansion, spreading like cancer cells, infecting the entire body. They attempt to impose their boringness on others and claim that their style is the model for science. Thus, the model language of science is the language of death, the language of boredom, an anti-language, a verbosity that seems to conceal ancient secrets about forgotten, inhuman civilizations scattered throughout the universe, knowledge of which is transmitted through a code that only the most soulless adepts of the sciences can decode. To possess jargon is to acquire the ability to cast spells without anyone realizing that the curse has already been cast upon them and is taking effect. Such science is a form of sorcery, a secret knowledge intended to repel the ignorant and keep the lowly in check (see Andreski, 1972). Those who fear they have not understood will have no comments, especially critical ones. Those who have lost a piece of their soul by trying to understand will not risk a detailed exegesis of the theory. The stakes are too high and simultaneously too low. The losses can be enormous and irreparable, and the benefits uncertain at best. Jargon is a fetish; it is believed to grant power, fill the sorcerer with mana, and grant authority. This is true magic—make the subject of your investigation so terribly boring that no one will be able to compete with you, that no one will even consult your works, that no one will dispute your conclusions, and everyone will pronounce your name with a mixture of fear and awe, due to those whose names should not be spoken in vain. As David Foster Wallace (2011, p. 83) rightly observes, “abstruse dullness is actually a much more effective shield than is secrecy.” Pure esotericism arouses curiosity, but behind the veil of boredom you can hide the greatest secrets; no one will pay enough attention to disturb it—the stench of boredom will be too intoxicating and off-putting. One of the most closely guarded secrets of boring science is that it has nothing new, important, or interesting to say.

To adequately imagine Dr. Langeweile's classes, one must recall painful memories of reading the most boring works compiled into a single syllabus. A plan of elaborate torture, mapped out over a dozen hour-and-a-half sessions. These are precisely Dr. Langeweile's classes. The materialization of madness, a conjunction of boredom rarely encountered in the inhabited Universe. And yet. It seems to me that creating such a collage—a representation of all types of bores, inflecting the concept of boredom through all possible cases, voices, and conjugations—is a distinct art form. (1) Virtuosos of empty words—bores who write prolifically and convolutedly, but with little meaning, watering down their texts like a groom with wedding vodka, or hiding a lack of essential content behind a facade of complex sentences; (2) Reasonable Esotericists—bores who speak in such an intricate and detailed manner that it's indigestible,

splitting every last hair into four just to make the reader vomit, writing texts as dry as mummies just to isolate themselves from the reader and assert their superiority and distinction; finally, (3) Digressive Slovenes—bores who speak in such an unstructured and digressive manner that it's impossible to maintain attention and follow their thoughts, regardless of whether they contain meaningful content or not. In life, there are also common bores who speak in a non-intricate way about non-important matters, but in science, such bores are quickly eliminated, and either they learn the art of writing in a hard-to-digest manner or face a poor future in the community. After all, under a layer of well-formed jargon, it's easy to hide the fact that one is spouting platitudes about unimportant matters or forcing open doors that have long been wide open (see Mills, 2000, in which the author deconstructs the theories of Talcott Parsons).

Dr. Langeweile is a rare example of the eternal doctor at the university. Despite his grey hair, he is not a professor in any significant sense of the word. Instead of becoming Gandalf the White, he became a grey-haired old man. His last significant scientific achievement—a PhD thesis. His last confirmed intellectual activity—the previous decade. By virtue of a legal loophole and some strange spell creating a bubble of frozen time, Dr. Langeweile is held at the university by the power of inertia and the support of his fellow professors, with whom he shared a generational experience and trajectory. Together, they experienced the ups and downs of Solidarity,³ reportedly fiercely conspired against communism (even the chairs at the Institute were allegedly in conspiracy), and in the 1990s, ostentatiously practiced Catholicism.⁴ Almost all of them were hired at the university after the events of March 1968, when the communist authorities purged not only the Jewish faculty but also those who disagreed with the party line and were too vocal about it. Consequently, many positions became vacant, and Dr. Langeweile's generation then jumped into them in the early 1970s. It's no wonder that, alongside distinguished scholars, some people were also hired who perhaps shouldn't have received this 'honour.' Dr. Langeweile, who has taught the same course for thirty years, seems to be one of them. It's no wonder, then, that the syllabus, unchanged for decades, featured only corpses, often quite elderly. And, to boot, all men (apparently, women aren't good enough to bore you to death).

§4

Professor Nudzisz⁵ also finds himself on the podium of the boring teachers this semester. The third lecture with the professor. By a twist of fate and due to an unfavourable conjunction of Saturn and Venus (this pair never bodes well), the power was out in the classroom. His Lordship

³ Solidarity—a Polish trade union founded in August 1980 at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk, Poland. Subsequently, it was the first independent trade union in a Warsaw Pact country to be recognised by the state. The union's membership peaked at 10 million in September 1981, representing one-third of the country's working-age population. The Government attempted in the early 1980s to destroy the union through the imposition of martial law in Poland and the use of political repression. Operating underground the union survived and in the late 1980s had entered into negotiations with the government. The 1989 round table talks between the government and the Solidarity-led opposition produced an agreement for the 1989 legislative elections in which a Solidarity-led coalition government was formed (Wikipedia).

⁴ Conspicuously manifested Catholicism was a sign of disagreement with the communist regime in Poland during 1980s and a mark of moral elevation in 1990s.

