

The Depiction and Interpretation of the Ambiguous Nature of Boredom and Everyday Life in Contemporary Comics

Laura Schlichting

Abstract:

With *What Happens When Nothing Happens* Greice Schneider lays the groundwork for an aesthetics of boredom and everyday life in comics by steadily exploring and travelling between the concepts of comics, boredom, and narratology. The author sets important constraints on comics storytelling in relationship to boredom by drawing on works of contemporary comic scholars. Moreover, the book historically traces the development of the concept of boredom, pointing out that there is no universally accepted definition of boredom. The term has been applied in many cultural contexts and covers a variety of states of mind. The book furthermore offers tools to analyse boredom in contemporary comics, since boredom is not yet a narratological concept.

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We could easily get the impression that our society is eager to shake off boredom: advice abounds to take up a hobby or an instrument, read a book, join a sports club or church group—it seems that we will do anything to keep boredom away (cf. p. 46), even though, as Greice Schneider notes, "boredom and leisure are just two manifestations of the same phenomenon, both of them emerging at the same time" (p. 17). Sometimes it seems that society frowns upon doing nothing and thus keeps quiet about it. But, at least in academia, the opposite is true: boredom has become extremely interesting to scholars (cf. p. 18) and forms a new field of interest within comics, a "hybridized field of study" (p. 19, cf. Jared Gardner & David Herman: "Introduction". In: *SubStance* 40(1), 2011: p. 3), as Schneider proves in her publication *What Happens When Nothing Happens* (2016).

Despite its obvious pun, the book's title is an apt description of itself: 'nothing does not happen'. On the contrary, Greice Schneider is not boring at all, because boredom itself already allows room for "a cluster of feelings" (p. 18), and is used as an umbrella term for often interchangeable words such as "ennui, melancholy, tedium, depression, apathy, anomie, banality, [Langeweile or] lassitude" (p. 18, cf. p. 43). It is remarkable how Schneider historically traces the development of the concept (from Romanticism and the Industrial Revolution to Marxist times and the twentieth century), pointing out that there is no universally accepted definition of boredom (p. 30 ff.). The term has been applied in many cultural contexts and covers a variety of states of mind. For her, boredom is a "modern phenomenon" and a "source of, and threat to, creativity" (p. 21).

The book's main purpose is to lay the groundwork for an aesthetics of boredom and everyday life in comics (p. 19) by steadily exploring and travelling between the concepts of comics, boredom, and narratology. The author sets important constraints on comics storytelling in relationship to boredom by drawing on works of comic scholars like Jan Baetens, Thierry Groensteen or Philippe Marion as well as combining their theories with Martin Heidegger's (p. 39 ff.) and Walter Benjamin's views (p. 42 ff.). Her "slippery corpus" (p. 19), as she herself calls it, consists of stories in which, at first glance, not much happens and which are "typified by a

certain vagueness; characters simply live their banal lives without the need of a significant mission propelling the story" (p. 20).

Schneider's book is precisely structured. It gives an overview of the concept of boredom and its relationship to cultural products followed by an articulation of boredom and comics storytelling. The first part of the book discusses the relationship between comics, everyday life, and boredom, while outlining four approaches towards everyday life that are prevalent in comics studies (p. 61 ff.). Here, Schneider develops a figure exemplifying a continuum between the positive and the negative aspects of boredom, ranging from disenchantment to enchantment, and from ironic to serious issues, in order to distinguish between "observational humour", "contemplation", "derisive humour" and "ennui" (p. 64). Her map of authors, which is organized according to their engagement with boredom and the everyday (p. 75), will be particularly convincing. In general, whenever there is need of precise classification, she inserts diagrams to help visualize her arguments (e.g., "the dynamics of boredom", p. 83).

The ambiguity of boredom and the aesthetic discussion around it are at the core of the second part of the book. She analyses categories such as slowness and speed, repetition and difference, and minimalism and excess in terms of panel breakdown, graphic immobility, page layout, lettering, gestures, and facial expressions. In the third part, Schneider elaborates on the question 'What happens when nothing happens?' by drawing on concepts of postclassical narrative theory. She also looks at the concept of duration, which is crucial for narratology and a phenomenology of boredom. Through close-readings of three authors who have contributed greatly to alternative comics—namely Chris Ware, Lewis Trondheim, and Adrian Tomine, Schneider shows "what really happens in stories (or at least parts of stories) in which nothing happens (or nothing seems to happen)" (p. 23).

She furthermore offers tools to analyse boredom in contemporary comics, since boredom is not yet a narratological concept. According to the author, "the simplest, most popular way of bringing boredom and comics together is by turning boredom into a subject" and this "has been successfully achieved through newspaper strips" (p. 46) starting in the 1960s— but why in comics? According to her, "comic books are an ideal vehicle for a certain apocalyptic discourse that combines mass culture, consumerism and banality" (p. 49). And she convinces her reader of this by referring to a huge amount of comics, as well as by drawing on intertextual cross-references. The section on gender issues, however, interrupts the book's structure and does not properly link to the previous comics' issues she focuses on. Instead, the author could have elaborated more on "emotions" and their function within affect studies. This could have been particularly fruitful in the context of boredom and everyday life, which she only slightly touches upon when speaking about "the gaze" (p. 165 ff.).

This minor criticism aside, Schneider's book succeeds in balancing the theoretical framework consisting of three different fields—comics, boredom, narratology, and the historical account for three reasons: First, the book is well-structured, its many chapters and subchapters making

the any sought-after issue easy to find. Moreover, each individual discussion is organized according to a similar pattern, so that the chapter on everyday life proceeds like the chapter before, on boredom.

Second, Schneider not only writes about "repetition" as one point along the continuum of boredom, but uses it herself as narrative means, which helps one to remember the main arguments of the book and supports the golden thread experienced while reading her book. Third, she demonstrates her deep and thorough research in the field by engaging with multiple perspectives on a complex cultural concept, as well as by considering works in languages other than English. She provides translations of French quotes, for example, which contribute to the text's accessibility.

All in all: this publication is worth reading, perhaps less for laymen interested in sequential art than for comics scholars and boredom experts. And this read in particular is truly an escape from boredom.