

DAN MOLLER

The Boring

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the aesthetic concept of boringness, of which there has been relatively little philosophical discussion, especially along its objective, nonpsychological dimensions. I begin by confronting skepticism about the validity of judgments about boringness and rebut suggestions to the effect that these judgments are inevitably compromised by mistakes or vices of the audience. The article then develops an account focused on certain kinds of reasonable expectations we form in a given aesthetic context. I go on to confront the question of whether boringness is inevitable given the internal imperatives of works of art and illustrate the discussion with Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle. Although I focus on art, I conclude by drawing some connections with the boring in everyday life.

*Those who bore others are the plebeians, the crowd, the endless train of humanity in general; those who bore themselves are the chosen ones, the nobility.*¹

We rarely think much about the boring, choosing more often to dwell on the psychological state of being bored and even then deploring more often than investigating. Thinking about the subject can seem precious, decadent even. Only indolent aristocrats, perhaps, sit about bemoaning their ennui, like Romans at Pompeii. And yet the boring is a fundamental presence in our lives. It is absolutely central to our evaluation of art, 'uninteresting' and 'dull' being among the strongest criticisms we make, and many have quit their jobs or left their spouses for related reasons. The fact that we nevertheless seem so often to tolerate the boring—or even to seek it out and criticize those who avoid it—raises important questions in aesthetics and perhaps even ethics.²

I.

A puzzling feature of a great deal of art is just how boring it is. We consume art in part to divert ourselves, and we often create it to express what we care most about, so why is so much of it—even the

best of it—so dull? We suffer through the endless ceterology sections in *Moby Dick* and the tedious filler tracks in the middle of pop albums; we accept with resignation the second movement of the symphony, the inescapably boring one that creeps along at a punishing tempo. Marcel Proust can thrill us with observational detail of diplomats and elevator boys, but after a while the eccentric sex lives of the French aristocracy fail to titillate, while Joyce's *Ulysses* is perversely praised for the very realism of its boringness.³ We know that Kubrick's *2001* is officially great cinema, but as the flight attendants walk up and down the aisles in real time, we secretly long for a more compact greatness; by the time we have seen our thousandth Madonna in Italy, we long for death. There will naturally be some disagreement over particular cases, but an impressively large amount of art bores most of us, and the pieces that do so seem to exhibit various patterns that suggest something other than arbitrary or capricious reactions on our part.

Instead of dealing with this observation, some will swat it away by claiming that boredom is the fault of the audience. The skeptic I have in mind is not a full-blown nihilist concerning aesthetic properties; he does not deny that there are such things as exciting movies or stupid video games. His suspicions focus on the boring in particular, because

judgments about boringness seem to him indefensible. The skeptic might say that nothing is boring as such; there is only psychological boredom, and that is a feeling born mostly of ignorance and sloth. Alternatively, he might acknowledge the boring, drawn perhaps to a dispositional theory of value, thus conceding that our psychological responses quite trivially engender boring objects. But he goes on to deny that those responses are good or appropriate ones to have.⁴

The skeptic's position resembles that of the moral theorist who does not deny that some acts are wrong, but is suspicious of properties like *uppity* or *being a slut* or *being a dork*.⁵ Some people systematically respond to certain people and behaviors in the terms carved out by these concepts (with the relevant attitudes on the relevant occasions), but the skeptic thinks these categories are rooted in a background theory or network of presuppositions that he rejects (rightly on my view). In one mood, he might then insist that the sensibilities corresponding to the supposed property are in fact unprojectible because defective ("Do not listen to them, son, there is no such thing as a dork"), but in another he might just say that projecting them is never appropriate ("Do not listen to them, son, only jerks think that way"). I am not attempting to establish the right option to pursue here, although it is perhaps telling that discerning twelve-year-olds tend to find the former reassurance dubious. Either way, the basic thought is the same: thinking about the world in terms of sluts, say, means assuming that women (but not men) are subject to certain sexual norms in a way that we in fact reject. Announcing that someone is a slut is to announce that she fails to meet certain standards that are, in fact, bunk. Since these standards do not actually have force, projecting properties rooted in them either fails (in one idiom) or else succeeds only in manifesting a mistake (in another). Similarly, the skeptic concludes, announcing that certain works are boring is to assume something like that there is not anything sufficiently interesting in them when that is in fact never true.

There is a great deal to be said in favor of this view. Many appeals to the boring are lazy or uninformed. Who has not clenched his teeth at the beginning student who writes off Plato as dull, not having the faintest understanding of the structure of the dialogues or of what an *aporia* is? Perhaps it is even worse in the arts, with the teenager, inno-

cent of counterpoint and fugue, who confidently dismisses "that tinkly snuffbox music," also known as Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Here, a certain mental torpor or plain ignorance veils the subject from the interesting, and we reasonably enough blame the bored. And attempts to ground the concept independent of our sensibilities really do look desperate. True, animals often seem bored, and one could make at least the beginnings of an attempt to introduce boredom into some very high-level science used to explain the caged lion's lethargy as well as the bored child's misbehavior.⁶ But of course the boring is value laden: there is no neutral way of being boring; the boring is always bad. This means that attributions of boringness involve normative judgments, not just observing physiological propensities toward restlessness or the like, which puts the notion at least partly outside the scope of the sciences. And, more importantly, if a certain number of people had unfortunate heart attacks tomorrow, *everyone* might be horribly bored by Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) or enthralled by late-night infomercials, but that would not show anything. Judgments about the boring make essential reference to certain idealized conditions and observers, which again alienates the notion from simple observation and measurement.⁷