⁵ The name is a word-play meaning literally in Polish 'you bore' [somebody] but in the same time, in its form it resembles a standard Polish surname.

the professor enters. He wants to turn on his computer. Someone in the audience informs him of a power outage. The lecture is cancelled. “Your generation doesn’t listen if there’s no presentation,” he states authoritatively. Between God and truth, it’s hard to say who needs these slides more, because the professor reads from them throughout the lecture, turning his back on the students like a Catholic priest before *Vaticanum Secundum*. A celebrant of boredom in careless robes, celebrating the mysteries of a long-dead god. The professor is clearly visually impaired, and everything on the slide is in twelve-point font at most. A comic effect reminiscent of a Czech cartoon, *The Little Mole (Krtek)*, in which a little mole squints, half-blind, his glasses perched on his nose, and tries to read something from a multimedia presentation while leaning over the screen. Professor Nudzisz’s second state of matter is a small, hunched goblin, perched before the monitor, so that only his clawed fingers clutching a poor mouse are visible. The voice emerges from behind the screen like the voice of the Wizard of Oz. And like any wizard, he pronounces the words reverently, as if polishing each one before unleashing it on the world, for each word is a spell with the power to change the world. Mispronounced, it can kill someone or wash their ears. The monotony of this voice lulls even stray flies in the lecture hall during the spring semester. In this density, boredom becomes a distinct state of matter—something between liquid and vapour. At the same time, we’re overflowing in our seats and leaking out of the room through every crevice, as if we were both there and not. I wonder what Schrödinger would say to that.⁶ Perhaps a necromantic session during the next lecture? If, of course, there’s another lecture. And we’ll gather a quorum to perform the appropriate incantations, because lectures are optional at the university (exams are a different story), and Professor Nudzisz has the classic first-lecture syndrome; after full attendance at the first lecture, the number of students drops exponentially from lecture to lecture until it reaches its lowest point, after which it never drops again (see more about it in Finkielsztein, 2013). There are about a dozen of us, all veterans, some of us experiencing Skuka’s classes together, all of us Langeweile’s classes. A motley crew of internally bruised student tramps. This must have been what the support group for the Teutoburg Forest survivors looked like.⁷ A picture of misery and despair, the bench of the substitutes sitting in the pre-hell, waiting for the doors to open and someone to let them into some purgatory. Something between Kafka and Dante.

The monotony of Nudzisz’s voice creates an effect of unreality. The words blur, as if the professor’s lips were escaping not as syllables but as a trickle of smoke from a pipe filled with some narcotic herb. There are no words, only a melody. A melody that lulls us to sleep. I look out the window at the patio, an inner courtyard where nothing is happening, no one is there, no sky or sun in sight, only a solitary bench and a wastebasket with an ashtray. Even the patio is more eventful than Nudzisz’s lecture. Occasionally, a pair of doves will fly in, or some trinity of holy spirits making insistent courtship. Our selves are slowly emptying themselves of unnecessary perceptions. In fact, they are emptying themselves completely. Finally, we might realize the true nature of life and the universe, see our own *Da-Sein*, and realize the essence and (non)meaning of existence. But lethargy, the grand langueur, overcomes us.

⁶ A reference to the famous thought experiment of Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger—the so-called Schrödinger’s cat.

⁷ The Battle of the Teutoburg Forest (9 BC) was one of the greatest defeats of the Roman legions in history. The battle lasted three days and ended with the near-total annihilation of three legions by Germanic tribes.

Finally, I fall into a restless sleep. I'm in Nudzisz's shoes. I'm giving a lecture. I'm retching from boredom as I speak. The words tumble out of me without thought. I become intoxicated by the melody of my own voice, which holds the entire room in a magical slumber. I speak of theories I once understood, but now I understand nothing of them. I read the slides as if I were reading the Koran or the Torah, and I experience a mystical horror. I freeze and fall silent. Nothing changes. One of the students leans precariously from his desk, unconscious. At the last moment, he wakes up and avoids hitting the floor. Somewhere beyond the open window is the world. The lecture hall is sunk slightly into the ground, so the window is at ground level. An unknown force pulls me toward it. I want to throw myself through it and run. I don't know where. Just run. Don't stop. To abandon the learned corpses, to break free from the shackles of death and run towards a life long since absent from this room. Suddenly, something jerks my body. I don't know how or when, I rush to the window, leaping over the lectern. My foot hits the monitor, which shatters on the floor. I briefly think that this is a good sign, that lectures will be cancelled for the rest of the semester. Standing in the window frame, taking a deep breath of fresh air, I suddenly wake up.

I'm back in the classroom. Nudzisz is still reading his slides and mumbling under his breath, adjusting his glasses. My friends in the row above me are playing *Heroes of Might and Magic III*.⁸ They're swapping a laptop so everyone can take turns. Someone at the back of the room is fishing with their smartphone. Someone by the window has settled down with a book and seems to have forgotten where she is. I admire the way she divides her attention. At the front, two friends are diligently taking notes. They've been assigned to take minutes. During each lecture, different people take notes and then pass them on to the rest of the class. The students sitting further back are acting as extras, so the professor feels like he's talking to someone. Although he probably wouldn't notice anyway if half of us stepped out the window onto the patio and never came back. We used to want to sneak out of the room this way when Nudzisz was facing his slides, but boredom paralyzes us. We'd run out of energy. We are like those Haitian zombies held in a stupor by bokor's⁹ spells, powerless, helpless, disoriented, unable to point to any sensible direction in which our lives should unfold. Here and now. Beyond the fog. We are there, but we are not. We observe ourselves in this room as if in a crystal ball. Does our future lie in this room until the parousia?

