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## The Nullarbor Actually Has Trees In It<sup>1</sup>

### *Paul Magee*

*This text argues that boredom is an indispensable moment in the experience of difference. It takes the form of an exegesis of Frederic Jameson on "the politics of Utopia." Jameson attributes a profound political function to the fact that literary Utopias tend to be so alienatingly boring. I suggest that his analysis can be extended far beyond the Utopian archive to comprehend the political value of real-life phenomena like unemployment or trips across the Nullarbor.*

**Key Words:** Aesthetics, Jameson, Unemployment, Boring Landscapes

Frederic Jameson's "The Politics of Utopia" was published in the January/February 2004 issue of the *New Left Review*. You could actually retitile it "The Politics of Boredom," because that's what it's all about. The following text is also about boredom. I'm taking Jameson as my guide.

Jameson begins his consideration of Utopias with reference to the parlous state of present-day thinking on the subject. In the wake of what Perry Anderson has described as "three decades of nearly unbroken political defeat for every force that once fought against the established order" (2004, 71), it is hard to imagine any viable alternatives to the status quo. As Jameson has elsewhere remarked, "people find it easier today to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (quoted in Anderson 2004, 75).

What's to be done? Jameson's strategy is two-fold. The first thing he does is to articulate his own Utopian programme, one that turns the valorization mechanism of capitalism on its head. He proposes, as "the most radical demand to make upon our present system—that demand which could not be fulfilled or satisfied without transforming the system beyond recognition" (Jameson 2004, 37), that we clamor for full employment across the globe. This is a beautiful call because full employment,

1. An earlier version of this paper appears as part of 'Strange Directions in Future Research,' an article in the web-journal *Text, the Journal of the Australian Association of Writing Programmes*, <http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/index.htm>

while satisfying all the requirements of right-wing rhetoric, would actually amount to the end of capitalism itself, which, as Jameson proceeds to remind us, requires “a reserve army of the unemployed in order to function” (38). This, incidentally, is a nice argument to run at present in Australia, a country that can’t even imagine the end of John Howard, to say nothing of capitalism. Mind, an even better argument would clamor for fully salaried *unemployment* for all, for that’s what’s needed if we are ever to bring a halt to the rampant overproduction that characterizes capitalism. Why? Because the means of access to civic rights and power is, for most all of us, having a job. We don’t work to create things that are necessary. We work so as to have a job. That’s why people feel so compelled to vote for governments that create more jobs, even if those jobs involve destroying things we like, such as nature. That’s why Marx’s son-in-law published a book entitled *The Right to be Lazy* (Lafargue 1999). For the real way to work for the revolution is, as André Gorz (2000) reminds us, not to work at all. Work is bad for the planet. Don’t do it. Of course, Jameson knows all this, for his demand effectively amounts to the same thing: an end to wage-labor as the means of access to social power; letting the machines do it for us.

Now for some people, and this includes Jameson, unemployment is a terrible prospect (imagine “the demoralisation, the morbid effects of boredom, the waste of vital energies” [Jameson 2004, 39]). Then again, some people think the Nullarbor doesn’t have any trees. Like most academics of my generation, I’ve spent years unemployed and I have to say that the view from there was really not so bad. You just had to learn to deal with the boredom.

Now we turn to the second strategy Jameson takes to the contemporary question of Utopia, and the prime concern of this text: boredom. Having articulated his own personal Utopia, Jameson now attempts to understand the way we respond to Utopian texts. The reason this involves boredom is that one of the main reactions to works such as Thomas More’s 1516 *Utopia* is: it would be so boring to live there. Constructed to eradicate the evils of pride and wealth, More’s *Utopia* offers compulsory employment for all, towns of uniform size and custom, collective eating halls, clothing of uniform appearance, taboos against makeup, gambling, hunting, and hawking, no opportunities for the display of difference other than through virtue or intellect, and (my own personal favorite, because it reminds me of Canberra) suburbs “of equal size, each with its own shopping centre in the middle of it” (More 1961, 80). You just go there and they give you whatever you want when you ask for it (which is rather like how it feels to have an income all of a sudden). But that’s by the by. The point is that once you flesh out the Utopian vision with some details as to what life looks like there, it begins to sound very boring. After all, it’s all been settled, well in advance. In Utopia, “politics is supposed to be over, along with history” (Jameson 2004, 42). There’s nothing to live for any more, other than life itself.

Jameson’s next move is striking. What if, he suddenly asks us, “the boredom or dryness that has been attributed to the Utopian text is . . . not a literary drawback, nor a serious objection, but a very central strength of the Utopian process in general”? (40). What if these texts challenge us precisely by making the object of desire so thoroughly boring?