For the same reason, it does not look promising simply to reduce the boring to some natural property like repetitiveness or unoriginality. Even waiving the point about value, this suggestion is just a hasty generalization. Repetition does often bore, but then we just as often crave it. Many a great pop song consists of a single hook repeated over and over, dozens of times (for example, the bass line to Michael Jackson's "Billy Jean"). There is good repetition and bad repetition, and it is hard to say much about the latter beyond that it is, well, boring. The same is true of originality, considering how fascinated we seem to be by even the ten-thousandth (well-done) car chase or boy-meets-girl tearjerker. And so, stuck with appeals to our sensibilities, the bored are, just as the skeptic says, open to the objection that they labor under a series of wrongheaded presuppositions or just sheer ignorance, which compromises their feelings in these matters, just like the racist claiming someone is uppity.

But I am nevertheless suspicious of all this skepticism. We are often ashamed to admit we find something boring, since it seems to reflect badly

on us. We worry that it is *us*, that we were too dull to discern the interesting, especially having seen others make similar mistakes. Admissions of boredom are risky, since they expose us to the charge of being in the dark, of being caught flat-footed, and associate us with the callow ignoramus, meaning it is far safer to call a work flawed or to ignore it altogether than to call it boring. On the flip side, calling art boring is among the very worst of insults, so that charges of boringness risk both ridicule for dullness and antagonism for insult. Misguided defenders of a work or an artist know all this and exploit it to flog the bored, and I suspect that much of the skeptical argument above arises from this sort of flogging. The situation is akin to revivals of intellectual or historical figures, where there is a sharp asymmetry between how motivated the respective parties are. Those who “rediscover” Thomistic metaphysics or A. C. Bradley or President Grant have much to gain from their reviving, while those who are not impressed have little to gain from denigrating, and the latter are exposed to the charge that they fail to grasp the relevant subtleties and risk seeming parochial or dull if they announce there is little of interest in these figures. It is hard work to become expert enough in something to make a powerful case that it is boring or otherwise no good, and naturally it will not seem especially attractive to work hard just to prove how trivial a figure or a movement really was. This asymmetry is then exploited in order to punish those who express disinterest (“Grant’s genius is easily misunderstood by those who lack a comprehensive understanding of the summer of ’72”), with the result that such revivals are hard to suppress, whatever their merits.

Moreover, we must not cheat by simply shifting our focus, which can lend false support to the skeptic’s case. One of Kierkegaard’s characters in *Either/Or*, while defending the thesis that boredom is the root of all evil (on the sensible grounds that rotten kids are less rotten when distracted), suggests the method of “rotation of crops”:

There was a man whose chatter I was obliged to listen to because of the circumstances. On every occasion, he was ready with a little philosophical lecture that was extremely boring. On the verge of despair, I suddenly discovered that the man perspired exceptionally much when he spoke. This perspiration now absorbed my attention. I watched how the pearls of perspiration collected on his forehead, then united in a rivulet, slid down

his nose, and ended in a quivering globule that remained suspended at the end of his nose. From that moment on, everything was changed; I could even have the delight of encouraging him to commence his philosophical instruction just in order to watch the perspiration on his brow and on his nose.⁸

It may be true that to the sufficiently fertile mind there will always be a nearby source of interest, but this is just changing the subject, not establishing that the lecture or music itself is not boring—just the opposite, since the shift in focus is motivated by and thus confirms the presence of the boring.

These counter-suspicions aside, the question remains of what the boring amounts to if it is not just a reflection of our own stupor. On my view, the boring arises when we reasonably expect something to give at least well-positioned audiences sufficient reason to focus their attention, and yet it does not do so. In a paradigmatic case, we are trapped in the music hall for a two-hour performance and naturally suppose that the music will be such as to absorb our attention, to suck us in, at least if we are tolerably conversant with the material. And yet the music does not have any features that would call for our focused attention, and so our minds wander, we twist in our seats and wish it would all be over so we could bestow our attention on something else. Here, we are forced to try and pay attention to something that is fundamentally unworthy of it, which is what makes the boring so agonizing, like a long-winded joke for which the speaker has forgotten the punch line. This account, then, is privative without being trivializing. Like Augustine’s (implausible) suggestion that evil is merely the absence of good, it says that the boring is fundamentally constituted by the absence of something, but it is not unreal or trivial for all that.⁹ And, just as the privative account of evil solves a theological puzzle, this view of the boring can help explain why so much of art is boring, as I show later on.¹⁰