The stream of consciousness that led me through the Haitian zombies to the parousia makes me reflect on the most famous zombie in the history of Western civilization. Jesus remained thoroughly Jewish even after his supposed death—in resurrection, he honoured the Sabbath. Symbolically, he waited another night to rise with the sun on the third day, like any self-respecting solar deity (he rose on Sunday, *dies solis*, *Sontag*). He didn't 'sleep' for three days, but for about a day and a half—that's how long the zombification process took. The sorcerer who transformed him must also have been a Jew who honoured the Sabbath.

I continue my religious reflection. If (a) man is bored; (b) man was created in the image and likeness of God, then, according to the logic of the syllogism, (c) God was also bored, capable of boredom, or perhaps, as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and many others that have mentally

⁸ Iconic turn-based strategy RPG PC game from 1999.

⁹ Haitian Vodouist sorcerer practicing black magic, responsible for zombification.

committed this sin—the world was created out of boredom, and the boredom of the demiurge haunts us to this day. Generally, only the good traits of humans were interpreted as coming from God; the less positive traits were not included in the scope of our creation in the image and likeness. It was, after all, impossible for human imperfections to have their source in the Creator. And yet, I think God was bored, not only on day seven, but especially on day zero.

Because of God's cosmic and eternal boredom, we too carry this cross, sometimes bending under its weight (like God when he decided to create the material world). Boredom has driven us from paradise. Boredom has made us kill and procreate. Out of boredom, we rebel and remain passive; we take drugs, drink, gamble, and engage in unsafe sex. And all of this is suffering. When I was young, I wanted to be a Platonist. Ideas, the pursuit of ideals, breaking free from the shackles of illusion. Then I wanted to be a Stoic. To achieve peace through apathy, total *blaséness*, and detachment, so that suffering cannot touch me. Now, I'd like to be at least an Epicurean. For now, the absence of suffering is enough for me. That would be the truest paradise. Boredom is suffering. This statement contradicts a bit of Schopenhauer's view that "Life swings like a pendulum backward and forward between pain and boredom" (1969, p. 312), where one annihilates the other and one negates the other. Not that Schopenhauer was necessarily wrong. Generally, this is the case, but only with engaging types of suffering. Great pain and strong affect demand intense engagement, which effectively wards off boredom, but if the suffering is chronic and relatively low-intensity, it can be boring. Such is the case with boredom in class. I feel as if I had tiny pins stuck in various parts of my body. The pain is relatively minor, but the discomfort is considerable. That's precisely what boredom does. It robs you of the joy of the moment and makes you yearn for a change of place, time, or activity. And perhaps even life.

§5

Boredom. All-encompassing, endless, and unbearably tiring boredom. The kind of boredom where you feel like you're going out of your mind and observing everything as if from the sidelines, from outside your body. You're bored like Annie Hall in a Woody Allen movie with sex. You sit down and wait for it to end. Boredom, however, causes a peculiar warp in time. From linear, it becomes circular, looping. It spins like the wheels of a car buried up to its axles in mud. We sink as if into a swamp or quicksand. We can only wait until we're slowly sucked in and disappear. Struggling is pointless. It only accelerates the agony. Some, however, try. Then it turns out that after being sucked in, the swamp or quicksand spits us out again, and the sequence repeats endlessly. The gods knew how to punish the unfortunates who sinned against hubris. The ancient punishments of Tantalus and Sisyphus are essentially punishments through boredom. Constant unfulfillment, repetition, and meaninglessness. A recipe for boredom.

Casanova had allegedly said that boredom is the part of hell that Dante forgot about in his Divine Comedy. He was very wrong. There is no circle of hell dedicated to boredom as we know it; there is only one for those who have sinned with *acedia*, the Christian version of boredom, the demon of the noontide, which initially haunted monks in the desert when they felt like doing nothing, became drowsy while reading the Bible, and when Satan encouraged them to

leave their cell. Later, it became the affliction of every Christian who didn't feel like following the commandments of their religion, slacked off at work, or slept in church during Mass (see Jütte, 2020). But *acedia* isn't what I'm talking about, and that's not why Casanova was wrong. All of hell is made of boredom. Hell is boredom. In each circle, the same punishments are repeated ad nauseam in an unchanging sequence stretching on for all eternity; boredom reigns supreme in these repeated aions of suffering. Schopenhauer indeed claimed that human life oscillates between boredom and suffering, and that one annihilates the other, but it seems to me that certain types of suffering repeated for eternity can become boring—for example, the punishment of Sisyphus, who must tirelessly roll a stone up a hill, unable to see the slightest meaning in it. I disagree with Camus (1991), who saw in Sisyphus a serenity in enduring suffering. Sisyphus is bored even if the effort blinds him to this fact. Dante's *Inferno* and the classes with Skuka are similarly boring. The difference is that here, every week, we seemingly move from circle to circle, discussing yet another excruciatingly dull text with no hope of understanding it, when in reality we are in the same circle of hell over and over again. As if we exited a torture chamber through one door and found ourselves back in the same room from the other side. And so it goes eternally. It's a ghastly Groundhog Day, with no hope in sight. We imagine various high points from which to jump, because liberation is still far away. The end of the semester is still so far away.

