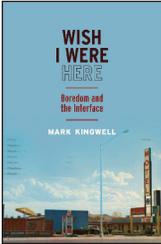


Review



Wish I Were Here: Boredom and the Interface. By Mark Kingwell. Montréal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019. 208 pp. ISBN: 9780773557123.

In late 2019, I reached out to the *Canadian Journal of Communication* (CJC) asking if I might be able to review Canadian philosopher Mark Kingwell's latest work, *Wish I Were Here: Boredom and the Interface*. The journal's book review editors promptly responded, letting me know a copy would be sent via mail. Several months later, I received an email from the journal's book review editors asking if my book review was close to being ready for submission. In reply, I explained that, for whatever reason, I had never received the book, but I would nevertheless read it and write a review given that my institution's library has a digital copy. I am contextualizing these events because I could not help but keep them in mind as I scrolled through Kingwell's interrogation of boredom and the Interface. Although his latest work is undeniably an interesting read, I found myself occasionally leaving the text window to reply to emails, read unrelated newspaper articles, and browse loosely related pages on Wikipedia. In a very real sense, I regularly caught myself living through the condition of Kingwell's analyses.

Wish I Were Here is Kingwell's eighteenth book, and its purpose is twofold. The first is to grapple with and tease apart the potential causes and philosophical implications of boredom—which, ironically, is one of the least boring books I have ever read in an academic work. Engaging with the philosophical boredom of Martin Heidegger, the political boredom of Theodor Adorno, and critiquing the “creative boredom” (p. 29) of late-capitalism, Kingwell arrives at his conception of neoliberal boredom—or, the anxieties and resulting behaviours manifest in the contemporary affective economy. His discussion is divided into four parts, each delving into a particular dimension of boredom and the interface: the specific condition(s) of boredom; the context of how contemporary neoliberal boredom came about; the political and existential crises of neoliberal boredom; and, finally, potential ways of moving past the crisis of neoliberal boredom.

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For Kingwell, neoliberal boredom entails constantly needing—or being told one needs—to upgrade the self and one's commodities; an obsession with the speed and efficiencies of daily life and devices; and the ideological belief that happiness or satisfaction is always somewhere just over the horizon. For example, he presents airports as literal utopias that exist only as sites we must occupy while waiting to go someplace else. That is, “boring” places. Here, however, Kingwell glosses over the incredible amount of labour and planning that goes into (re)producing these “nowhere-zones” (p. xii). While airports, along with train stations, bus terminals, and other travel hubs, certainly represent spaces of waiting and unavoidable boredom for most people, they also are workspaces where many people spend a significant amount of their adult lives. Despite doing an excellent job of addressing the technologies in perpetuating neoliberal boredom, Kingwell leaves the labour practices that go into reproducing boredom and boring spaces largely unexamined. As such, the general philosophical contribution of his analysis would be strengthened by his having engaged more directly with the reproductive labour of boredom (i.e., not just boring jobs, but jobs that (re)produce the conditions of boredom). Readers who are familiar with Kingwell's past writings and sense of humour are likely to query why he does not have more to say about the idea of people whose livelihoods revolve around the (re)production of boredom itself.

Similarly, when engaging with Adorno's notion of the political and politicized boredom in late-capitalism, Kingwell notes that in spite of being rhetorically constructed as “independent contractors” who work for themselves, gig labourers, and the gig economy more broadly, represent a profound sense of alienation and exploitation; put simply, they are situated within a system of flux and removed from the value they produce. For gig workers, boredom manifests as a “hurry up and wait” (p. 39) mentality that can either be addressed politically or internalized and unthinkingly accepted as the new economic reality. Here also, Kingwell overlooks the philosophical absurdity of individuals finding and/or creating meaning in gigs, as well as other so-called “bullshit jobs” (p. 72). For example, how do happy line cooks or joyful telemarketers, who create meaning from mostly boring tasks, factor into the crisis of neoliberal boredom? The obvious response from a critical theory lens rests in these individuals suffering from some form of false consciousness or cognitive dissonance.

The book's second purpose is to address what Kingwell labels “the interface,” and its relationship(s) to neoliberal boredom. In addition to more obvious digital interfaces such as the screen, which encompasses the bulk of Kingwell's critical analysis, interface, here, is conceptualized as “interstitial spaces where we are not quite ourselves” (pp. xii, 46). Put simply, it is the nexus of platform, content, and user, including doorways, turnstiles, windows, and borders. Echoing Marshall McLuhan, Kingwell notes that the restlessness of contemporary interfaces is such that, by their nature, they, as media, change our experiences with them from what creators or producers, and even we as consumers, originally intend. For example, we visit digital song libraries to find something to listen to, yet even with hundreds or thousands of options we end up endlessly scrolling until the act of scrolling itself becomes the activity that gives us pleasure.

Politically, Kingwell argues that Donald Trump and the “post-truth” (p. 89) era are perfectly situated for neoliberal boredom, writing that “the longstanding Western

philosophical project has reached its endgame, and its results are in: not only can anyone say anything, but the anyone saying anything can be the highest elected official in the most powerful nation on Earth” (p. 74). Trump (especially through Twitter) thus stands as both a beneficiary and an example of postmodern post-truthism, though he certainly is not the cause. Kingwell critiques the fact that Twitter, with its emotive tendencies and limited characters, encourages us-versus-them shouting matches rather than any sustained or civil discourse. This concern with civility is consistent with his career-long interest in the reasonable means by which people can engage in democratic discourses and genuine debate. Kingwell is also critical of the fact that the digital interfaces so many people seemingly use as a distraction from neoliberal boredom—or a retreat from the politics of everyday life—end up pulling people into uncivil, polarized, and unproductive political discourses. In other words, people download Twitter to distract themselves from the boredom they experience as a result of being alienated from modern politics only to end up being intensely, though superficially, engaged in political discourses.

Kingwell calls the Habermasian “utopia of a rational public sphere” (p. 79) an illusion, countering that civil discourse through social media and similar digital interfaces is likely impossible, not least because, even in traditional interpersonal exchanges reasonable debate often fails to work. He thus contends that we need structural means, or scaffolding, by which to limit or mediate our interface addictions. This could, for instance, include regimens or schedules for media use; fasting, reflection, and meditation periods; and other techniques to combat neoliberal boredom. More generally, Kingwell recommends societal scaffolding in the sense of “participant-accepted discourse norms, penalties on unhelpful public outrage, and aggressively regulated social media” (p. 82), as well as the banning of media panel discussions in order to refine, or re-establish, any sense of civil public discourse. This said, he is pessimistic about the likelihood of any of these solutions being adopted. To this end, he sardonically highlights some of the more colourful backlash he has received in response to such suggestions.

Kingwell ultimately encourages us to “dwell, wonder, and reflect” (p. 146) on our recurring boredom rather than succumb to the swipe logic and interface addiction of neoliberal boredom. Philosophical reflection is his answer to individual bouts of boredom, though he acknowledges that collective actions in addressing this persistent social malaise are more difficult to implement than continuous critiques of the self and surrounding social structures. Still, his prescriptive arguments regarding scaffolding and other means for addressing the conditions of incivility on social media would be strengthened by his having set out more concrete strategies for implementing the measures he proposes. Overall, *Wish I Were Here* showcases Kingwell’s renowned wit and style, and the book serves as an excellent read for anyone interested in philosophy, communication, or politics.

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