This conception is linked to our sensibilities, since it invokes the psychology of attention but without being purely dispositional, since it also gives a prominent place to *reasons* for our responses. In fact, this view is normative along several dimensions. First, it implies that to be boring is a defect, since it involves failing to live up to a reasonable expectation. It is true that some writers have spoken of a *pro*-boring aesthetic, exemplified by Andy Warhol (“I like boring things”) and

minimalists like Philip Glass and Mark Rothko, but I suspect this is a misunderstanding.¹¹ On the one hand, as we just saw, minimalism need not be boring just because it is repetitive or unadorned; those features may in fact be exploited to bring about striking effects and emphasize climaxes, as in Glass's solo piano work. On the other hand, some minimalist work clearly is intentionally boring, but that is generally because the point of the work is not really an aesthetic one, but rather some practical effect on the audience, similar to the role of drones or chants in certain Buddhist traditions or a lullaby for drowsy children, where boring is good.¹² Conceptual art may be aesthetically boring, say in the case of a frame containing a blank canvas, or possibly John Cage's *4'33"*, but then the conceptual point itself may be arresting or interesting. Casual audiences struggle with abstract expressionism, expecting their interest to be arrested by innovations in representation, but this is usually just a case of an audience being poorly positioned. Few visitors to the Rothko Room in the Phillips Collection seem bored gazing at subtle effects of color and layering when they know what to expect.

Second, the reasonable expectation of something to arrest attention is normative, not just a probabilistic estimate. Suppose an artist (or, in a variation, a critic) reliably informs us that a piece of art will be excruciatingly boring. We might then worry that, in this kind of case, we do not have a reasonable expectation of something that grips our interest, and yet the work will presumably still be boring. But just as we cannot cancel a reasonable expectation of consumer safety by printing "These gumballs may kill you" or of honesty by having reliable witnesses testify that we do not keep our promises, so the expectation of art to hold our interest is not merely an inductive inference. The reasonable expectation is instead generated by the norms internal to art and the social practices surrounding it—the sorts of reasons we have for wanting to go to the movies or read novels in the first place. What makes it reasonable to expect even inveterate liars to tell the truth—not that we are surprised when they do not—is that the norms of conversational interaction dictate honesty; so too the norms appropriate to art dictate presenting us with a ground for our attention, I am claiming. To see these distinctive norms in action, consider a case like this: after you press me, I criticize as dull the enormous mod-

ern painting prominently featured in your living room, since it consists only of random patches of gray. You then chuckle and inform me that it is not a painting but part of some remodeling equipment the contractor has installed. My feelings, staring at the behemoth, might not change, but the norms appropriate to the context do, and for this reason it would be silly to expect my attention to be focused and so I withdraw my criticism of boringness.

Finally, something is not boring just because there is nothing to excite poorly positioned audiences who do not have the background to comprehend what is before them. The requirement need not be one of *ideal* audiences, though, just one of being sufficiently well positioned. Nor does this requirement need to curl back in a circle to audiences who are not bored by what is not boring. Hume and others have given independent outlines of what being 'well-' or at least better positioned amounts to, usually by turning to such standards as a broad familiarity with the general class at issue, open-mindedness toward innovation, technical competence, and so on.¹³

All this normativity will disappoint those who crave flat desert landscapes and those who would prefer more of a *fiat* account, whereby our feelings about the matter are themselves sufficient to engender the boring. But such views neglect the possibility of error. The obvious cases are those where we condemn people for being bored when they should not be, for failing to notice that behind the thicket of Henry James's prose lies an irresistible drama or failing to see the chiaroscuro in *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). These are simply cases of people overlooking reasons there are to get absorbed in the work. But just as often people are mistaken in the other direction, in not being bored when they really ought to be. People are wrong all the time about how exciting or interesting some book or movie is. Teenagers are easily entranced by mindless CGI confections, even when they are laden with clichés and when the action to which they are responding is poorly executed and unoriginal. The point is not one of lowbrow versus highbrow but of what counts as interesting even within lowbrow entertainment; the contrast is between *Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2007) and *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984), not Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (1987). In fact, as Pauline Kael points out, highbrow critics and sophisticates are just as liable to being

wrongly fascinated by movies, since they tend to neglect the virtues of ‘trash’ and to inflate the reasons we have to become absorbed by high-minded think pieces like *2001* (which she hated for its “idiotic solemnity”).¹⁴ In a famous review of Alain Resnais’ *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), she criticizes the critics for falling for a great deal of pretentious nonsense that was much less interesting than was supposed: “I have never understood why writers assume that repetition creates a lyric mood or underlines meaning with profundity. My reaction is simply, ‘OK, I got it the first time, let’s get on with it.’”¹⁵

This insistence on fallibility may seem perverse, especially when what is at issue is simply a tingling of the spine. We can be utterly absorbed by horror movies that are terrible. The visceral effect of a pounding soundtrack and a sudden scare might titillate us even as we acknowledge that the movie is trash. It may look as if there is not anything we could describe as a *reason* to pay attention (it is a terrible movie), and yet our gut says otherwise. We might be tempted to say that such a movie simply *causes* us to be excited and so not bored without normative reasons playing any role at all. And it may sound paradoxical to announce that this movie is in fact quite boring when the audience is saucer eyed, which may in turn cast doubt on the cleft between the boring and the bored that I have been emphasizing. But on reflection, I think we can accept that such a movie is not boring and that it is not so because of the reasons it gives us to pay attention. In this case, the reasons are connected to the experience of the movie as opposed to its contents, but if the experiences are worthwhile they can be reasons all the same, just as we can have reason to ride the roller coaster or take some pill. To see this, suppose that you are distracted by your constant phone messages, thus disabling the causal powers of the soundtrack and cheap thrills. You have reason to put your phone away, as I might point out, so you can let the relevant features work their magic. If the movie were bad trash, trash that did not even scare you, I would have no reason to make such a recommendation. We over-intellectualize if we insist that to escape the boring we must actually reflect on the reasons we have, but we under-intellectualize if we ignore the existence of such reasons even in these lowbrow examples.