§6

Dr. Langeweile's teaching method is devilishly simple, though not particularly sophisticated, and its traditionalism harks back to the Jewish scribes who taught the Torah. Each text is discussed line by line, or perhaps verse by verse, because the texts under discussion should be read with reverent concentration, like words sent by Yahweh—one of the gods of boredom. Dr. Langeweile asks a seemingly general question about the author's view of some fundamental and universally significant issue. Apparently, because he is never satisfied with answers that concisely capture any thought. He cries loudly in disapproval at such thoughtlessness and the lack of truly Prussian exegetical discipline. He points to the text and asks, "Please read what is written in the first paragraph on page five, line three." The answer must always be expressed in the form of an appropriate quote from the relevant section of the text, which Dr. Langeweile seems to know by heart, considering his constant juggling of addresses. This kind of torture drags on mercilessly, and no one can defend themselves against it, he asks everyone. Everyone must have the text open to the appropriate page and traverse it with immaterial *Yad*,¹⁰ like Jews with their holy books. Dr. Langeweile seems to have a pious, almost religious, reverence for his chosen collection of corpses, which he regales us with each week. A necrophiliac academic type, an academic ghoul savouring dead thoughts in the decaying tissues of hermetic scientific texts. We sit gripped by

¹⁰ "A Jewish ritual pointer, or stylus, popularly known as a Torah pointer, used by the reader to follow the text during the Torah reading from the parchment Torah scrolls. It is often shaped like a long rod, capped by a small hand with its index finger pointing from it" (Wikipedia).

the mortal horror of boredom, whose tentacles we cannot escape, being at its mercy despite constant activity, stress, and exhausting concentration.

Dr. Langeweile's classes are, in a sense, even worse than Skuka's. There, you can easily skip reading the texts for class—no one will ask about them anyway. Here, you have to read the incredibly boring texts paragraph by paragraph. Once before class, the second time in slow motion, dictated by Langeweile's bone-dry voice. It's as if we were walking in circles on a treadmill from which there's no escape, because we're tied to him with strong ropes. We walk this treadmill, dictated by Dr. Langeweile, who never lets up. He constantly asks about subsequent sentences in the text, giving precise addresses. He won't go any further until he hears a specific incantation, because all the sentences in his chosen readings sound like ancient curses. We are doomed. Our entire family, three generations back and forth, will be cursed. These texts could just as easily have been written in Chaldean,¹¹ and it wouldn't have made a difference in terms of understanding them. Or maybe we would have learned at least a few interesting-sounding ancient Semitic words of magical power.

These classes are also harder than those of Skuka's, because there's not even the slightest chance of taking any countermeasures against the boredom. This is an active boredom. Not the boredom of doing nothing, but the boredom seeping into our veins like poison precisely when we're forced to engage in some activity. There's a cold sweat on our foreheads. We toil actively without hope of redemption. No one here believes in eternal life anymore. We don't want to. There's always the risk that eternity will look like Dr. Langeweile's classes. Some old Jew (like St. Peter) will quiz us on the contents of the Pentateuch. He'll unleash, at the speed of a machine gun, the code for Genesis 2:10, Deuteronomy 5:17, Leviticus 8:13, Hebrews 6:9... and we won't know the answer. No one but Jehovah's Witnesses will know the answer. And so it goes, day after day. The Jew will be patient, but somewhat disappointed with our attitude. In general, the vision of Christian heaven is utterly boring. I wouldn't be surprised if some people sinned persistently just to avoid this place. Compared to the blandness of heaven, the vision of hell begins to seem quite interesting. But it's just a vision. In the heaven of theologians, there's no room for boredom, and perhaps they're even right. That would be internally consistent. There's no boredom because there's no time. God exists outside of time, and in heaven, there's no time. Boredom requires time and its passage, or the awareness of its passage. Boredom is a phenomenon deeply rooted in time. If there were no time, there would be no boredom. Perhaps heaven wouldn't be so boring after all. However, the question of the boredom of eternity remains open.

§7

One might ask, expressing some doubt, whether the author isn't exaggerating by presenting this impressive pantheon of boring types? Such things don't happen in an inhabited universe, do they?

¹¹ An extinct language spoken in ancient Mesopotamia, closely related to Hurrian, written using cuneiform on clay tablets. In Greek literature, it was commonly considered a magical language, as the Chaldeans were known for their profound knowledge of astrology and divination.

I wish I did. If I hadn't experienced it myself, I would probably have thrown the first stone. I admit that this semester has seen an extraordinary accumulation, a conjunction of boring things. It's rare to be forced to attend classes with such virtuosos of boredom as Professor Skuka, dr. Langeweile, and Nudzisz at the same time. They, too, are exceptional in their own way. They've perfected their system of boring. Not that they've thought it through, but they are certainly outstanding specialists in the field.

Boredom saps energy and destroys motivation. Furthermore, it tends to escalate and create loops, vicious circles. A healthy dose of mind-numbing boredom, by sapping your energy and motivation, increases your susceptibility to boredom. The chance of you becoming bored increases dramatically. You expect boredom. You're not surprised when you meet it. You become accustomed to it. I'm not saying you become friends with it; that would be too much to say, but it's like a familiar face you see over and over again in the same place. You were strangers, now you nod to each other. You haven't exchanged a word, yet you feel like you know each other. You're surprised when that face is gone in the circumstances in which you're used to seeing it. Boredom has become such an acquaintance by sight. Perhaps even a very good acquaintance, judging by how often we see each other. Boredom has also begun to infect classes that aren't as unquestionably boring as those of Professor Skuka, dr. Langeweile, and Nudzisz. It's a vicious cycle. The boredom of some classes saps energy and motivation to such an extent that they're also lacking in the more enjoyable classes.