The Utopian text does this by presenting us with characters we simply cannot identify with. More’s account of the Utopians “never tempts us for one minute to try

to imagine ourselves in their place” (39). They lack all the pleasures we rely upon to make life liveable. They bore us. Inasmuch as we make the effort of imagination anyway (perhaps without even being aware of doing so), the Utopian text pushes us toward an encounter with “our desubjectification in the Utopian political process, the loss of psychic privileges and spiritual private property, the reduction of all of us to that psychic gap or lack in which we as subjects consist, that we all spend a good deal of our energy trying to conceal from ourselves” (40). The Utopian text bores us to death—and reminds us that we’d still be living.

As I said, this is a striking move. In what follows, I am going to argue that it has implications far beyond the Utopian text per se. Or maybe it’s that Utopian literature is a far broader category than we imagine. To introduce this argument, let me start by saying how funny it is to be writing this text while driving across the Nullarbor on the way to Perth. I keep thinking of how bored I would be if I had to sell petrol at one of these roadhouses like Madura Pass, 1,256 kilometers from Perth, 1,450 from Adelaide, 200 from the nearest roadhouse in either direction. And now we’re on the road from Caiguna to Balladonia, described as “the world’s straightest road,” 145 kilometers without a bend (Ashworth, Turner, and Egger 2004, 250). Mind, if I asked, some of these people might find the prospect of living in Canberra, where I do, pretty boring, too.

As far as life in Utopia goes, Jameson argues that what we find so lacking there is not merely pleasure, but pain, too: “what we call our personality is made up of these very things, of the miseries and deformations, fully as much as the pleasures and fulfilments” (Jameson 2004, 52). He locates this pleasure/pain nexus in two realms, the first being that of addiction. According to Jameson, addiction is not merely a private matter; indeed, commodity culture has raised it to a whole new level (think of Benjamin’s collector, of “retail therapy,” of the way people work so as to pay for holidays, alcohol, dining out, and other diversions to take their minds off work). The second is sexuality, which by Foucault’s thesis, has been so thoroughly invested with meanings and problematizations in the modern world: “what would it mean, then, from within our sexualized existentiality, to imagine a human sexuality that was so unrepressed, yet so utterly divested of the multiple satisfactions of meaning as such?” (53). Doubtless that is why More’s *Utopia*, where everyone dresses the same, where makeup is close to forbidden and jewellery simply incomprehensible, presents us with such an existential challenge. It rips us out of our historical moorings and forces us to see that there’s next to nothing left. That’s why it’s political. It opens our eyes to the possibility that we, on the other side of our boredom, could be completely and utterly different.

Now I want to ask the question this all evokes for me. What’s so specific to Utopian literature in all this? Lady Murasaki’s *Tale of Genji* (1970) bored me, too—until I found my way into its twelfth-century characters, which changed me in turn. So did the Nullarbor. So did the city of Canberra, which was built with such Utopian design, which bores people stupid, though I have to say I’m starting to like it. And what of the Roebuck Plains, up near Broome, in far Western Australia, which Stephen Muecke approaches through the rubric of boredom, too, and one of Roland Barthes’s loveliest quotes: *Boredom is not that far from ecstasy, it is ecstasy viewed from the shores of pleasure.*

The quotation from Roland Barthes suggests that boredom has an intimate relationship with pleasure. In fact, there is no need to see boredom as an unfortunate experience or a waste of time. Each time the reader says that there is no pleasure to be found in one text, he or she is assuming that it will be found elsewhere, in another text about to come into view.

'Boredom' thus labels an extremely important category for any theory of reading. It says that you have read in a certain way, and demands that you take note of *how* you have been reading things (because it is always possible to find a new way of reading a 'boring' text so that there is a sudden rush of pleasure).

For the Aboriginal inhabitant, the Plains are a moving text: an eruption of life as a lizard scuttles for safety. Your whole attention is concentrated for a moment, then released in laughter. How can it be that the lizard is both there and not there, and all you are left with is a surprise? And perhaps a flash of memory, a story, because that *djalubardju* (the lizard) is really a little boy, as we shall discover later (Stephen Muecke, in Benterrak, Muecke, and Roe 1996, 101).

In other words, and to table the thesis I'm trying to rip from Jameson's text: Boredom is an indispensable moment in the experience of difference. It announces the presence of a way of being we do not, indeed cannot, know—at least for the moment. For boredom also signals the possibility of learning. It's the only way we'll ever learn to celebrate unemployment, or, for that matter, new art. There are Utopias all around us.

To put this polemically: There's been much discussion of the ideological aspects of aesthetics in poststructuralist writing, and even a general rejection of aesthetics itself. It's the general rejection I want to question. For isn't that also a rejection of just how we encounter difference?

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