Once we think of the boring in the terms that I have described, I think it is perfectly obvious

that there are many classics that can be defensibly described as boring in whole or part. Such a defense will consist in pointing out the features that resist our attention and in rebuffing attempts to single out features that should absorb it. Moreover, even when there is disagreement about particulars, hopefully these reflections capture what is going on. Thus, I mentioned the thousandth Italian Madonna earlier, but of course this might be contested, and to the extent that the contest turns on questions like whether seeing the thousandth Madonna amounts to overexposure and thus disqualifies one as a well-positioned audience or on whether there are exciting subtleties that are overlooked or even whether it is reasonable to expect objects of religious veneration to interest decadent aesthetes, the very controversy may support this account. In a moment I turn to a case study in this vein, but for now I will assume that readers can think of many instances in which judgments of boringness can be supported in the manner I have suggested. This allows us, at long last, to explain where the skeptic goes wrong in comparing boringness to moral categories like being a dork. For unlike the latter, judging something to be boring need not be rooted in a false set of norms or be otherwise inappropriate. The unmet expectations that give rise to judgments of boringness may be perfectly legitimate on the account I have offered. The norms condemning preoccupation with computers or science as ‘dorky’ are illegitimate in a way that norms demanding grounds for attention while trapped in the concert hall are not.

II.

The boring is real, and our nagging elders who told us it was our fault were wrong, just as we suspected: sometimes those museums or concerts they dragged us to really were horribly dull. But that just brings us home to the question we started with, of why there is so much boring art. There is the haunting possibility that the boring is if not inevitable, then pretty close. *Must* we be bored? There are several reasons this might be. Perhaps part of what is involved in giving us reason to focus on a work is that it is *better than* most other works in some respect. Our attention is arrested by an especially beautiful melody, not a middling one. Since most works (or melodies or plots) must fail to be better than most, the boring would

then be a statistical inevitability for reasons reminiscent of Francis Galton's "regression towards mediocrity."¹⁶ On the other hand, we might think that the problem confronting the artist is not so much the comparative one of eclipsing his or her rivals as that of meeting certain absolute thresholds of quality or beauty. On this view, a boring opera is no more mysterious than the Heldenenor who cracks on high C; failure is likely simply because the task is so hard. After all, contrary to the first suggestion, in a world of a thousand Mozarts we might adjust our standards of eminence, but perhaps we still would not be *bored* by the thousandth overture to *The Magic Flute*. Or alternatively, the difficulty might be that internal to the tasks that artists set themselves lie reasons to produce boring works or parts of works. Part of what composers set out to accomplish may lead them toward the boring. These ideas are not mutually exclusive, but I want to make a case mainly for the third.

We can focus on music. An overriding goal in many musical compositions, just as in the other arts, is to achieve contrast. Thus, in classical symphonies there is a propulsive dialectical process beginning in the initial sonata-allegro movement, whereby ideas are mooted, then queried or contradicted by contrasting themes, and the work moves forward by examining this tension and finally resolving it in a satisfying cadence. (Arthur Schopenhauer: "So music always consists in a steady alternation between more or less unsettling and satisfying chords, just as the life of the heart (the will) is a steady alternation between greater and lesser uneasiness [*Beunruhigung*].")¹⁷ Philosophers can think of this as strikingly similar to the elenctic process in a dialogue like the *Euthyphro*: the elicitation and refutation resemble the statements of theme and counter-theme; the aporetic puzzlement in the middle is analogous to a harmonically disorienting development section; the end of the dialogue restates the initial position as first movements recapitulate initial themes. Ultimately this process of tension and resolution occurs on multiple levels—within a movement, across the symphony as a whole, via tempi, via harmony, melody, and so on. The design here is not capricious or willful; it responds to something elemental and human, as the philosophical analogue indicates. But implicit in the plan is the need for music that has the following properties: *slow tempo*,

major key tonality, *languorous melodies*, and *avoidance of drama* (for example, huge dynamic changes). For example, many second movements in symphonies have *all* of these properties. And although there is nothing logically inevitable about it, it is very hard to avoid placing the epithet 'boring' at the end of the sequence, "slow, major key, languorous, undramatic, and _____." This would suggest that in this instance the boring is an upshot of goals that are internal to the very enterprise. "The boring as structural imperative" might be a fitting slogan for this suggestion, as long as we do not take 'imperative' too seriously.