For the first four years of my studies, I didn't experience this kind of boredom. Of course, there were less captivating classes, but they weren't a problem; they weren't cumulative, repetitive, or deeply impactful. They were also somehow balanced by interesting, even exciting, classes that removed blemishes from my eyes, challenged my worldviews, and shaped my character. Now, in my final year, I've missed such classes. It's not that I know everything or that nothing could surprise me, but my capacity for epiphany has dulled. I'm tired of studying. I just want to finish it. I see it in my classmates. Many of them feel the same way. You can feel it in the lecture halls. You can hear it in the corridors and in front of the institute, where the best of the student population comes out for a smoke during breaks (smoking is not allowed in the buildings, and the small smoking room is for staff only). Everyone I've been going through college with since my first year seems to be showing signs of extreme fatigue, to varying degrees, especially since in master's programs we repeat a lot of things we already covered in bachelor's (thank you, Bologna system!). So we all have remedial classes.

Not that there was a shortage of potentially boring lecturers. I remember one professor I called Mr. Baron. He was a person characterized by a marked eccentricity and nonchalance. He conducted classes in a rather chaotic manner, always dominated by his own commentary when lecturing on a particular theory. It wasn't always on topic. The theory of X and Y always merged with the pipework in the professor's apartment building or his comments on his favourite movies. He was constantly writing something on the blackboard. He brought his own box of coloured chalks, from which he would carefully select the colour he considered appropriate for the subject matter. He would spend several good moments pondering aloud the advantages and disadvantages of specific colours in the context of the angle of light in the room, the color of the blackboard, the colour of the walls, his own mood, the weather outside, and finally, the creator

of the theory, whose name he was supposed to write down. The colour was supposed to reflect the characteristics of the things written down. But the connections were purely impressionistic. Although it did happen that the author of the theory was homosexual, so it was written down in pink chalk. However, even in this case, writing the name on the board was preceded by a loud internal debate over which shade of pink or perhaps light purple would be most appropriate. Another time, he spoke of a theoretician who, despite his notoriety and inflated ego, never even earned a doctorate. Here, too, he vacillated between a rotten dark green and navy blue, listing the pros and cons of each choice as if it mattered. Generally, choosing the chalk colour took up significant chunks of class time. However, it wasn't as if we didn't learn anything. To this day, I can tell aquamarine from celadon, and aquamarine from sea green. And I know what Pompeii pink looks like. You learn when you least expect it.

And now being straight to the point of this digression: Mr. Baron's classes had their fans, opinions were divided, and no one would equate them with pure, undiluted boredom. This was still open to interpretation, like the assessment of many other classes as neither boring nor incredibly engaging. However, this ambivalence was absent from the classes we were given this semester. Hence the sudden spike in fatigue and *taedium vitae*.

§8

Boredom. All-encompassing, endless, and unbearably tiring boredom. One of those boredoms where you feel like you're going out of your mind and observing everything as if from the sideline, from outside your body. I regret sitting with my back to the window. I could watch the sun travel across the sky. And I would have a nice view of the city and the river. I could observe the tiny specks of cars on the bridge. And people the size of fleas. And the treetops. And the clouds. So many interesting things. Meanwhile, I sit in this mortuary and see only shadows on the wall. Skuka, as usual, is in her fervour—standing and chattering. The classes proceed, as usual, with a steady pace through the vacuum of our skulls. The room seems to have been drained of oxygen. We slowly transition to anaerobic respiration.

All those who praise boredom, linking it with creativity, don't know what they're talking about. Boredom isn't idleness, blissful rest, and recharging batteries that boost our cognitive abilities and allow us to become inventive geniuses. Boredom is the hard work of rolling a heavy stone to the very bottom of existence. Boredom is the awareness of wasted time, the rising opportunity cost, and the squandering of our cognitive powers. Boredom does contain a strong imperative to escape boredom, to change—so in a sense, it's creativity, but often not very inventive. More important than its form is the mere fact of escaping. And we usually escape by any means necessary, just to ward off the demon of boredom. Moreover, in many boring situations, creative escapes from boredom are incredibly difficult both due to the boredom itself and the surroundings. To rise above boredom in Skuka's classes, you have to not only get used to its monotonous drone, which initially prevents you from focusing on anything else. We also need to overcome our impulses of good manners, to some extent freeing ourselves from the superstition of creating the appearances that characterize the so-called cultural person. These

don't have to be rejected entirely, of course, but their corset must be significantly loosened to allow us to fully distance ourselves from the horror of class. We must refrain from looking at the person speaking. We must forget about the attentive facial expression. We must stop pretending to listen. We must finally shed the shame that prevents us from taking out our laptop or book and focusing our attention on them without embarrassment. This process takes a moment and is one of the important stages of student socialization. After four years of studying, we are all veterans, so no one is ashamed, no one grimaces; we have it all figured out, we know what to do, we know how to do it, we even know how to maintain a certain illusory semblance of attention. We cannot fight this cosmically infinite boredom, but we do not stand helplessly with our hands spread wide. Everyone activates procedures developed during years of struggling with educational boredom. After a few adaptation sessions, everyone has developed a routine, and the sessions pass on autopilot. Humans are creatures with a high capacity for adaptation. Routinization. A fixed sequence of events. I can tell with my eyes closed what's happening and what will happen next.