As always, there will be disagreement about particular cases or classes of the boring, but a good test is this: your young niece shows some tentative interest in classical music and has never been exposed to the greats. You want to show her that it is a colossal tragedy that popular culture no longer engages with music that captures the full resources of human intelligence and that it is not all as boring as she suspects. Excited, you brush through your collection of symphonic works. What are the odds you select a second movement? More subtly, if I make you select fifty exemplars of any movement and then I will pick from a hat, would you choose fifty slow movements? Of course, this is a crude test, and novice reactions should not be our ultimate arbiters. But I think it is telling nonetheless. Artists seem to suffer from disparate goals that are hard to reconcile—in this case, propulsive contrast as against avoiding tedium.

The problem here is most acute in music, the temporal art par excellence. By its very nature, taking in music requires a fixed interval of time, that is, the time it takes to be played, and thus there is no way to both listen to the piece of music *and* abstract from the boringness of passages that lack interesting features. Visual art, by contrast, can be boring insofar as it gives us no reason to focus on it but rarely bores us in practice, since most experiences of sculpture and painting are such as to allow us to regulate our attention and quickly pass from what would be dull in both parts of works and works as a whole, as we move our eyes or walk along. A painting by a Dutch master consisting mostly of blurry shadows combined with a few striking flashes of light on an expressive face can fascinate us, and the dark regions do not in any way detract from the work. We can take in these contrasting parts, notice the effect they

have on the face, without suffering any penalty of boredom through it all.¹⁸ But there is no conceptual reason paintings and sculptures cannot bore us, as we see if we contemplate variations in display conventions. (We can imagine that audiences sit through a ‘performance’ of a painting whereby they are expected to remain seated for twenty minutes as a painting is unveiled before them and then replaced by another, for two or three hours.)

Some reflection shows, I think, that the symphonic case is not an isolated instance, but that there are many worthwhile artistic goals that tend to open the door to the boring. There are architectonic considerations, in particular, that dictate scope and scale comprising connective tissue that risks boring us. For a work to be grand, to invite description as an epic, it must have a certain heft, and it is difficult to connect the many parts involved in a work of great scope without some slackness entering in. At certain points the only rationale of the music will be either to pad out the work to lend the right sense of proportion to the whole or else to connect up various important moments, and it is hard for these not to bore. Musical examples include the recitatives in opera, serving as exposition and as connective fiber for the arias. Or think of the pop albums that seek to intersperse slow-moving filler tracks between the hits. These might look like cynical attempts by record companies to pad out a higher-priced album, but the parallel to classical symphonies is striking; a less jaded view attributes the pattern simply to the internal goals of providing enough contrast to make the whole digestible and attractively varied. Books like *Moby Dick* might reflect something similar, where the cetology sections serve to create a sense of proportion and let readers catch their breath between Shakespearian flourishes. A poem about the Trojan War cannot be brief, and it is difficult to sustain 12,000 lines of varied, yet enthralling narrative. In other cases, like Proust and parts of Joyce, the goal is different again: to establish a sufficiently fine-grained and voluminous portrait of a milieu to establish reader “buy in.” But to do so requires that they tell us about the sights and sounds of people eating lunch and using the toilet and that we get to know dozens of characters, which, across thousands of pages, tends to be boring from time to time.

A metaphysician might object to some of this as follows: “At best you have shown that internal goals sometimes make it hard to avoid less engag-

ing material from time to time *when taken on its own*. But the relevant unit here is the work as a whole. And you have not shown anything about that unit. As you would concede, it is not as if symphonies would be better if they consisted of four minor key allegro movements nor *Moby Dick* if it were six hundred pages of Ahab fulminating as the ship is struck by lightning.” This is Leibniz’s view of evil transposed. In a complex whole containing good and evil, perhaps the best overall patchwork (of which we have not the faintest overview) consists of exactly what we see. And there is surely some truth in this. The relevant unit cannot be individual chords or words. Extent matters. But this is true in the other direction as well. It is one thing for Mozart to contrast his exciting main theme in the first movement of the fortieth symphony with the languorous, major-key theme group that follows; it is another to provide contrast with an entire movement that can last ten or twenty minutes, let alone an act in an opera that can go on for hours (in German, at least). It would be absurd to declare that a painful twenty-minute interval of tedium might still turn out not to be boring depending on what follows. What determines the relevant unit is not how the artist has chosen to organize his or her work—whether some twenty-minute interval is grouped with some other interval—but the nature of human attention. Reasons for us to focus our attention need to occur on a timescale congruent with what will occupy a well-positioned audience’s focus. We cannot be bored by a word, but a couple of minutes’ worth of paragraphs will certainly suffice.

From the opposite quarter, one might object that my remarks show only that it is *hard* to avoid the boring, not that it is inevitable. We can all think of examples of brilliant second movements, for example, the famous one in Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony, and there are vast tracts of Proust and Joyce that are gripping. So artists have no excuse, since the boring is apparently both bad and avoidable. And, in fact, I agree with this assessment. The point I am making is that there are powerful internal reasons to produce boring works, not that they are literally unavoidable. We can think of this as akin to the distinction between forced and unforced errors in sports. Forced errors are attributable to the opponent’s skill; unforced errors mean the player can be blamed for not performing up to snuff. Similarly, there is dullness that arises from taking up a plan that is good on the whole but

which makes it very hard to avoid the boring, and then there are simple mistakes on the artist's part. In the post-Romantic era, artists have managed to bully us into being more and more bashful about attributions of error to the classics. And now there are professionals whose livelihood depends on the greatness of Edmund Spenser or the forgotten genius of Mannerism. But it is unclear why we should expect artists to make fewer unforced errors than tennis players. In any given boring work, the question to ask is whether the boringness was forced or unforced.

III.

It will help to run through a brief case study, and nowhere is the problem of the boring so focused as in Richard Wagner. "Wonderful moments, dreadful quarters of an hour," as the saying goes, often attributed to Rossini. To make things fair, let us focus on the *Ring*, which contains a great deal of thrilling music and engaging drama, rather than harder cases like *Parsifal*. For the reasons I set out above, the very idea of a case study in the boring directed toward Wagner will irritate his defenders and make irreverent views like mine seem crude or ignorant, but we must press past all this and especially the patina that time and museum culture place upon acknowledged classics. A good way to accomplish this is to remind ourselves that before the *Ring* was deposited in the glass case of the canon, listeners well placed to appreciate the work, and by no means hostile to the enterprise as a whole, were appalled at how boring much of it was. A music historian sums up the verdict with, "Longueur was in fact regarded as a—if not *the*—grave weakness of the *Ring*. Never had anything been written that was so 'endlessly and wearisomely spun out,' according to Tchaikovsky," who was at Bayreuth in 1876. Franz Liszt seems to have fallen asleep "during the fuller and uglier passages," according to an eyewitness. Edvard Grieg found some of the dialogues "quite tedious."¹⁹ Almost everyone thought a great deal should have been cut and that a more restrained, better edited version would have been superior. The eminent music critic Eduard Hanslick commented that the second act of *Die Walküre* was an "abyss of boredom" and reported that, "We sit there, helpless and bored, amid those endless dialogues, thirsting equally for clear speech and intelligible melody."²⁰

This is more or less how most people feel listening to much of the *Ring*, and we thus should not be too hasty to dismiss them as Philistines. We should be open to the possibility that Romanticism tended to insulate artists from criticism and pressure toward brevity in a way that left them vulnerable to the boring.

One thing to dismiss once again, however, is the facile notion that repetition is bad and novelty good. The leitmotifs in the *Ring* are endlessly repetitious but wonderful for all that, and audiences respond quite favorably to them when not asked to do too much elaborate decoding. The Hunding theme, for example, sounds over and over as he returns home and confronts Siegmund in *Die Walküre*, but since the theme is dramatic in its own right and is deployed skillfully, it is hardly objectionable. Elsewhere, the leitmotif can be used to great effect, as when Erda suggests the downfall of the gods through an inversion of her own theme or when the Rheinmaidens' joy in the gold is transformed (perverted) into several Nibelung themes.²¹ Nor is the problem that Wagner does away with traditional setpiece arias in favor of an "infinite melody" in the *durchkomponiert* style, since this, if anything, is a net gain by doing away with the recitatives. Moreover, it would be wrong to object merely to a complex work in German, filled with unfamiliar characters, singing in a musical language distant from pop culture—all this is just the price of admission, and lazy audiences unwilling to pay may be psychologically bored, but not because of the boring.

As the initial critics noted, the central problem is rather related to length—everything seems spun out too long. But length in itself is not the problem either, really, or else the cries would have been simply to split the operas or adjust their performance, whereas the calls were rather to *cut* these pieces. The key issue is rather *how* Wagner generates these sixteen hours of music. There are a number of specific features that contribute to this length that wearied even a Liszt: (a) The pacing of individual scenes that are otherwise interesting is often quite slow. Thus, the opening to *Siegfried*, while generally interesting and building to the climactic reforging of the sword, takes an hour just to introduce a single character and revisit two old ones. Much of the dialogue is repetitive, and interesting narrative themes are recycled multiple times, exhausting our attention. There are reasons to attend closely indeed to both the brilliant

music and some interesting ideas, but since they are spread across such a vast interval, the effect is often boring. Moreover, (b) there are many hours of characters standing onstage and narrating off-stage plot points or histories. Oft-cited examples include the scene of the Nornes in the opening of *Götterdämmerung* and later on the recitation of Waltraute. Such scenes are difficult to make interesting at length because the characters are not engaging anything onstage, and our visual system is thus completely unoccupied. The music, too, is difficult to animate sufficiently because it must be suitable to the emotional range of people engaged in offstage narration, that is, relatively flat. A related tendency (c) is inclusion of frequent and often lengthy summaries of what has already happened in the *Ring*. Since the listeners have only just recently seen all of these events unfold (at Bayreuth it would have been no more than a night or two ago), it is difficult to engage with this material. Examples include Wotan's encounter with Mime in *Siegfried* and, later on, Siegfried's painful recounting for Wotan of the action he missed (but we did not!) in just the last act. And finally, (d) the audience is often far ahead of the characters, meaning that we must wait for long stretches until they catch up to us. A particularly striking example is the long wait we endure as Siegmund and Sieglinde struggle to discover one another's identities in *Die Walküre*, which the audience will have determined long before.