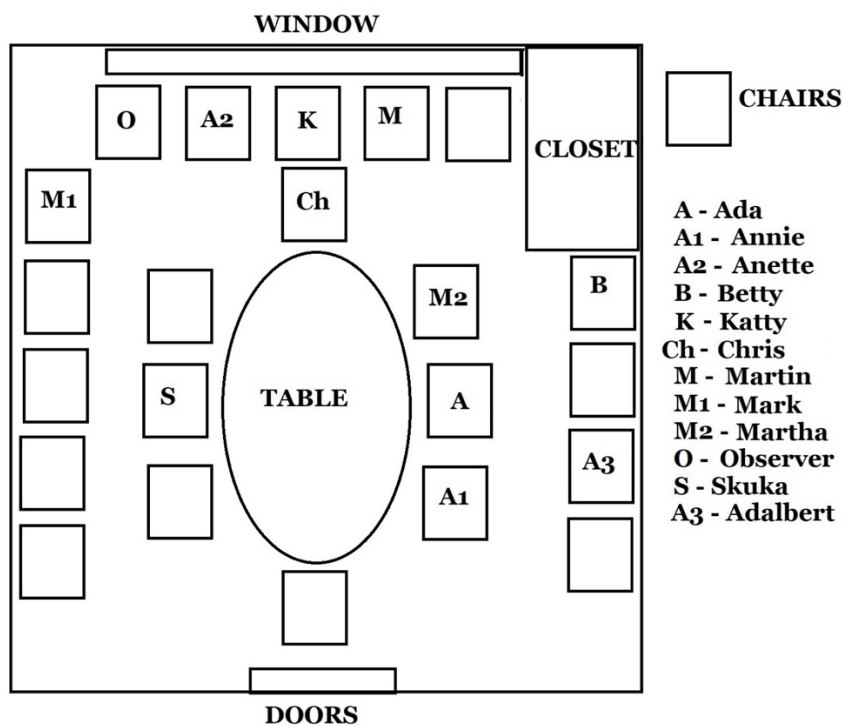
Annie takes out her laptop. Mark takes out her laptop. Anette takes out her notebook. Martha takes out her notebook. Adalbert takes out his laptop. Ada crosses her legs and rests her elbow on her knee. Chris sniffs. Betty sniffs. Katty takes out her notebook on wheels. Skuka prattles on. Annie opens her laptop. Mark looks for an outlet. Anette opens her notebook. Martha opens her large notebook to a random page. Adalbert isn't looking for an outlet; his laptop has a good battery; he'll charge it during Professor Nudzisz's lecture. Ada takes her smartphone out of her pocket. Come back. Ada has her smartphone welded to her left hand; she doesn't have to pull it out from anywhere. Chris searches for a tissue in his bag. Betty yawns. Katty opens her notebook. Skuka begins her wrist dance and keeps prattling on. Annie opens her browser. Mark finally finds a working outlet and opens his laptop. Anette searches for a pen in her bag. Martha places her notebook on her lap, resting the top edge against the edge of the table (see Figure 1). Adalbert opens his laptop. Ada uses her thumb to explore the internet. Chris pulls a pack of tissues from his bag. Betty yawns again, this time making her eyes wet. Katty takes out a set of engineering pencils and places them on the table. Skuka prattles on, completely in her fervour. Annie logs onto Facebook. Mark pulls a wireless mouse from his briefcase. The mouse has a red LED between the buttons. Anette takes a pen from her bag. Martha pulls a book from her bag. Adalbert opens his browser. Ada continues scrolling. Chris pulls a tissue from the package. Betty leans her backpack against the closet next to her chair. Katty draws in her notebook. She always starts with a caricature of Professor Skuka. Professor Skuka is on every page. Skuka keeps prattling on. Annie opens Messenger. Mark begins reading a text for Dr. Langeweile's class. Mark always has everything ready, open PDFs and Word files for taking notes. He just puts his computer to sleep between classes. Anette clicks the pen on and off. Martha places the book in her notebook, covering it with it. She opens the book where she left the bookmark. It's the go-to book for boring classes. Around 400 pages of cheap, light greyish paper. Most likely some kind of fantasy, but it could just as easily be a Bible, a law textbook, or a codex. The cover suggests fantasy—a dragon in a plume of fire. Adalbert browses online stores, searching for happiness. Ada sighs heavily, looking at her phone. Chris blows his nose loudly. Betty shifts in her chair, searching for the optimal sleeping position. Katty draws abstract shapes. Skuka rambles and babbles. Annie is writing with Magda M. Magda M. is our classmate. She's simultaneously bored in other classes and sending a report from another part of hell. Mark is reading a text for Dr.