Many more items could be added to this list. In isolation the effect would be minor, but across sixteen hours the effect is significant. This is not to deny the stature of the *Ring* as a whole, which is surely one of the greatest musical achievements of all time. But these features do leave the way open to the boring. In terms of our distinction between forced and unforced errors, they seem for the most part unforced. To be sure, some of what bores people does consist in forced errors. There is no way to generate an epic opera that functions musically as a symphonic tone poem without some connective material—sometimes characters must articulate key points in a way that contrasts with dramatic material before and after, and some lulls are inevitable. But most of the points mentioned above seem *unforced*. Perhaps we must be bored now and then, but there is nothing internal to the aim of a musical epic utilizing the leitmotif concept that requires repetitive plot summaries or staging exposition instead of depicting the key events on-

stage. An obvious solution would be to edit the operas significantly, but the cult of the artist renders this impractical. Doing so draws apoplectic protests from rigorists and signals that one is not as 'serious' as other venues, leading to an uncut equilibrium. Here, as elsewhere, acknowledging the boring is punished.

iv.

So far we have been thinking about art, but of course the rest of life is often pretty boring too—we wait in line at the airport without a wireless signal, our spouse blathers on about work. Some have wondered whether everyday life is subject to aesthetic categories at all, whether riding a crowded subway train could be not merely pleasurable but beautiful or sublime. But as Thomas Leddy and others have pointed out, art itself is often the distillation of everyday aesthetic experiences, and the boring seems like an example par excellence.²² Let me therefore conclude by making a few comparisons. The nature of the boring is just the same: we have reason to expect some situation or relationship or job to give us reason to attend to it, to lose ourselves in it at least a bit, and yet we are not given sufficient reason to do so, and so our minds wander and we fiddle with our napkins. Likewise, there are structural features of our jobs and relationships that make some boredom very hard to avoid. But there are also some features of social boredom that are distinctive.

The boring is intimate. Long, boring silences can make us uncomfortable, but that in turn lets us prove something if we come to accept such boredom. The awkward silence in the car on the way home from the first date is the glorious silence on the way home from the fourth or fifth. The transition between the two drives is frightening because it is so awful to imagine ourselves boring others. ("We often forgive those who bore us, but we cannot forgive those whom we bore.")²³ And once we have undergone the thrill of mutually tolerated boredom, we have the more ambiguous years of boredom later on—the repetitious stories, the dull nights at home with our spouse in middle age. But these too mean something. There is a social significance, an intimacy to these boring facets of relationships. Unlike art, where sitting through a boring performance means only that the artist has to some degree failed and that we must suffer,

the fact that we let ourselves be bored together says something about our attitudes toward one another, since we do not let just anyone bore us.

Running the risk of boring one another takes courage. It would be easier, perhaps, to keep up a running patter during those long silences, but this would prevent us from realizing some of the benefits of mutual boredom. One sees this again teaching. Obviously it is generally bad to bore students, and other things equal, of course it is better to be engaging. But sometimes there is unavoidably boring setup that is required to get to what is interesting. (Reading Thucydides in Greek is exciting; doing endless grammar drills to reinforce recall is not.) It can be tempting to respond to this by avoiding the boring at all costs, perhaps by cravenly pandering to students with flashy but less substantive material, say by substituting pop-culture references for boring substance. But this is a mistake. Wagner bores us when he need not, but flash-based teaching excites us when it should not. The optimum amount of boredom to inflict on those around us is generally very little, but not zero.

The young, it is often said, are especially prone to being bored because they have a short attention span. We blame them for being inattentive in lecture or constantly distracted with their gadgets at the dinner table. There is a virtue, we seem to think, in tolerating a certain amount of boredom, and part of what it takes to impress us as precocious is to exhibit that virtue. We worry when we think it in decline, and to a certain extent this worry may be justified. If we are too easily bored, we may not push through to the interesting. In economic terms, we will underinvest. But it is unclear whether what has changed is that the young are deficient in the virtue of tolerating boredom or whether innovations have increased the opportunity cost of doing something boring. Before, attending a long-winded opera or reading a novel might have meant merely forgoing a game of cards by candlelight. Now, it means teenagers not knowing about important changes in their social status by fiddling with their phones or listening to something immediately exciting by pressing a button on a device. What is changing may not be the virtue of tolerating boredom but the economy of the boring.

Why, in the end, is the boring such an important category in aesthetic and social assessment? The boring revolves around attention. Attention

is precious and is entwined with consciousness itself. (On some views, a certain kind of attention is what *makes* us conscious.)²⁴ Given the choice between 70,000 hours of life, many of which would be spent attending to things I do not care about and far fewer hours attending to the people, art, and projects that matter to me, I might well take the latter. The boring asks us to devote perhaps our most precious resource to that which is unworthy of it. No wonder we are such reluctant victims, and what a pity we do not do more to resist our oppressors.²⁵

DAN MOLLER

Philosophy Department
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland 20742

INTERNET: dmoller@umd.edu

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. I, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 288.

2. Previous contributions on the subject include William James Earle, "Interesting, Boring, Beautiful," *The Philosophical Forum* 43 (2012): 361–382, and Ted Gioia, *The Imperfect Art: Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1990), chap. 6.

3. As in Judge John M. Woolsey's verdict that *Ulysses* is not obscene, in part because of its realistic boringness. See *United States v. One Book Called "Ulysses,"* 5 F. Supp. 182 (S.D.N.Y. 1933).

4. Classic presentations of dispositional axiology include David Wiggins, "A Sensible Subjectivism?" in *Moral Discourse and Practice*, ed. Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 227–244, and Michael Smith, David Lewis, and Mark Johnston, "Dispositional Theories of Value," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 63 (1989): 113–174. The account of the boring I offer below is not dispositional.

5. I have in mind the morally charged senses of these terms implying contempt for African Americans, women, and smart people who act in certain ways. The comparison is of course a limited one; the idea is simply that skeptics of boringness and of uppitness might both explain their skepticism in terms of indefensible background assumptions.

6. Even minks do it. See Rebecca K. Meagher and Georgia J. Mason, "Environmental Enrichment Reduces Signs of Boredom in Caged Mink," *PLoS ONE* 7, 11 (2012), e49180. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0049180.

7. As I explain below, *idealized* need not mean *ideal*. Sufficiently good may be enough. For more on the controversial issue of idealization in this context, see Jerrold Levinson, "Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002): 227–238.

8. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, p. 299. Symmetrically, having given many lectures to boring, unresponsive audiences, I can attest that there are usually interesting facts

about *them*, for example, that the right-hand side sometimes seems to contain more intelligent people, whom I in turn address more eagerly, raising interesting questions of cause and effect, of brain hemisphere asymmetries, and so on.

9. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), p. 83.

10. For more on the metaphysics of categories like boring and interesting from a broadly Kantian perspective, see Earle's "Interesting, Boring, Beautiful."

11. Gioia, *The Imperfect Art*, pp. 121–123.

12. Andy Warhol: "If I'm going to sit and watch the same thing I saw the night before, I don't want it to be essentially the same—I want it to be exactly the same. Because the more you look at the exact same thing, *the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel...*" (emphasis added). *Andy Warhol 365 Takes: The Andy Warhol Museum Collection*, ed. The Andy Warhol Museum (New York: Abrams, 2004), p. 365.

13. See David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987), pp. 226–249, and Levinson, "Hume's Standard of Taste."

14. Pauline Kael, "Trash, Art and the Movies," in *For Keeps: 30 Years at the Movies* (New York: Penguin, 1996), pp. 200–227, at p. 223.

15. Kael, "Fantasies of the Art-House Audience," in *For Keeps*, pp. 29–32, at p. 30. Kael is more broadly concerned to defend trash: "Movies—a tawdry corrupt art for a tawdry corrupt world—fit the way we feel. The world doesn't work the way the schoolbooks said it did and we are different from what our parents and teachers expected us to be. Movies are our cheap and easy expression, the sullen art of displaced persons" ("Trash, Art and the Movies," p. 200).

16. Francis Galton, "Regression Towards Mediocrity in Hereditary Stature," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 15 (1886): 246–263.

17. Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, vol. II, pt. 2 (Zürich: Diogenes, 1977), p. 536, my translation.

18. I am thinking of Peter Paul Rubens and Rembrandt van Rijn, for example, some of the self-portraits.

Or imagine giving equal temporal weight to each sector of Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* (1793) or some of Henri Fantin-Latour's paintings. There are complex questions I am skirting here about the metaphysics of the boring, for example, whether the fact that we process paintings and music differently affects how boring they really are, and if so how and why exactly.

19. Frederic Spotts, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival* (Yale University Press, 1996), p. 72.

20. Spotts, *Bayreuth*, p. 72. No fair protesting that Hanslick did not like Wagner and that Tchaikovsky was somewhat diffident. The boringness was part of the reason *why* they were not crazy about Wagner, who went on to parody Hanslick in *Die Meistersinger*.

21. Critics like Theodor Adorno bitterly complain that the role of leitmotifs degenerates in the end to merely "help the audience to orientate itself more easily" (*In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone [London: Verso, 1981], p. 36). But even if this were true (and it is not), perhaps there are worse things in the world. For analysis of philosophical themes in the *Ring*, see Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht, *Finding an Ending: Reflections on Wagner's Ring* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

22. For example, see Thomas Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Buffalo, NY: Broadview, 2012), pp. 57–62. A conveniently sized example of art distilling everyday aesthetics is Ezra Pound's famous poem "In a Station of the Metro": "The apparition of these faces in the crowd;/Petals on a wet, black bough."

23. Jean La Rochefoucauld, Maxim #304, in *Maximes et Réflexions Diverses, 1665–1678*, ed. Jean Lafond (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976), p. 95.

24. See Jesse J. Prinz, *The Conscious Brain: How Attention Engenders Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 3. Prinz, to be precise, claims that consciousness arises when and only when intermediate-level representations are attended to. As he shows, attention is not the same thing as consciousness.

25. This article emerged from conversations with Lauren Hauptman, to whose inspiration and suggestions I am deeply indebted. Thanks also to Chris Avery for helpful advice.