Langeweile's Friday class. Given Dr. Langeweile's methodology, it would be better to print the text and annotate with a pen and coloured markers. However, Mark has a set of habits. Anette stares at the left corner of the ceiling. Martha turns the page of a book. Adalbert finds no happiness in consumerism. He doesn't have enough money to spend it out of boredom. Ada looks away from her phone, overcoming its magnetism, and stares out the window. Chris tucks a tissue into his pants pocket and pulls out a newspaper. Betty yawns, forgetting or simply not caring to cover her mouth with her hand. She doesn't have any gold teeth, but she does have at least two black fillings. Katty notes in the margin the number of Skuka's characteristic expressions. She crosses out each subsequent use. She crosses out the fives like prisoners counting the days of their sentence on the wall. She usually reaches a hundred in a single class. She compiles monthly statistics, tallies attendance, and calculates medians. Skuka drones on and on. Annie types on her laptop. Mark types on his laptop. Anette stares at the right corner of the ceiling. Martha looks up from her book at Professor Skuka and then goes back to reading. Adalbert tosses the holy grails into the basket. Ada sighs again. Her sigh has a theatrical quality, as if she's remembered she once had something but has irretrievably lost it. Chris pulls out a second newspaper. Betty keeps shifting, searching for a comfortable sleeping position. Katty begins to absently scribble in her notebook. Her gaze is vacant, and her pen glides across the page as if she's attended a séance and connected with the spirit of a two-year-old child. Skuka adjusts her watch and drones on. Annie looks up something on Google and scratches the wrist of her left hand. Mark glances at Magda, whom he somehow likes more out of boredom, but he has no energy to do anything about it. Anette stares at the ceiling of the seminar room, as if she saw hidden, invisible baroque paintings there. Martha glances from her book out the window, passing Mark with unseeing eyes. Adalbert tosses more holy grails into the basket. Ada scrolls. Chris rustles the newspaper. Betty tentatively settles herself on her backpack and closet. Katty scribbles. Skuka bores. Obvious things are mixed with hermetic references to occult demon names, as if every platitude needed a footnote. Annie taps heavily on her laptop as if she had to overcome physical resistance. Mark types on the laptop. Anette examines her nails. Martha underlines something in her book with a pencil. Adalbert adds another holy grail to his basket. Ada places her phone on the table. Her hand has grown tired. Then she rests it on her thigh and continues scrolling. Chris spreads the newspaper on his bag, which rests on the empty chair next to him. Betty shifts, adjusting her sleeping position. Katty continues to scribble in her notebook.

At that moment, Martin walks in, fifteen minutes late, carrying a stack of papers under his arm. He doesn't apologize to Skuka for being late because Skuka is in the middle of his own ramblings and doesn't seem to notice him. Martin doesn't sit in the empty seat by the door, but squeezes his way in to settle in the corner of the room on the other side of the closet, the front of which is occupied by Betty, settling down for sleep. He places his papers on the empty chair next to him. Meanwhile, Annie continues typing on her laptop. Mark continues typing on his laptop. Anette, unfazed, picks dirt from under her fingernails. Martha turns the page of a book. Adalbert buys holy grails, collected in a basket out of boredom, ruining his finances because of Skuka. It's unclear how he'll make it to the end of the semester; he doesn't have a credit card, and his parents don't send him much for support. Ada continues scrolling. Chris reads the newspaper, almost completely hidden behind it. Betty closes her eyes and tries to sleep. Katty continues scribbling. Martin reads the papers with a pen in his hand, underlining something every now and then. These

are his master’s thesis materials; he’s doing desk research on energy vampires. A theoretical foundation for what’s happening here. Skuka’s face is flushed, so full of our life energy has she already been. Annie is typing on her laptop. Mark is typing on his laptop. Anette is examining her fingernails, checking if there’s any dirt left to pick out. Martha turns the page of a book. Adalbert is clicking on his computer. Ada is scrolling. Chris is loudly turning a page in a newspaper. Betty is falling asleep. Katty is scribbling in her notebook. Martin is turning a page in his papers. Skuka is babbling. Annie is typing on her laptop. Mark is typing on his laptop. Anette is staring at the ceiling as if something were speaking to her there. Martha is turning the page of a book. Adalbert seems to be looking for a job; somehow he has to earn money for the holy grails he buys during Skuka’s classes. Ada is scrolling. Chris puts the newspaper aside. Betty sleeps alertly from time to time shifting on her backpack and closet almost directly in front of Skuka, who pretends not to notice, aware that she’s being boring. Katty scribbles in her notebook. Martin underlines something on his printouts. Skuka, still in her fervour, adjusts her glasses. Annie types on her laptop. Mark types on his laptop. Anette looks to the right. Then she looks to the left. Straight ahead. And nothing. Boredom. Martha turns the page of her book. Adalbert clicks on his computer. Ada scrolls. Chris picks up another newspaper. Betty sleeps. Katty scribbles in her notebook. Martin turns a page of his papers. Skuka rambles. Annie writes on her laptop. Mark writes on his laptop. Anette stares blankly into herself. Martha turns the page of her book. Adalbert clicks on his computer. Ada scrolls. Chris turns the page of his newspaper. Betty sleeps. Katty scribbles in her notebook. Martin underlines something on his printouts.

Figure 4: Seminar room’s layout



Source: Author’s own work

Ania stops typing on her laptop and waits for class to end. Mark stops typing on his laptop and waits for class to end. Anette waits for class to end, looking out the window. Martha closes her book and waits for class to end. Adalbert stops clicking on the computer and waits for class to end. Ada puts down her phone and waits for class to end. Chris puts his newspapers in his backpack and waits for class to end. Betty is asleep. Katty puts away her pencils and notebook and waits for class to end. Martin frantically tries to finish reading his papers, knowing class will be over soon. Skuka stops babbling and asks if anyone has anything to say. Silence. The rest is silence.

§9

The rest of the semester flies by on autopilot. The weeks blur into one swath, like a dream on the edge of reality. If it weren't for the weekly observation sessions in boring classes and the notes taken based on them, there wouldn't even be a fleeting trace of them ever happening. Boredom doesn't leave many memories. It fades from memory as soon as we break free. Boredom is also alienating. Everyone retreats to their own corner, trying to survive, waiting to emerge from the bunker where they hide from the shockwave. I discover a surprising and paradoxical transformation within myself. I realize I've had enough of studying. Enough of this Institute. I'm tired, I'm burnt out. I leave the building and feel revived, as if I'd shed some heavy burden that had been weighing me down while I was inside. As if I'd emerged from a tomb or a haunted house. From the musty air of the mortuary, where the ghosts of past bores clanging their chains constantly demand new victims. I feel the sun on my face, the warmth on my hands, and I feel revived. During Skuka's classes, I begin to play mind games. I compile inventories of the places I've slept or even dozed off throughout my life. I recreate the plans of the apartments and houses I've been in. I try to recall the details of the faces I've passed. I mentally catalogue every working electrical outlet in the Institute.

Another time, I think about the typology of boring professors. What emerges is a small academic bestiary:

Zombie professors—suspended between life and death, the undead. Their last manifestation of life is usually a doctorate, after which they begin a slower or faster process of zombification. They move slowly, apathetically, lacking energy, originality, and life. They infect students with stagnation. They infect a few with a craving for corpses, which are their favourite food (which is a trait they share with ghouls). The best example is Dr. Langeweile.

Vampire professors—energy vampires—draw their life energy from bored students. They prey on off-guard young people, without whom they are unable to function. When they speak, their faces flush, and student bodies slowly sink into their chairs and desks. Professor Skuka is an example of this type.

Golem professors—created by someone else, they only know how to obey orders. The subtlety of a flail. Mediocre, but faithful, if the right incantations are used. They bore students with their mediocre classes, usually adding nothing original of their own. They rehash, more or less

mediocre, content that has been rehashed hundreds of times, flooding them with a bland and stale quasi-intellectual pulp.

Werewolf professors—live in packs, maintain their own territories, and always have an alpha to lead the pack. They are uncontrollable during the full moon (which in academia generally falls near the evaluation period). They bore students by teaching classes together. The worst situation is when the alpha professor teaches with a younger werewolf. Ridiculous humour, quips, and unfunny comments are commonplace. It can be so embarrassing it's downright boring, as the show repeats itself in a nearly unchanged form every week. In this formula, they have something in common with satires. Intellectually atavistic, they can reduce any thought to banality and mundanity. When angry, they can eat someone—the perfect type of mobster and abuser in academia.

Sorcerer professors—with magical incantations, they can enchant students, transforming them into obedient zombies. They are also capable of employing love magic or mobbing, depending on the day and their whim. They bore students with elaborate terms from ancient languages, intricate ritual gestures, and spells completely incomprehensible to laypeople. They often employ sleep magic to gather locks of hair. Professor Nudzisz could fit this mould. A priest mumbling in Latin, facing his god, a dead theory inscribed on an ancient clay tablet.

§10

Skuka's classes are graded by an essay on a topic of the student's choice within the general scope of the course. I'm writing a paper on student boredom during university classes, using my field notes, meticulously compiled throughout the semester. Skuka isn't happy. She clicks long and hard over the printout of my essay as I sit in her room. She asks me what this topic is: boredom? It's not a scientific topic, and certainly not for our field. She lowers my grade without giving any specific reason. Finally, she asks me if I'm suggesting the lecturers are boring. Certainly not one, nor two. It's all a matter of proportion. Professor Skuka, Dr. Langeweile, and professor Nudzisz didn't exercise restraint. But they became the inspiration for the development of a new research stream, boredom studies, as my essay on Skuka became the introduction to my master's thesis and then, as it turned out, a job in academia, so perhaps boredom can be creative after all.

Boredom is a form of frustration of meaning. We expected meaning, but what we got was meaninglessness, and then even more meaninglessness. The academic world straddles the line between meaning and meaninglessness, between boredom and cognitive curiosity. When one studies solely with the intention of quickly completing higher education, one misses many things happening around them. They are like a hiker on a trail, walking with their hands clasped behind their backs, seeing only a faint streak of green and hearing the mingled chirping of birds and the rustling of the wind. However, when this walk turns into a march toward the goal of doctoral studies, a whole spectrum of details, events, and shades opens before their eyes. The blurred green of the forest transforms into a detailed expanse of individual trees, each emitting its own vibrations. The birdsong becomes a symphony composed of many identifiable and distinct voices, each with its own place and role in the score. Thousands of phenomena become visible

on the surface of this seemingly peaceful and almost idyllic landscape. When one decides to pursue a PhD programme, one opens one's eyes and ears wide, sniffs for clues, explores familiar spaces, and learns about human fauna from a completely different perspective. What matters now is no longer whether this or that professor is a boring or engaging lecturer. What matters now is their position within the institute, what kind of person they are in their relationships with younger colleagues, whether they are an erotomaniac, the boss of all bosses, a boor and a lout, a mobster, or simply a good and decent person. Or perhaps a combination of all of them. As a consequence of unmasking, the descent of the gods from Olympus, the shedding of the cataracts from one's eyes, and the shedding of the remnants of youthful naiveté, the decision to pursue a doctoral programme begins to appear as a subtle act of masochism. And certainly an act of almost unbelievable optimism or stupidity. Yet boredom pushed me in this direction, because what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. And so the die was cast. Out of boredom, I studied boredom. To study boredom, I stayed on for doctoral studies. Out of boredom, I earned my PhD. Now I scare students with boredom. And so the circle of life closes.

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